

CHAPTER 5, VERSES 1 - 3

by Rabbi Dovid Siegel

(5, 1)

"And when all the Emorite kings west of the Jordan and the Canaanite kings by the Jordan heard that Hashem dried the Jordan while they crossed, their hearts melted and no wind remained in them (to stand) before the Jewish people." Their reaction to the miraculous Jordan crossing was total paralysis. Although we have previously seen similar responses of fear and awe, this reaction was the strongest of all. In Rachav's statement to the spies she related, *"And no spirit arose in man after hearing of your miracles"* (2:11). Our Rabbis explain these words to mean that all men lost interest in pleasures and passions of life. Because of their all encompassing awe, they could not arouse any feelings of pleasure or appreciation for life. Rachav revealed to the spies that the mighty warriors had lost all interest in life. With such overpowering awe they would never be capable of conducting an offensive maneuver against the Jewish people. She reasons that given these conditions it was obvious that Hashem had prepared a guaranteed victory for His people.

Although this should have sufficed, an even stronger response occurred after the revelation of the Jordan. In the exact words of Yehoshua, *"No wind remained in them from before the Jewish people."* This meant that their wind was totally knocked out of them and they remained defenseless. They saw Hashem's mighty hand closing in on them and their response was to become petrified and incapable of defending themselves. And indeed this is exactly what happened when the Jewish people invaded the first of their cities, Yericho. After a miraculous sinking of the mighty walls of Yericho, the Jews charged into the city and totally levelled it. No attempted defense is mentioned and no Jewish casualties are recorded. Apparently, the splitting of the Jordan made its mark and the inhabitants of Canaan were totally paralyzed. They were so overtaken by fear that they could not even attempt to defend themselves. This allowed for the Jewish people's conquest of the city without any opposition whatsoever.

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"At that time Hashem said to Yehoshua 'Make for yourself sharp knives and go back and circumcise the Jewish people again.'" Once the Jewish people entered the land they, were immediately commanded to circumcise themselves. Although the mitzvah of circumcision was given to our patriarch Avrohom many generations earlier, it had been neglected throughout the Jewish people's travel in the desert. Our Sages in Tractate Yevomos 73a explain that their constant and unpredictable travel plans were not conducive for this surgical procedure, thus exempting the

Jewish people from the mitzvah. Now, at the completion of their journey, the obligation of circumcision was reinstated in its fullest sense. The day after their crossing the Jordan, the entire Jewish nation was commanded to undergo circumcision.

It is worthwhile to appreciate the setting and impact of this procedure. The Scriptures state, *"And circumcise the Jewish people again."* Rashi comments on the word "again" and understands it to mean that this was the second en masse experience of circumcision. The first such experience transpired in Egypt after the Jewish people neglected the mitzvah for generations. On the eve of the fifteenth before partaking of the pascal sacrifice, the entire Jewish nation underwent circumcision. This was the first circumcision en masse and now we have the second.

This comparison suggests a strong relationship between their exodus from Egypt and arrival in Eretz Yisroel. The night of the exodus marked the beginning of the chosen people. For the first time in history Hashem revealed Himself to the entire Jewish nation. In order to merit these revelations, it was necessary for the Jewish nation as a whole to identify with Hashem. Based on Sforno's comment to Breishis (17: 7, 8), circumcision epitomizes this identity reflecting our perfect and direct relationship with Hashem. These revelations which began with the plague of the firstborn continued throughout the Jewish people's travels in the desert. During this era, they were privileged to be encircled and led by Hashem's cloud of glory reflecting Hashem's constant presence amongst them. This concludes the first era.

With their arrival to Eretz Yisroel a new era began. Eretz Yisroel is the land of Hashem and His people. In it Hashem maintains constant focus on them. Although upon entering the land constant revelations would no longer occur, Hashem would continue His direct, albeit concealed, involvement in their lives. With the close of one era and the start of another, a renewal of the Jewish people's commitment to Hashem was in line. According to Sforno's commentary even this dimension of Eretz Yisroel is represented by the Milah (circumcision). Our true direct relationship with Hashem only exists in Eretz Yisroel and the circumcision best expresses this relationship.

And so, the day after their entry to His land the entire Jewish nation reinstated their bond with Hashem, totally identifying themselves as His chosen nation.

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"And Yehoshua made sharp knives and circumcised the Jewish people at the foreskin heap." Rashi explains that they named the site "Foreskin Heap" to commemorate the large heap of foreskins that Yehoshua formed after the circumcision. This development deserves reflection from both of its aspects. First, why did they make this heap? and second, why did they name the site after this? Although the circumcision procedure does involve foreskin removal, the mitzvah's significance is certainly not limited to this ugly skin. Much to the contrary, it is our custom to bury the skin because it represents shame and imperfection. Why then, did they focus on this shameful skin?

One possible understanding is that with this Yehoshua conveyed a strong message to the people.

The Jewish nation's entry to the Canaanite land exposed them to a serious danger. They were repeatedly warned throughout the Torah to maintain their distance from the inhabitants of Canaan. Hashem sternly stated, "*Guard yourself lest you establish a treaty with the dwellers of the land... and you will come to take their daughters for your sons and their daughters will stray after their idolatry...*" (Shemos 34: 12, 17). Hashem forewarned them that exposure to foreign culture could generate persuasive and attractive influence which would ultimately lead to intermarriage and sin.

Now that the Jewish people entered the land of the foreign cultures, the Torah's serious concern surfaced. To combat this, Yehoshua made a public display of the foreskin. Many generations earlier, Shechemites, inhabitants of this very land expressed interest in intermarriage with the household of Yaakov. The response of his sons was that it was inconceivable to yield this request due to the shameful uncircumcised nature of the Shechemites (see Rashi's comment to Breishis 34:14). The foreskin or the lack thereof represented identity and served as a powerful barrier between the Jews and their foreign neighbors. The neighbors were told that bearers of the foreskin were shameful partners for the Jews, rendering it inconceivable for mingling and intermarriage to occur. If Shechem wishes to bond with them, they must undergo circumcision and become like Yaakov. This approach proved successful and put a halt to the Shechemite request. For this reason Yehoshua now focused on this shame and formed a heap of foreskins displaying Jewish distinction. He told them to learn this lesson well and forever realize the shame of intermarriage. The Jewish people are a sanctified nation whose entire being, physical included, reflects sanctity and perfection. Yehoshua said that with the irrecent circumcision, the foreskin, their shame has been removed.

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