

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

Introduction to the Prophets:

Sefer Yehoshua – Chapter 7

Shiur #15: Israel's First Setback

By Rav Michael Hattin

INTRODUCTION

Last time, we read of Israel's first encounter on the battlefield with the Canaanites. After circling the stout ramparts of Yericho for seven consecutive days, the walls of the city came crashing down, and the Israelites easily captured it and laid it waste. About fifty years ago, between 1952 and 1958, the site of Yericho was extensively excavated by the British archaeologist Kathleen Kenyon on behalf of the British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem. Her investigations established that the earliest settlement at the site dated from the 10th to 8th millennium BCE, making Yericho perhaps the earliest urban concentration in the world. Ostensibly, her research also demonstrated that the Biblical claim of the entire wall falling away was unsubstantiated by the archaeological record, since she found no evidence of the complete collapse of the outermost fortifications.

Careful readers of course, will have already noted that the text never indicates that the ENTIRE wall of the city gave way. Quite the contrary: recall that of all of the city's inhabitants, only Rachav the Harlot and her extended family, crowded into her humble dwelling, were preserved, for she had saved the two spies sent by Yehoshua to scope out the city's defenses. Rachav did as she had been instructed by the escaping spies, tying the scarlet cord in her window to alert the invading Israelite forces that the inhabitants of her home were to be preserved (2:2:18-19). However, earlier the text clearly indicated that Rachav's domicile "was in the city wall, for she dwelt in the wall" (2:15). In other words,

the fact that immediately after the fall of the city wall, the spies hurried to Rachav's house to rescue her and her family ahead of the Israelite troops, indicates that parts of the wall must have been still intact. So concludes Rabbi David Kimchi (Radak, thirteenth century Provence) in his commentary on 6:5 –

The text states that 'the city wall will crumble in its place' but what about the house of Rachav that was sited in the city wall? It is not likely that she and her family were preserved although their house was destroyed, for the text would have not passed over such a miracle in silence. Also, Yehoshua commanded the spies to 'go to the HOUSE of the harlot and save them...' (6:22), implying that her house was intact and did not fall. Rather, it would seem to me that not the entire city wall collapsed, but only that section that faced the Israelite forces. There they attacked, while Rachav's house was situated in another section of the wall that did not fall.

Often, perceived conflicts between the Tanakh and the archaeological record are predicated upon erroneous readings of the text rather than faulty scholarship. We may even go so far as to argue that as an unintended byproduct, archaeology can assist us in testing the accuracy of a textual reading. The popular and unschooled perception of the proverbial walls of Jericho completely and utterly tumbling down, is now known to be incorrect. What Radak was able to establish based upon no more empirical evidence than could be gleaned from an extremely thorough, conscientious and rigorous study of the relevant texts, was in fact corroborated six centuries later by the excavator's spade.

Sometimes, though, the opposite is true – the fault of inconsistency lies not with the interpretation of the text but rather with the erroneous methodology or incorrect conclusions of the excavator. Either way, we should regard the contributions of archaeology to Biblical study with anticipation but also circumspection. There is no doubt that archaeology and its related fields have much to contribute to the understanding of the Biblical text. However, under no circumstances should the foundations of one's faith (or lack thereof!) be predicated upon its 'conclusions,' for they are notoriously subject to adjustment, revision, and reinterpretation as new finds and information become available.

A TENUOUS SELF-CONFIDENCE

Leaving behind the ruins of Yericho, the story now shifts to the 'trespass of Achan.' Let us bear in mind that until this juncture, the tone of all of the narratives has been entirely positive. Yehoshua has deftly navigated the rough sea of the transition of leadership without mishap, and the people of Israel have admirably succeeded in rectifying the disastrous failures of their forebears. The incident of Achan is therefore a watershed, for it marks the first time since Moshe's death that the people experience disappointment and dejection. Curiously, though, their failure is borne out not by direct Divine communication, but rather by a confluence of circumstances that leave no doubt about their origin and import.

