

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

Introduction to the Prophets:

Sefer Yehoshua – Chapter 5 Finale
Shiur #12: The Paschal Lamb, the Manna, and the Termination of Sefer Yehoshua's First Section

By Rav Michael Hattin

INTRODUCTION

In our last study, we investigated the wider ramifications of the mass circumcision performed by the people of Israel immediately after they had crossed the Yarden. We carefully considered the startling Biblical admission that the rite had not been performed in the forty years since the people had left Egypt, and were able to link the people's negation of the practice with their Divinely-imposed estrangement from Canaan. Having been condemned to perish in the wilderness, that generation's performance of the ceremony of circumcision, with its underlying ties to national identity and national homeland, would have constituted a glaring contradiction in terms. As evidence for this reading, other related sources were adduced: the Rabbis' otherwise obscure claim that the drawn-out absence of the curative northern wind precluded the observance of circumcision, the well-founded Rabbinic tradition concerning God's grudging manner of communication to Moshe during that same thirty-eight year wilderness sojourn, and the undeniable textual confirmation provided by the fact that the Torah's narratives record nothing (or next to nothing) of those intervening years.

Taken together, the implication of the above seemingly disparate elements is clear: for Israel to be distant from Canaan's soil and its attendant possibility of national autonomy, for Israel to stray from its God-given comprehensive mission that is inextricably bound up with a homeland, is for Israel to become but a shadow of itself. Banished from the Yarden's western bank by a reckless lack of trust, the people reaped the bitter harvest of their indiscretion and were no more. The most fundamental manifestation of their identity as a people, the precious command of circumcision, was subtly but compellingly placed by God beyond their grasp, in order to indicate in no uncertain terms that the ethereal exile of the wilderness could never substitute for the tangible challenge of settling the land. Thus, as soon as the people of Israel resume the thread of their story as a nation by traversing the river's rushing waters under Yehoshua's able leadership, finally closing the ignominious chapter of the Spies' infamy, they enthusiastically and en masse fulfill the observance of circumcision.

THE PASCHAL SACRIFICE – A SYMBOL OF NATIONAL RENEWAL

Of course, what immediately follows in our narrative should now be readily comprehensible: "The people of Israel encamped at Gilgal, and they performed the Pesach (Passover) on the fourteenth day of the month at evening, at the Plains of Yericho" (Yehoshua 5:10). Just as on the eve of the Exodus from Egypt, the rite of the Passover sacrifice was preceded by the mass circumcision of the males, who were otherwise disqualified from participating (see Shemot 12:42-50), here as well Yehoshua circumcises the people and they then prepare the Paschal lamb without delay.

While it is beyond the scope of this essay to fully explore the themes of the Passover, suffice it to say that many of its detailed prescriptions plainly attest to its overriding national dimension. Chronologically, it ranks among the first of the commands that were given to Israel as a people. That is, of course, entirely appropriate, as the Exodus from Egypt signaled not only the emancipation of oppressed slaves, but also their adoption of a shared destiny that triggered the unfolding process of their coalescing into a people. Accordingly, the Torah mandates that the Paschal sacrifice is ideally to be consumed in a group setting, and that individuals are to be discouraged from offering and consuming it in isolation (see Maimonides in his *Laws of the Passover Sacrifice*, Chapter 2:1-2). According to the depiction in Tractate Pesachim 5:5-7, which detail the offering of the Paschal lamb during the late Second Temple era (1st century, CE) but could have been describing its celebration at any point throughout the lengthy historical period that the Temple stood in Jerusalem, the Passover was a national event of epic proportions.

As the Temple's sacred enclosure overflowed with Jewish pilgrims drawn from the four corners of the globe, the experience of the Exodus would be relived. The Passover observances that had marked their birth as a people would be commemorated anew, marked by all of the vigor and vitality that had characterized the rites since their very first commemoration while yet in Egypt, where Israel's national consciousness had been forged. Understood in this light, Yehoshua's Passover is thus the most definitive statement yet of Israel's ongoing transformation from tribal wilderness nomads to a united nation settled in a homeland. But what of its link to the observance of circumcision, a connection made explicit not only by ritual laws enshrined in the text, but by the historical precedent of Egypt as well?

THE THEMATIC LINK BETWEEN CIRCUMCISION AND THE PASSOVER

Circumcision is a painful experience, and its adherents must be ready to suffer that pain in order to testify to their association with each other as well as with a common destiny. As we explored last time, on the most fundamental level, circumcision acts as an identifying mark that links together unrelated individuals to form a community or a nation. Similarly, that first paschal lamb prepared in Egypt was also about identifying marks, for its blood marked the homes of God's followers. And eaten in units of family and clan, this sacrifice more than any other eloquently spoke of larger, national affiliations. Thus, it was precisely these two mitzvot that ushered in the Exodus, for they both speak of assuming a national identity that is predicated on recognition of the Supreme God and adherence to His teaching. Most appropriately, therefore, these two observances constituted the 'merits' by which the people of Israel secured their redemption from Egyptian bondage.

