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ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

Introduction to the Prophets:

Shiur #22: Sefer Yehoshua – Chapter 11  
Divine Design and Human Initiative

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## INTRODUCTION

Last time, we examined the miracle at the battle of Giv'on, as the sun "stood still" while Israel finished routing of its foes. That enemy army was comprised of at least five distinct forces, the respective militias of the five "Kings of the South." These monarchs controlled territories in the southern hill country of Canaan as well as in its foothills that descended to the coastal plane. Their defeat at the hands of Yehoshua effectively ended any military opposition to the slow but steady Israelite expansion into this territory, the area later associated with the tribal lands of Yehuda and Binyamin. At the same time, by capturing the towns of Yarmut, Lachish and Eglon, all of them strategically sited at the western approaches to these hills, Yehoshua obviated any military involvement by the Canaanites who populated the fertile coastal plain. The remaining Canaanites of the hill country would have to oppose Yehoshua's army alone.

Recall that Israel's first battle was against Yericho, the border city that guarded the entry into the central area of the plateau. After its miraculous fall, Yehoshua went on to attack the towns of A'i and Beit El, both situated to the west of Yericho, and eventually concluded a pact with the people of Giv'on, to the southwest of the A'i. Significantly, the ancient and important city of Shechem (modern-day Nablus), also inhabited by the same Chivite stock as Giv'on, is completely absent from the account of the Israelite conquest of the area, but was indicated as the site of the national assembly held by Yehoshua after the fall of the A'i. This may very well imply that its people offered no resistance to the Israelite onslaught and perhaps even abetted Israel's entry into the land.

The geographic progression of Yehoshua's battles can therefore be reconstructed and appreciated: first, he attacked and captured the cities of the central hill country, for through their conquest he was able to drive a wedge between the southern and northern halves of this plateau. The southern kings were no longer able to enlist the support of their northern neighbors in the campaign against the Israelites, and this made their conquest immeasurably easier. Now the northern kings similarly stood alone, led by the powerful King of Chazor, who exercised his rule over a substantial population. The preceding Israelite victory over the Kings of the South and their supporters had effectively precluded the formation of a broader and more menacing coalition, and the northern forces were defeated. In fact, the impressive ruins of city of Chazor, still located north of Lake Kinneret, provide mute but unassailable testimony to the Biblical account of Yehoshua's conquest and burning of the city.

## THE PROGRESSION OF THE BATTLES

There is another progression that we may trace by examining the description of Yehoshua's battles, and to recognize it is to appreciate one of the book's most enduring themes. For convenience, let us list the major battles of these first eleven chapters while noting any unusual expressions of Divine involvement that accompany the encounters. Bear in mind that the wars against the southern and northern kings also included the capture of many associated towns that may not have initially participated in the conflict and are therefore somewhat tangential to the discussion.

(1) Yericho – Chapter 6. The ramparts and walls of the city tumbled down at the sound of the people's outcry that followed the final, extended shofar blast.

(2) A'i – Chapter 8. At Yehoshua's preordained signal of the raised spear, Israel's forces ambushed and seized the open city, while his remaining troops counter attacked and defeated the people of A'i and Beit El.

(3) Southern Kings – Chapter 10. The fleeing Canaanite forces were struck down by a sudden storm of hailstones, and the sun stood still to allow Israel to complete the rout.

(4) Northern Kings – Chapter 11.

It will be immediately noted that no overt expressions of Divine involvement at all seem to accompany the battles against the Northern Kings, although God does clearly suggest that the victory is His: "God said to Yehoshua: 'Be not afraid of them, for tomorrow at this time I will give all of them as corpses before Israel. You shall cripple their horses and burn their chariots...'" (11:6). Conversely, at Yericho the Israelites are granted victory almost effortlessly, for when "the people heard the sound of the shofar, they cried out loudly. The wall fell down upon itself and the people entered the city round about it and captured it..." (6:20). This telling contrast between these two battles is quite pronounced and finds expression in the text as well.

#### YERICHO VS. THE KINGS OF THE NORTH

At Yericho the thrust of the narrative is the role of the Ark of the Covenant, the physical manifestation of God's presence, while also emphasizing the passage of seven days, the hallmark of God's involvement in time. The Ark leads the troops as they circle the walls of the city, and the seven-day campaign, culminating in seven circuits of the walls on the seventh day, unambiguously recalls not only to God's creation of the world, but also His ongoing embrace of human history, which is marked by that unending seven-day cycle. It is the shofar that wages war at Yericho, the sonorous blast that in the Torah often accompanies the revelation of God's glory (see Shemot 19:9-25, VaYikra 23:23-25). The Israelites were mere followers in the procession around the walls, their only contribution to the victory consisting of an inspired shout let loose as the Ark completed its seventh circuit on the seventh day. If ever there was a clash that was convincingly won by troops that did not need to fire even a single shot, it was at Yericho.

