

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION  
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

Introduction to the Prophets:

Sefer Yehoshua – Chapter 8 Conclusion  
The King of A'i and the Altar at Mount Eval

By Rav Michael Hattin

Dear readers: This week, we in Alon Shevut merited to host some of our sons and brothers who fought in the recent battles against the terrorists entrenched in the territories administered by the PA; many of us had the opportunity to hear directly from them of the great efforts to which the IDF went, often at the cost of endangering our own men, to avoid harming the civilian populations. Absurd talk of 'massacres,' whipped up by an enemy propaganda machine long known for its skill at spinning defeats into victories and transforming unrepentant killers into victims, will no doubt continue to swirl, fed in large measure by unscrupulous foreign states long inimical to the Jewish people.

In the meantime, readers of Introduction to Prophets can take comfort from the timelessness of Sefer Yehoshua's message, for its words are as meaningful today as they were over three thousand years ago. The sanctity of human life, even that of the enemy, is a central tenet of the Torah and one that that inspired the men of Yehoshua in their battle at the A'i. Thankfully, the defense forces of the State of Israel have well internalized that message of sensitivity and humanity, as they continue to protect the State's citizens from an enemy that, in glaring contrast to all that we hold sacred, continues to invariably target, wound and murder unarmed men, women and children.

Sincerely, Michael Hattin

INTRODUCTION

Last lesson, we considered the second battle of the A'i. In contrast to the first skirmish, in which the Israelite forces were routed and traumatized, the second battle sees them decisively prevail against the Canaanite town. Employing a clever strategy of controlled flight and concealed ambush, the army under Yehoshua's command is able to draw out the A'i's inhabitants and capture it without resistance. The king of A'i is taken alive, but subsequently executed. His body is hanged and remains suspended until evening, but as the sun sets, the body is removed and buried beyond the town's gates under a large heap of stones.

While the text tells us nothing else concerning the king of A'i, we do know that Yehoshua's directive to release his body at sunset and afford it a burial is based upon a passage from the Book of Devarim:

If a person is guilty of a capital crime and is hanged, you shall not allow his corpse to remain suspended overnight. Rather, you shall bury him on that very day, for it is a curse of the Lord to be hanged. You shall not defile your land that God your Lord gives you as an inheritance. (21:22-23)

#### THE 'SANCTITY' OF THE LAND

The commentators disagree concerning which criminals are condemned to be hanged after execution. Rashi (eleventh century, France) maintains that anyone found guilty of a crime that requires death by stoning, a serious and proscribed category of offences, is subsequently hanged. The Ramban (thirteenth century, Spain), however, adopts the contrasting Talmudic view that the humiliation of hanging is only applicable to an Israelite found guilty of blasphemy or idol worship. In either case, the punishment meted out to the Canaanite king of A'i was therefore outside of these rather specific situations and was apparently an exigency undertaken with its deterrent value in mind.

Significantly, however, his body is honorably removed from the gallows and afforded a form of burial. Evidently, this is done in fulfillment of the proviso of Devarim: "You shall not defile your land that God your Lord gives you as an inheritance", for this directive not only forbids the humiliation of the deceased (which would tend to limit the application to the criminals detailed above), but also insists upon

maintaining the sanctity of the land. In deference to the land's sacredness, displays of overt defamation, even when contemplated against a sworn enemy, are outlawed.

#### THE 'PARADOX' OF WARFARE AND THE INTRODUCTION OF HIGHER IDEALS

The above episode is a striking example of the troubling ethical contrasts that dot the story of Israel's conquest of the land. On the one hand, the defenders of the A'1 and its inhabitants, "men and women, all of them" (8:25), are killed, and the town is burned to the ground. On the other hand, the body of the king is not left to ignominiously rot on the gallows, but is instead removed according to Yehoshua's directive and thus preserved from further degradation. As an earlier example of this dissonance, consider the complete obliteration of Yericho and its people, while Yehoshua meticulously fulfills the oath of preservation vouchsafed to Rachav the Harlot (!) and her extended family.

We shall yet have occasion to discuss the moral aspects of Israel's war of conquest at length. Let us for now take note of the fact that while our account clearly speaks of defeat, death and destruction, it lacks any triumphalist tones whatsoever, and nowhere glorifies the acts of conquest that it describes. The blood that is shed in the passages of Yehoshua is nowhere degraded nor presented contemptuously. In this important sense the book differs from all other accounts of wars that have descended to us from antiquity. It seems that the seemingly minor acts of humanity described above must be understood in this perspective, for they are in fact indicative of more comprehensive truths.

