

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

Introduction to the Prophets:

Sefer Yehoshua – Chapter 5 Conclusion

Shiur #11: Circumcision and the Land of Canaan
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INTRODUCTION

Last time, we began to consider the mass rite of circumcision that takes place as soon as the people cross over to the Yarden's western bank. As Israel encamps at the outskirts of Yericho, Yehoshua is commanded to circumcise all of the males who had been born during the course of the wilderness journeys, since only the males who had left Egypt some forty years before had been circumcised. The text does not indicate why the rite of circumcision, though regarded as a vital and venerable command, had been neglected by the people of Israel during the course of their wanderings.

An ancient Talmudic tradition, quoted by Rashi (11th century, France), begins to shed some light on the omission.

On the eve of the Exodus from Egypt, a great multitude were circumcised together, and the rite described in the Book of Yehoshua therefore constituted the second time that the ceremony was performed. During the entire forty years of the wanderings, the northern wind did not blow, and thus there was no day that was deemed fit for executing the procedure...(Rashi to 5:2, based upon Talmud Bavli, Tractate Yevamot 72a).

According to this source, the northern wind is associated with dispersing cloud coverage that creates the ideal conditions to accelerate the healing process. While under normal circumstances, its curative effects are felt on most days, its unprecedented absence for such a lengthy period was deemed sufficient grounds for a protracted delay of the commandment of circumcision.

RASHI AND RADAK

It is not within the scope of our textual investigation to ascertain the scientific basis of this tradition. For our purposes, what is significant is to recognize that by ascribing the negation of the rite of circumcision to the absence of the northern wind, the onus for the omission is clearly removed from the people of Israel, and seemingly placed on God. The Creator Who marshals the forces of nature and bends them to His will decided in accordance with His inscrutable wisdom to hold back the therapeutic powers of the northern wind, and the people of Israel were consequently denied the opportunity to perform an ancient command that they would have otherwise apparently fulfilled with fervor. Rashi does not attempt to explain the Divine decision to altar the

prevailing weather patterns in a manner that prevented the people of Israel from maintaining this singular sign of the Covenant.

Rabbi David Kimchi ('RaDaK', 13th century, Provence) is also reticent concerning the underlying assumptions of the Talmudic tradition, and is content to provide a more empirical but no less mystifying explanation.

It is also possible to explain that the people did not fulfill the rite of circumcision for all of those years, because the verse states that 'they encamped by God's command, and they broke up camp at God's command' (Bemidbar 9:20). Thus, they never knew in advance the day that they would travel. If the newborns would have been circumcised and would have then had to travel on the day of their circumcision, they would have become endangered enroute" (commentary to 5:2).

Since the fundamental objective of the wilderness experience was to nurture the people's recognition of their necessity to rely upon God, their travels were conditioned by inexplicable Divine fiat and by no other discernable criterion. When the Cloud of Glory unexpectedly lifted off of the Tabernacle, the people of Israel grudgingly followed, and where it just as abruptly came to rest, there they set up camp until the next round of journey (see Bemidbar 9:15-23). This inherent uncertainty and instability that characterized their nomadic lives made the fulfillment of the commandment of circumcision impossible, lest it lead to endangering the well-being of the newborn children.

Thus, like Rashi before him, the explanation of the Radak also has the convenient effect of shifting responsibility for annulment of circumcision to the Deity, but offers us no penetrating insight into the Divine motivation. In contrast to Rashi, however, Radak's comments tend to marginalize the significance of the people's 'oversight' even more. At least for Rashi, there was a distinct and direct cause for the abandonment of circumcision – the deliberate suppression of the northern wind. For Radak, however, the neglect of circumcision was more circumstantial. It was a secondary result of the unusual convention for travel through the wilderness, a routine that was dictated by Divine imperatives that were seemingly detached from their deleterious side effect of rendering the commandment of circumcision unfeasible.

THE TALMUDIC PASSAGE

A closer reading of the relevant Talmudic passage may assist us in understanding the matter with greater perspective. The Talmud in Tractate Yevamot (71b-72a) actually provides a lengthier explanation for our query, and offers no less than three possibilities as to why Israel did not fulfill the mitzvah of circumcision during the forty years of wandering.

