

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHETS

SEFER SHOFTIM

Shiur #07: Chapter 4, Part 1

The Battle at River Kishon

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INTRODUCTION

Chapter Four of Sefer Shoftim opens with a familiar refrain that only becomes more shrill as the book progresses. After Ehud's death, Israel again strayed from God, and a new tyrant arose to remind them of the consequences of their infidelity. The mighty Yavin King of Chazor, whose chief-of-staff was the menacing Sisera of Charoshet HaGoyim, subjugated the people of Israel, and at his disposal were nine hundred chariots of iron! The text emphasizes for the first (and last) time that the oppressor imposed his rule with "ruthlessness" ("bechozka" – 4:3), thus indicating that Yavin constituted a particularly pitiless fellow.

Although we know nothing else of this Yavin, his city-state of Chazor is well known to us from other Biblical as well as extra-biblical sources. In modern times, extensive excavations have turned the ancient tell of the town into the largest archeological site in the state of Israel, and numerous strata of occupation have been exposed. First mentioned in the Tanakh among the cities captured by Yehoshua and the invading Israelites (Yehoshua Chapter 11), Chazor is located in the upper Galilee region, about 10 kilometers north of the Sea of Kinneret. Overlooking an important section of the major trade route that extended along the length of the Mediterranean coast and then inland, from Egypt in the south to Damascus in the north (and from there, on to Mesopotamia), the city was well-positioned to take advantage of the commercial and military possibilities that its location offered. To control Chazor, therefore, was to exert influence not only regionally, but

nationally and internationally as well. Not without cause does our passage refer four times to Yavin not as the king of Chazor, but rather as the "king of Canaan" (4:2; 4:23-24).

Of course, by introducing Yavin as the next tyrant in the series, our attention is subtly shifted away from the southern tribes of Binyamin and Yehuda towards their northern brethren settled in the regions of the Galilee and along the Phoenician coast. This is to clearly indicate that while the political challenges that arose during the period of the Shoftim may have been regional – each tribe or group of tribes fighting for its own piece of territory and its own cultural survival – the religious and spiritual challenges were much more universal in scope.

In Sefer Yehoshua, the city of Chazor was also ruled by a certain Yavin, and this name must therefore constitute a dynastic or honorific title much like "Pharaoh" of Egypt or "Avimelech" of the Philistines. At that time, some one hundred and fifty years before the events of our chapter, the king of Chazor crafted a confederacy of four large northern Canaanite city-states, along with their innumerable allies, to oppose the Israelite onslaught under Yehoshua, but to no avail. Yehoshua unexpectedly engaged and then crushed them at Mei Merom, and Chazor was captured and burned to the ground. Mute testimony to the conflagration can still be seen at the excavations of the site, and Chazor was not rebuilt until the time of Solomon some three centuries later when it became one of his most important administrative centers (see Melakhim 1: 9:15). Solomonic Chazor came to an abrupt end during one of the early waves of conquest of the northern kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians in the 8th century BCE (see Melakhim 2:15:29).

YAVIN KING OF CHAZOR?

Most significantly, though, according to the most reasonable interpretation of the archeological evidence currently available, Chazor was NOT settled at the time of the Shoftim! How then to explain the prologue to our chapter, that clearly seems to describe the oppressor and his city as very much in existence? The answer is to be found in a close reading of the passage in question, and the exercise parenthetically provides us with an important lesson in how to approach historical or geographical references in the Biblical text when these appear to be at odds with conventional (and well supported) evidence. The second verse of the chapter states:

God gave them (the people of Israel) over to Yavin the king of Canaan who had ruled ("asher malakh") at Chazor, and his chief-of-staff was Sisera, and he dwelt at Charoshet HaGoyim (4:2).

We have already determined that the name "Yavin," having occurred earlier in the context of Sefer Yehoshua, was not to be understood as a proper name but rather as a dynastic title. The use of the past tense in our verse to describe Yavin's reign ("who had ruled") must therefore be indicating that the ancestral dynasty had ruled Chazor in the past but NO LONGER DID SO. Instead, the rule of the king was centered at so-called Charoshet HaGoyim, and it was from there that the loyal Sisera was dispatched to plunder and to pillage. In other words, the DYNASTY of Yavin, that HAD RULED at Chazor before its destruction, was not extirpated entirely by Yehoshua but continued to play a prominent (if somewhat diminished) role after the battle of Mei Merom. While the immediate power base of Chazor lay in smoldering ruins, the Yavin dynasty survived (although the king himself was killed in battle – see Yehoshua 11:10). It regrouped after the crushing defeat at the hands of Yehoshua and eventually reconstituted some form of its rule at Charoshet HaGoyim. Therefore, when our verse says that "he dwelt at Charoshet HaGoyim," it modifies not Sisera, the chief-of-staff, but rather Yavin himself. The implication is that, eventually, a new "Yavin" came to the throne whose exploits recalled some of the dynasty's ancient glories when it had still reigned from Chazor, and in a curious twist of irony (of which the Tanakh is most fond), he re-established his rule over his nemeses the Israelites. Thus, Yehoshua's awesome legacy of triumph was once again undone.

It is the rationalist Rabbi David Kimchi (the Radak – 13th century, Spain) who alerts us to this reading. As he explains:

When the verse states that "he had ruled at Chazor" it means before Yehoshua defeated them and burned the city, also killing the king. Yavin was the king of Chazor at that time, and remnants of that family went to Charoshet HaGoyim and re-established themselves. Their king was also called Yavin after their forebear...(commentary to 4:3).

