

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

Introduction to the Prophets:

Shiur #28: Sefer Yehoshua – Chapter 15
The Tribal Boundaries of Yehuda
By Rav Michael Hattin

INTRODUCTION

With the account of Chapter Fifteen, the tribal divisions of territory are finally introduced. The Canaanite military alliances have long ago been smashed, their sponsors now reconciled to the inevitable settlement of Israel in the land, and Yehoshua has become old. Last time, we read of Calev's steadfast faith, of his journey to formidable Chevron some forty-five years earlier, and of the fulfillment of God's pledge as he and his descendents are assigned that place as their eternal inheritance. While constituting an essentially personal account of overarching trust in God's word, the episode of Calev also highlighted the spiritual qualities that would be needed by the people of Israel in order for them to be successful in their quest to put down roots in the new land.

This time, the narrative turns its attention to more national concerns, as the borders of the nascent state are delineated. Significantly, the text follows up its account of Calev with the story of his kin, the tribe of Yehuda, always the foremost among the tribes of Israel. Recall, for instance, that in the organization of the wilderness encampment, the tribe of Yehuda was assigned the coveted eastern flank (BeMidbar/Numbers 2:3), opposite the leadership families of Moshe, Aharon and their children (BeMidbar 3:38) and along the axis of approach to the Mishkan itself (Shemot/Exodus 27:13-16). Recall also that in the two censuses undertaken in the Torah, the first soon after the Exodus from Egypt and the second on the eve of the entry into the land, the tribe of Yehuda was the largest single entity. In the former instance, the tribe of Yehuda numbered 74,600 adult males of military age (BeMidbar 1:27), while in the second, it contained 76,500 (BeMidbar 26:22). In both cases, Yehuda outranked its closest rival tribe by about 10,000 men.

THE BORDERS OF YEHUDA IN BROAD TERMS AND FUTURE INTIMATIONS

It is therefore only natural that in the descriptions of the tribal boundaries, the tribe of Yehuda should be mentioned first. It should be pointed out that of all the tribal boundaries spelled out in Sefer Yehoshua, that of Yehuda is the most detailed. Topographically, Yehuda's borders are straightforward enough, and the account makes use of the Dead Sea (or "Salt Sea" as it is known in the Tanakh) as a well-known and convenient reference point. Thus, the southeastern extremity of the tribe was bordered by the so-called "lisan," a triangular peninsula that extends out from the eastern shore of the sea near its southern end, and effectively reduces its width at that point to only four kilometers of shallow and traversable salt flats. From here, the southern border continued along a line southwestwards, eventually terminating on the Mediterranean shore at the so-called "Nachal Mitzrayim" or present day Wadi El-Arish. The eastern boundary of the tribe continued northwards along the shores of the Dead Sea and the Jordan River, terminating at a point on its banks roughly corresponding to the latitude of Jerusalem.

The northern boundary then proceeded westward in a somewhat jagged line, until terminating at the Mediterranean Sea. Broadly speaking, then, the tribal border of Yehuda could be said to comprise the substantial area bounded by the Dead Sea to the east and the Mediterranean Sea to the west, with the addition of a band of more territory in the arid south.

Significantly, the territorial lands of Yehuda included a representative selection of the major climatic zones of Canaan, arranged as a series of topographic strips from west to east. These were the flat and fertile coastal plain, the gently sloping foothills, the rocky central highlands, and the foreboding and barren wilderness overlooking the Dead Sea. Additionally, there was a fifth zone: the parched southern expanse beyond Be'er Sheva known as the Negev. Perhaps, then, the lands of Yehuda can be regarded as a sort of microcosm of the land of Canaan itself, much as the tribe of Yehuda was to become the pivotal tribe in Israel and, later in the Biblical period during the ascendancy of Assyria in the 8th century BCE, the only remaining tribe of importance. Eventually, of course, by the period of the Persian Empire that rose to prominence in the 6th century BCE, the people of Israel would be identified solely by their association with this one extant tribe, becoming known as "Jews" or "Yehudim" after its name.

THE CENTRALITY OF YEHUDA AND THE CITY OF JERUSALEM

Our text already alludes to this eventuality. Later in the chapter, verses 20-63, the Judean towns and cities are grouped according to the topographical key described above. The Negev towns number 29, those of the foothills comprise 39, the mountain settlements are 38, and the sparsely populated Judean desert have but 6. All together, then, the text spells out 112 cities and towns (29+39+38+6=112), not including the coastal towns of Ekron, Ashdod and Aza and their surrounding regions that are not counted because they remained outside of Judean hegemony. Significantly, the numbered cities of all of the remaining seven tribes that received their territorial borders at Shilo (see chapters 18 and 19) also equal 112 (Binyamin – 26; Shimon – 17; Zevulun – 12; Yissachar – 16; Asher – 22; Naftali – 19. The cities of Dan are mentioned but not numbered). The implication then, is that the tribe of Yehuda, here featured prominently as the first and most powerful in Israel, would one day remain alone as its surviving core.

