

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

Introduction to the Prophets:

Sefer Yehoshua – Chapter 6 Conclusion
Shiur #14: The Fall of Yericho

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INTRODUCTION

Last time, we considered the significance of the mysterious phantom that appears to Yehoshua as the people of Israel encamp on Yericho's outskirts, awaiting the order to strike. After offering words of encouragement as well as a charge to Yehoshua to not desecrate the 'sanctity' of the land through acts of wanton cruelty, the angelic figure disappears.

Suddenly, God Himself addresses the Israelite leader, confirming the angel's words and indicating to Yehoshua how the city is to be attacked and conquered:

Let all the fighting men circle the city once, repeating the procedure for six days. Seven Kohanim will bear seven rams' horns before the Ark, and on the seventh day you shall encircle the city seven times, as the Kohanim sound the horns. As the sound of the rams' horns persist, when you hear the sound of the horn, then all of the people shall shout very loudly. The wall of the city will fall in its place, and the people shall then attack it from all sides (Yehoshua 6:2-5).

THE ENCIRCLEMENT OF THE CITY

As Yehoshua implements the plan, a number of other pertinent details emerge. The Ark is indeed preceded by the Kohanim sounding the rams' horns, but the Kohanim themselves are led in the procession by a vanguard of elite fighting men, identified by Rabbinic tradition with the members of the tribes of Reuven, Gad and Menashe (Rashi 6:9), who swore their allegiance to Yehoshua in Chapter 1 by undertaking to fulfill Moshe's oath. As for the rearguard of the procession, it is manned by another fighting force associated with the tribe of Dan (Rashi 6:13), who during the course of the wilderness peregrinations manned the last of the tribal standards and were appointed to round up any Israelites who fell behind (see Bemidbar 10:25).

Thus, there are properly four elements in the march: the vanguard, the Kohanim, the Ark, and the rearguard. The central two are typically linked in the context of the Tabernacle, for it is the Kohanim who minister there before God's presence that is represented by the Ark. The bracketing two, on the other hand, are representatives of the tribes of Israel, both those associated with the lands east of the Jordan (Reuven, Gad, Menashe), as well as those who are set to reside on its western shore (Dan). In other words, this first and pivotal battle is engaged by a force that constitutes a microcosm of the people and their God, united in purpose and bonded by a common destiny. As knowledgeable readers, we all know that as the campaign to secure the land progresses and other Canaanite cities fall, some tribes will suffer from the sore temptation to abandon the more comprehensive national concerns in pursuit of their own sectarian

interests. For this very reason, the attack on Yericho is carried out in a manner that emphasizes the overriding importance of maintaining national cohesiveness in the face of the common threat.

The method of encirclement here outlined constitutes a powerful source of psychological warfare against the inhabitants of the city, who will watch with alarm as the Israelites file by silently, led by their God and proceeded by the shrill sound of the rams' horns (commentary of Rabbi David Kimchi, 13th century, Provence, 6:3). Further, the strategy is no doubt calculated to foster a vague but palpable feeling of increasing anxiety among Yericho's defenders, as each passing day brings another circuit of the city by the voiceless enemy, but no overt hostilities. The denizens of Yericho will have plenty of time to ponder the ominous intentions of the Israelite God, Whose disciplined troops maintain their unnerving composure as the cool morning stillness is shattered by the piercing blasts of the seven horns.

THE THEME OF SEVENS

But from Yehoshua's and the people's point of view, the most remarkable feature of the encirclement of Yericho concerns the repeating motif of the number seven: seven Kohanim, seven rams' horns, seven days of circling the city, and the culminating act of circling seven times on the seventh day as the walls come tumbling down. Such a recurrence of the 'seven' theme is found elsewhere, typically in the case of hallowed times. Thus, the weekly Sabbath (mirrored perhaps in the seven-branched candelabrum or Menorah of the Temple – see Shemot 25:31) is celebrated on the seventh day, the national holidays of Pesach/Passover in the Spring and Succot/Tabernacles in the Fall are of seven days' duration, and seven weeks link the observance of Passover – the anniversary of the Exodus from Egypt, to the celebration of Shavuot, the Harvest Festival known as the 'Feast of Weeks' that traditionally commemorates the Revelation at Sinai.