As for the mysterious "Charoshet HaGoyim," the name may mean "forest of the nations" (from the word "CHoReSH" – see for instance Yeshayahu 17:9; Yechezkel 31:3) or perhaps "implements (of war?) of the nations" (from the word "ChaRaSH" – see for instance Shemuel 1:13:19; 2:5:11) but its location has not been identified with certainty, nor has it even been established whether the reference is to a region or else to a particular place. What is clear, though, is that the inclusion of "Charoshet HaGoyim" in the description of Yavin is to indicate that his oppressive rule was centered there at the time, for fabled Chazor that had been the ancestral seat of his family's rule was then in ashen ruins (and so remained until Shelomo rebuilt it).

ARCHEOLOGY VS. THE BIBLE

The reasonable solution of the Radak raises an important methodological point. Often a conflict between a Biblical verse and an archeological "fact" is not the result of a corruption or lacuna that crept into the ancient text on the one hand or else faulty interpretation of the objective scientific data on the other, but rather is the result of a cursory and superficial reading of the verse in question. It is this lack of care that creates the conflict by supposing a difficulty even where none need exist. It is generally and begrudgingly agreed, even by most of its detractors, that the Tanakh is remarkably accurate in its portrayal of historical periods and in its presentation of historical facts, and as loyal students of the text, we must assume that its portrayals and presentations are truthful. But that does not absolve us of the responsibility to read the verses carefully. Quite the contrary. Because we believe the Prophets and the Writings to be the inspired word of God, we must be especially careful in our reading. The text of the Tanakh uses an economy of words while conveying a wealth of information, and we must always proceed with reverence and exercise caution when engaged in its study.

At the same time, however, it must be borne in mind that these historical/geographical data are only peripheral to the Tanakh's much more exalted agenda of improving the human condition, by both nurturing our bond with God as well as by providing us with the moral and spiritual tools to develop our innate sense of goodness and righteousness. And here we must part ways with the detached methods of the academics, for they consistently treat the text of the Tanakh as a dry, historical literature that is devoid of any transcendent meaning, a text no different in import than

any other text that dates from the same historical period, and certainly no more deserving of our respect. Naturally, with assumptions such as these, the tendency when confronted by a seeming contradiction between the verse and the historical record is either to treat the text as an accidental distortion or else to accuse it of duplicity.

RECONSTRUCTING THE BATTLE

Although the location of Charoshet HaGoyim is shrouded in obscurity, the narrative provides us with more than sufficient information to reconstruct the epic battle in which Sisera was defeated and the iron rule of Yavin broken. The heroine of our story was Devora "the wife of Lapidot" who judged Israel at that time from her seat of power in the hill country of Efraim, between "the Rama and Beit El" (4:5), not more than about five kilometers east of the modern town of Ramallah. The Canaanite provocation of Yavin and Sisera was centered quite a bit to the north, upon the Yizrael Valley. This flat and fertile plain provided in ancient times the most strategic pass in Canaan for those traveling from the coast to the interior towards Asia Minor or Mesopotamia, and its terrain was perfect for the staging of the nine hundred iron chariots of the enemy that overawed the northern tribes of Zevulun and Naftali then chafing under Yavin's yoke. By controlling the Valley of Yizrael, Yavin effectively ruled over the entire northern region of the Galilee.

Devora responded by summoning a certain Barak son of Avino'am from Kedesh Naftali, a town in the upper Galilee about twelve kilometers north of the ruins of Chazor. He in turn, following Devora's directives, gathered ten thousand men and ascended with her to the summit of Mount Tavor (4:10). Now Mount Tavor, located at the confluence of the tribal boundaries of Zevulun, Naftali and Yissachar (see Yehoshua 19:23, 34), rises approximately three hundred and fifty meters above the flat landscape like an inverted bowl. From its rounded peak, at the northeastern entrance to the Valley of Yizrael, the entire plain is plainly visible, while the armor of the enemy is effectively kept at bay, for the chariots cannot ascend its slopes. Thus, Barak's men secured a safe vantage point while they awaited further instructions from the Prophetess.

The last geographical detail that provides the key to reconstructing the entire episode is the River Kishon (4:7,13), a watercourse that begins its route near the feet of Mount Tavor and flows along the floor of the Yizrael Valley all the way to its exit at the base of the Carmel Range on the Mediterranean Sea. While the final western ten kilometers of the watercourse until its discharge on the coast are a perennial stream, the rest of the "river" is actually a wadi. This means that during the long summer months, its bed is dry and easily traversable, but during the rainy season it can suddenly and destructively fill with a torrent that may even overflow its banks and cause extensive flooding all along the valley floor.

The text states:

She (Devora) sent and summoned Barak son of Avino'am from Kedesh Naftali, and she said to him: "behold, God the Lord of Israel commands you to draw ten thousand men from the tribes of Naftali and Zevulun to (the summit of) Mount Tavor. I will draw to you, to the wadi of Kishon, Sisera the chief-of-staff of Yavin with his chariots and his multitude, and there I will give him into your hand!" (4:6-7).

Barak did as commanded, gathering his men to the heights of Tavor, while Sisera and his menacing chariot force approached to give battle. What followed next is not stated explicitly in the narrative of Chapter 4 but, as we shall see next time, is all but plainly spelled out in Devora's epic song of triumph preserved in Chapter 5. Suddenly Barak descended with his men at Devora's behest to battle Sisera, just as an unexpected cloudburst appeared and turned the fertile plain into an impassable mudflat, a topographic trap that abruptly rendered the Canaanite chariots useless. The charioteers were caught by surprise by the overflowing waters of the Kishon, and Barak and his men seized upon their confusion to cut them down.

Next time, we will continue to consider this most important battle, focusing more closely upon the exploits of Devora and her counterpart Ya'el the wife of Chever the Kenite. Readers are requested to review Chapter 4.