"Yehoshua sent men from Yericho to the A'i, east of Beit El. He said to them: 'Go and spy out the land.' The men went and spied out the A'i. They returned to Yehoshua and said: 'It is not necessary for all of the people to go. Let two or three thousand men go to strike at the A'i. Do not tire out all of the men, for they [the people of the A'i] are few in number.' About three thousand of the people went there, but they fled before the men of the A'i. The men of the A'i smote about thirty-six men and pursued them from before the gate until the Shevarim. They struck them down at the descent, and the heart of the people melted and turned to water" (7:2-5).

THE REVERSAL OF THE TRIUMPH AT YERICHO

The above passage is significant on a number of counts. First of all, note that Yehoshua dispatches spies to reconnoiter the A'i, following the precedent of Yericho. Thus, his miraculous victory over the latter has not at all infected him with the overbearing self-assurance that has condemned many a brilliant strategist to the proverbial dustbin of military history. At the same time, the spies return with a reasonable and levelheaded assessment that contains none of the triumphalist language employed by the first set of

spies sent to search out Yericho. The overall effect is to suggest that the attack on the A'i is planned and executed with care and forethought.

How doubly shocking, then, is what follows, for the seemingly outgunned men of the A'i, although no doubt shaken by the astonishing news of Yericho's miraculous capture, easily succeed in repelling the Israelite onslaught, and even inflict a number of casualties. We may gauge the fragile nature of Israel's confidence by noting that although only thirty-six men of Yehoshua's strike force are killed, out of a contingent that numbers two or three thousand, nevertheless, the people are thrown into a panic. In fact, their melting hearts that faint away are a direct reference to Rachav the Harlot's description of the terrified Yerichoites, who, when they heard of Israel's triumphs, their stout "hearts turned to water" (2:11)! The text, therefore, presents the defeat at the A'i as the complete reversal of the victory at Yericho.

YEHOSHUA'S REACTION – ACT AND WORD

Most astonishing of all, however, is Yehoshua's impassioned reaction. Tearing his clothing, he falls before the Ark of the Lord along with the elders of Israel. They place dust upon their heads, which, coupled with the rending of garments, is employed elsewhere in Tanakh as a sign of abject grief and mourning (see Shemuel 1:4:12, 2:1:2, etc.). Yehoshua cries out to God:

Oh, Almighty God Lord, why have you caused this nation to pass over the Yarden, only to give us up into the hands of the Amorites who will destroy us? If only we had desired to remain on the Yarden's other side! Please, Almighty God, what shall I say after Israel has fled before its foes? The Canaanites and all of the inhabitants of this land will hear of it and turn against us, obliterating our name from the land. What shall You then do for the sake of Your great name? (7:6-9)

Yehoshua's words, almost defeatist in tone, recall long-forgotten events that had mercifully all but been expunged from Israel's collective memory. First, note that the last time we saw

Yehoshua tear his clothing in mourning was at the debacle of the spies sent by Moshe, a doomed expedition in which Yehoshua had taken part. When ten of those spies returned with their hopeless message, only two members of the group opposed them: Yehoshua and Calev. Soon realizing that their words of encouragement could not stem the people's panic, the two "tore their garments" as Moshe and Aharon "fell down upon their faces before the whole congregation of Israel" (Bemidbar 14:5-6).