The deference shown to the defeated king of A'1 constitutes a glimmer of hope in the otherwise barren moral landscape that is the ancient (and modern!) Near-Eastern world. The text's author obviously took pains to point out that the king's body was removed from the gallows at sunset, even though this detail certainly appears to be extraneous to the larger story. By so doing, the narrative not only indicates to us that Yehoshua was a conscientious student of Devarim, but perhaps more importantly to emphasize that although 'war is hell,' the army of Israel is called upon to execute their strategic objectives without wanton cruelty or gratuitous violence. There is no MILITARY reason for the king's body to remain on the gallows indefinitely. Combatants that would cheer such a grotesque display willingly nurture a feral blood lust that is, in the end, self-consuming. In war, the enemy must be neutralized, but the image of God in which man was created must not be forfeited.

## THE ALTAR AT MOUNT EVAL

This theme is amplified by the unusual episode that follows:

Then Yehoshua built an altar to God Lord of Israel at Mount Eval. (He built it) as Moshe the servant of God had commanded the people of Israel, as is stated in the book of Moshe's Torah, that whole stones should be used, stones that had not been hewn by implements of iron. They offered burnt sacrifices to God and presented peace offerings. He inscribed upon the stones the repetition of Moshe's Torah that he had presented to the people of Israel ... Afterwards, he read all of the words of instruction, the blessing and the curse, in accordance with what is stated in the Book of the Torah. Nothing that Moshe had commanded was omitted, for Yehoshua read all of it in the presence of the entire congregation of Israel, the women, the children, and the converts who were among them... (8:30-35)

Here again, the text describes the careful fulfillment of a Deuteronomic injunction. In its fuller context, the passage from Devarim also links warfare to the rite of the building of the altar at Mount Eval:

If you carefully observe this commandment that I command you today to fulfill, to love God your Lord, to follow all of His ways and to cleave to him. Then God will drive out all of these nations from before you, and you will displace nations greater and stronger than yourselves ... No man will stand before you, for God will place the fear and dread of you upon the whole land in which you shall tread, just as He spoke to you.

Behold, I place before this day the blessing and the curse ... The blessing if you listen to the commandments of God your Lord ... and the curse if you do not ... but rather go astray after other gods that you do not know ... When God your Lord brings you into the land...then you shall proclaim the blessing at Mount Gerizim and the curse at Mount Eval ..." (Devarim 11:22-30)

Later in the book, this rite is spelled out at greater length and the unusual altar is described:

Moshe and the elders commanded the people saying: Observe all of the commandments that I command you this day. On the day that you pass over the Yarden into the land that God your

Lord gives you than you shall erect large stones and cover them with plaster. You shall inscribe upon them all of the words of this Torah when you pass over, in order that you might enter the land that God your Lord gives you, a land flowing with milk and honey ... you shall erect these stones at Mount Eval ... you shall build an altar to God your Lord, an altar of stones that are not cut by iron. You shall rather build the altar of God your Lord with whole stones, and you shall offer burnt sacrifices...you shall inscribe upon the stones all of the words of this Torah very clearly...' (Devarim 27:1-8).

#### THE CONDITIONAL CHARACTER OF ISRAEL'S CONQUEST

The Torah's command contains a number of distinct elements. There is an instruction to erect an altar of unhewn stones and to offer sacrifices upon it, an injunction to inscribe those stones with the text of the Torah, and a commandment to pronounce the 'blessing and the curse' in the presence of the entire assembly of the people of Israel. The theme that informs the passages is the polemic against idolatry and the inheritance of the land of Canaan, two foundation ideas that are invariably linked throughout the Torah and especially in Devarim. Overall, then, the core of the assembly is to emphasize that Israel's entry, settlement, and success in their new land are by no means guaranteed. Rather, the matter is completely conditional upon the people being faithful to God and to His commandments and steadfast in their rejection of idolatry and its licentious rites.

