

Introduction to the Prophets:

Sefer Yehoshua – Chapter 24  
Yehoshua's Final Address  
By Rav Michael Hattin

## INTRODUCTION

Finally, we have arrived at the closing chapter of Sefer Yehoshua. Patiently, we have followed the trials and triumphs of Israel's selfless leader as he has labored mightily to remain faithful to the example of his exalted mentor Moshe. We have seen Yehoshua enthusiastically don the mantle of leadership and proceed to confidently and courageously prepare the people for entering the land, for battling the Canaanites, and for striking down roots in the new territory.

Simultaneous with the narrative's personal account of Yehoshua's progress and development, we have also seen the national account of the spiritual maturing of the people of Israel. Incrementally and sometimes painfully, they have shed the passiveness of their former wilderness existence, one that had been characterized primarily by its immediate and overt expressions of Divine intervention and providential care. In its place, they have acquired precious self-sufficiency, and the intense satisfaction that is the exclusive preserve of those who expend great efforts and achieve much but still remain intensely cognizant that their successes are just as much a product of God's ongoing assistance:

Remember God your Lord, for it is He who gives you the strength to achieve greatness, in order to fulfill this day His covenant that He swore to your ancestors (Devarim 8:18).

## THE SETTING OF SHECHEM

Summoning the people for the last time, Yehoshua gathers them to ancient Shechem. To that site, nestled picturesquely between Mount Gerizim and Mount Eval, their ancestor Avraham had first arrived. He and his wife Sarah had answered God's summons to leave kith and kin behind at Ur upon the Euphrates, and to journey westwards at His word to the land of Canaan:

And Avram took Sarai his wife and Lot his nephew, and all of their possessions that they had acquired, and the entire household that they had gathered at Charan, and they departed to journey towards Canaan, and they arrived in the land of Canaan. Avram traversed the land, until the site of SHECHEM, until Alon Moreh, and the Canaanite was then in the land...(Bereishit 12:5-6).

No doubt, Yehoshua carefully chooses the location of his last address to the people, hoping to impress upon them both their ancestors' deep connection to the place as well as their inspired lives of devotion to God. And in organic association to the place called Shechem as well as profound insight into the preciousness of the hour, Yehoshua solemnly intones:

Yehoshua said to all of the people: Thus says God the Lord of Israel – on the banks of the River your ancestors had always dwelt, Terach the father of Avraham and the father of Nachor, and they worshipped other gods. I took your ancestor Avraham from the banks of the River and caused him to traverse throughout the land of Canaan, and I multiplied his descendents, and I gave him Yitzchak. To Yitzchak, I gave Ya'acov and E'sav; for E'sav, I gave him Mount Se'ir to possess, but Ya'acov and his children went down to Egypt...(24:2-4).

## THE OUTLINE OF ISRAEL'S HISTORY

In schematic outline, Yehoshua traces the history of the people of Israel, focusing upon its foremost theme, one that was first exemplified by their ancestors. Were their lives not the account of the slow and stressful process of abandoning the morally corrupt but comfortable life of idolatry, in order to embrace the demanding but meaningful service of the Absolute God? Briefly, Yehoshua recalls the oppression in Egypt and the Exodus, the parting of the Sea of Reeds and the conquest of the Transjordanian kings, the ineffectual curses of Bil'am and the conquest of Yericho, concluding his address with a ringing and rhetorical challenge:

I have given you a land for which you toiled not, cities that you did not build but in which you now dwell, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant but whose fruits you now consume. Now therefore, revere God and serve Him in sincerity and truth, and remove the gods that your ancestors served on the banks of the River and in Egypt, and serve God! If you regard it as repulsive to serve God, then choose for yourselves today whom you will serve: will it be the gods that your ancestors worshipped on the banks of the River, or else the gods of the Amorites in whose land you now dwell? As for me and my household, we will serve God! (24:13-15).

What is most remarkable about Yehoshua's address is that he has distilled his presentation of the rich and full account of Israelite history – the storied lives of their ancestors and their odyssey of trust, the degradation of Egypt and the triumph of the Exodus, the securing of a place to call their own in the Promised Land – all of it, into a single irreducible notion: be counted among those who follow God and faithfully fulfill His commands in order to succeed and prosper, or else abandon Him and His ways to betray Israel's unique destiny and perish.

## TAKING UP THE CHALLENGE

While the people are quick to accept Yehoshua's challenge and unequivocally proclaim their fealty to God and to His Torah, Yehoshua is not convinced. Again, he impresses upon them the gravity of the choice before them, for to choose God is also to choose the burden of fulfilling His moral, ethical and ritual obligations. Above his protests, the people again proclaim their willingness to comply, and this time Yehoshua relents. In a scene reminiscent of the great and awesome covenant sealed by Moshe on the eve of his death, between God and the people of Israel as they stood at the Plains of Moav poised to enter the land (see Devarim Chapter 29-30), Yehoshua calls the people as witness:

Yehoshua said to the people: you are witnesses for yourselves that you have chosen God to serve Him, and they said: we are witnesses. Now, (he said), remove the foreign gods from your midst and turn your hearts to God the Lord of Israel. The people said to Yehoshua: God our Lord we will serve, and to His voice we will hearken. Yehoshua concluded a covenant for the people on

that day, and he set for them a statute and law in Shechem. Yehoshua recorded these things in a book of the Torah of the Lord, and he took a great stone and set it up beneath the doorpost (oak?) that was in the sanctuary of God. Yehoshua said to all of the people: behold, this stone will serve as our witness, for it heard all of God's words that He spoke with us. Therefore, it will serve as a testimony lest you deny your God. Yehoshua then sent the people forth, each man to his plot of land.

