

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION  
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

Introduction to the Prophets:

Sefer Yehoshua – Chapter 3 Conclusion

Shiur #7: Crossing the Yarden – The Theme of Passage

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## INTRODUCTION

Last time we began to study the account of the crossing of the Yarden, described in Chapter 3 of Sefer Yehoshua. We considered the chronology of the events, examined the special significance of the Ark, and pointed out the parallel to the initial journey from Sinai. This week, we will analyze the episodes and details of our chapter in light of their most striking analog: the splitting of the 'Yam Suf' (Sea of Reeds) and the passage of Israel through its midst 'on dry land.'

Let us begin by noting the procession of events as they unfold in Sefer Yehoshua, Chapter 3:

- 1) The people journey to the banks of the Yarden and encamp overnight at its edge.
- 2) The officers enjoin them to maintain a respectful distance from the Ark.
- 3) Yehoshua tells the people to 'sanctify' themselves in preparation for the following day's 'wondrous' events, but does not announce what those events will be.
- 4) God tells Yehoshua that He will 'exalt' him in the eyes of all Israel, and they will 'know' that He will be with Yehoshua always, just as He assisted Moshe.
- 5) Yehoshua announces to the people that when the feet of the kohanim who bear the Ark enter the waters of the river, they will immediately divide and form a dam-like wall.
- 6) The people journey, the kohanim enter the waters, which are now swollen by the spring runoff, and the Yarden divides at a location 'far off, at the city of Adam.'
- 7) The kohanim bearing the Ark stand steadfast on the river's eastern bank as the people of Israel cross before them.
- 8) The people of Israel emerge into the Promised Land at the outskirts of Yericho.

## PARALLELS TO THE YAM SUF

Superficially, this chain of events bears much resemblance to the account of the splitting of the Yam Suf, described in the fourteenth and fifteenth chapters of sefer Shemot. Let us note the similarities by cataloging the events that lead up to the splitting of the Yam Suf and matching them to their sefer Yehoshua analogs, indicated by a bracketed number corresponding to the list above. Recall that in sefer Shemot, the people scarcely had fled the iron grip of Egyptian servitude when God redirects their natural route of escape by 'the way of the wilderness of the Yam Suf. Reaching its shore, the people are enjoined to encamp (1). Suddenly, the sound of approaching chariots and horses breaks the surreal nighttime silence, and the freed slaves cry out to God in alarm. Moshe, himself unsure of God's plan of intervention, encourages the people to stand steadfast and witness 'God's salvation,' but leaves out specifics (3). God tells the people to begin trekking towards the ominous waters and informs Moshe that God himself will be 'honored' by the overthrow of Pharaoh and his army. The people of Egypt will thus 'know' that He is the true and only God (4). The pillars of fire and smoke that had guided the people through the wilderness, now move behind the camp in order to serve as a barrier between the Israelites and their Egyptian pursuers (7). God causes a great eastern wind to blow all night long, and as dawn rises, the waters divide (6). The people of Israel enter the sea, as its waters form a 'wall to their right and to their left' leaving dry land (5). Pharaoh's horsemen and charioteers pursue them into the sea, but as day breaks, the Egyptian army is thrown into confusion and then drowns as the waters rush back upon them. The people of Israel, led by Moshe and Miriam, erupt in a spontaneous outpouring of joyous thanksgiving. Moshe guides the people to safety as they leave the sea and enter the wilderness of Shur (8).

## THE THEME OF PASSAGE

As the above scheme clearly indicates, the crossing of the Yarden does not simply echo the events at the Yam Suf, but is in fact almost a perfect duplication. Before analyzing the details common to both events, let us first consider the broader themes. In simple terms, the motif that most powerfully links the two episodes is the theme of passage. The people of Israel, formerly enslaved and oppressed by

the harsh taskmasters of the maniacal Pharaoh, journey forth to unexpected freedom, marking their change of status at the banks of the Yam Suf. There, the bitter experience of brutal servitude is forever transformed as their nemeses are suddenly and irreversibly vanquished. There will be no return to the physical bondage in the brick pits, though its mental effects may live on in the people's shattered psyches for some time.