Thus, the altar, the potent symbol of the relationship between heaven and earth, between God and the people, is to be constructed of whole stones that have not been defiled by implements of iron. This unusual provision was first mentioned at Sinai, in the aftermath of the Revelation of the Decalogue:

God said to Moshe: 'Behold, you have all seen that I have addressed you from the heavens. Do not fashion gods of silver or gold for Me, do not make them for yourselves. Prepare an altar of earth for Me and offer upon it your burnt sacrifices and peace offerings, your sheep and cattle. Wherever I shall make My name known, I will come and bless you. If you fashion an altar of stones then do not make it of hewn stones, for you have defiled it by raising your sword upon it. Do not ascend to My altar by stairs, lest your nakedness be exposed upon it. (Shemot 20:18-22)

As Rashi explains: "The purpose of the altar is to lengthen man's lifespan, while implements of iron (i.e. weapons) shorten it. It is therefore improper for the executor to be raised upon the preserver" (commentary to Shemot 20:22). In other words, the altar must embody the ideal of peace and harmony, of closeness to God and to the fulfillment of His will. It cannot simultaneously champion the cause of bloodshed, warfare, and death. Its whole, unblemished stones embody the ideal of moral and ethical perfection, around which our relationship with God ought to revolve.

At Eval the altar was to include one additional element: upon its stones were to be inscribed the words of the Torah. More significantly, the Talmud asserts (Sota 33b) that not only was the Deuteronomic text emblazoned upon the plaster coating of those stones, but also that text's translation was inscribed next to it, in the seventy extant languages of the day (!). The thrust of these traditions is clear: the stones of that altar will proclaim loud and clear the foundation ideas that constitute Israel's bequest to the larger world. The laws that will frame the social order of their state must be just and upright, for the people of Israel are the bearers of God's word into the world. Therefore, how they establish their state in Canaan and upon what laws they will found it are not only local or regional concerns. Because the people of Israel are God's representatives their state and its laws inevitably reflect upon Him. If Israel upholds the Torah and its just laws, then the truth of God's Oneness, Incorporeality, and associated ethical absolutes is proclaimed. If Israel strays and instead adopts the dubiousness of polytheism and its underlying moral relativism, then God's name is profaned and His just statutes are maligned.

## CONCLUSION

No wonder Rabbinic tradition insists, against the straightforward chronology of the book and at the danger of introducing serious geographical difficulties, that the people of Israel fulfilled the injunction to erect the altar at Mount Eval ON THE VERY DAY that they crossed the Yarden and entered the land, as the literal reading of Deuteronomy implies: "On the day that you pass over the Yarden into the land that God your Lord gives you, than you shall erect large stones and cover them with plaster..." (27:3). The intent of their reading was to emphatically declare that Israel could only survive the passage over the Yarden and the entry into Canaan if they put God's Torah at the forefront of their concerns and their mission as His people as their national objective. In the context of Sefer Yehoshua, the message is especially pertinent. Israel's war of conquest must not become a war of pillage, booty and sacrilege.

Their army must adopt much more exalted aims. Though they will need to shed blood in order to secure their place in the land, they are not to be consumed by that bloodshed so that it becomes the foundation of their state and the essence of its regional policies. Though they are not permitted to brook any compromises with idolatry, nevertheless they are to remain cognizant of the spark of divinity that animates and ennobles every human being.

No wonder also that the original Hebrew text of the Book introduces no chapter break between the end of the Mount Eval account and the observation that "when all of the kings on the (western) side of the Yarden heard...they gathered together as one to do battle with Yehoshua and with Israel as a single man". According to the conventional division (which we pointed out earlier is of Christian origin), these verses introduce the beginning of chapter 9, rather than forming the conclusion of Chapter 8 and the account of the altar at Eval. The original Hebrew textual divisions may very well be implying that not only were the Canaanite kings alarmed by the Israelite victories over Yericho and A'i. They may in fact have been even more discomfited by the assembly at Mount Eval, for the universal adoption of its God-based moral manifesto would effectively spell the end of their tyrannical way of life. Israel's Torah stood in complete and utter opposition to all that bankrupt Canaanite idolatry asserted, and it proclaimed all of life's sacred values that Ba'al and his cohorts could never uphold.

Therefore, like the dignified removal of the King of A'i from the gallows, in spite of the complete annihilation of the town's inhabitants that preceded, the description of the building of an altar at Eval in the aftermath of Israel's bloody victory is not a study in irreconcilable contrasts. Rather, it is the deliberate introduction of more exalted ideals that, if adopted and nurtured, can yet transform the world of man.

Next time we will consider the ruse of the Gibeonites described in chapter 9 of Sefer Yehoshua. Readers are kindly requested to prepare.