

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

Introduction to the Prophets:

Sefer Yehoshua – Chapter 3

Shiur #6: Crossing the Yarden with the Ark of the Covenant
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INTRODUCTION

Last time we concluded our study of the spies' mission to Yericho. We followed their daring escape with bated breath and marveled over the courage and fortitude of their rescuer, Rachav. Returning to Yehoshua after three days in hiding, the spies submitted their unified and forceful conclusion:

They said to Yehoshua that 'God has given the whole land into our hands, and all of its inhabitants melt before us!' (Yehoshua 2:24).

Relieved and inspired by their words, Yehoshua wasted no time in preparing the people for their next challenge – the crossing of the Yarden (Jordan River).

The Yarden is a rather small and narrow watercourse, notwithstanding its gigantic proportions in the mind's eye of a pilgrim and voyager. Its cold and fast-flowing headwaters originate in southern Lebanon and consist of three main springs that are fed by the melting snow pack of the Hermon mountain range. These cool headwaters gather and discharge into the northern end of the Kinneret (Sea of Galilee). As the Yarden flows out of the Kinneret's southern end, it begins its meandering but precipitous descent towards the Yam Hamelach Dead Sea, into which it empties after a drop in elevation of about 180 meters. The name 'Yarden' is derived from the Hebrew root 'YaRaD' meaning 'to go down,' and is a most fitting title in light of its downward course that ends at Yam Hamelach, the lowest point on earth. The Yarden's sluggish flow from the Kinneret to Yam Hamelach, along the scrub-covered floodplain of a narrow rift valley, is three times longer than its air distance of about 120 km. The entire length of the Yarden, forming the natural eastern border of Canaan, is but a small part of the immense and earthquake-prone Great Rift Valley, a fault line that runs from Syria, through the Red Sea, and across East Africa to Mozambique.

CHAPTER 1 AND CHAPTER 2 – THE ORDER OF THE EVENTS

Yehoshua arose early in the morning and he and the people of Israel journeyed from Sheetim and arrived at the Yarden. They slept there prior to crossing. At the end of three days the officers passed through the camp. They commanded the people saying: 'When you see the Ark of the Covenant of God your Lord borne by the Kohanim of the tribe of Levi, then you shall begin to journey after it. However, you shall maintain a distance from it of about 2000 cubits in measure. Do not draw close to it, so that you can be guided by it, for you have not journeyed by this route in the past' (Yehoshua 3:1-4).

Recall that in chapter 1, Yehoshua had taken firm grasp of the reins of leadership by telling these same officers to command the people to prepare provisions, "for in three days time you shall traverse this Yarden to enter and take possession of the land..." (1:11). In chapter 2, he sent the spies to Yericho and they lodged at the house of Rachav. That very night, she hurriedly sent them on their way and advised them to hide for three days among the foreboding cliffs west of Yericho, in order to elude their pursuers who assumed that they had fled eastwards towards the Yarden. This the spies dutifully do, returning to Yehoshua after three full days. Yehoshua receives their report, and the next morning the people commence their journey towards the Yarden, and set up camp on its banks for the night. The next day, 'at the end of the three days,' (3:2) the officers bid the people to follow the Ark. Of course, all of these episodes cannot possibly have taken place in the initial three-day preparation period announced by the officers in chapter 1, making it clear that Yehoshua must have sent the spies BEFORE those three days. Therefore, the events of chapter 2 precede much of chapter 1, and the text's reticence on that matter can only reinforce our earlier conclusions: the spies were sent secretly and the people of Israel were unaware of their mission.

LED BY THE ARK

Now, confident and self-assured in consequence of the spies' successful mission, the people of Israel stand ready to cross the Yarden. They are to follow the Ark, borne by the Kohanim, while maintaining a respectful distance. Because the Ark plays the central role in the crossing, it is critical for us to appreciate its meaning. Recall that the Ark constituted the principal vessel in the Tabernacle, the portable shrine that the people of Israel constructed during their wilderness sojourn and which they transported during the entire length of their wanderings. When the people encamped and the tent-like Tabernacle was erected, the Ark was placed in its innermost chamber, the Holy of Holies. The Ark and other elements of the Tabernacle, including the building's structure and the special garments worn by the ministering priests during their service, are dictated to Moshe at length in parashot Teruma and Tetzave.