The motif of seven also recalls the agricultural calendar that is spelled out in the Book of Vayikra 25:1-24, in which six years of planting and harvesting are followed by a seventh year of 'release,' during which no farming work takes place and the earth lies fallow and untended. Seven such cycles constituting forty-nine years are followed by the remarkable year of the 'Yovel' or Jubilee, which is inaugurated by the blast of the ram's horn on the solemn day of Yom Kippur. In the year of the Yovel, all ancestral lands excepting those of walled cities, though they may have been sold to others during the course of the intervening period, return to their original owners, and all bonded servants are set free to return to their homes.

SANCTIFICATION OF THE CYCLE

Although the Radak (Rabbi David Kimchi), rejects the attempt to provide a rationale for the 'seven' motif in our passage and instead directs the reader to more mystical possibilities, the most plausible general explanation for the theme and its relevance here is that it highlights the necessity of recognizing God and consecrating His holy name. Thus, to return to the other parallels, the six days of labor are designated for man to pursue his mastery of the natural world, but the seventh day is 'a Sabbath unto God your Lord' (Shemot 20:8), set aside for the furtherance of more lofty spiritual goals. The national commemorations of Pesach, Shavuot, and Succot recall the overt acts of God's saving involvement in the process of the Exodus and during the sojourn in the wilderness, as well as commemorating His unequivocal proclamation of the Ten Guiding Principles at Sinai. In addition, the three festivals call to mind God's ongoing and sustaining providence, in bestowing upon the earth seasons of planting, harvest and ingathering so that humanity might not only survive, but also prosper. The agricultural cycle of seven years is to impress upon the Hebrew mind that not only is time hallowed by God's command, but that also material space, the

mundane soil and its produce, are to be dedicated to His service. There is nothing in the world, no man and no clod of earth that can remain disconnected from its Source forever. Thus proclaims the shofar blast on the Day of Atonement of the Fiftieth Year of the Jubilee, calling upon all of the people of Israel, and even their land property, to "Return!"

In all of the above cases of consecration, whether of time or place, the Sabbath, Holidays, or the Years, the number seven defines the bounds of a COMPLETE CYCLE, whose progression must be directed towards God. The series of the seven days of the week, the sequence of the seasons of the year, and even the septennial successions of the farmer's hoe turning over the moist earth, are not meaningless repetitions undifferentiated in their numbing sameness, but rather unique opportunities for communion with God. These constant temporal and spatial reminders gently but persistently declare that our short life spans, conditioned as they typically are by relentless cycles of time and space, can be easily crushed and consumed by incessant rote, unless some Higher Purpose informs them.

THE THEME OF SEVEN IN THE CONQUEST OF YERICHO

It must therefore be that in our context, the motif of seven that reverberates across the Plains of Jericho is to affirm to the Israelites as well as to their nemeses that victory is God's alone, for they will prevail not by force of their arms but rather by His decree. By encircling seven times and sounding the seven horns for seven days, the battle is to be dedicated to God, to impress upon Yehoshua and his army that although they are enjoined to exercise autonomy, to employ military strategy, to cautiously plan and to carefully execute their plans, the day, in the end, will be won only by God's intervention. Significantly, according to a well-founded Rabbinic tradition, the 'cycle' of warfare that the encirclement of Jericho introduces will continue unabated for a period of SEVEN years (see Rashi 14:10). In other words, the battle of Jericho underscores a theme that will inform the entire period of Israel's conquest of Canaan and even subsequent Biblical history: "They [wage war] with chariots and others with horses, but we proclaim the name of God our Lord. They are bowed and fallen, while we rise up and are strengthened. God, save us! The King will answer us on the day that we entreat Him" (Tehillim 20:8-10).

But there is more. By indicating that the victory over Jericho is God's alone, the army of Israel will come to appreciate that their campaign must be waged for more noble causes than looting and plunder, the twin pillars of 'justified' warfare in the ancient world. No wonder that in this first and paradigmatic battle against the Canaanites, Yehoshua pronounces an otherwise inexplicable ban against their bodies and their possessions:

The seventh time as the Kohanim sounded the horns, Yehoshua told the people 'Shout out, for God has given the city to you! The city and all that is in it shall be consecrated ('CheReM') to God. Only Rachav the Harlot and all that are with her in her house shall live, for she concealed the spies that we sent. As for you, observe the consecration ('CheReM'), lest you succumb ('taChaRiMu') and take from the ban ('CheReM'), for in so doing you shall place the camp of Israel under a ban ('CheReM') and discomfit it. All of the silver and the gold, the bronze and the iron shall be holy to God, and shall be placed in the treasury of God.' ... At that time, Yehoshua pronounced an oath saying, 'Cursed be the man before God who arises and rebuilds this city of Jericho, for he shall lay its foundations with [the death of] his firstborn and set its gates with [the death of] his youngest child!' (6:16-19, 26).