Why weren't the people circumcised? It may be because they suffered weakness due to journeying, or it may be because the northern wind did not blow. Thus have we learned, "For all of the years that the people of Israel were in the wilderness, the northern wind did not blow on their account.' Why not? It may be because the people were in a state of reproach, or it may be because it would have scattered the Clouds of Glory...

A careful reading of this passage indicates not only the source of Rashi's explanation, but that of the Radak as well. 'Weakness due to journeying' is very similar to Radak's contention that the precariousness and unpredictability of camp life made it hazardous for the command of circumcision to be observed by the people. Significantly, though, the Talmud devotes most of its

attention to the alternate view concerning the northern wind, but here provides a reading that varies from our previous understanding furnished by Rashi. The pivotal phrase is of course 'because the people were in a state of reproach', where the exact nature of the reproach as well as its underlying causes are cryptically absent from the text. Why were the people of Israel in a state of reproach for the duration of the wilderness experience? Why should this impact on the command of circumcision? Is there any textual basis in Sefer Yehoshua or elsewhere for this elusive Talmudic explanation?

THE TORAH'S STARTLING TIME FRAME

Fortunately, we have at our disposal a fleeting Biblical allusion that provides us with the key for unraveling some of the obscurity. In order to appreciate its significance, let us first consider the following remarkable fact: all of us are already well aware that from the moment of the Exodus until the entry into the land of Canaan some forty years elapse. The pivotal episodes of the entire period, the trials and triumphs, successes and failures, are described at great length in the narrative sections that constitute much of Sefer Shemot and Sefer Bemidbar. The Torah devotes a great deal of attention to the events that lead up to the Exodus, to the subsequent journey from Egypt to Sinai, to the Revelation of God's ten guiding principles at that mount, to the debacle of the Golden Calf and God's forgiveness, and to the people's energetic endeavor to craft and erect the Tabernacle as they encamp at its foothills. At Sinai the people of Israel remain for almost a year and there they receive the bulk of the Torah's commands, as contained in Sefer Vayikra. Finally, as the Book of Bemidbar opens, they are bidden to break up camp as the Cloud of Glory lifts off of the Tabernacle and the Ark of the Covenant begins its trek towards the land. As they approach its borders and reach the oasis of Kadesh Barnea, the Spies are sent to search out the land but they return with frightening reports of Canaanite invincibility and implied Israelite weakness. The people tragically fall prey to their inflated claims, surrender their trust in God's saving support, and that entire generation is consequently condemned to wander aimlessly in the wilderness and to expire.

Almost forty years later, the Torah again picks up the thread of the narrative with the description of the people's arrival at the wilderness of Zin, 'in the first month of the fortieth year' (Bemidbar 20:1). There Miriam dies, Moshe and Aharon strike the rock, and, notwithstanding the brothers' loss of the gift of the land, the inexorable march of the people of Israel towards Canaan continues apace. Skirting the territory of Edom, Moav and Amon, they find themselves east of the Yarden and in direct confrontation with Sichon, the mighty king of the Amorites whom they defeat in battle. Og king of the northern region of Bashan is vanquished next, leaving the people encamped on the Yarden's eastern stretches with no opposition barring their entry into Canaan.

What is most unusual about the above schematic survey of the proverbial forty years is that it indicates that **THE TORAH PASSES OVER THIRTY-EIGHT OF THOSE YEARS IN ALMOST COMPLETE SILENCE!** Thus, we know a lot about the period associated with the Exodus and the arrival and encampment at Sinai, we know a fair amount about the successful second march towards Canaan, but we know almost next to nothing about the intervening period – from the debacle of the Spies until the people's arrival at the wilderness of Zin – a span of almost four decades. Phrased differently, "the Torah mentions not a single episode or prophecy (to Moshe) except that occurred during the first year or the fortieth" (commentary of Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra, 12th century, Spain, to Bemidbar 20:1). The great majority of the Torah's narratives and commands, the numerous chapters that comprise four of the Five Books of Moses, are thus properly compressed into the astonishing time frame of **TWO YEARS**: the year of the

Exodus and the year of the Entry. The intervening period, during which a generation came of age, lived out its useful years and unceremoniously perished, is thus shrouded in utter gloom.