There are other premonitions as well. While the text describes the borders of Yehuda with a fair amount of detail, it pays particular attention to the northern boundary, and singles out the topography in the environs of Jerusalem for special mention. This, too, is an allusion to the central role that Jerusalem would one day play in the national conscience of the people of Israel, though at this time the town was inhabited by the powerful Canaanite tribe of the Yevusi and utterly beyond the realm of Israelite control: "As for the Yevusites that dwelt in Jerusalem, the people of Yehuda were unable to dispossess them. The Yevusites dwelt in Jerusalem among the people of Yehuda until this very day" (15:63).

THE ACCOUNT OF CALEV, OTNIEL AND ACHSA

Completing the account, the text indicates that Calev son of Yefuneh, whose exploits were described in Chapter 14 and discussed last time, was assigned "in accordance with God's word to Yehoshua, the city of "Kiryat Arba the father of the giants, that is Chevron" (15:13). Though advanced in age, Calev's warrior spirit is undiminished, and he succeeds in dislodging the children of the giant and in possessing the region. Continuing to Devir, Calev offers his daughter in marriage to the one who will succeed in conquering the town. Otniel son of Kenaz the younger brother of Calev is victorious, and takes Achsa the daughter of Calev as his wife. She in turn prevails upon her new husband to request additional

territory from her father, springs of water to irrigate the otherwise "dry lands" that comprise the region, and Calev readily agrees to her entreaties that she subsequently delivers as she forcefully alights from her donkey!

This curious passage contains a number of important points. First of all, we must take note of Calev's challenge. Much later, Shaul the first king of Israel would make a similar offer under somewhat similar circumstances. Shemuel/Samuel 1 Chapter 17 records that during his reign, the coastal-dwelling Philistines continued to assert harsh control over the adjacent tribes of Israel, buoyed by their superior armed forces and especially by their champion Golyat/Goliath, a seasoned warrior of giant proportions. The fighting men of Shaul were deathly afraid to engage Golyat or his hordes in battle, and the new king attempted to rally the people by making them an irresistible offer: "the man who strikes him (Golyat) down will be given great wealth by the king, will receive his daughter in marriage, and his household will be exempted from taxes in Israel!" (Shemuel 1:17:25). Thus, the offer of the daughter was in both instances regarded as a grand incentive, implying both the allure of becoming related by marriage to the leader making the offer as well as emphasizing the difficulty of the task that had to be accomplished. In other words, Calev must have been very highly esteemed for his challenge to be taken up, while the city of Devir and its environs must have been unusually fortified and inhabited by the same race of "giants" that called nearby Chevron their home.

OTNIEL AS A SUCCESSOR FIGURE

It is Otniel son of Kenaz, Calev's kinsman, who conquers Devir and takes Achsa as his wife. Significantly, Otniel is later named as the first of the Judges in the Book of Shoftim (1:8-15), effectively succeeding Yehoshua as leader in the twilight period before the people began to fall prey to the idolatrous fetishes of Canaan. Even more striking, the Rabbinic sources seem to indicate that Otniel was a scholar of unusual stature, rivaling even Yehoshua in his brilliance:

"Calev said: whosoever strikes Kiryat Sefer and captures it..." – we learned: one thousand and seven hundred doubts concerning parallel phrases ('gezera shava'), minor to major syllogisms ('kal va-chomer'), and scribal nuances ('dikdukei sofrim') were forgotten during the period of mourning over the death of Moshe. Rabbi Abahu said: even so, Otniel son of Kenaz restored them through his acumen... (Talmud Bavli Tractate Temura 16a).

While the impetus for this Rabbinic comment may have been the suggestive name of "Kiryat Sefer" or "Town of a Book," implying some sort of scholarly association, the Talmudic source preserves an important tradition concerning the prominence and reputation of Otniel. As successor to Yehoshua, we would have expected him to demonstrate exceptional leadership qualities, and here his military prowess is paired in the Rabbinic sources with his erudition, just as it was for Yehoshua. Of course, the Biblical texts tell us much less concerning Otniel than they indicated about Yehoshua, but his membership in the clan of Calev both by blood as well as by marriage, his success as a strategist in defeating Kiryat Sefer, and the Rabbinic implication of his spiritual gifts all converge to destine him for greatness and rule.