As we saw earlier, the text makes the celebration of the Paschal sacrifice CONTINGENT upon being circumcised, for both observances are expressions of the same religious national themes (see Shemot 12:43 – 44). In other words, their linkage in history suggests a much more profound linkage in their underlying theme. Significantly, the offering of the Paschal sacrifice and the observance of circumcision are also the ONLY two positive commandments in the Torah that carry the penalty of 'Karet' (being 'cut off'), spiritual excision from the community of Israel, for their non-fulfillment. One who willfully abrogates either of these rites has rejected any connection to the destiny of the People of Israel, and is therefore spiritually expelled from their midst.

THE ABROGATION OF THE PASSOVER IN THE WILDERNESS

How telling that the texts and traditions indicating that the rite of circumcision was abrogated by the people for the vacuous thirty-eight year period of the wilderness sojourn also record a similar fate that befell the observance of the Passover! While the Torah itself records that the people of Israel did perform the Paschal sacrifice during the second year of their Exodus, as they prepared to break up their encampment at the foot of Mount Sinai, the Rabbis' careful reading of that relevant text exposed more ominous undertones:

"God spoke to Moshe in the wilderness of Sinai, in the FIRST month of the second year of their Exodus from the land of Egypt, and said, "The people of Israel shall observe the Paschal sacrifice at its appointed time. On the fourteenth day of this month at evening you shall perform it in its correct time, in accordance with all of its decrees and ordinances." Moshe told the people of Israel to observe the Pesach. They observed the Pesach on the fourteenth day of the first month in the evening while in the wilderness of Sinai, according to all of the matters that God had commanded Moshe so did the people of Israel perform" (Bemidbar 9:1-5).

Echoing the Rabbinic opinion that this section was written out of order since, this 'Passover' section chronologically precedes the census recorded at the beginning of the Book of Bemidbar (that took place 'on the first day of the SECOND month of the second year'), Rashi (11th century, France) comments: "Why didn't the Book begin with this section? It is because it contains allusions to Israel's reproach, namely that during the entire forty year period of the people's sojourn in the wilderness, they performed only this one Paschal rite!" (commentary to Bemidbar 9:1).

We must therefore amend our earlier list of 'wilderness negations' to include one more item. Not only did the Torah pass over the four decade span of the generation of the wilderness in utter silence, not only did the northern wind die down for that time and thus prevent the observance of circumcision, not only did God fail to address Moshe during that era in tender tones of prophecy, but tradition asserts that the inviolable observance of the Passover sacrifice, the very service that more than any other recalled Israel's election as God's chosen and her donning of that destiny in turn, was abrogated and forsaken as well. The stifling stigma of 'reproach' that marked that ungrateful generation for oblivion, for having recklessly foresworn nationhood and homeland to instead favor the fleshpots of Egypt, could not be wholly cleansed even from the perennial celebration of their national independence. Thus, the Passover remained for almost four decades disregarded, with the notable exception of the rites celebrated during the second year of the Exodus as the people prepared to take their leave of Sinai AND JOURNEY TOWARDS THE LAND OF CANAAN – a stirring march tragically cut short by the dispatch of the Spies!

REVERSING THE INFAMY OF THE WILDERNESS

Therefore, it is in a stunning flashback to those singular events of the Exodus and in a shattering reversal of their current trajectory, that the people of Israel now again perform these two thematically related observances in quick succession. This time, though, they fulfill circumcision and offer the Paschal lamb not as reluctantly liberated slaves who were forcefully driven across the Exodus' dark threshold of uncertainty and fear, but as morally mature persons who willingly embraced God's unceasing guidance in the wilderness and now stood ready to mark the dawn of Israel's true nationhood with their entry into the land.

Significantly, the celebration of the Paschal Sacrifice is one of the few holiday celebrations that is attested to throughout the entire Biblical period. In our context, of course, we find it prepared by Yehoshua (3:2-12) when the people of Israel cross the Yarden to enter the land, in the 13th century BCE. Later, the rites are celebrated by King Chizkiyahu (II Divrei Ha-yamim 30:5-15), the resolute and righteous 8th century BCE King of Judea who attempted to gather in the remnants of the Northern Kingdom of Israel in the aftermath of the Assyrian exile. Later still, the inspiring 7th BCE century religious reformer King Yoshiyahu (Ibid, 35:16-19) calls for the observance of the Paschal sacrifice, as the storm clouds of Babylonian domination begin to gather on the horizon of Jerusalem. Finally, towards the end of the Biblical period, the Passover is observed by the nascent community of 5th century BCE Jews who return to Zion under the aegis of King Cyrus of Persia (Ezra 6:19-22).

Of course, although there is no evidence to suggest that the Passover sacrifice passed completely unobserved during the intervening periods, as it did during the course of the wilderness wanderings, it stands to reason that its effects must have been correspondingly less pronounced. We do know from the Biblical text itself that the long intervening periods in between those brief bouts of inspired leadership were more often than not characterized by national stagnation and moral and spiritual decline. In contrast, all of these cited Paschal celebrations occurred at pivotal moments of national religious renewal, and were initiated by a leader animated by a spirit of genuine reformation and rapprochement with God. We might therefore tentatively conclude that our Egyptian and Yarden precedents are repeated throughout Biblical history, not only in deed as narrow ritual act, but in broad intent and underlying purpose as well.

