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

SEFER SHOFTIM

Chapter 1 Conclusion  
Israel's Tragic Lethargy  
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INTRODUCTION

Last time, we began to consider the opening narratives of Sefer Shoftim. While the book commenced with an encouraging description of tribal cooperation – Yehuda enlisted the aid of Shimon in the conquest of its territory and then reciprocated in kind – there were a number of glaring omissions from the account that suggested more worrying developments. First of all, we noted that the text lacked any mention of a national leader for the people, an outstanding person with a corresponding national vision. In utter contrast to Sefer Yehoshua, the book of Shoftim instead opened with a description of ancient Israel that highlighted its tribal, regional and narrow concerns. There was no pivotal Yehoshua-like authority figure to rally the troops or to instruct the masses, and the negative fallout of this fact will yet emerge as one of the book's most significant cautions.

Secondly, we noted that the lines of communication between God and the people were (correspondingly?) less direct. They enquired of the Urim ve-Tumim and the Deity responded, but without the benefit of some sort of prophet figure who might have conveyed God's message to the people more unequivocally. The overall picture that emerged from the preliminary study of the beginning of Chapter 1, therefore, was one of growing distance, as if God chose to take a less overt role in the people's process of settling the land in order to allow them to effect their own choices and to learn from the consequences of those decisions. It remains to be seen if this ostensible distance of Chapter 1, never openly stated but repeatedly implied, will be determinant for the remainder of the book's events.

THE CONDUCT OF YEHUDA VS. THAT OF THE OTHER TRIBES

At the same time, in so far as the mandate to take hold of the land, the conduct of the tribe of Yehuda was certainly above reproach. They did not hesitate to possess their portion of territory, dislodging the king of Bezek and his hordes (1:5), the inhabitants of Yerushalayim (1:8), the Canaanites who dwelt in the Negev and the coastal lowlands (1:9), as well as the people of Chevron in the hill country (1:10). Again, while some of the battles recorded in our chapter are certainly out of place chronologically since they properly belong to the conquest chapters of Sefer Yehoshua, they were presumably recorded here in order to emphasize the seriousness of Yehuda's efforts as well as the extent of their successes. Significantly, the narrative concluded its

description of Yehuda's conquests with a statement of Divine approval, namely that "God was with Yehuda and they possessed the hill country, but they were not able to possess the dwellers of the valley for they had chariots of iron" (1:19). In other words, whatever lands Yehuda was capable of conquering and settling, they did so. All that remained beyond their grasp were the more heavily populated valleys, whose Canaanite inhabitants had menacing chariots of iron that Yehuda could not best in battle.

The picture was certainly more complicated for most of the other tribes. While ambitious Yosef, composed of the fraternal tribes of Efraim and Menashe and constituting along with its southern counterpart Yehuda the nation's political, military and cultural core, also exhibited some initiative and enjoyed God's assistance in the conquest of Beit El (1:22), most of the other tribes were lax in their drive to settle the land. And while Yosef may have demonstrated resolve in the conquest of Beit El, many other important parts of his territory remained in Canaanite hands:

Menashe did not possess Beit Shean and its towns, Ta'anakh and its towns...so that the Canaanites still desired to live in those lands. Though Israel waxed strong and placed tribute upon them, they did not dispossess them...Efraim did not drive out the Canaanites who dwelt in Gezer, so that the Canaanites in Gezer dwelt in their midst. Zevulun did not drive out the inhabitants of Kitron and Nahalol, so that the Canaanites dwelt in their midst and paid tribute. Asher did not drive out the inhabitants of Akko...so that the tribe of Asher dwelt among the Canaanites who inhabited the land (!), for they did not disposes them. Naftali did not drive out the inhabitants of Beit Shemesh...The Amorites forced the tribe of Dan into the hill country, for they did not allow them to descend into the valley...

Thus, the majority of the tribes (excluding Yehuda, his ally and territorial neighbor Shim'on, and some of Yosef) did not dislodge the Canaanites and were content to allow them to remain. In fact, for some of those tribes, the situation was even more severe. The tribe of Asher, for example, assigned the prosperous and densely-settled region of the Phoenician coast, was not able to overcome the indigenous peoples at all and in the end dwelt among THEM. The tribe of Dan was prevented from achieving any foothold in the valleys of the Sharon plain and instead had to stake out new territories in the hill country. Most of the tribes, then, quickly exhausted by the struggle and challenge to drive out the Canaanites and to settle their land, opted for the more slothful approach of "containment." The Canaanites could be subjugated and forced to pay tribute. Was it really necessary to entirely dislodge them? But in so doing, the tribes of Israel unwittingly unleashed a dynamic that was to have far-reaching and destructive consequences, most of all for them.