Some forty years later, the people of Israel again stand at a crossroads, for they are about to abandon their unsettled and insecure wilderness lives for the promise of 'a good and expansive land, a land flowing with milk and honey, a land peopled by the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Amorite, the Perizzite, the Chivite and the Yevusite' (Shemot 3:8). The experience of ceaseless wandering, of setting up camp only to abandon it shortly thereafter, of aimlessly following an ephemeral pillar of clouds as ephemeral as the dusty desert winds, is to finally end with the securing of a plot of rich, red earth. The allure of an unrooted life, devoid of responsibilities beyond the self and unburdened by higher purpose, may maintain its hold on the tenuous tribal confederacy for many years; Nevertheless, there can be no going back to the vulnerability of the nomad.

In both cases, passage through a body of water is the symbolic act that severs the past and secures the future. The Yam Suf splits wide open to reveal the people's ineluctable destiny, and the Yarden stops in midcourse to welcome Israel to its patrimony on the other side. In the process of passage, the former identity is shed and a new status takes its place. Like an act of rebirth, the people of Israel emerge from the depths to embrace the glaring brightness of a new beginning. In both cases, the past, with its crushing failures and all too-familiar bitter trials and tribulations, is jettisoned in favor of a promising but inscrutable future. And, of course, in both cases God initiates the process and guides it to its successful conclusion. Israel the enslaved becomes Israel the liberated; The Israel who wandered finally secures rest.

#### AVRAHAM AND YAACOV

There are other examples in Tanakh where traversing a body of water represents a similar process of transformation. Recall that Avraham and Sarah, denizens of the Persian Gulf city of Ur, were called upon by God to break their familial and cultural moorings, and to follow His voice to the land of

Canaan. The two duly obeyed, crossing the River Euphrates in their journey westwards. The process eventually transformed them into champions of ethical monotheism, the belief in a single God whose absolute moral code is incumbent upon all of humanity. Avraham is henceforth known in the Torah as 'Avraham Halvri' or 'Avraham the Hebrew' (Bereishit 14:13), because he hails from 'ever hanahar,' the 'other side of the River [Euphrates].' His descendents, known as Hebrews, thus preserve this ancient tradition of passage that characterized their forebear.

Yaacov, the grandson of Avraham and Sarah, is forced to flee the promised land to escape the rage of his brother Esav. In a striking reversal of Avraham's confident journey of faith, Yaacov is alone and afraid, penniless and vulnerable, as he crosses the Yarden and heads eastwards towards the land of Aram. There, he seeks refuge in the house of his uncle Lavan, where he remains for twenty difficult years. Again he is forced to flee and this time journeys back towards Canaan with his family and flocks. Unsettled by the prospect of encountering his long-lost brother, Yaacov prepares for a confrontation. Quickly and under the cover of darkness, he spirits his family to safety across the 'pass of Yabok,' a tributary of the Yarden, located midway between the Dead Sea and the Kinneret. All alone in the darkness, Yaacov is suddenly confronted by an angel, who struggles mightily with him but cannot prevail. Yaacov, injured but victorious, extracts a blessing from the mysterious phantom, who informs him that henceforth he will be known as Yisrael, 'for you have become exalted with God and man and have overcome' (Bereishit 32:29).

Here again we have a water passage, this time in both directions. Each passage is in turn associated with a transformation of destiny. Initially, Yaacov's crossing of the Yarden symbolizes his exile; the crossing of Yabok is his restoration.

The above two episodes differ from our original context, however, because they involve individuals rather than the nation and describe passage OVER water rather than THROUGH it. But this contrast serves to underline the unique bond between the episodes of passage of the Yam Suf and the Yarden. As we shall see, these two formative events effectively describe the complete story of Israel's national coming of age.