THE CESSATION OF THE MANNA

Standing outside Yericho's gates, the people are now ready to embark on the conquest of Canaan. One final telling episode separates Israel from its first encounter with the Canaanites:

"On the morrow of the Passover, the people ate matzot and roasted grain prepared from the produce of the land, on this very day. The manna ceased on the morrow when they ate from the land's produce, and the people of Israel had no more manna. Therefore, that year they ate from the new produce of the land of Canaan" (Yehoshua 5:11-12).

This fleeting reference to the cessation of the manna serves as a fitting conclusion to the entire first five chapters of the book. The course of our studies up until this point has in large measure focused upon the glaring contrasts between the Exodus from Egypt and the entry into Canaan, between fearful slaves and proud free men, between uncertainty and failure and resolve and triumph. We have considered the very many parallels that separated this chasm of forty years: Yehoshua's leadership/Moshe's guidance, the Spies of Yericho/the Spies of Canaan, the traversal of the Yarden/the crossing of Yam Suf, and now, the rites of circumcision and Passover that served as significant markers in time for both events. Now we are ready to take our leave of what might be called the 'Thematic Introduction to Sefer Yehoshua' in order to consider the Book's next section: the conquest of Canaan, a prolonged account that begins with the battle of Yericho. But before doing so, the text first indicates that the miraculous manna, the remarkable food that sustained Israel for a generation, abruptly terminates. What might be the significance of its end?

Again, we must turn back to the Exodus for an answer. After the people suddenly left Egypt, bearing no more provisions than the unleavened cakes on their backs, they were guided to the Sea of

Reeds. There, God caused the Sea to miraculously open up, and the people of Israel traversed it on dry land while the pursuing Egyptian hordes drowned in its chilly depths. Leaving its banks, the people entered the inhospitable Wilderness of Shur. After a fruitless three-day journey in search of water, they came to the bitter waters of Marra but could not drink them. Crying out to God, they were miraculously provided with liquid refreshment, as Moshe healed the bitterness. Continuing to march, they then came to Eilim, a well-watered oasis, but soon were enjoined to leave its pleasant landscape and journey through the barren wilderness of Seen. Exactly one month had passed since the people had left the brick pits of Egypt, when they cried out to God for food:

God said to Moshe: "Behold, I will cause sustenance to rain down from heavens for you. The people will go out to gather it each day, so that I might prove their resolve to see if they will follow my Torah or not ...the House of Israel called the substance 'manna'... They consumed it for forty years until they came to a settled land, they ate the manna until they came to the boundary of the land of Canaan... (Shemot 16:4-36).

TRANSCENDING THE WILDERNESS EXPERIENCE

Thus, the entry into the wilderness of Seen, and into the proverbial wilderness experience of desolation, deprivation and despondency, was signaled by the onset of the manna, the sustaining symbol of God's guidance and care. For the entire period of the wilderness sojourn, the people of Israel were nurtured on its ethereal substance as they simultaneously ingested the profound meaning of God's providence. No matter what else might happen, the manna never failed to fall and the people were never disappointed. If there was a lone constant in the drawn-out equation of the journey through the wilderness, geographically a short trek from Egypt to Canaan but experientially a colossal passage from slavery to freedom, it was the delicate manna that daily covered the environs of the Israelite camp. If there was a single indication of God's miraculous intervention and ongoing support from on high, it was the otherworldly manna that fell daily from the heavens like some supernatural rainfall.

Taking their leave of the wilderness forever, standing firmly on Canaan's more substantial soil, the people of Israel have not only reached their destination but have completed the experience of their journey. The miracles of the Exodus, the Sea of Reeds, and the wilderness have drawn to a close and Israel must now build its national life in its land like any other people. Of course, God's involvement in that process is just as real, His concern and kindness just as immediate, but the overt nature of His contribution must necessarily recede into the background so that the people of Israel can exercise their newfound maturity to choose, to err, and to learn from their errors in order to succeed. It cannot be otherwise, and the miraculous manna must perforce cease, just as Israel enters the land and completes the dual rites of circumcision and Passover that signal the dawn of its nationhood. The four decades of the wilderness, the expiration of one generation as another one came of age and took its place, are thus bracketed by the experience of the manna. The implication is clear: even while held in 'reproach,' the people of Israel are never far from God's loving concern and kindness.

Next time, we will begin our study of the conquest of Yericho, a battle that properly begins with the unexpected appearance to Yehoshua of the mysterious 'Captain of God's Legions' at the end of Chapter 5. We will consider that episode and then go on to analyze the significance of the encirclement of the city by the army of Israel, as described in Chapter 6. Readers are therefore requested to complete their reading of Chapter 6.