They shall make an ark of acacia wood, two and one half cubits in length, one and one half cubits in width, and one and one half cubits in height. You shall cover it with pure gold inside and out, and place a golden crown upon its top. You shall prepare four molten rings and place them upon its ends, two rings on one side and two on the other. You shall prepare staves of acacia wood and cover them with gold, and you shall insert the staves into the rings in order to carry the ark. The staves shall always remain in the rings and shall not be removed. In the ark you shall place the testimony that I will give you. You shall make a lid of pure gold ... and place two keruvim of gold at each of its ends ... The outstretched wings of the keruvim shall cover the lid and they shall face each other ... I shall meet with you there and speak to you from upon the lid, from between the two keruvim that are upon the Ark of the Testimony. From there I shall convey all of My commandments that you must tell the people of Israel (Shemot 25:10-22).

The detailed directions for the Ark's construction speak of three discrete elements: a chest-like wooden receptacle covered inside and out with pure gold, a lid for the chest consisting of a rectangular block of pure gold upon which sit two obscure figures, and two long poles of gilded wood for carrying the object. Concerning the function of the Ark, the text speaks of two intertwined aspects. First, the Ark serves as the physical depository for the 'Testimony,' elsewhere defined as the tablets upon which are graven the Ten Utterances (see Shemot 31:18, 40:20). Second, the Ark acts as the focal point for the

reception of God's commandments. God communicates to Moshe from the infinitesimal point in space that lies between the outstretched wings of the keruvim.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE KERUVIM

The most mysterious elements of the Ark, and the key to unraveling its significance, are the keruvim. These two winged figures sit upon the lid of the Ark at either end, but the Torah nowhere describes their form. Translated as cherubs, they are often portrayed as possessing child-like features, a depiction that finds support in traditional Jewish sources as well (See Sukka 5b). The keruvim find expression elsewhere in the Tabernacle, where they are embroidered on the fabrics of the building's tent-like cover (Shemot 26:1), as well as upon the special curtain that divides the Holy of Holies from the rest of the Tabernacle compound (Shemot 26:31). The ONLY other mention in the Torah of these curious beings is in the description of the Garden of Eden, where the path to the tree of life is closely guarded on the east by the "keruvim and the flaming, whirling sword" (Bereishit 3:24).

The Ramban (13th century, Spain) provides the most convincing explanation for the meaning and purpose of the Ark in general, and of the keruvim in particular:

The text commands that the wings of the keruvim must be outstretched but does not indicate their purpose in the Tabernacle or why they are to be constructed in this way. Therefore the text continues by saying that the lid with its keruvim is to be regarded as an integral part of the Ark. The lid is keruvim (Yechezkel 10:20).

For this reason, God is called 'He that is enthroned upon the keruvim' (Shemuel 1:1:4:4), and their outstretched wings indicate that they are the chariot that bears the glory of God..." (commentary to Shemot 25:21).

For the Ramban, the Ark is a so-called chariot that represents God's 'throne of glory.' Like an earthly monarch who sits upon a throne, God's presence is manifest upon His throne of glory, the Ark. Of course, God is incorporeal, and therefore has no physical proportions. One cannot see Him enthroned atop the keruvim, but one can nevertheless experience His presence and perceive His commands. Eschewing the terminology of the mystics, we might say that the Ark expresses the possibility of introducing God's presence into the world. The keruvim are certainly not representation of God, for the Torah explicitly outlaws idolatry as a most heinous offense. Additionally, they cannot be representations of the Deity simply because there are two of them, while the God of Israel proclaims absolute, incorporeal, oneness. Rather, suggests the Ramban, the keruvim are a human attempt (according to Divine behest) to portray the spiritual 'angelic' beings associated with God's intangible presence. The Ark therefore, represents the chariot or the vehicle by which the experience of God in the material world can be realized.

CARRYING THE ARK FORWARD

Thus, the Ark symbolizes our desire to bring God into our lives. In the Torah's frame of reference, this can only be done through the medium of God's teaching and the performance of His mitzvot. Therefore, the Ark only contains one thing: the tablets that spell out the unique obligations of the people of Israel, for these mitzvot are the fulcrum around which the relationship between God and humanity

must pivot. God communicates to Moshe from 'between the keruvim,' for the Ark is the symbol of His throne, denoting His ongoing presence and involvement in the world. That throne, in turn, rests upon the bedrock of the tablets, for the instruction etched upon them is the only means of bridging the chasm between God and man. Most uniquely among all of the peoples of antiquity, the most sacred object in the most hallowed area of the national shrine of Israel contains neither a molten image of a god nor a physical relic of a human saint, but rather a timeless and intangible guiding text that is the antithesis of corporeality.