## THE ELEMENTS OF THE COVENANT

The above passage describes two separate elements to the sealing of the covenant: on the one hand, Yehoshua records the terms in the form of a text and perhaps places it in proximity to the master Torah scroll kept as part of the Ark of the Covenant. On the other hand, he sets up a physical marker to commemorate the covenant, a large and looming stone to suggest the permanence and immovability of the provisions. While Yehoshua's erection of the stone calls to mind other earlier events in the book, such as the setting up of the stones in the Yarden (Chapter 4) or else the building of the altar at Mount Eval (Chapter 8, end), perhaps the closest parallel is to be found in the aftermath of the Revelation at Mount Sinai:

Moshe came and told the people all of God's words and all of the laws, and all of the people said in a single voice: all of the things that God has spoken, we will do. MOSHE WROTE ALL OF GOD'S WORDS and arose in the morning to build an altar at the foot of the mountain, AND HE ERECTED TWELVE PILLARS FOR THE TWELVE TRIBES OF ISRAEL (Shemot 24:3-4).

In all probability, Yehoshua's deed is calculated to call to mind that moment, as the people stood before God and swore upon themselves to fulfill His Torah. In the closing public moment of his leadership, Yehoshua thus becomes Moshe's worthy successor, for like his mentor before him, he has secured the people's sincere pledge to serve God.

It is no wonder that the very next verse records Yehoshua's death at the ripe old age of one hundred and ten, and tellingly describes him as "Yehoshua the servant of God" (24:29). Although this description was used of Moshe innumerable times, particularly in the book's first chapter, it was NEVER before used to describe Yehoshua until this moment. In other words, one of the book's most pressing questions concerned whether Yehoshua would in fact succeed in not only replacing Moshe but in perpetuating his legacy and bringing it to its realization by successfully settling the people of Israel in their new land while impressing upon them the awesomeness of their task in the world. The conclusion of the book provides us with a resounding affirmative to that question. Yehoshua achieves his potential; the people of Israel eagerly don their mantle of responsibility, and Yehoshua dies as God's loyal servant just as Moshe had before him.

## THE THEME OF TRANSITION

In a passage reminiscent of Parashat Chukat (BeMidbar Chapter 20) that saw the demise of Miriam and Aharon, as well as the sealing of Moshe's fate not to enter the land, our final verses are also full of transition. With the death of Yehoshua and the elders, a new generation prepares to continue the process of settlement and to find their unique place in the land, under God's watchful eyes. With the death of El'azar the son of Aharon, the priesthood is transmitted in turn to Pinchas his own son, who will

no doubt face new and different challenges than those addressed by his capable father. Thus far, the transitions noted in the final verses are straightforward and direct: Moshe to Yehoshua and El'azar to Pinchas. But the book notes, in its penultimate verse, a final event associated with those times:

The bones of Yosef that the people of Israel had taken up from Egypt they buried in Shechem, in the plot of field that Ya'acov had purchased for one hundred "kasita" from the sons of Chamor the father of Shechem. It thus became part of the territory of the children of Yosef.

Significantly, it is the story of Yosef's burial that completes our account, the same Yosef who had been sold by his brothers down to Egypt and there rose to prominence as Pharaoh's viceroy (see Bereishit 37 et al). It will be recalled that Yosef's descent to Egypt was in the end the cause of his extended family's survival, for they too came down when famine blanketed the land of Canaan. There they were welcomed by Pharaoh and enjoyed his beneficence, but eventually the welcome turned to resentment, and a new Pharaoh arose to enslave them. But those events took place quite some time after Yosef's death. During his lifetime spent in Pharaoh's service he enjoyed honor, respect and wealth. Nevertheless, at the time of his death the Torah records that his final will and testament did not sing the praises of his adopted land:

Yosef placed an oath upon the children of Israel saying: God will surely remember and redeem you, and you will then take up my bones from here! (Bereishit 50:25).

#### THE BURIAL OF YOSEF IN CANAAN

In other words, though Yosef overcame his humble origins, he never forgot the legacy of his ancestors and the special place of the land of Canaan in the unfolding of their destiny. Though held hostage to Egyptian soil by his own success, Yosef was perceptive enough to realize that a nation cannot fulfill its mission without a land, and that Israel's land was Canaan and Canaan only. The conclusion of the book of Yehoshua with the story of Yosef's burial is therefore particularly apt – it represents not only the neat closing of a circle, from the descent to Egypt, to the Exodus, to the entry into the land. Rather, Yosef's burial in Canaan, in the very plot of land secured by his father Ya'acov when he himself returned to the land from exile in the lands of Aram (see Bereishit 33:18-20), highlights the book's most enduring truth. In hindsight, we know that the descendants of Israel did not succeed in securing their place in the land. Falling prey after Yehoshua's demise to the deadly intoxication of Canaan's polytheistic cults, they strayed from God and were eventually driven out, just as the aged leader had warned. But the land was never forgotten from Israel's heart. Even when exile to distant lands brought prosperity and seeming permanence, the "Yosefs" among them remembered. And with the preservation of that ancient memory, the way back to the Promised Land was secured, if not for Yosef, then at least for the descendants who lovingly carried his bones back home.

**I would like to take this opportunity to thank all those of you who have taken this course and studied with us, submitted questions for clarification, and deepened your knowledge and appreciation of Sefer Yehoshua and its perennially relevant themes. With God's help, we will continue in the Fall with the study of the book of Shoftim – Judges.**