

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

Introduction to the Prophets

Sefer Yehoshua – Chapter 4 Conclusion

Shiur #9: The Memorial of the Twelve Stones

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INTRODUCTION

Last time, we completed our analysis of the Yarden crossing. In contrast to the episode of Yam Suf, at the Yarden the people of Israel demonstrated confidence and resolve, initiative and trust. The kohanim bearing the Ark remained behind on the eastern shore of the river until all of the people had passed, and only then did they too join their compatriots now standing on the hallowed earth of Canaan to the west. Before Israel left behind the climactic moment and the waters of the river rushed back to fill the void, God bid Yehoshua to commemorate the event in a most unusual way:

God said to Yehoshua: Take twelve men, one from each tribe. Command them to remove twelve stones from the Yarden, from the very place where the kohanim stand. Bring them over with you and place them at the location where you will sleep this night (Yehoshua 4:1-2).

Yehoshua duly issues the directive, adding the following explanation:

...Let this be a sign among you for the time that your children will ask, 'What then is the meaning of these stones?' You shall explain to them that the waters of the Yarden divided before the Ark of God's Covenant, when it passed into the Yarden, the waters divided. These stones shall therefore serve as a memorial for the people of Israel forever (4:6-7).

Significantly, Yehoshua does not only remove twelve stones from the waters of the Yarden to be carried by the people to their new national home, but places twelve OTHER stones in their place:

The people of Israel did as Yehoshua commanded and carried twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of Israel, from the midst of the Yarden, just as God had spoken to Yehoshua. They carried them over to the place of their lodging. Yehoshua placed twelve other stones in the midst of the Yarden, at the place where the kohanim stood, those that bore the Ark of the Covenant, and there they remained, until this very day (Yehoshua 4:8-9).

YEHOSHUA'S ADDITION

This seeming departure from God's directive is easily explained by Rabbi David Kimchi (13th century, Provence):

Although the text does not state that God enjoined the placement of twelve additional stones in the river, we must assume that Yehoshua was so commanded... (commentary to 4:9).

The effect of Yehoshua's additional act, however, is to create a sense of repetition and reiteration that is echoed throughout the chapter: God's command to Yehoshua is followed by Yehoshua's directive to the twelve selected men, which is in turn followed by their removal of the stones, then by Yehoshua's supplementary placement of other stones, and finally by a report of the twelve taken stones being erected in Gilgal where the people camp! The entire account is concluded by another explanatory passage:

Yehoshua said to the people of Israel: when your children will later ask their parents the meaning of these stones, then you shall say to your children 'Israel traversed this Yarden on dry land. God your Lord dried the waters of the Yarden from before you until you crossed, just as God your Lord did to Yam Suf, drying it before us until we traversed. This is in order that all the peoples of the world might know that God's hand is strong, so that you might revere God your Lord forever' (4:21-24).

OTHER EXAMPLES OF 12 STONES – MOSHE AT SINAI AND ELIYAHU AT MOUNT CARMEL

Of course, the significance of twelve stones is obvious and is indicated by the text itself: they represent the twelve tribes of Israel (4:4). In fact, this motif is found in at least two other places in

Tanakh that shed much light on the use of the theme here. In the immediate aftermath of the Sinaitic revelation some forty years before, as the people stood encamped at the foot of the mountain and Moshe prepared to ascend to its peak, God concluded a special covenant with the people of Israel and they agreed to observe His teachings. The passage in Shemot 24 relates that

Moshe came and told the people all of God's words and the laws, and the people answered with a single voice saying, 'We will perform all of the things that God has said.' Moshe transcribed all of God's words, arose early the next morning and erected an altar at the foot of the mountain, and placed twelve standing stones to represent the twelve tribes of Israel... (Shemot 24:3-11).

In this passage, the twelve stones, standing sentinel-like and steadfast next to the altar, memorialize the acceptance of God's covenant by the people of Israel.

In a very different passage, from the period of the Assyrian Empire's ascendancy some five hundred years after the entry into the land, the twelve stones are again utilized to represent the twelve tribes of Israel. By this time, however, the people of Israel had shed their tribal divisions to become a nation, but a nation nonetheless divided into two disparate kingdoms. The southern kingdom, populated in the main by the tribe of Yehuda, was ruled from the capital in Jerusalem by the descendents of David. The northern kingdom of Israel, comprised of the so-called Ten Tribes, had already begun its fateful and precipitous descent into idolatry and immorality, a downward spiral that would ignominiously conclude with its destruction and exile. A lone voice still dared to proclaim the truth of God's teachings, but the people and their spineless king stood aloof and detached.

The numbing message of the false prophets of Ba'al, who made no appeals for social justice or moral development and in their place offered the soothing balm of empty ceremonial, was forcefully opposed by the fiery Eliyahu (Elijah), who single-handedly confronted four hundred of these pretenders at Mount Carmel. With the people of Israel massed around the combatants, Eliyahu chided the false prophets who, try as they might, could not persuade Ba'al to send fire from the heavens to consume their sacrifice. After their mighty but unsuccessful attempts, it was Eliyahu's turn to stand before the people and petition God to respond:

Eliyahu said to all of the people, 'Draw close to me,' and all of the people drew close to him. He then repaired the ruined altar of God. Eliyahu took twelve stones according to the number of the tribes of Yaacov, whom God had addressed by saying, 'Israel shall be your name.' He built the stones into an altar in the name of God... (I Melakhim:18:30-32).

