

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

Introduction to the Prophets:
Sefer Yehoshua – The Book of Yehoshua

Shiur #2: Chapter 1 – The Transition of Leadership

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Introduction

The Book of Yehoshua may be said to commence where the Pentateuch or Five Books of Moshe conclude.

"It came to pass after the death of Moshe the servant of God, that God said to Yehoshua son of Nun, Moshe's loyal disciple: 'Moshe My servant has died. Now, arise and traverse this Yarden (Jordan River), you and this entire people to the land that I am giving to them, to Bnei Yisrael. Every place wherein you will tread I will give to you, just as I said to Moshe. From the wilderness and this Levanon until the great river Perat (Euphrates), all of the land of the Chittites up to the Great Sea where the sun sets (the Mediterranean) shall be your borders.'" (Yehoshua 1:1-4)

Quite clearly, these introductory verses of the Book are transitional in nature, for they narrate the succession in leadership that has recently taken place. Moshe is dead, and God has chosen Yehoshua to bring the people into the land. Of course, it has been some time since Yehoshua has been formally selected to eventually succeed his master Moshe (see Bemidbar/Numbers 27:12-23), and we have known almost from the beginning of Moshe's leadership that Yehoshua was his close disciple. But who is this Yehoshua, the protagonist of our Book? In order to address this question, we must briefly turn our attention to the text that serves as the necessary introduction to Sefer Yehoshua, namely the "Chumash" or Five Books of Moshe.

A Brief History of Yehoshua's Exploits

We first meet Yehoshua at the clash against the marauding tribe of Amalek, who had mercilessly attacked the weary and worn-out people of Israel soon after they had left the land of Egypt, some forty years earlier (Shemot/Exodus 17:8-16). There, Yehoshua had been appointed by Moshe to "arise and select men to go out and give battle against Amalek," a contest that Yehoshua waged successfully. He appears again as Moshe's faithful student at the sin of the Golden Calf, when he waits expectantly, at a distance from the people's encampment, for the return of his master from the encounter with God at Sinai (Shemot/Exodus 32:17). We next meet him at the incident of Eldad and Medad, defending Moshe's honor (Bemidbar/Numbers 11:28-29). Finally, we anxiously follow his appointment as one of the Twelve Spies, and marvel at his steadfast refusal, along with Calev son of Yefuneh, to later adopt the self-defeating report of the other ten (Bemidbar/Numbers 13:8, 14:6-10). It is in the aftermath of this final event that Yehoshua's place in Biblical history is assured, for God indicates at that time that he and Calev will be spared from the decree that condemns the generation of the Exodus to perish in the wilderness. Towards the end of

that period, Yehoshua again emerges, this time at Moshe's side as the latter conveys his poignant song of farewell to the people (Devarim/Deuteronomy 32:44).

Taken together, the above list indicates that Yehoshua has been present, involved and active in every single formative event that the people have experienced during the course of the previous forty years. He has never strayed from Moshe's side and has always been a source of support to him, as well as an exemplar to the people of steadfast trust in God. He has shown devotion but also independence, initiative and leadership. There is no one more worthy than he to become Moshe's successor, and no one more capable of transmitting Moshe's teachings after him.

What's in a Name?

Significantly, his name indicates "salvation" or "deliverance," and it is Moshe himself who is responsible for altering his name from "Hoshea" to "Yehoshua" (see Bemidbar/Numbers 13:16). This second form, introduced on the eve of the mission of the Spies, includes an added emphasis on God, and can be literally translated as "God will save." This subtle modification is not only an expression of Moshe's wish that his loyal student achieve success on the mission, but also an indication that Moshe sees in him great promise, for Yehoshua will be the instrument by which God will deliver His people.

In a characteristic instance of Biblical irony, although Hoshea's name change is introduced here, it presumably took place much earlier (see commentary of Ramban to Shemot/Exodus 17:9). Moshe has unwittingly(?) renamed his loyal disciple "Yehoshua," meaning "God will save" through him, because as an indirect result of the episode of the Spies that is about to transpire, Moshe himself will be denied entry into the land and his leadership will be terminated prematurely. Yehoshua will indeed follow him, and under his command, God will deliver the people of Israel.

