

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

Introduction to the Prophets:

Sefer Yehoshua – Chapter 8

Shiur #17: The Victory Over the A'i

By Rav Michael Hattin

INTRODUCTION

Last time, we considered the trespass of Achan and its terrible consequences for the entire people of Israel. The core lesson of this tale was the indispensable bond of Jewish nationhood that tightly links all the people of Israel together, to the extent that the fortunes of the larger community or even the national grouping are sometimes affected by the acts of an individual. Having begun the process of settling the land, the formerly twelve disparate tribes will need to quickly assimilate the painful lesson of Achan if they are to survive as a state.

Recall that Achan's act of indiscretion was directly responsible for the subsequent defeat of the people at A'i, when the outnumbered inhabitants of that town routed the Israelite attack force and even inflicted casualties upon them. Once Achan's crime was uncovered and the people had witnessed the awful but necessary spectacle of his punishment, they are enjoined by God to renew hostilities against the A'i and are buoyed by His promise of victory.

God offers Yehoshua strengthening words of encouragement, even recalling the soothing expression of "do not fear, nor be afraid," initially extended to him by his mentor Moshe when he first was designated as the future leader of Israel (see Devarim 31:8). Yehoshua, however, does not take the Divine assurance of triumph as an invitation to faithfully but passively await God's miraculous intervention, but instead prepares extensively in accordance with God's terse directive to "place an ambush behind the city" (Yehoshua 8:2).

EMPLOYING A STRATEGY

Arising to attempt the conquest of the A'i once again, Yehoshua chooses thirty thousand fighting men and accompanies them as they march to strike the town from its northern flank. At the same time, five thousand men are selected from among that larger force and sent under the cover of darkness to wait in ambush on the town's western outskirts. Yehoshua's remaining troops, who make no attempt to conceal their movements, attack the city but then feign retreat. The inhabitants of the town as well as those of the adjoining town of Beit El, believing that another easy victory over the Israelites awaits them, give chase and leave their cities exposed. Quickly, the five thousand concealed fighters emerge from their lair and attack the open town of the A'i, setting it ablaze. Realizing that they have been trapped, the fighters of the A'i and Beit El find themselves caught in between the two Israelite armies and are slaughtered to a man. All together, twelve thousand of the enemy are slain, and only the King of A'i is taken as prisoner.

Besides providing us with an excellent insight into Yehoshua's brilliance as a military strategist, the battle of the A'i also indicates that the Israelite leader takes no chances this second time around. Recall that at the first battle of the A'i, Yehoshua had unconditionally accepted the words of his spies who maintained that a small force of perhaps "two or three thousand" would be more than sufficient to subdue the A'i, and that there was therefore no need to "weary all of the people" (7:3). Here, Yehoshua employs a force that numbers TEN times the cautious number suggested by the spies!

YEHOSHUA'S CRITICAL SIGNAL

But there is one important detail that must not be overlooked, for it provides us with one of the Book's key insights into the mysterious workings of Divine providence. This victory, in marked contrast to that over Yericho, seems to be the exclusive result of Yehoshua's maneuver and his men's fearless implementation. Here, there is no active participation of the Ark of the Covenant, no spectacle of silent encirclement of the town's ramparts, no miraculous crumbling of its impregnable defenses. Rather, the town of the A'i is overrun by an irresistible combination of overwhelming force and perfectly executed strategy. The Israelite fighters feign retreat and thus draw out the men of the A'i after them; the smaller ambush force rapidly deploys at precisely the exact moment of the town's greatest exposure and seizes it without encountering resistance. They quickly set it on fire and the men of the A'i are suddenly surprised by the demoralizing spectacle of their town, as well as their associated visions of sure victory, going up in

more than proverbial smoke. Losing their will to fight, they are easily overcome by the pincer movement of the Israelites and conquered.

But how does Yehoshua's smaller force know the precise moment when to leave their concealed location and seize the town? After all, to deploy too early will result in the strategy being discovered and in its probable failure. The task of conquering the A'i and neighboring Beit El will in that scenario be immeasurably harder. Fortunately, a solution is offered by a unique and visible signal that Yehoshua provides. Accompanying the larger force, which, as we have seen, feigns defeat and retreat in order to draw out the fighters of the A'i and Beit El after them, Yehoshua is apparently nevertheless able to maintain visual contact with the concealed ambush group of five thousand. Perhaps he cannot see them as they lie in wait on the town's western outskirts, but they can see him: "... Yehoshua raised the spear that was in his hand towards the town. The ambushing force quickly arose from their (hiding) place and ran towards the town as he lifted his spear. They entered the city and captured it, setting it ablaze" (8:18-19).

In other words, the critical deployment of the ambush force, an act predicated upon impeccable timing that in the end proves decisive, is a function of the 'flare' that Yehoshua sends up. When they see his outstretched spear, they know that the city gates have been left wide open by its over-confident defenders. Really, then, it is Yehoshua's symbolic gesture that wins the day, as the victory unfolds in a perfectly naturalistic manner. But how does Yehoshua know when to raise his spear? Is it perhaps no more than another expression of the intuitive sense of timing with which great military men are blessed?

GOD'S CONCEALED INVOLVEMENT

"GOD SAID TO YEHOSHUA: 'STRETCH OUT THE SPEAR THAT IS IN YOUR HAND TOWARDS THE A'I, for I give it into your hands.' And Yehoshua raised the spear that was in his hand towards the town" (8:18). In an act reminiscent of Moshe raising his staff over the waters of the Sea to part it, so that the Egyptian foe would be drowned in its deep waters, God commands Yehoshua to raise the spear. When he does so, the force in ambush who patiently await just that signal swiftly leave their hiding place and attack, prevailing against the town and heralding a crushing triumph for Israel over its foes.

