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ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)  
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INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHETS

SEFER SHOFTIM

Shiur #2: Chapter 1 Part A

Some Opening Themes

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INTRODUCTION

And it came to pass after the death of Yehoshua, that the people of Israel enquired of God saying: who shall go up for us first to do battle against the Canaanites? God said: Yehuda shall go up, for behold I have given the land into his hands. Yehuda said to Shimon his brother: go up with me to secure my lot and we will fight (together) against the Canaanites, and then I will go with you to secure your lot. So Shimon accompanied him...(Shoftim 1:1-3).

Thus begins Sefer Shoftim, with a description of the battles of the tribe of Yehuda. The opening phrase of the book is of course reminiscent of the beginning of Sefer Yehoshua: "And it came to pass after the death of Moshe the servant of God, that God said to Yehoshua son of Nune, Moshe's loyal servant..."(Yehoshua 1:1). During the course of our studies we will have many occasions to compare and contrast Sefer Shoftim with Sefer Yehoshua, for while the two books share an intrinsic chronological linkage, they are fundamentally different in theme and in implication.

YEHOSHUA'S ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Sefer Yehoshua was the description of the entry into the land of Canaan by the tribes of Israel. Some forty years after the Exodus from Egypt, the people traversed the river Yarden under the able leadership of Yehoshua. Moshe the lawgiver, who had taken them out of Egypt, brought

them to Sinai to receive the Torah, and then had ably led and guided them during the entire period of their unfortunate wilderness sojourn, perished at the Plains of Moav on the Yarden's eastern banks. Before his demise, he had appointed at God's behest a successor to lead the people into the new land, a capable teacher and gifted warrior by the name of Yehoshua. And Yehoshua was successful. Under his rule, the tribes of Israel together battled the Canaanite confederacies and achieved impressive results. By the time of Yehoshua's death, the major military alliances of the Canaanites had been defeated, as recorded in the famous "king's list" of Chapter 12 of that book.

But the defeat of the chief Canaanite city-states' armies did not signify the end of the conflict. The land was still largely unsettled and Israel had yet to set down significant and lasting roots. In order to do so successfully, it was not sufficient to defeat the Canaanites on the battlefield, a process that did not take more than a few years. In order to claim the land as their own, the people of Israel were called upon to make it theirs by clearing its brush, cultivating its hills, and building their towns and cities along its length and breadth, while all the while avoiding the charms of Canaanite polytheism. That task of settlement and habitation implied a much more extended progression lasting decades if not centuries. The associated mandate to extirpate all indigenous traces of idolatry could not possibly be completed overnight. Clearly then, the dual undertaking could not be accomplished during Yehoshua's lifespan, lengthy though it was. It may be recalled that God indicated as much to Yehoshua towards the end of his life: "Yehoshua was old, he had lived many days, and God said to him: 'you are now old and have lived many days, and so much of the land still remains to be possessed...'" (Yehoshua 13:1). In fact, the matter was quite obviously spelled out in the Torah itself, as God addressed the people of Israel while they yet stood at Mount Sinai many years earlier, in the immediate aftermath of the Revelation:

I shall send My dread before you to discomfit all of the nations that you shall encounter, and all of your enemies shall turn their backs (in flight) from you. I shall send before you the hornet to drive out the Chivite, Canaanite and Chittite from before you. BUT I WILL NOT DRIVE THEM OUT FROM BEFORE YOU IN A SINGLE YEAR, FOR THEN THE LAND WOULD BECOME DESOLATE AND THE BEASTS OF THE FIELD WOULD MULTIPLY AGAINST YOU. RATHER, I WILL DRIVE THEM OUT VERY SLOWLY, UNTIL YOU INCREASE AND INHERIT THE LAND. I shall mark your

borders from the Sea of Reeds until the Sea of the Philistines and from the wilderness until the river (Euphrates), for I shall give into your hand the inhabitants of the land and I shall drive them out from before you. You shall not conclude covenants with them or with their gods. Let them not dwell in your land lest they cause you to transgress against Me, for if you serve their gods you shall become ensnared (Shemot 23:27-31).

## UNDERSTANDING THE NATURE OF MILITARY VICTORY

Thus, as Sefer Shoftim begins, the land still remains "unconquered." The smashing of the Canaanite confederacies and their combined armies in the time of Yehoshua may have removed the immediate existential threat from the tribes of Israel, but the individual tribal allotments still had to be possessed and the local military menaces still had to be overcome. It is the story of that possession, its triumphs and more often its setbacks, that constitutes the bulk of the book.

The distinction between military victory versus effective and permanent possession may perhaps be illustrated by a modern, if somewhat dissimilar, example. In the Six Day War of June 1967, the state of Israel achieved a crushing victory over its Arab foes, who had initiated the conflict with the express goal of destroying it. By the end of the war, Israel had not only defeated the military alliance of Egypt, Jordan, Syria and their compatriots and had devastated their weapons, but had also succeeded in conquering large tracts of territory that had not been assigned to it according to the Partition Plan of 1947. But that acquisition of land, an entirely legitimate consequence of any objective definition of *causus belli*, was never properly followed up by an intense and determined program of possession, and hence was never completed. Thirty-six years after that conflict, the State of Israel still finds itself in the precarious and unenviable position of attempting to secure its borders, with no foreseeable end in sight. In other words, military victories astounding though they may be, are in and of themselves not sufficient to guarantee national security or success, unless they are determinedly followed by possession through settlement.