How different the battle against the Northern Kings! Here, Yehoshua engaged them in battle at Mei Merom, and, attacking suddenly, "they [Israel] fell upon them" (11:7). The Israelites struck their enemies and pursued them as far as Tzidon (Sidon on the Lebanese coast), leaving no remnant of the enemy forces. Israel debilitated their foe's battle horses and destroyed their chariots. While the text mentions that "God gave them into Israel's hand" (11:8), it offers no further elaboration on the nature of His involvement. At the same time, the text recurrently emphasizes not God's role but rather Yehoshua's:

"Yehoshua and all of the people of war arrived at Mei Merom suddenly..." (11:7); "Yehoshua did to them as God commanded..." (11:9); "Yehoshua returned at that time and captured Chazor" (11:10); "all of these king's cities as well as their kings, Yehoshua captured..." (11:12); "Yehoshua conquered all of this land..." (11:16); "for many days Yehoshua waged war against all of these kings..." (11:18); "at that time, Yehoshua came and cut down the giants..." (11:21); and, finally, "Yehoshua captured the whole land, just as God had spoken to Moshe, and Yehoshua apportioned it to Israel according to their divisions and tribes, and then the land was quiet from warfare" (11:23).

#### A'I AND THE KINGS OF THE SOUTH

The two intermediate battles, that against the A'i and that against the Southern Kings, can now be more subtly and profoundly appreciated when considered within the above outlined progression. At the battle of the A'i, God provided both the battle plan as well as the pivotal signal. He bid Yehoshua "place an ambush behind the city" (8:2) which he dutifully did, in the guise of five thousand chosen men. After drawing out the town's defenders by feigning retreat, Yehoshua visually signaled to the ambush force to enter the open gates by raising his spear at God's behest:

God said to Yehoshua: "raise the spear that is in your hand towards the A'i for I will give it into your hand." Yehoshua raised the spear that was in his hand towards the town. The ambush force quickly arose from their place and ran as he lifted his hand. They entered the city and captured it... (8:18-19).

In other words, while Yehoshua and the people had to physically engage the enemy in battle and defeat them, it is God Who manifestly delivered victory by providing the strategic planning and critical intelligence. The text does not indicate whether God's initial directives concerning the ambush were only outlines that Yehoshua had to tactically develop and implement, or rather complete battle plans, which, for the benefit of the reader, are only mentioned in passing. Either way, the impulse for the offensive as well as its pivotal timing were provided by God, while the actual fighting and pursuit of the enemy were executed by the Israelite forces under Yehoshua's command. The victory may, therefore, be described as a dynamic combination of overt Divine intervention and inspired human deed.

At the next battle, the Southern Kings ominously gathered their forces at Giv'on and prepare to attack their erstwhile comrades in retaliation for the Giv'onites having concluded a non-aggression pact with the Israelites. Yehoshua mustered his forces and, marching all night from Gilgal, mounted a sudden counter attack. The enemy forces were discomfited and defeated and began fleeing as their lines crumbled. At that moment God intervened by raining down hailstones upon the Southern Kings' troops and then delaying the sundown, which together allowed Israel to utterly rout and destroy the enemy forces. Thus, while God again intervened in the human arena to ensure an Israelite victory, it was only AFTER His people had engaged the enemy in battle and roundly defeated them. God limited his intervention the aftermath of victory. God allowed Yehoshua the decisive opportunity to wipe out the enemy so that they could not later regroup for battle, but the initial triumph was entirely a function of human initiative and will.

#### THE DECLINE OF OVERT DIVINE INTERVENTION

Considering these "chapters of conquest" in broad terms yields a remarkable progression. As the battle narratives unfold, God's overt intervention declines, matched by an increase in Israel's active participation in their own victories. However, the narrator is exceedingly careful to make clear that

decreased visible Divine intervention must not be misconstrued as absence, diminished concern or minimal engagement in human affairs. God is just as aware, just as immediate, and just as instrumental in guiding events according to His will. The only thing that has changed over the course of the chapters is the transparency and prominence of that involvement. The goal is to afford human beings the opportunity to take an active part in their destiny, to choose its trajectory if not its outcome, and to spiritually grow and mature as a result.

In other words, these chapters argue forcefully for a transformation of the "Wilderness Existence" in which the tribes of Israel were miraculously nourished by bread from the sky, sustained by water from the rock, and shielded from harm by God's ever present clouds of glory. In the dimension of wilderness living that characterized Israelite experience from the time of the Exodus until the entry into the land of Canaan, God had been constantly manifest, His saving power and stern correction only a heartbeat away. Human will and free choice may have existed in real quantities even in such a setting, but they were inevitably awed and overruled by Divine transcendence.

#### BUILDING A JEWISH KINGDOM ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE JORDAN

On the other side of the Jordan, God invited the people to live more "normal" lives, sheltered from the constant glare of His radiance and detached from the constant and unavoidable awareness of His presence. As a result, their struggle of faith was made more acute, for God's intentional retreat into the concealing layers of human artifice allowed for an alternative interpretation of events that tends to downplay if not deny Divine involvement, which to a corresponding degree encouraged human hubris. At the same time, though, God's concealment afforded human beings the possibility to be active players in their own lives, allowing them to experience the pain of their bad choices and the joy of the good, to learn from their failures and to overcome the inevitable setbacks that are the result of human error.

In short, during the course of these pivotal chapters, the people of Israel are incrementally made to realize that to forge their own place in the world as God's nation they will need to exercise strength of will, and will be called upon over and over again to employ ingenuity and ambition. If, in the process, they can remain true to God's teachings, then He in turn will not let them down. He will be quietly but constantly by their side as they build their state and He will crown their efforts with success.

Readers are requested to read chapter 12, as we prepare to complete the second section of Yehoshua.