## ALLOWING THE CANAANITES AND THEIR MORAL SYSTEM TO REMAIN

In our past lessons on Sefer Yehoshua, we dwelt at length on the significance of the Torah's oft-repeated directive to drive out the Canaanites. Readers are invited to request the three-part series on the twelfth chapter of Sefer Yehoshua that addresses the topic at length. For the purposes of conciseness, suffice it to say that the confrontation with the Canaanite threat was not perceived by the Torah to be a clash of race, ethnicity, or cultural history, but rather of values. The polytheistic worldview of the Canaanites, like all of the other peoples of the ancient Near East before them, championed a cult of serving the gods that was shallow, hedonistic and often cruel. It

fostered a corresponding morality that was relativistic in the extreme. It is of course not a coincidence that the Canaanite culture, materially more advanced than Israel's though it was, did not bequeath to posterity a single document that could be unequivocally regarded as a significant statement of moral or ethical import. With genuine alarm, then, the Torah regarded a continued Canaanite presence among the tribes of Israel as a potentially corrosive influence. Their beliefs and practices could effectively spell the demise of the people of Israel by undermining the unique creed of ethical monotheism that Israel was to champion.

In its ongoing polemic against the Canaanites, the Torah emphasizes again and again that it was their moral values that were incompatible with Israel's mission. A single quote, strongly worded but not exceptional, harsh but not exaggerated, may serve to illustrate the point:

When God your Lord cuts off the nations (from the land) where you are going to inherit, and you drive them out and inhabit their land, then be careful lest you become ensnared by them after they have been destroyed from before you, and lest you enquire after their gods saying: "How did these nations serve their gods? I will do so as well." Do not serve God your Lord in such a way, for every abominable act that God hates they performed in the service of their gods. They even burn their own sons and daughters in the fire for the sake of their gods! Rather, all that I command you, you shall be careful to perform. Do not add to it nor subtract from it (Devarim 12:29 – 13:1).

The argument is bolstered by the fact that most traditional interpretations maintain (with a small number of celebrated exceptions), that the acceptance by the Canaanites of the so-called Seven Noachide Principles would have been sufficient to guarantee their well-being and continued presence in the land. While a comprehensive discussion of these principles is beyond the scope of this essay, it can safely and accurately be said that they represent a fundamental definition of an absolute morality that is (and, by definition, must be) predicated upon the acceptance of a Higher Authority. Thus, included among them are 1) rejection of idolatry, prohibitions concerning 2) blasphemy, 3) murder, 4) adultery, 5) theft, 6) consuming a limb torn from a living animal, and 7) an obligation to maintain a judicial system. It therefore emerges from both the Biblical record as well as from the Oral Tradition that God's directive to dislodge or else reform the Canaanites was regarded as the only mechanism that could protect Israel's exceptional ethical patrimony, a most precious but fragile possession in an ancient (and modern!) world largely awash in warfare, cruelty and moral neglect.

## THE ALARM SOUNDED IN CHAPTER 1

The opening narratives of Sefer Shoftim are therefore disquieting in the extreme. The proverbial alarm bells kept shrilly sounding, but Israel remained indifferent:

Menashe did not possess Beit Shean and its towns...Efraim did not drive out the Canaanites who dwelt in Gezer...Zevulun did not drive out the inhabitants of Kitron and Nahalol...Asher did not drive out the inhabitants of Akko...Naftali did not drive out the inhabitants of Beit Shemesh...The Amorites forced the tribe of Dan into the hill country, for they did not allow them to descend into the valley...

Leaderless and no longer certain of their mission, the people of Israel instead settled down, content to farm their fertile plots, raise their flocks and families, and to leave the process of possession incomplete. The Canaanites continued to dwell among them, with their religious and moral systems intact, and the siren call of their gods soon had its effect. What is this opening chapter, then, if not a veiled accusation against Israel's serene and self-satisfied smugness, a subtle critique of their lack of national vision, and a restrained indictment of their misguided priorities? "History will vindicate me," the disappointed narrator seems to be saying, "for today's indifference will undermine tomorrow's security. As long as the Canaanite world-view has not been rejected, though Yehoshua may have long ago vanquished their armies on the battlefield, they will continue to represent an existential threat to Israel's calling."

And so it was. The remainder of Sefer Shoftim, while it tends to revolve textually around a series of inspired regional leaders, really traces the story of Israel's tragic lethargy. Sure enough, it was not possible for the people to suffer an unrepentant Canaanite population in their midst while remaining aloof from their cultural and moral values. The repeated warnings of the Torah, addressed to the people from the moment they left the land of Egypt until the very eve of their entry into the land forty years later, must have sounded at the time like so much over-anxious preoccupation. But the leaders among them, like inspired leaders in every generation, could already see the portents writ large:

...Observe carefully all that I command you this day. Behold I will drive out from before you the Amorite, Canaanite, Chittite, Perizite, Chivite and Yevusite. Guard yourselves from concluding a covenant with the inhabitants of the land that you will enter, lest they be a snare in your midst. Rather, you shall break down their altars, smash their idolatrous pillars and cut down their shrine trees. You shall not bow down to another god, because God is zealous, He is a zealous God. For if you conclude a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, then they shall stray after their gods and sacrifice to them, and they shall invite you to partake of their sacrifices. Then you will take their daughters for your sons, and their daughters shall stray after their gods and cause your sons to stray after their gods. You shall not make any molten images. Observe the festival of Unleavened Bread... (Shemot/Exodus 34:11-18).

Next time, we will study the critical second chapter that succinctly sums up the major themes of the Book's remaining narratives and provides us with the key to understanding Israel's struggle. Readers are requested to therefore prepare Chapter 2.