## TRIBES VERSUS A NATION

Because the nature of the conflicts recounted in Sefer Shoftim are so very different than the battles waged in Sefer Yehoshua – the latter describing a short series of intense battles, the former the much longer progression of possession – the tribal makeup of the respective fighting forces are also markedly different. Yehoshua's battles were undertaken as a national enterprise by all of the tribes together – recall how even the tribes that dwelt east of the Yarden had sent their complement of troops to serve under his command (see Yehoshua 1:12-18) – but the battles that introduce Sefer Shoftim are primarily regional in scope and are waged by each tribe on its own.

The opening of the book, therefore, while stylistically recalling the introductory phrases of Sefer Yehoshua, highlights this glaring difference. For now, there is no national leader, no national mission and no corresponding national vision. Each tribe must act on its own to take possession of its portion. While a group of tribes may often work in collaboration, as Yehuda and Shimon of our chapter, they just as often labor alone. Perhaps this explains the inclusion of verses 9 – 15 that describe the conquest of the southern hill country in the environs of Chevron by Otniel son of Kenaz. The passage is actually an almost complete reproduction of Yehoshua 15:13-19, and chronologically it belongs there. Here it is repeated with an important divergence. While the passage in Sefer Yehoshua speaks of Calev and Otniel as individuals fulfilling their part of the national mission under the watchful gaze of the national leader, our section recasts the events in much more tribal terms. The accomplishments of Calev and Otniel are here understood as belonging exclusively to the tribe of Yehuda rather than to the people of Israel as a whole. This principle of tribal possession and defense of territory, with its inescapable corollary of tribal and hence more narrow concerns, is one of the abiding themes of the book. And, as we shall see in coming weeks, the results of such an approach were very often unsatisfactory.

## CLOSENESS VERSUS DISTANCE

There is of course another important difference between the openings of the two books. Sefer Yehoshua immediately introduces us to God's involvement: "And it came to pass after the death of Moshe the servant of God, that God said to Yehoshua son of Nune, Moshe's loyal servant... " While we noted at the time that as Sefer Yehoshua progressed God's involvement became less overt (although no less real), our book already begins from a point of greater Divine

obscurity. Here, there is no prophet that communicates God's word to the people directly. God has not selected and appointed an individual who is inspired to speak on His behalf. Instead, the people must "enquire" of Him, an expression that indicates the consultation of the fabled stones of the High Priests' breastplate. According to the proleptic provisions of Sefer Bemidbar 27:15-23, when Yehoshua succeeds his mentor Moshe as leader, he is to secure God's response to matters of national significance through the instrument of the "Urim ve-Tumim" – the aforesaid precious stones: "He shall stand before El'azar the Priest who shall ask for him before God by the law of the Urim. In accordance with it they shall go out (to battle) and in accordance with it they shall come in (from battle), he and all of the people of Israel with him and all of the congregation." These twelve stones were engraved with the names of the tribes of Israel, and the Talmudic traditions relate that in response to the enquiry of a national leader, some of the letters would light up or otherwise stand out. The highlighted letters would then be joined into coherent words through Divine inspiration (see Talmud Bavli Tractate Yoma 73a-b).

In any case, while Yehoshua surely made use of this method (see for instance Yehoshua 7:14-18), Sefer Yehoshua makes no explicit reference to it, and it certainly could not have been the exclusive mode of communication between him and the Deity. On many occasions, in fact, God speaks to Yehoshua directly, in a manner that does not seem categorically different than His conversations with Moshe. Therefore, the lack of any mention of the method of "enquiry" in Sefer Yehoshua must constitute a deliberate "oversight" that was meant to underline the cohesive relationship obtaining between God and Israel, as if their direct lines of communication did not necessitate recourse to such a detached and disengaged procedure. And while it is true that during the course of our study of Sefer Yehoshua we clearly detected the decreasing manifestation of God's involvement, we also understood that to have constituted a necessary development, namely to allow for the possibility of the people of Israel taking the initiative in the formulation and implementation of national policies. Those narratives never alluded to any sinister implications contained in God's decreasing overt involvement; quite the contrary, they pointed to the positive potential inherent in human decisions that were predicated upon His covert assistance. God's presence was experienced and His immediacy was palpable for as long as Yehoshua and the elders that succeeded him served as the people's leaders, and nothing in the book suggested otherwise.

In contrast, as Sefer Shoftim opens, God's response is secured exclusively through the agency of the Urim ve-Tumim, and this fact presumably points to more ominous prospects. Perhaps the text is emphasizing that the distance between God and the people has increased and therefore their lines of communication are correspondingly less direct. The accuracy of this reading is of course borne out by the unfolding narratives of the book, for they describe in progressively more forceful terms the extent and consequences of this increasing estrangement.

Next time, we will complete our study of the first chapter as we begin to consider the profound implications for ancient Israel of failing to dispossess the Canaanites. Readers are kindly requested to finish the first chapter, verses 22 – 36.