It is the Ramban, the great 13th century Spanish commentator, who provides an unusual insight into his "surname," for strictly speaking, we may have expected "Yehoshua son of Nun" to be Yehoshua BEN Nun," where "ben" means "son" or "son of." Instead, the text invariably refers to him as "Yehoshua BEEN-Nun," with the use of the "chirik" or "long e" vowel. The Ramban suggests (commentary to Shemot/Exodus 33:11) that the variation is grammatically sound, and we may add that it may even be preferred when two equivalent consonants converge. (Ramban adduces other Scriptural examples of it, e.g. Mishlei/Proverbs 30:1 - "The words of Agur been-Yakkei.") Nevertheless, he adds an additional insight by suggesting that

"The people would refer to him in this way out of respect, for he was the most illustrious of Moshe's disciples. Thus, they would call him 'Beenun,' meaning 'the wise one,' for there was none as wise as he..."

The Ramban perceptively connects "been-Nun" to "beenun," a Hebrew root that signifies comprehension, understanding and wisdom (B-U-N). In other words, the people of Israel intentionally pronounced Yehoshua's surname in a way that could be construed as not only "the son of Nun," but more importantly, "the wise."

To sum up thus far, the Biblical texts that serve as the background to Sefer Yehoshua make it quite clear that this individual has long been the most suitable candidate to one day

take his place at the helm of the people of Israel. At the same time, although he has been taught and primed by Moshe and could be expected to be impatiently waiting in the wings for the latter's demise, Yehoshua has never demonstrated anything other than absolute fidelity to his master, complete devotion to the people, and utter subservience to God. He has exhibited none of the pretentious, overarching ambition and has engaged in none of the degrading, devious machinations that characterize most aspirants to leadership in this part of the world until this very day!

Yehoshua as Completer of the Torah

A measure of the high estimation that the early sources accord to Yehoshua may be gauged by the well-known and remarkable tradition that ascribes to him the completion of the final eight verses of the Five Books. It will be recalled that the Book of Devarim/Deuteronomy draws to a close with Moshe's eloquent blessing and God's inexorable invitation to ascend Mount Nevo to die:

"Moshe ascended from the plains of Moav to the peak of Mount Nevo opposite Yericho, and God showed him the whole land... God said to him: 'This is the land that I swore to Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaacov... I have shown it to you with your own eyes but you shall not cross over to it.' There Moshe the servant of God died in the land of Moav, by God's decree... The people of Yisrael cried for Moshe at the plains of Moav for thirty days, until the days of mourning for Moshe were completed. Yehoshua bin-Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, for Moshe had placed his hands upon him. The people of Israel hearkened to him and observed, just as God had commanded Moshe. There arose not another prophet in Yisrael like Moshe, whom God had known face to face..." (Devarim/Deuteronomy 34:1-12)

The Talmud (Bava Batra 15a) relates:

"The verse states that, 'There Moshe the servant of God died.' Is it possible that Moshe had died and yet he wrote the verses that follow? Rather, Moshe composed up to this point, and Yehoshua completed the Torah. So says Rabbi Yehuda. Said to him Rabbi Shimon: Is it possible that the Torah lacked even a single letter when Moshe commanded the Leviim to 'take this Book of the Torah and place it next to the Ark of the Covenant of God your Lord...' (Devarim/Deuteronomy 31:26)? Rather, up until this point [describing Moshe's death] God dictated the text and Moshe repeated it and wrote. After this point, God dictated the text and Moshe wrote it while in tears."

Therefore, at least according to the broadly accepted opinion of Rabbi Yehuda, it is Yehoshua who is responsible for completing the text of the Torah! The doctrinal ramifications of this view are staggering, for the Mosaic transcription of the Five Books in their entirety is regarded by traditional sources as the touchstone of the text's divinity and authority. Moshe talked with God, and God in turn dictated to him, as a Master to His loyal and exacting scribe, His eternal message. To include Yehoshua in this unparalleled process, statistically minor though his contribution may have been, speaks worlds about this man's stature and standing. Indeed, it is obvious from Rabbi Yehuda's reading that Yehoshua had God's conviction that he would succeed, for the lengthy and winding path of his emerging leadership was still before him, and much could have presumably happened along the way to compromise and to discredit the Divine selection of Yehoshua to complete the transcription

of the Torah.