In this context, the twelve stones of Israel constitute the very foundations of the altar, symbolizing the Divine service and of the noble attempt to bridge the daunting distance between humanity and the Creator.

Both passages thus link twelve stones with the twelve tribes, as if this ancient and evocative division of the people of Israel, Yaacov's own sons, must somehow be petrified into permanence. In glaring contrast to Moshe's twelve stone pillars, however, that embodied all of the promise of Israel's future, Eliyahu's altar stones are a sad and pathetic reminder of a different time, an earlier epoch before Israel had succumbed to the wiles of idolatry and renounced the Torah that was its heritage. In contrast, however, while Moshe's stones stand apart and separate, Eliyahu's are lovingly brought together to become a cohesive unity.

COMMEMORATION VS. CONTINUITY

Returning now to our passage in Yehoshua, we can better appreciate the symbolism of the twelve stones. Heaped up under the feet of the kohanim, the twelve stones speak of preserving the transcendent moment when the people of Israel stood united in purpose and unified in trust. The miracle of the Yarden's traversal was made possible by Israel's faith. At the banks of the Yarden, the often uncomfortable dialectic between man's deeds and God's intervention was harmoniously resolved. Guided by His Ark, the people of Israel followed with conviction and resolve, and God did not disappoint. The waters ceased to flow, the people entered the riverbed, and traversed it into Canaan to find their destiny.

At the same time, the crossing of the Yarden is not only a moment frozen in time, but is more importantly the unleashing of the historic dynamic of founding the state. Therefore, the stones must not remain rooted to the riverbed but must also be borne into Canaan to accompany the people on their

journey. Where the people lodge, they too must lodge with them, to indicate that history's most precious lessons of faith must not be reduced to static commemorative monuments.

THE ALTAR AT MOUNT EVAL

How significant that according to a well-founded and astonishing Rabbinic tradition quoted by Rashi these twelve stones taken from the Yarden are on that same day transported to Mount Eval, some 60 kilometer distance (!), and are there used to fashion the very altar enjoined by Moshe's directive in the Book of Devarim:

Moshe and the elders of Israel commanded the people saying, 'Observe all of the commands that I give you this day. On the day that you pass over the Yarden into the land that God your Lord gives you, you shall raise up great stones and cover them with plaster. You shall then write upon them all of the words of this Torah, so that you may come into the land that God your Lord gives you, a land flowing with milk and honey... When you traverse the Yarden, you shall erect these stones that I command you this day at Mount Eval, and cover them with plaster. There you shall build an altar to God your Lord, an altar of stones that have not been cut by tools of iron. The stones shall be whole for building the altar to God...' (Devarim 27:1-8).

As Rashi (11th century, France) indicates,

God's command to transport the stones into Canaan was in accordance with Moshe's directive to erect an altar at Mount Eval and inscribe thereon the words of the Torah. On that very day, the people came to Mount Eval, built the required altar, offered sacrifices and feasted, and then disassembled the stones and brought them to Gilgal where they lodged (commentary to 4:3, based upon the Talmud in Tractate Sota 35b).

In other words, the stones taken from the Yarden are used on that very day to construct the ceremonial altar at Mount Eval. After the assembly, that altar is disassembled and the stones are transported back to Gilgal, where the people have set up camp.

It is of course difficult to reconcile the traveling distances involved. Also, it must be noted that Rashi's tradition assumes that the altar stones of Mount Eval are the very same stones upon which the Torah is to be graven and are in fact equivalent to the Yarden stones, two assumptions that are by no means certain from the Biblical texts. We shall address some of these difficulties when we reach the eighth chapter of Sefer Yehoshua, where this remarkable assembly by the people at Mount Eval is more fully described. For our purposes now, however, what is significant is to recognize the Midrashic linkage between the twelve Yarden stones and the hallowed altar stones, the very same motif that we saw concerning Eliyahu at Mount Carmel! In the reading of the Rabbis, the stones of the crossing become the stones of the altar and upon them are incised the words of the Torah. What a profound association between the people of Israel, the teaching that they must exemplify, and their exalted mission to apprehend God and serve Him.

THE TWO ACCOUNTS

Summing up, and considering the elements of the episode in their textual totality, we note that this chapter provides us with two separate accounts of twelve stones as well as two separate explanations. One set of stones is REMOVED from the waters of the Yarden to be carried by the people to their destination; another set is PLACED into the waters of the river to remain there forever. According to Yehoshua's FIRST explanation, the twelve stones are a memorial of GOD'S INTERVENTION through the vehicle of the Ark of the Covenant.

Let this be a sign among you for the time that your children will ask 'what then is the meaning of these stones?' You shall explain to them that the waters of the Yarden divided before the Ark of God's Covenant, when it passed into the Yarden the waters divided (4:6-7).

