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Introduction to the Prophets:

Sefer Yehoshua - Chapter 5

Shiur #10: The Rite of Circumcision at the Yarden

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INTRODUCTION

Having successfully crossed the Yarden, the people of Israel are now encamped on its western side, not far from Yericho. Last week, we considered the memorial of the double set of twelve stones, one set placed into the Yarden and the other removed from the river to accompany the people to their new camp. At the time, Yehoshua indicated the purpose of the dual commemoration: on the one hand to indicate God's miraculous intervention through the agency of the Ark, and on the other hand to emphasize Israel's steadfast trust in fearlessly crossing into the Promised Land. Of course, the similarities to Yam Suf were numerous, but as we discovered, the two pivotal events were more properly appreciated in contrast. The theme of contrast will continue to preoccupy us as we begin the study of Chapter 5, for the text will again deliberately invite us to recall events associated with the Exodus from Egypt.

When all of the Amorite kings on the western side of the Yarden, and all of the Canaanite kings on the sea shore heard that God had dried up the waters of the Yarden before the people of Israel until they had passed, their hearts melted and they had no more spirit in them to fight the people of Israel (Yehoshua 5:1).

This introductory verse admirably encapsulates the aftermath of Israel's crossing of the Yarden. For the people of Israel, the traversal of its

waters was an important transformative act that highlighted their shedding of their wilderness existence, a life characterized by minimal active initiative on their part and maximal overt intervention by God. Henceforth, they would be expected to demonstrate greater resolve and enterprise, while still remaining cognizant of God's central role in the successful outcome. For the peoples of Canaan, on the other hand, the miracle at the Yarden had a very different purpose: to instill unprecedented fear, dread, and surrender to a degree more pronounced than that described by Rachav before Israel's passage.

#### UNDERSTANDING THE TOPOGRAPHY OF CANAAN

As we stand poised to embark on the chapters of 'conquest and settlement,' it is important to be aware of some salient geographical and political features of the Canaanite countryside. The uniqueness of the land of Canaan west of the Yarden is a function of its unusual variety of climatic and topographic zones. Although constituting a relatively small geographic area that forms the natural land bridge between Africa and Asia, Canaan in fact contains a great diversity of landscapes. The snow-covered peaks of the Chermon range to the north give way to the verdant and rolling countryside of the Galil, which then abruptly descends to the fertile and hot valleys of the Kinneret basin. From here, the landscape rises again to form the limestone hills of the central region and the arid and barren cliffs of the Negev to the south. From west to east, the flat and mostly traversable Mediterranean seashore yields to the foothills that rise to form the central hills, but then the landscape abruptly cascades into the Jordan rift and finally trails off into the desolate and stark deserts to the east. The crest of the central hill country constitutes the regional watershed, dividing the coastal fertile valleys and western hill terraces that are watered by the Mediterranean's rain clouds from the inhospitable and desiccated wilderness to the east. This land of contrasts is highlighted by the fact that while the Sea of Kinneret is the only substantial body of fresh water in the area, Yam Hamelach (the Dead Sea) only 120 kilometers to its south contains the highest salinity of any sea in the world.

The variegated terrain of Canaan had the pronounced effect of making political unity difficult to achieve at all periods of Canaanite (and later, Israelite) history. The tribes that inhabited Canaan tended to come together to form independent city-states that controlled their immediate regions and little else. Frequently, these cities were in conflict with each other and rarely cooperated on matters of national importance. During no period of Canaanite history do we find the development of political models based upon allegiance to an absolute and central authority, such as were to be found to Canaan's west in Egypt or to its east in Mesopotamia. Those latter two realms were both characterized by great and undifferentiated river valleys that tended to nurture populations prone to desiring political unity and content to brave its typical ancient manifestation of absolute monarchical rule.

In Canaan, the Amorite tribes that originally hailed from Asia Minor and the lands northeast of the Jordan inhabited the hill country, while the fertile coastal valleys were settled and extensively farmed by the more materially advanced peoples whose cities and towns dotted the seaboard all the way up to Phoenicia. Thus, the above cited verse is quite precise in speaking of numerous 'Amorite kings' and 'Canaanite kings,' for the land was effectively carved up among their assorted petty fiefdoms. The importance of this fact for the people of Israel is therefore obvious. Their task of conquest will be made easier by the absence of any real united front that can oppose them. Even the emerging tribal confederacies of Canaanite city states (hurriedly hatched in the aftermath of Yericho's fall) will present much less of a threat than a cohesively joined national polity. Generally speaking, therefore, the conquest of Canaan will unfold as the successive fall of individual towns and cities that only taken together could be said to constitute a campaign of countrywide scope.

#### THE CIRCUMCISION OF THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL - TWICE

This brief introductory verse is quickly passed over, though, as the text suddenly refocuses our attention on another matter entirely:

At that time, God said to Yehoshua; "Make blades of flint and circumcise the people of Israel on a second occasion." Yehoshua made blades of flint and circumcised the people of Israel at the 'Hill of Foreskins.' This is the matter concerning the circumcision performed by Yehoshua. All of the people who had left Egypt, the males of military age, had perished in the wilderness on the journey after having left Egypt. All those who had left (Egypt) were circumcised, but all those who had been born in the wilderness while traveling, after the Exodus from Egypt, were not... (Yehoshua 5:2-5).