PARALLELS TO YEHOSHUA'S RISE TO PROMINENCE

It will be recalled that Yehoshua's career was introduced by a very similar Rabbinic comment, quoted by Rashi (11th century, France) on 1:1:

"During the period of mourning over Moshe's death, over three thousand halakhot (teachings and practical laws) that had been communicated by him were forgotten by the people. Yehoshua enquired of God how to resolve them. God responded: 'Moshe My servant has died, and the Torah is called by his name. To tell you is impossible. Rather, go and occupy the people with warfare.'"

In the corresponding Talmudic passage (Tractate Temura 16a), when Yehoshua was unable to restore the lost traditions and had to therefore enquire of God, the people of Israel threatened to kill him!

Clearly, this parallel source attempts to capture some of the popular sentiments that must have surrounded Yehoshua's succession. Moshe was the 'man of God,' the ideal leader who was so profoundly connected to the Deity that, during his tenure, how to proceed was never in doubt. His death left a void so vast that it seemed to the people incapable of ever being filled. Three thousand halakhot, a great number, were already forgotten during the brief thirty-day period of mourning over his demise! In effect, the source intimates that while Yehoshua attempted to take Moshe's place and become a lawgiver in his image, God rebuffed his noble attempts. It is as if God said to him: "Moshe My servant is dead, and you cannot be Moshe. You must be Yehoshua, and the leadership and guidance that you provide for the people cannot and must not be the same. In Moshe's stead, you have been chosen to lead Israel into the land and to inspire them in battle. The necessities of the hour are different, the needs of the people are no longer the same, and the nature of your leadership must be correspondingly distinct as well."

OTNIEL AND THE NEEDS OF THE HOUR

In a similar vein, Otniel arrives to fill the breach, but, unlike Yehoshua, he succeeds in restoring the "lost traditions"! Perhaps we have here an insightful reading of the people's post-bellum needs. Yehoshua fulfills his transition role admirably, bringing Israel into Canaan and beginning the process of their settlement, but many new contingencies arise in the meantime, questions, doubts and issues that require resolution. The so-called "gezera shava, kal va-chomer" and "dikdukei sofrim" are among the mainstays of traditional halakhic analysis and provide the keys to addressing new and unforeseen realities by delving deeply into the primary texts in search of guidance. At the same time, however, by their very text-based nature, these tools of interpretation highlight the eternity that those Biblical words embody, the never-exhausted wellspring of Divine inspiration and teaching that they contain.

By restoring them, Otniel therefore becomes not only the fitting successor to Moshe and Yehoshua, but the inspired innovator as well, the next link in the unfolding chain that connects the teachings of Sinai to the future destiny of the people of Israel in their new land. The period of warfare stands to one day pass, but settlement and statehood must not become spiritual stagnation. The teachings of Moshe, the laws of the Torah, must continue to provide the people of Israel with direction, even as they confront situations and circumstances that their parents could scarcely have anticipated

ACHSA'S SPIRITED EXAMPLE

Finally, we have Achsa, Calev's forceful daughter who makes her point with such dynamic assurance. How are we to understand her remarkable conduct? Quite probably, her behavior represents

an analog to her own father Calev's steadfast conduct. Confronted with the prospect of "dry lands" that appear barren and inhospitable, Achsa does not lose her faith and throw up her hands in dejection. Rather, she is absolutely determined to make the best of her difficult situation, to actually improve upon it and to transform it into triumph.

With the national prospect of settling the land looming large on the horizon, her inspired conduct is thus calculated to serve as an important example for her people. How will they confront the disappointment and disillusionment bound to arise as the wilderness "myth" of a land flowing with milk and honey is shattered by the more sobering reality of desolate and uncultivated expanses covered by scrub and forest and sometimes strewn with rock and ruin? Will the people of Israel lose heart because of the magnitude of the task placed before them and, like the proverbial Spies, surrender to despair? Or will they rather embrace their mission enthusiastically, cognizant of the fact that the settlement of the land will be a slow and laborious process that will not be completed by them, nor by their children nor even by their grandchildren? By introducing us to Achsa, the text hopes to alert us (and them) to this more profound possibility, as it utters a silent prayer that the people of Israel succeed in internalizing the message of her example well, so that they might enjoy eventual and ongoing triumph in the land.

Next week, we will continue to explore the tribal territories, this time turning our attention to the children of Yosef. Readers are asked to prepare Chapters 16 and 17.

Shabbat Shalom