Additionally of course, Rabbi Yehuda's opinion casts the transitional nature of the beginning of Sefer Yehoshua in an entirely different light, for it now emerges that the text of the Torah and that of our Book are regarded as a cohesive unit, with Yehoshua's authorship instrumental in both. Additionally, the implication of this tradition is that the rule of Moshe and the leadership of Yehoshua that succeeds it are to be understood as a seamless continuum. In essence, Yehoshua does not simply come to replace Moshe as leader of Israel, but must in fact embody the spirit and success of Moshe's tenure. He is not only the continuation of Moshe's authority, but also the bearer of his legacy as Servant of God.

Be Strong and Courageous

The above analysis is helpful in explaining a recurring phrase in our reading that is a reflection of the great challenge facing Yehoshua at this critical juncture:

"No man shall stand before all of the days of your life. I will be with you just as I was with Moshe; I will neither let you go nor leave you. BE STRONG AND COURAGEOUS, for you will cause this people to settle the land that I swore to their ancestors to give them. Only BE VERY STRONG AND COURAGEOUS to observe and fulfill in accordance with all of the teaching commanded to you by Moshe my servant, do not stray from it neither to the right or to the left, in order that you will be successful in all of your endeavors. The words of this Torah will not depart out of your mouth, for you shall meditate upon it day and night so that you will observe to do all that is recorded in it, for only then will you be successful and triumphant. Did I not command you to BE STRONG AND COURAGEOUS? Do not be afraid or terrified, for God your Lord is with you wherever you go." (Yehoshua 1:5-9)

The expression "be strong and courageous" is mentioned in the short passage above three times. Accordingly, by carefully considering the context of each of the expressions, Rashi (11th century, France) detects the three discrete components of Yehoshua's rule that will require special perseverance: 1) settling the people in the new land, 2) carefully observing the commands of the Torah, and 3) engaging in warfare to conquer the Canaanites. Clearly, these three elements are intertwined, for Yehoshua's failure in one aspect will hamper if not preclude his realization of the others.

Significantly, this phrase of reassurance and encouragement occurs only eleven times in all of the Tanakh, and of those, six are addressed to Yehoshua! Of the additional three mentioned outside of our immediate context, two are addressed by Moshe (Devarim/Deuteronomy 31:7) and God (Devarim/Deuteronomy 31:23) respectively, as Yehoshua is formally invested with leadership, and the other is spoken by the tribes of Israel in response to his directives (Yehoshua 1:18). Later in Biblical history, the phrase is employed by David to reassure his young and inexperienced son Shelomo (Solomon), as he stands to assume the throne and to undertake the awesome task of building the Temple (Divrei HaYamim/Chronicles 1:22:13). Additionally, Chizkiyahu (Hezekia), the 8th century BCE King of Judea, uses the same words to raise the flagging spirits of the inhabitants of Jerusalem, as the menacing hordes of the Assyrians loom on the horizon and threaten to overwhelm their weakened state (Divrei HaYamim/Chronicles 2:32:7). Thus, it should be clear that the expression "be strong and courageous" is invariably employed when there is very good reason to feel weak, inadequate, overwhelmed and discouraged!

The inference of the above is that all recognize that Yehoshua stands confronted by an awesome mission. Not only must he lead the people into the land, lead them to victory over their foes, and establish the pattern for moral and ethical government, but he must initiate the process that will culminate in the realization of the national destiny first spelled out to Moshe at Sinai: "You shall be My treasured people from among all of the nations, My kingdom of priests and holy nation" (Shemot/Exodus 19:5-6). God, Moshe, and the people all reassure Yehoshua and bid him to "be strong and courageous," not to be overawed by a daunting mandate, not to be fearful to exercise his newly-acquired authority, not to be overwhelmed by the task of forging disparate tribes and sectarian concerns into a unified nation, not to be intimidated by the unavoidable prospect of conflict, warfare, and bloodshed. As if that were not enough, however, Yehoshua stands in need of reassurance because he has been called upon to replace and complete the task of the most unique and storied leader in the history of the people of Israel, the only man to have brought tyrants low and to have gone up to receive God's word "face to face," the most humble of men and yet the most supremely confident in the justness of his cause: Moshe.

Next week, we will complete the first chapter of the Book by carefully considering the first commands that Yehoshua issues as leader, and how these are received by the people in turn. Please prepare by finishing your reading of Chapter One.