According to his SECOND explanation given later in the chapter, however, the stones speak not of the miraculous nature of God's involvement in the splitting of the river, but rather of ISRAEL'S FORTITUDE in traversing its waters:

When your children will later ask their parents the meaning of these stones, then you shall say to your children 'Israel traversed this Yarden on dry land. God your Lord dried the waters of the

Yarden from before you until you crossed, just as God your Lord did to Yam Suf, drying it before us until we traversed' (4:21-23).

Taken together, there is a dual message to be communicated by the unique memorial of the twelve stones, and it addresses the unique spiritual patrimony of the people of Israel. On the one hand, they must have steadfast and unshakable trust in God, a trust that is rooted to the earth, immovable in anticipation of His salvation. At the same time, however, they must become the agents of their own deliverance by confidently 'traversing the waters' at their own initiative, demonstrating not only absolute faith in God but also initiative and effort as well. Twelve stones, the crystallization of Israel's purpose in the world, are placed in the river's raging waters to remember the Ark's miraculous work and their firm faith, but twelve other stones are simultaneously transported to the new land to highlight the people's own resourcefulness in securing and settling it.

THE SOARING ARK

The entwined strands of Divine involvement and human initiative, the stones that remain and the stones that are removed, are beautifully captured in a striking Rabbinic tradition preserved in the Midrash and Talmud concerning the Ark's passage through the Yarden. By utilizing a fanciful and grammatically unsubstantiated reading of the relevant verses (4:15-18), the Midrash understands that when the kohanim heed God's command to ascend from the Yarden after the people have passed, they do not advance across the dry riverbed and exit at its western shore as the people did. Rather, the kohanim and the Ark retrace their initial steps and leave the river from its eastern bank. As soon as they do so, of course, the river begins its raging flow anew, leaving them seemingly stranded on the opposite side of the river: "Thus, the Ark was on this side and the people of Israel were on the other. The Ark carried its bearers and passed over the waters!" (Talmud Tractate Sota 34a).

The contention of this source, in clear contravention of the straightforward reading of the verses, so unnerved the Radak (Rabbi David Kimchi, 13th century Provence) that he remarked:

I am astonished by this Midrash for I see no exegetical reason to adopt its forced reading of the text... why indeed must the Ark carry its bearers and fly over? If such a miracle had in fact

occurred, wouldn't the text have stated so explicitly?... Our Sages who recorded this tradition understood their intent, and their wisdom is more profound than mine (commentary to 4:11).

Thus, Radak can provide no convincing rational argument in favor of the Midrashic reading.

READING THE MIDRASH DIFFERENTLY

Adopting the Radak's wonder, it seems obvious that this source did not intend for us to accept it literally, and certainly not as the plain reading of the text. However, that should not be taken as an invitation to dismiss it out of hand. There is a much more profound idea that this Midrash communicates, choosing to do so through colorful imagery and whimsical language. As stated earlier, the passage of the Yarden is very much about human initiative and its ability to 'condition' a Divine response. The people of Israel sally forth with confidence and the Ark steps aside to let them go forward. In fact, the Ark itself, as we pointed out some lessons ago, is a static object unless it is carried into the world by human beings. This is to say, God desires us to take an active part in His work, in the process of deliverance that alone can transform our world. Having exerted the effort that God demands, attempting a task and either becoming crowned with success or bowed by failure, the human psyche begins to ponder whether in fact God was at all involved, whether perhaps His perceived role was illusory and our role alone was determinant. Is there no more or no less than human initiative in the world that can redeem or enslave? Is it possible that all of life's triumphs and tribulations are solely the product of our personal and national resolve or lack thereof?

The Midrash answers this gnawing doubt with a resounding no. God is aware, God is involved, and God saves. It is true that the kohanim must bear the Ark in order for it to be a dynamic force. Without human initiative, there is no fulfillment of the Torah and no possibility of redemption. At the same time, however, the most perceptive minds realize that our abilities and successes are gifts of God that He bestows in accordance with His will. To phrase the matter differently, the kohanim may be the bearers of the Ark, but in reality the ARK CARRIES THEM!

As the people of Israel stand on the Yarden's western shore, they eagerly anticipate the arrival of the Ark to again take the lead. Suddenly, however, the waters resume their flow as the kohanim beckon from the opposite side. In a memorable moment, the Ark takes to the air, bearing aloft the kohanim and

gracefully gliding over the waters. The import of the episode is clear to the people. The God whom they have pledged to introduce to a skeptical and jaded world will help them overcome. Their arduous exercise of trust and initiative will not be in vain, because God will support their efforts and give them the strength to go on. When Israel carries His presence into the world, He in turn bears them and raises them aloft. The great expenditure of trust in God that is often required to navigate a cruel and callous world is not spent in vain; it is reflected back to us in the form of God's sustaining support.

For next time, please read Chapter 5:1 through 6:1, and begin to consider the rite of circumcision and its significance for the people of Israel in the immediate aftermath of having crossed the Yarden..