THE ELUSIVE STATE OF REPROACH: THE FLEETING BIBLICAL ALLUSION

In the Book of Devarim, the aged Moshe, his life ebbing away, recounts the history of Israel. He remembers well the sending of the Spies, the promise and the disappointment, and God's stern sentence against the people.

None of these men, this evil generation, will live to see the good land that I swore to their ancestors to give them... Your young children, whom you said would be taken as spoil, the children who know not yet how to tell good from evil, they will enter it. I will give it to them and they will inherit it..." (Devarim 1:35,39)

Moshe recalls the journey from Kadesh Barnea whence the Spies had been initially sent, to the brook of Zered at the gateway to Canaan from the east. A distance that could have easily been traversed in a period of days stretched out interminably to become almost forty years. Wistfully, Moshe recalls them:

The years that passed from the time that we left Kadesh Barnea until we came to Nachal Zered were thirty-eight years, until all of the adult men of military age had perished from among the people, as God swore to them... When all of them had completely died out, then God spoke to me saying, "Today you pass by the border of Moav at the city of Ar..." (Devarim 2:14:18).

A careful reading of the above verse indicates that Moshe implies a subtle linkage between the death of the generation of the wilderness and the renewed communication of God to him. Or, as Rashi puts it, echoing sentiments preserved in the much earlier Rabbinic Midrash of the Sifra (Parshata 1, Perek 2:13): "From the episode of the sending of the Spies until this point, the text of the Torah does not record that 'God spoke to me [Moshe]?' ('VaYedaber Hashem eilai') but rather that "God said to Moshe." This indicates that during those thirty-eight years, the people of Israel were in a state of reproach, and God's communication to Moshe was not characterized by affection or equanimity. This teaches that the spirit of God inspires the prophets only for the sake of the people of Israel" (commentary to Devarim 2:16-17).

Of course, Rashi's penetrating comments are critical in revealing the true nature of the 'prophetic gift,' namely that God inspires people with His word mainly as a function of the needs and merits of His people Israel. For our purposes, though, the primary significance of Rashi's words is that they provide the sought after key for our above investigation. As long as the people of Israel were in a 'state of reproach,' a period of thirty-eight years, God's communications to Moshe were correspondingly austere and abrupt. This is the very same 'state of reproach' that our above Talmudic source associated with the cessation of the rite of circumcision!

WEAVING THE STRANDS

Earlier, we noted that as long as the people of Israel were in the wilderness, they did not observe the commandment of circumcision. Now, we have also learned that during this very same period, God addressed Moshe in a tone that lacked tenderness and warmth. What is most remarkable, though, is the realization that these are the very same thirty-eight years that the Torah

highlights by its deafening silence. Recall that the vast majority of the Torah's narrative events and commands are associated with either the first year after the Exodus or the final year before the Entry. In other words, the intervening vacuum of thirty-eight years constitute the futile and fruitless lifespan of a generation condemned to die, perishing in a barren wilderness that quite literally swallows them up without even a textual trace. And what is the singular event that triggers this tragic and fatal chain? It is the sending of the Spies.

In our study of Chapter 2 of Sefer Yehoshua, we devoted much time to contrasting Moshe's spies to those of Yehoshua. What concerns us here, however, is that earlier episode's existential implication: when the people of Israel frightfully embraced the Spies' tainted report, they rejected God's precious gift of the land of Canaan. To recall their own words at that sorry juncture.

The people raised their voices and cried that night. The whole people of Israel railed against Moshe and Aharon, and said, 'If only we would have died in the land of Egypt, or in this wilderness, if only we would have died! Why does God bring us to this land to die by the sword, leaving our wives and children as plunder. Surely it is better for us to return to Egypt!' Each one said to his fellow, 'Let us appoint a leader and return to Egypt!' (Bemidbar 14:1-4).

Or as the Psalter poetically describes it some 400 hundred years later:

"They rejected a desirous land and did not believe His word.
They slandered in their tents they did not listen to the voice of God.
He raised His hand and swore to cause them to fall in the wilderness" (Tehillim 106:22-26).

