

CHAPTER 6, VERSE 17-18

by Rabbi Dovid Siegel

(6, 17)

"And the city shall be banned - it and all therein - for Hashem, save Rachav the innkeeper...." When studying this verse we discover a serious problem in its structure. It begins with a ban on the city, continues with the inclusion of the city's belongings and concludes with a direction for the ban. Why wasn't the verse written in order, calling for a ban on the city and its belongings for Hashem? In addition, we find Rachav's preservation mentioned in exception to the ban. Wasn't this ban, in essence, a dedication to the Sanctuary of all usable items? Accordingly, how could the preservation of Rachav's life be regarded an exception to the ban?

All of this suggests that, in actuality, there were two bans, a dedication to the treasury and the total destruction of the city. The notion of the ban was that everything bear the identity of Hashem. The silver and gold which could physically serve Hashem in His Sanctuary were dedicated to the treasury. However, the city itself and all remaining therein could not identify with Hashem this way. They therefore served Hashem in a unique manner, through total destruction.

We now understand the order of the passage and its hidden message. It begins with a general ban on the city referring to its dedication to the treasury of Hashem. This follows the Torah's basic ruling of a ban as is stated in Vayikra (27:28) regarding one's acceptance of a general ban on his items. But the passage continues with a ban on the city proper and all therein. Obviously, the city itself could not be dedicated to the treasury and some other dimension must have been meant here. This ban refers to the total destruction of the city and its belongings restricting them from all usage thereafter. The verse then brings everything together and identifies both of these dimensions as done for the sake of Hashem. Regarding the dimension of the city proper Rachav was the exception to the rule. Although everything inside was totally destroyed Rachav and her family were spared.

Why was the city's destruction considered an act of dedication to Hashem? The general practice of the land's conquest did not call for destruction and devastation. What was significant about Yericho that warranted such destructive behavior?

The Torah considers the seven Canaanite nations the most destructive influence in the world. Regarding them the Torah states, *"Totally destroy them; do not allow any soul to live"* (Devorim 7:2, 20:6). Their mere existence is threatening to the fiber of the Jewish nation. They were so steeped in their idolatrous ways that there was no recourse for such people. Accordingly, anything identified

with them presented a potential threat to the Jewish people and their religious ideology.

The general practice of conquest allowed the Jewish people to take hold of the Canaanite cities. They were commanded to conquer the city and destroy its inhabitants. The city was then converted into a Jewish settlement leaving behind no trace of idolatry. Yericho, being the first to be conquered, was treated differently. Through its conquest Hashem announced His presence in the land. The sanctity of Hashem repels all opposing forces and His sacred presence certainly does not allow for any trace of idolatry. Yericho was declared Hashem's arrival point to the land which by definition called for the removal of all existing associations. The entire city and all therein were consequently destroyed and Yericho was established a monument to Hashem. Its devastated state reflected Hashem's clear intention to remove all idolatrous influence from His land. Eventually, the land would become totally identified with Hashem, reflecting His perfect glory through every facet of the land.

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"But you should guard the ban lest you destroy yourselves by violating the ban through which you will render the Jewish camp devastated and you will ruin it." The Jewish people were sternly warned against violating this ban. Why was this ban - self-imposed by Yehoshua - treated with such severity? The commentators (see Radak, Mtzudos) deduce from this passage that the warning was twofold. Firstly, they were personally restricted from violating the ban. Secondly, each person was sternly commanded to guard the ban by preventing others from violating it. It seems as if the people's lives were at stake if anyone partook of the spoils of Yericho.

The general practice of war was to partake of its spoils. After all, major efforts were expended to capture the enemy, thus entitling the victor to reap the fruits of his labor. The war of Yericho was, by definition, of a different nature. The Jewish people exerted no effort in this war and claimed no credit for any part of the victory. The entire credit was owed to Hashem Who, by announcing His presence, destroyed everything in His path. Rightfully, all results of this war belonged to Him and deserved to bear His identity. Even the slightest infraction of this would reflect the Jewish nation's involvement. This, in addition to being incorrect, could potentially undermine the entire effect of this war. It was necessary for Yericho, the leading victory of the people, to be viewed as the total act of Hashem. If any inaccuracy occurred regarding the recognition of Hashem's involvement, the potential existed for this error to expand to greater proportions. This would ultimately cause Hashem to remove His involvement from the people, a development which would devastate them.

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