Thus, while it is clearly Yehoshua and the people of Israel who make the necessary preparations, fight the battle and achieve victory, their success in the end is due to God's covert intervention. Inspired at precisely the right moment, Yehoshua raises the spear and the rest of the plan unfolds with perfection. The military historian, hypothetically observing the battle from the outside, sees only Yehoshua's stroke of brilliant timing and the people of Israel's determined attack. The more perceptive onlookers, however, who possess deeper insight into the true nature of the 'miraculous' are able to discern the hand of God. In glaring contrast to God's obvious involvement at Yericho, therefore, the battle of the A'i introduces a new stage in His evolving relationship with Israel. Just as He indicated to Yehoshua, He will always be with them and will not abandon them to the cruel designs of their foes. But unlike the obvious and irrefutable proof of His ongoing salvation that was provided by the plagues, the Exodus, the splitting of the Sea of Reeds, the crossing of the Yarden and even the victory over Yericho, as Israel enters its land to build its state, God begins to 'retreat' behind the veil of natural events. This is in order to allow the people of Israel the space that they will need to forge their own path, to make autonomous decisions, and even to learn the difficult lessons of their own mistakes.

But let no man of Israel make the tragic error (as some of us do, even now) of equating Divine silence with Divine absence, as if a dearth of miracles indicates His uninvolvedness, unawareness, impotence or nonexistence. The freedom given to man to exercise his autonomous will ostensibly without hindrance is a unique invitation that is afforded only to the human species. It is an opportunity to seek God and to find Him, as an act of human initiative and out of the bittersweet yearning for a better world. God patiently awaits our overture and yearns to respond in kind. His response, however, is often concealed under layers of cause and effect. Often it is overwhelmed by the trumpet blasts of human hubris that claim the victories for ourselves but assign the defeats to the cruel but arbitrary fates. The sensitive souls, though, can sense His constant involvement and can therefore see its unmistakable imprints all along the tortured path of human history.

RAISING THE SPEAR ALOFT AND TAKING FROM THE SPOILS

Like Moshe before him, who raised his hands aloft at the battle against Amalek and kept them held high to inspire his people to victory, "Yehoshua did not let down his hand that grasped the spear until all of the people of the A'i had been subdued" (8:26). Significantly, in that battle against the marauding Amalekites who had attacked the defenseless and tired Israelites soon after they had left the

land of Egypt, it was Yehoshua who had been selected by Moshe his mentor to lead the people to their improbable victory (see Shemot 17:8-13). Here too, perhaps, Yehoshua's raising of the spear serves as more than simply the signal to the five thousand men who lie in ambush anxiously awaiting his order to attack. The raised spear symbolizes victory and reminds the people of God's critical involvement in that process. They are inspired to prevail against the foe because they know that God will not let them down.

In the aftermath of the victory, the people of Israel are permitted to take from the spoils of the town, thus providing another important contrast to the battle of Yericho. While some commentaries see in this license a more prudent assessment by Yehoshua of the people's spiritual abilities, others detect another sign of the subtle shift towards more hidden Divine involvement that we pointed out earlier. At Yericho, the victory was God's alone. It was precipitated by His Ark, the symbol of His earthly throne, and resulted from the miraculous collapse of the city's fortifications. Assuming, as some commentaries do, that God nowhere enjoins the harsh ban against the booty of Yericho that Yehoshua pronounces, we must instead posit that it was only natural for him to interpret the miraculous circumstances surrounding the Israelite triumph as an invitation to dedicate the victory's proceeds to God. "All of the silver and the gold, the vessels of brass and iron, shall be sanctified to God. It shall be brought to God's treasury" (6:19).

Here at the A'i, the groundwork for the undertaking that resulted in success was prepared by the twin components of Yehoshua's meticulous planning and the people's spirited struggle. While God in the end provided the critical catalyst for the victory, it was a triumph that belonged to all of Israel. Therefore, the spoils are also given over to them (as indeed they are in every battle that is henceforth described in the Book), to stress the significance of THEIR initiative and to highlight THEIR involvement.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has provided us with an important lesson into the trajectory of the Book of Yehoshua, as it begins to trace the sometimes uncomfortable dialectic of decreased overt Divine involvement and correspondingly increased human initiative. This dynamic tension, in marked contrast to the miraculous tone of the vast majority of the 'Wilderness' narratives that constitute the bulk of Shemot, Vayikra, Bemidbar, and Devarim, colors the rest of Sefer Yehoshua, the remainder of the Biblical books, and the post-Biblical history of the people of Israel until this very day. Like Israel of old, we must not lose sight of the fact that God is always aware, always involved, and always able to intervene at the decisive

moment, albeit in a concealed manner shielded from our dim eyes that equate trust with shallow catechisms and predicate faith upon the supernatural house of cards known as 'miracles.'

The message of the battle of the A'i is in fundamental opposition to the shallow practitioners who would magically fashion belief by applying the 'quick fix' of Divine wonders. In the end those phenomenon cannot transform a recalcitrant heart of stone into one of flesh. Only the patient and incremental nurture of our innate sensitivity to God's presence in our lives, often obscured by our myriad cares and buried under the accumulated debris of life's tragedies, can help us appreciate that God cares about us and guides our progress towards a recognition of His concern.

Next time, we will complete Chapter 8 with a discussion of the assembly at Mount Gerizim, and then begin our study of the subterfuge practices by the Canaanites of Giv'on.