In other words, when the people of Israel portentously turn their backs on the land of Canaan, notwithstanding God's longstanding oath to secure it for them, they are in turn reprimanded by Him. Of course, there is the explicit statement of His displeasure and disappointment: that generation will perish. But what is even more painful is the subtle but stark realization by the people that there will be no clemency for their indiscretion, no moderation of their sentence, and no hope for pardon. God's oath will instead be fulfilled to their children, who will be nurtured on the steadfast trust that only the experience of the wilderness can provide.

THE SPIES, CIRCUMCISION AND THE LAND

In the meantime, the 'northern wind' ceases to blow, its healing breezes desist and die away, and in their place uncomfortably crouch the sinking feelings of God's distance and utter remoteness. To their dismay, the people of Israel realize that what yesterday was palpably within reach is today unachievable. Turning to the sole remaining comfort of God's guiding laws, they soon become aware that one of the most solemn and meaningful of their national rituals can no longer be performed without great and intolerable danger: the commandment of circumcision. The mark that had set them apart on the eve of their national awakening as they prepared to leave Egypt, the ancient expression of their national identity and God's perpetual covenant, THE SIGN THAT HAD BEEN TRANSMITTED TO THEIR FOREFATHER AVRAHAM AS GOD LOVINGLY EXTENDED TO HIM THE ETERNAL PROMISE OF THE LAND OF CANAAN, was now, like the precious earth that beckoned sadly from beyond the sands of the Sinai, past their grasp forever.

Although clearly devolving upon individuals and completely independent of any actual geographic link to Canaan, the ideal fulfillment of circumcision nevertheless implies a national identity and its corollary of an autonomous existence in a homeland. Therefore, when Israel readies to leave Egypt by transcending individuality to forge that national identity, it necessarily follows that they must perform circumcision, although they have neglected the command for some time. With bodies marked with the seal of God's covenant, and minds seared with its eternal promise, they venture forth to secure the land and the mission that He swore to their ancestor Avraham.

When the Spies and later the people reject that future by loudly and vociferously declining God's gift of Canaan, it necessarily follows that His denial of their entry into the land will be accompanied by the onset of circumstances that will render circumcision incapable of fulfillment. Could it be that the people can angrily rebuff the 'land flowing with milk and honey,' first promised to their ancestors and sealed by solemn oath, but can yet stand ready to observe the ancient rite of circumcision that is so fundamentally bound up with awareness of their national mission and its organic and historic connection to the soil of Canaan?

God, in His mercy, spares them the unbearable pain of explicitly renouncing their offers of fulfillment. Instead, He precipitates conditions that will make circumcision impossible. Thus, the north wind ceases to blow, Moshe's prophecies are brusquely bestowed, and the people of Israel enter the gaping jaws of a wilderness that will swallow up any memory of their lives. The linkage of these events is not at all arbitrary, for together they delineate the people's anguished 'state of reproach' and describe the distress of Israel's transitory estrangement from Canaan's fertile expanse. However, all hope is not lost, for the children of that generation will grow to maturity and merit to graciously accept the gift of the land.

CONCLUSION

Now crossing over the Yarden, finally overcoming the collective curse cast on those thirty-eight exhausted years, standing on the very land that God had promised to their parents and had now given to them, the people of Israel listen attentively as God finally seals that sorry chapter forever:

At that time, God said to Yehoshua, 'Make blades of flint and circumcise the people of Israel on a second occasion.' Yehoshua made blades of flint and circumcised the people of Israel at the 'Hill of Foreskins.' This is the matter concerning the circumcision performed by Yehoshua. All of the people who had left Egypt, the males of military age, had perished in the wilderness on the journey after having left Egypt. All those who had left (Egypt) were circumcised, but all those who had been born in the wilderness while traveling, after the Exodus from Egypt, were not. For forty years the people of Israel trekked through the wilderness, until those adults of military age who had left Egypt and had not hearkened to God's voice perished. God had sworn to them that He would not show them the land that He had sworn to their ancestors to give us, a land flowing with milk and honey. Their children who became established in their place were therefore circumcised by Yehoshua... GOD SAID: 'ON THIS DAY I HAVE ROLLED OFF ('GaLotee') THE SHAME OF EGYPT, therefore they called that place Gilgal until this very day" (Yehoshua 5:2-9).

Next week, we will briefly examine the circumcision-Passover link and the cessation of the Manna (5:9-12), before turning our attention to the events of Chapter 6, the conquest of Yericho.