CONTRASTS BETWEEN THE ACCOUNTS

It is always useful to directly compare episodes in Tanakh in order to delineate and thus understand their common motifs. It is, however, even more important to take note of the contrasts, for these often hold the key to understanding the true nature of the events. Thus, having considered the similarities between the events of sefer Yehoshua and those of sefer Shemot, let us now analyze the differences. First, note that at the Yam Suf, God diverts the liberated Hebrews from their original and more natural route along the Mediterranean shoreline. A traveler from Egypt to Canaan would logically follow this arterial coastal road, the so-called Via Maris or 'Way of the Sea' (called in the Torah 'the way of the land of the Pelishtim/Philistines'). God, however, instead directs the people by way of the wilderness, and thereby deliberately orchestrates their unexpected arrival at the banks of the Yam Suf. There, God enjoins them to encamp, but gives no indication as to the significance of the detour. Yehoshua, in contrast, makes it clear to the people from the outset that their objective is to cross the Yarden in order to enter the land. Their arrival at its banks opposite Yericho is, therefore, eagerly anticipated and involves no surprises.

Next, note that Moshe's charge to stand steadfast is a hasty and unreassuring reaction to the people's alarmed outcries. In contrast, Yehoshua's directive to prepare for God's 'wonder' is delivered from the outset with deliberation and foresight. At the Yam Suf, God orders Moshe to tell the people to go forward and says that Egypt will come to 'know' His Divinity. In Sefer Yehoshua, it is Israel who will 'know' that God is with them, as He was with Moshe.

Yehoshua announces ahead of time that the Yarden will immediately cease as soon as the kohanim bearing the Ark set foot in its waters. At the Yam Suf, the eastern wind divides the waters spontaneously as Moshe stretches his staff over them. Then, the waters part to form a tunnel-like passage. As the pillars of clouds and fire hold off the pursuing Egyptian cavalry, the people of Israel hurriedly enter the sea. At the Yarden, the River is dammed far upstream, 'at the city of Adam' (Yehoshua 3:16). Adam is identified by scholars with Tel ed-Damiyeh, an ancient town located near the important route that led from the Transjordanian highlands of the Gilead to the Canaanite city-state of Shechem (modern day Nablus). Thus, the waters stope approximately 25 kilometers north of the Plains of Yericho, where the people actually cross! Finally, at the Yam Suf Israel emerges from the waters into the wilderness, while out of the Yarden they enter the Promised Land.

## THE DEFINING DISTINCTION

These contrasts can be traced to a single fundamental and defining distinction, which surprisingly recasts the Yam Suf and the Yarden as two widely divergent episodes: the events at the Yam Suf express the people's PANICKED and IRRESOLUTE OBJECT status, while crossing the Yarden Israel acts as a DISCIPLINED and CONFIDENT SUBJECT. As we shall see, from this perspective the Yarden and Yam Suf share almost nothing besides a superficial resemblance!

When the Hebrew slaves leave Egypt, they display all of the trappings of liberation. Surging forward, they take their flocks and possessions with them, even bearing parting gifts of silver and gold from their former overseers. Joyously, they follow Moshe, Aharon and Miriam, and fall in line behind the guiding pillar of clouds. With wide and unbelieving eyes, they bid farewell to the deep and dismal brick pits, sprawling building sites stained with their sweat and toil, and toppled lifeless stone figures of pharaoh a being they only recently regarded as an invincible god. Not only does Pharaoh acquiesce to the terms of their departure, but urges them to make haste!

## THE SLAVE MENTALITY

Israel's liberation must come about exclusively through Divine intervention, since centuries of oppression robbed them of self-worth, resourcefulness, or hope. Stricken with a textbook case of 'slave mentality,' their first, tentative steps as free men are fraught with great misgivings. The people of Israel play no role in their liberation. Rather than march defiantly forward from servitude with confidence and direction, as might have been expected, they must be forcibly driven out of Egypt by a king and people eager to preserve the tattered remains of their empire: "The people of Egypt pressed the people [of Israel] to leave quickly, for they said 'else, we shall all perish!'" (Shemot 12:33). Even matza, the bread of liberation, is prepared only because "the people baked their dough that they took forth from Egypt as cakes of matza and not leavened bread, for they WERE DRIVEN OUT OF EGYPT AND COULD NOT TARRY, nor had they prepared any provisions" (12:39). If not for God's determination to bring forth Israel from the crucible of bondage in order to recast them as the bearers of His Torah, they would have remained there forever, swept up by a vicious vortex of helplessness and subjugation, as much a function of their own self-loathing as the product of their Egyptian overlords' brutal oppression, would have been their lot.

