

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION  
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

Introduction to the Prophets:

Sefer Yehoshua – Conclusion of Chapter 7

Shiur #16: The Trespass of Achan

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## INTRODUCTION

Last time, we considered the circumstances of Israel's first setback at the battle of the A'i. Recall that after the victory over Yericho, Yehoshua sent spies to reconnoiter the town of the A'i. The spies returned with a promising report, but Yehoshua's small attack force was routed. The people of Israel were thrown into a panic and Yehoshua himself expressed doubts about God's plan to bring the people into Canaan. God responded by indicating that the defeat of the people was not arbitrary but rather came about as a result of the fact that "Israel sinned...for they have taken from the ban [imposed upon the spoils of Yericho]...." Success on the battlefield would only resume once the perpetrators would be punished. The Divine communication went on to specify how exactly the guilty parties were to be revealed:

"Arise and sanctify the people and tell them to prepare for tomorrow, for thus says God the Lord of Israel: 'There is contraband in your midst. You will not prevail against your foes until it is removed from your midst. In the morning, you shall draw close according to your tribes. The tribe that is singled out by God will then draw close according to clans. The clan that is singled out by God will draw close according to families, and the family singled out by God will draw close according to male members. The one who is singled out in the ban will be burned by fire, he and all that he possesses, for he has transgressed God's covenant and has committed a base act in Israel'" (7:13-15).

## SINGLING OUT THE PERPETRATOR

The passage above describes the remarkable process by which the perpetrator is to be exposed. Although the text is silent concerning the precise mechanism, it is clear that the process involved some sort of consecutive sorting of elements from the larger to the smaller, and finally to the single individual. The traditional sources suggest that it was the Ark of the Covenant or perhaps the breastplate of the High Priest containing the twelve tribal gems that served as the 'polygraph.' Thus for instance, as the twelve tribal representatives filed past the Ark, the tribal prince of Yehuda was 'ensnared' so that he was paralyzed to escape its embrace, indicating that a member of his tribe was responsible. The clan heads of that tribe then appeared before the Ark, and one of them again become trapped in the Ark's 'force field.' This winnowing process continued until the actual guilty individual was singled out. Then again, the tribal leaders may have presented themselves before the High Priest, and, according to this alternative reading, the gem of the tribe of Yehuda darkened, indicating that it was a member of Yehuda responsible. The clan heads of that tribe then appeared before the High Priest and drew lots, and the lot of the guilty clan was chosen, and so on.

While it is not possible to ascertain the exact nature of the selection method, whether it is the Ark of the Covenant or the breastplate of the High Priest that is instrumental, the fundamental implication is the same: it is as if God Himself is actively singling out the perpetrator, for both the Ark as well as the breastplate are regarded as the barometers of His presence and involvement in the world, and in the life of the people of Israel. As we explained in an earlier lesson, the Ark is an expression of God's 'throne' and the symbol of His sovereignty on the terrestrial plane, while the breastplate that is always worn as part of the High Priest's regal garb of service indicates the unique relationship that exists between the Deity and the people of Israel.

## THE INEXPLICABLE LARGER BLAME

On the next day, Yehoshua arises early and initiates the grim process. Sure enough, the tribe of Yehuda is singled out, followed by the clan of Zerach, the family of Zavdi, and finally by the heart-stopping and ignoble selection of Achan son of Carmi, son of Zavdi, son of Zerach of the tribe of Yehuda. Under Yehoshua's gentle prompting, Achan readily admits his trespass and describes his indiscretion:

"Achan answered Yehoshua, saying: 'It is true. I have sinned against God the Lord of Israel and have done such and such. I saw in the spoils an Assyrian robe, two hundred shekels of silver, and a gold ingot of fifty shekels weight. I coveted them and took them. Behold, they are hidden in the ground under my tent, while the silver is underneath.' Yehoshua sent messengers and they ran to the tent. Behold, it was buried in his tent and the silver was underneath. They brought it forth from the tent and presented it before Yehoshua and before all of the people of Israel, pouring it out before God" (7:20-23).

While Achan's sincere admission is admirable but not surprising under the circumstances, we are perhaps more startled by the description of the stolen goods. While the robe may have been a fine example of Assyrian craftsmanship, and the silver and gold a not insubstantial amount, it is difficult to understand the intense Divine displeasure ignited by such a trifling act of pilfer. After all, there were probably many thousands of Israelite soldiers that overran Yericho, and much booty to be had. Of all of them, only Achan dared to abrogate the ban imposed by Yehoshua. Viewed in the larger perspective, his act of indiscretion seems almost inconsequential. Most astounding of all, however, is the earlier text's unequivocal accusation of wrongdoing followed by God's thundering announcement of blame:

"The PEOPLE OF ISRAEL committed treachery and took from the ban...God said to Yehoshua...'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!'" (7:1, 7:10-12).

What a lengthy litany of iniquity, what a detailed list of wrongdoing, what a damning pronouncement of indictment against all ISRAEL! How are we to reconcile the text's sweeping indictment, God's broad accusation and the people's bitter defeat by the inhabitants of the A'i, with the simple fact that ONLY ONE PERSON actually took from the spoils of Yericho, and even that crime was indisputably 'white collar' in nature.