Thus, the Israelite forces are to take no booty from the spoils of Jericho, no human slaves to do their bidding, no material souvenirs of their crushing victory. Instead, all proceeds of the enemy are to be

consecrated to God and to His Tabernacle. The commentaries disagree as to whether this ban of Yehoshua was enjoined by God – though no such reference in the text to His command can be adduced – or whether in fact Yehoshua himself pronounces it of his own volition. Whatever the case may be, it is clear that the inspiration for such a ban is writ large all over Yericho's ramparts, for it is none other than the blatant motif of seven that we have been discussing. It is but a short and direct route from the seven-fold encirclement of the city with its overtones of Divine involvement and human dedication to His name, to the pronouncement of Yehoshua that completely consecrates the city and its contents to God's honor.

THE CITY LED ASTRAY TO EMBRACE IDOLATRY

We will yet have occasion to more fully consider the moral quandaries introduced by Yehoshua's directive, in particular when they are raised again in Chapters 10 and 11 of the Book. For now, let us begin to consider the relevant issues by noting the most striking and informative of all Biblical parallels to the overthrow of Yericho:

If you hear reports concerning one of the cities that God your Lord gives you to dwell in, that ignoble men from your midst have led astray the people of their city saying, 'Let us go and serve other gods' that you have not known. You shall diligently investigate and enquire carefully. If it is true that this abomination has taken place in your midst, then you shall slay the inhabitants of that city by the sword, and destroy ('haChaReM') it and all that is in it, including its animals, by the edge of the sword. You shall gather up all of its spoils into its central square and completely burn them with fire unto God your Lord. The city shall be a desolate ruin forever, never to be rebuilt. Let nothing of the ban (haCheReM') adhere to you, in order that God may turn away from His burning anger and grant you compassion and increase, just as He swore to your ancestors. Therefore, hearken to the words of God your Lord to observe all of His commandments that I command you this day, to do what is upright in the sight of God your Lord" (Devarim 13:13-19).

The above passage constitutes perhaps the harshest of Sefer Devarim's many invectives against idolatry. Although in the narrow sense the verses speak of ISRAELITES who have embraced idolatry, the analogies that otherwise exist between the so-called 'Ir HaNidachat' – the city led astray, and Yericho, are too conspicuous to be mere coincidence. In both cases, the city under discussion is to be utterly destroyed, its inhabitants including animals completely slaughtered, their possessions and the city's plunder to be entirely shunned, and its ramparts and houses never to be rebuilt. In both cases, the recurring word in the passage is a cognate of 'CheReM,' translated according to various contexts as 'banned' (Devarim 7:26), 'utterly destroyed' (see Devarim 20:17), or 'wholly consecrated' (see Vayikra/Leviticus 27:28). And in both cases, the objective of the severe reaction is to secure God's favor. What might be the significance of the correspondence?

The obvious and only linkage between the 'City Led Astray' and Yericho is idolatry. The Ir HaNidachat is a hypothetical Israelite city whose inhabitants have wholeheartedly embraced the worship of other gods, after the manner of the Canaanite city-states of which Yericho is the exemplar. The unforgiving punishment that is to be meted out to its Israelite people is the Torah's typical response for the deliberate abrogation of the prohibition of idolatry. The striking analogy to Yericho is meant to drive home the following unsettling truth: an Israelite city that endorses idolatrous worship is no different than its Canaanite counterparts and will suffer the same ignominious fate.

In a contrasting vein, recall that Rachav and her family are preserved by Yehoshua when Yericho falls. Thus, while these particular people of Canaanite stock are saved, cities whose inhabitants are of

Israelite stock can yet be doomed. This contrast in and of itself is enough to make absolutely clear that Yehoshua's war is NOT a racial and genocidal campaign of ethnic cleansing but something else entirely: a war of CONFLICTING VALUES. We will continue to analyze and to substantiate this fundamental axiom as we go on to study the upcoming chapters of conquest. Readers are kindly requested to begin reading Chapter 7.