This mass rite of circumcision performed by Yehoshua was meant to rectify a striking omission: the males who had left the land of Egypt some forty years before had been circumcised, as the day of liberation drew near, but all those subsequently born and raised in the wilderness were uncircumcised. Although the relevant texts in the Book of Shemot fail to say so explicitly, they imply that during the enslavement, the commandment of circumcision had fallen into neglect! The Paschal Sacrifice, presented on the very eve of the Exodus, could not be brought by males who were uncircumcised (see Shemot 12:43-50), and therefore a mass rite of circumcision must have taken place a short time before the flight from Egypt. During the course of the wilderness wanderings, all of the circumcised adults who had left the land of Egypt eventually perished as a result of the episode of the Spies. Those who had been born in the wilderness, on the other hand, remained uncircumcised, as the command of circumcision was again apparently disregarded, so that the males who entered the land were in need of performing it.

#### AVRAHAM AND THE RITE OF CIRCUMCISION

Our text thus sets up a double parallel in which the initially uncircumcised generation of the enslavement corresponds to the uncircumcised generation of the wilderness, while the circumcision of the Exodus is like the circumcision of the entry into Canaan. To understand the ramifications of these parallels, it is necessary to briefly revisit

the command of circumcision as it is presented for the first time in Bereishit 17:1-14.

When Avram was ninety-nine years old, God appeared to him and said, "I am Almighty God, walk before me and be pure of heart. I will fulfill My covenant with you and shall increase you greatly... Your name shall no longer be Avram, but rather Avraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations... I will give you and your descendants after you the land of your sojournings, the entire land of Canaan as an inheritance forever, and I shall be their God." God said to Avraham, "You shall observe my covenant, you and your descendants forever. This is My covenant that you shall observe between Me and you and your descendants after you, all of your males shall be circumcised. You shall remove the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall constitute the sign of the covenant between Me and you. At the age of eight days shall all of your males be circumcised forever... He who remains uncircumcised and does not remove the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from among his people, for he has abrogated My commandment.

#### THE ESSENCE OF THE IDEA

The passage above, describing the special relationship between God and the aged Patriarch Avraham, suggests that the covenant sealed between them both shall be indicated on the bodies of Avraham and his descendants by the physical mark of circumcision. Without digressing to discuss the substantial literature devoted to explaining this unusual commandment, it should be obvious that at its most essential core, circumcision denotes the fostering of an identification with a larger context of people. As individuals, people may continue to lead their circumscribed and unconnected lives, but when a group of them are provided with a similar indelible physical mark on their bodies, that cannot but imply their coming together in some sort of communal or national association.

The descendants of Avraham, the people of Israel, are henceforth identifiable as a separate faith community. No wonder that God's command

is accompanied in context by Avraham's change of name, because from now on his household will be similarly charged with a new destiny and mission. The covenant between God and Avraham is one in which his descendants will be responsible for upholding God's commands, and He in return will relate to them as His special people. Since that covenant is eternal, and can never be abrogated by either 'party,' it is indicated by a physical bodily sign that is bound up with the male's reproductive capacity. Individuals may die, but the nation that they forge through a transcending common purpose lives on in perpetuity through their descendants.

What is especially meaningful for our purposes is the progression of God's unfolding revelation to Avraham: the promise of the covenant is followed by his name change. This in turn is succeeded by God's oath to maintain the eternal bond between Avraham's descendants and the land of Canaan, and the passage then concludes with the command of circumcision and the consequences of non-compliance. In other words, the nation-in-the-making that will champion God's covenant will be charged with a unique and historic role that will be most effectively realized in its own land, the land of Canaan. The land is thus not simply a convenient backdrop for the covenant's fulfillment, but it rather acts as the very glue binding together the disparate elements constituting the national mission. The individual descendants of Avraham will henceforth be identified as fulfilling a crucial role in a larger and more comprehensive design, whose ultimate realization necessarily depends upon the framework that only national autonomy can provide.

It is therefore eminently reasonable that the two mass rites of circumcision occur at moments of intense national determination. As the people prepare to leave Egypt, they are for the first time identified as a nation and not only as a collection of tribal units. As they enter the land some forty years later, they are about to embark on a new stage of nationhood, for their collective yearnings will now become capable of attainment. How telling indeed that the consequence of abrogating the rite of circumcision spells, for the individual, the penalty of being 'cut off

from his people,' as if the deliberate attempt to negate identification with the larger nation can only be met by a similar counter-response.

Next time, we shall continue our discussion by investigating the people's failure to practice circumcision during the sojourn in the wilderness. We will also consider their fulfillment of the Paschal Sacrifice, the cessation of the miraculous manna, and the mysterious appearance of the 'Angel of the Lord' at the conclusion of Chapter 5. Readers are kindly asked to complete this chapter, which properly concludes with the first verse of Chapter 6.