RECONSIDERING THE METHOD – THE PRINCIPLE OF CO-RESPONSIBILITY

In order to comprehend the matter, we must again return to the method that God indicates for the singling out of the criminal. Since ultimately it is only by miraculous Divine intervention that Achan is selected, would it not have been easier and more efficient for him to be named from the outset as the guilty party? Why is it necessary to go through the lengthy process of exposing him, a process that, as we stated above, is predicated upon a sifting out of a single individual from the series of larger groups of which he is part?

Rabbinic tradition, basing itself upon the episode of Achan and other relevant texts, formulated a principle that lies at the foundation of Jewish nationhood, a unique characteristic of Israel that sets it apart from most other peoples. That principle is this: all Jews are co-responsible for each other, and Jewish individuals are regarded as being organically connected to the larger grouping. There is no such thing as living a Jewish life that is indifferent to the larger community or aloof from the trials or triumphs of the nation. In essence, our Rabbis taught that there may indeed be a number of discrete dimensions to human existence, but all of them are nevertheless inextricably intertwined.

Thus, a Jew first of all lives his life as an individual before God. He is responsible to God for his personal conduct, his private moral decisions and the intensely individualistic exercise of his autonomous will. At the same time, however, the Jew must live his life conscious of the larger community of which he is part. He must share in their moments of joy and not distance himself from their suffering. There is a communal aspect to his existence that is more than simply a function of living among others and learning to respect overriding social norms and conventions. It is rather an expression of his intense connectedness to all members of the community, their shared purpose and objectives, and the collective destiny that binds all of them together as one.

#### THE SURVIVAL OF THE NATIONAL DIMENSION

At the same time, there is an additional facet to Jewish living that transcends the narrow concerns of the individual and even overshadows the general affairs of the community, and that dimension is the national. In its brilliant glare, we do not speak of the Jew or of the Jewish community, but rather of the people of Israel. The individual may perish and disappear, the community descends to oblivion, but the nation that is bound in a covenantal relationship with the Creator will live forever. The

nation of Israel has a mandate that is comprehensive and all embracing, and every Jew has a part to play in its successful realization. No member of the nation can forever deny his affiliation with that mandate, for it is seared into his very flesh by the mark of circumcision, the so-called 'Sign of the Covenant' (Bereishit 17:11).

During the long centuries of exile, the Jewish people were dispersed to the four corners of the globe so that they came to adopt the speech and manners of the people among whom they lived, and of necessity this national dimension became muted and sometimes almost imperceptible. Nevertheless, the deep-seated concern of the Jew for his far-flung brethren no matter where they were to be found, in spite of being separated from them by untraversable geography, as well as by the seemingly insurmountable twin barriers of language and wildly differing social conventions, were indisputable indications that the ember of nationhood still burned brightly in the Jewish heart and could not be extinguished.

It is precisely this aspect of Jewish living that animates the story of Achan. While it may be the case that, strictly speaking, only he is guilty of the crime of trespass, in essence the whole nation must share in his blame. We are not simply speaking of his immediate accomplices, those who must have seen him commit the crime, or else heard of it indirectly through other sources. As part of the nation, even Yehoshua must be held accountable, for he too is part of Organic Israel. The method of ascertaining Achan's guilt can now be appreciated: in the end, he is singled out, but not before the process of his capture emphasizes the concentric circles of concern that form the basis of every Jew's identity: the family, the community, the tribe, and the nation.

These spheres of identity, like the proverbial layers of an onion, are separated and ranked according to their distance from the core. Those that are closest to Achan are held more accountable than those that are on the periphery of his crime. It is Achan's immediate family and personal possessions that bear the brunt of his punishment. While the commentaries disagree concerning the precise fate of his children, all agree that their anguish is most severe, and their shame most intense. Can it be otherwise? No crime is committed in a vacuum, and in order for a criminal to successfully conceal his nefarious deeds, outside active assistance or at least passive acquiescence is usually necessary.

CONCLUSION

This then is the powerful lesson of Achan's downfall: all human acts, of omission or commission, of good or evil, of selfish greed or altruistic love, impact upon the larger human and even cosmic reality of which the perpetrator and his innocuous deed represent only small but not insignificant parts. It is the glory of man and sometimes his infamy that God has assigned to him such a central role in the unfolding of the human saga, and woe to the person who lives his life oblivious to this overarching truth. This truth is even more pronounced in a life lived according to the Torah, in an authentically Jewish life, where every minor and mundane act, every insignificant and insipid deed, every breath and every passing thought carries with it the potential for astounding consequence. It is not enough to mourn over Achan's tragic end, to bewail his cruel fate and the unfortunate circumstances of his 'being caught.' Rather, like Yehoshua and the people of Israel of old, we must take away from his cautionary tale the precious and sustaining concepts of living our lives aware of others and involved in their fate, forever conscious of the larger dimensions of community and nation that are affected by our deeds, and that, by the immutable laws by which God governs the world, affect us in turn.

Next week, we will begin Chapter 8, describing the second battle of the A'i and the subsequent assembly at Mount Gerizim. Readers are kindly requested to begin their preparations.