After leaving Egypt, their new-found but fragile faith will not sustain them through the struggles that lie ahead on the road to true emancipation. In order to nurture confidence, self-reliance and the ability to exercise true moral choice, the people must first learn that their fate is in the hands of a personal God and not a callous and cruel despot. The highest objective of a slave is to mindlessly make bricks; the most noble goal of a free man is to do right in the eyes of God. To transform a slave into a free man is a long and difficult process, which can commence only once the fear of and dependence upon the ruthless master has been smashed.

#### THE DIVINE PLAN

God redirects the people towards the Yam Suf to irreversibly overthrow their erstwhile taskmasters and to make it clear to Israel that there can be no return to Egypt or its senseless and numbing servitude. Encamped on the shore, the sound of chariot wheels and pounding hooves throws them suddenly into a panic:

They said to Moshe: "are there not enough graves in Egypt that you took us out to perish in the wilderness? What have you done to us to take us out of Egypt? Is this not the very thing that we said to you in Egypt, that you should leave us alone so that we might labor for Egypt? For it is better for us to labor for Egypt than to perish in the wilderness!" (Shemot 14:11-12).

As the people cry out in their uncertain flight, their contorted faces to the sea and their vulnerable backs to the pursuing hordes, God utters the impossible directive: "Speak to the people of Israel and tell them to go forward...into the midst of the sea on dry land". They are thus to place their fate (and faith!) with God and enter the parting waters of the Yam Suf confident that they will emerge alive. In essence, their 'decision' to follow God is a foregone conclusion. There is no other choice. Turning back to Egypt is impossible, the path barred by ominous pillars of fire and clouds. In fact, the inevitability of entering the sea, or else perishing by the sword, is highlighted by the Torah's twice-repeated remark that the "waters formed a wall to their right and to their left" (Shemot 14:22, 29). Like the submissive objects that they still are, God forces Israel to enter the channel of the Yam Suf in a

way that offers them no alternative, no distraction, no escape they have only one direction of trajectory: forward.

At the shores of the Yam Suf the Hebrews demonstrate little initiative. They show themselves utterly incapable of fighting back against their former oppressors, whom they outnumber a thousand to one, even though their wretched lives hang in the balance (see commentary of Ibn Ezra to Shemot 14:13). Broken and paralyzed, they can only cry out to Moshe and bemoan their bitter fate, as they were accustomed to do during their centuries of servitude. God, in His compassion, offers them an alternative means of survival if they will but believe. In a charged and transcendent moment, their fortunes are forever altered, as the Egyptian hordes perish beneath the waves. Transformed they are, but by a process imposed upon their stiff necks rather than embraced by their proverbial 'wilderness' of introspection and realization, they stand ready to embark upon the long and painful journey to secure their real freedom, an exalted state of being infinitely more meaningful than the release from physical bondage that we mistakenly call 'liberty.'

Having now considered the true nature of the Yam Suf episode, we will continue our discussion next week by analyzing the Yarden crossing as its antithesis. Readers are kindly requested to complete the account by reading Chapter Four of sefer Yehoshua.

Shabbat Shalom

For further study: see two other episodes of passage over the Yarden, that of King David in flight from his rebellious son Avshalom (Shemuel 2:17:21-22), and that of Eliyahu on the eve of his ascent to heaven in a 'chariot of fire' (Melachim 2:2:5-18). Eliyahu is the only other Biblical character to pass 'through' the waters, in a manner that strikingly resembles the Yam Suf. How are their journeys related to the themes of passage that we discussed above?