Second, Yehoshua's outcry, including the remarkable yearning never to have entered Canaan, recalls the people of Israel's most aggrieved moment of overwhelming defeat: "The whole congregation raised their voices and the people cried that night. All of the people of Israel complained to Moshe and Aharon and said to them: 'if only we would have died in the land of Egypt, or in this wilderness, if only we would have died! Why does God bring us into this land to perish by the sword, our women and children will be despoiled. It is better for us to return to Egypt!'" How telling, therefore, that both Yehoshua's deed as well as his heated words finally recall the formative event of forty years before that had recast Israel's history. The introductory narratives that constitute the book of Yehoshua's first five chapters lack any explicit reference to the episode of Moshe's spies. This is in spite of the fact that so many of those same episodes are clear analogs to that notorious event. It is almost as if the dark and grotesque phantom of the spies, sublimated, submerged and seemingly (but really never entirely) overcome, had to be confronted one last time in order to finally purge it from the national conscience forever. All of its painful hallmarks – the panic, disbelief, hesitation, and despondency – are assembled here at the Battle of the A'i, this time crying out for a more satisfying resolution. In considering Yehoshua's outcry, we may note in contrast that never had Moshe, even in his most dejected moments, questioned God's motives in bringing the people forth from Egypt, leading them into the wilderness, or directing their emergence from it in preparation for the Yarden's traversal.

INVOKING GOD'S 'NAME'

Unlike his condemned compatriots who could not see beyond their own fear, Yehoshua's concluding words, his invocation of God's 'great Name,' indicates that his initial deliberate references to the spies carry other connotations besides hopelessness. Like his mentor Moshe before him, who assuaged God's wrath by appealing to His special relationship with Israel (see Shemot 32:11-14, Bemidbar 14:11-20), Yehoshua recalls the insoluble link that binds God to His people. Since God's presence in the world, i.e. His 'great name,' depends on Israel's service as the bearer of His message, their destruction as a people would effectively end God's involvement in human history. Should Israel disappear, no one else would remain to champion the exalted cause of ethical monotheism, no other nation to proclaim God's Oneness or the absolute morality that is its necessary and most important corollary. In effect, Yehoshua proclaims that, notwithstanding Israel's failures, there must be Divine forgiveness and the opportunity for rectification, if not for Israel's sake then for the sake of God's own 'survival.' Therefore, Yehoshua's declaration is not a mournful dirge of defeat but rather a cautious call to go forwards.

God's response is swift and direct. Calling upon Yehoshua to rise up, God informs the leader that:

The people of Israel have sinned and have also abrogated My covenant that I commanded them, and have also taken from the consecrated property, and have also stolen, and have also denied and have also placed [it] in their vessels. The people of Israel will not be able to stand before their foes, for they will flee from before them, for they have become banned. I will no longer be with you if you do not destroy the banned matter from your midst! (7:10-12)

This stark formulation, employing five usages of the 'and also' in a single verse, implies a progressive list of indiscretions assembled in ascending order: the as-of-yet anonymous perpetrator has sinned, abrogating Yehoshua's directive not to take from the spoils. This act of theft has required the perpetrator (or perpetrators) to subsequently deny any wrongdoing and, finally, to resort to hiding the loot. Severe consequences of the crime, in

the form of defeat at the hands of the Canaanites, will not be waived until the people of Israel apprehend and punish the guilty parties.

This Divine rejoinder concisely formulates one of the Tanakh's most significant and abiding principles, a doctrine that serves as a foundation for the remainder of Biblical history and beyond. In effect, God binds the destiny of Israel as a people to their moral and ritual conduct. When the nation of Israel as a whole sincerely observes God's laws and genuinely fulfills His commands, then they enjoy the success and triumph that are the product of His direct involvement, overt or otherwise, in human history. But, when they stray from His directives and replace His guiding teachings with false gods of their own making, then they experience all of the failures that more 'natural' circumstances would tend to bring about. Of course, an individual's fortunes typically follow more convoluted pathways, so that evil people may enjoy victory, while the righteous may perish, but the national aspect operates according to this more perceptible overriding axiom. We shall, in fact, encounter this idea over and over again as Yehoshua and the rest of the prophetic writings unfold.

Next time, we will conclude chapter seven by considering the specific trespass of Achan and attempting to correlate his punishment to the crime. Readers are requested to complete their preparations of chapter seven.