Ramban's approach sheds light on an otherwise inexplicable feature of the Ark that made it unique among the other vessels of the Tabernacle. "In the rings of the Ark shall the staves remain, they are not to be removed." All of the other vessels, such as the table, the menorah, and the alters, had staves that were inserted when the Tabernacle journeyed, and were removed when it was set up at its new temporary location. For all of the other vessels the staves were nothing more than a practical and essential means of facilitating transport. In the case of the Ark, however, the staves must have an additional function, for they remain in the Ark even when it is at rest. It is probable that the injunction to maintain the position of the staves was an emphatic and concrete expression of the idea that the people of Israel, the human bearers of the Ark, have the special purpose of bringing God's presence into the world. The Ark may indeed express God's desire to be involved in our lives, His glorious throne suggesting the promise of an immediate and intimate relationship. But, unless human beings bear that Ark, unless the staves are carried by the people of Israel, God remains an inert and detached reality.

The staves must remain in the Ark always to indicate that although the keruvim extend their wings in flight, by themselves they are incapable of animating our material world with God's presence. Their outstretched wings may indeed represent a possibility of vital interaction between man and God, but their lifeless gilded forms emphasize that the opportunity is characterized by an inherent latency. The potential to translate stasis into movement, the promise of an unfolding spiritual dynamic that alone can transform our concrete world, is indicated by the staves that must be lifted by human beings in order to initiate the Ark's motion. The constant presence of the staves and their perpetual attachment to the Ark highlights the role of humanity in general and the people of Israel in particular in the forging of the link between earth and heaven.

RETURNING TO THE TEXT

Returning to Sefer Yehoshua, the procession of the people towards the land is led by the Ark not because it is a cultic object or talisman, but because it signifies God's ongoing presence and involvement. He will lead Israel into the land and secure it for them, but they in turn must uphold the provisions of the tablets of testimony that serve as the foundation of His throne.

It should be noted that according to the detailed directives governing the movement of the israelite camp, spelled out at the beginning of Bemidbar, the Ark did not generally travel at the head of the procession. The tribes of Israel, encamped according to four ensigns that surrounded the Tabernacle on all sides, would break up camp at the first sign of the cloud of glory lifting from the Tabernacle where it is rested. The first two tribal groupings, comprising six tribes, would begin to move in advance of the collapsed Tabernacle, which was then followed by its enwrapped vessels, including the Ark. This would allow the Tabernacle to be reassembled before the Ark's arrival, so that it and the other holy vessels could be honorably positioned immediately upon their arrival (see Bemidbar 2:1-31, 4:1-20). In any case, the directive to follow the lead of the Ark, as described in our passage from Sefer Yehoshua, is an unusual

departure from the typical practice. The only other recorded instance of following the Ark is highly telling:

On the twentieth day of the second month of the second year, the cloud lifted from upon the tent of Testimony. The people of Israel traveled from the wilderness of Sinai, and the cloud came to rest in the wilderness of Paran. They traveled for the first time according to God's word at Moshe's command ... Moshe said to Chovav son of Reuel the Midianite his father-in-law: 'We are going to the place that God has said He will give us. Accompany us and we will deal kindly with you, for God has spoken good things concerning Israel' ... They traveled from God's mountain a distance of three days, and the Ark of God's covenant WENT BEFORE THEM at a distance of three days to seek out a place for them to rest. The cloud of God was upon them during the day when they traveled from the encampment... (Bemidbar 10:11-34).

RELIVING THE PAST

The above passage, so pitiful in retrospect, is the description of the first attempt to enter Canaan. A couple of months after the people had left Egypt, they arrived at Sinai. There they stood awestruck as God proclaimed His thunderous Ten Utterances, and there they remained encamped for over a year as they adapted to their new destiny. Finally, as the above passage describes, the people traveled from Sinai towards the promised land. Moshe, blissfully unaware that he himself would later be denied entry into the land, excitedly invited Reuel to join the triumphant march of the people to their objective. Falling in formation behind the Ark, Israel took its first tentative steps as a free and focused nation. But fate was to overtake them as their subsequent complaints against God's guidance and providence spiraled out of control, only to soon thereafter spawn the devastating mission of the spies. The land that had beckoned to them from so near would remain beyond their reach for almost forty years.

Thus, our narrative in Sefer Yehoshua is particularly meaningful, for it recalls those ruinous events and lost years, but now with the promise of accomplishment and realization. Again the Ark travels before the people of Israel as they confidently march towards the land, but this time success will be theirs. This theme, in which the generation that stands poised to enter the land must relive the failures and indiscretions of their fathers only in order to successfully recast them, is one that we shall come across many times in Sefer Yehoshua, particularly in these early chapters that describe the entry into the land. As readers, we can begin to take note of these flashbacks as we continue to ponder their meaning.

Next time, we will continue our study by comparing the crossing of the Yarden with its most obvious parallel, the crossing of Yam Suf (the Sea of Reeds). Readers are asked to complete chapter 3 and to continue on with the first three verses of chapter 4. Those who are interested in beginning to compare and contrast are directed to Shemot 13:17-15:21, the splitting of the Yam Suf.