

Preface and Overview to Book of Yehoshua - Transcript

Shiur Overview

Summary: Introduction to Sefer Yehoshua — Structure, Themes, and Significance

Placement in the Biblical Narrative and the Succession of Yehoshua

Sefer Yehoshua is a direct continuation of the end of Sefer Devarim, as Rashi already notes at the book's opening and virtually all commentators agree. The end of Devarim reports Moshe's death and explicitly mentions Yehoshua bin Nun (יהושע) inheriting his position in two dimensions: the spiritual (the spirit of wisdom/prophesy received from Moshe — חכמה — the people listened to — וישמעו אליו בני ישראל — and the political (him as they had listened to Moshe

This succession was prepared across multiple stages. Going back to the end of Sefer Bamidbar, when Moshe was told he would die without entering the land, Hashem designated Yehoshua as his successor. This appointment is repeated three or four times across Bamidbar and Devarim, culminating in the final notice after Moshe's death.

Pattern of Succession Across the Historical Books

A notable structural pattern emerges across the historical books:

- **Sefer Yehoshua** opens - ויהי אחרי מות משה עבד ה'

- **Sefer Shoftim** opens - ויהי אחרי מות יהושע

- **Sefer Melachim** begins with David about to die, but notably with a *succession crisis* — multiple pretenders to the throne (Adoniyahu, Avshalom), leading eventually to the great split under Rechavam and Yaravam.

The contrast is significant: Moshe and Yehoshua each created clean successions, so the next book can safely begin "after the death of..." without narrating a crisis. The entire book of Melachim, by contrast, can be read as a chronicle of leadership crises. Sefer Yehoshua thus occupies a unique place within the great narrative arc from Yetzias Mitzrayim (Shemos) through Shivas Tzion (Ezra) — the stretch called Nevi'im Rishonim, though by content these are really historical books (as the Septuagint labels them).

The Scope of Yehoshua's Leadership

Moshe and Yehoshua are the only two universally accepted leaders of the entire people. After Yehoshua, during the period of the Shoftim, it is not clear from the text that any single judge led all of Israel — they may have led only individual tribes or groups of tribes. The succession chain of Shoftim that is sometimes constructed may not reflect pan-Israelite leadership. Yehoshua, however, like Moshe, enjoyed the obedience of the entire nation throughout his lifetime.

The Book's Central Theme: Fulfillment of the Promise

Moshe's great act was Yetzias Mitzrayim; his second, lesser act was the desert sojourn, plagued by tribulations and sins, culminating in the tragedy that Moshe himself never reached the Promised Land. Yehoshua's one great act is the conquest of the land, which subdivides into two parts: conquest and division (the division possibly revealing some weakness, discussed around chapters 13–14).

The overarching theme, stated explicitly multiple times in the book: **Yehoshua fulfills the promise that Moshe made but could not himself fulfill**. Moshe took the people out of Egypt and promised them the land but never delivered it — because of the meraglim, the people's sins, and Moshe's own sin. Yehoshua succeeds because the people in his generation were good enough. The same theological framework that explained Moshe's failure explains Yehoshua's success: the promise was conditional on the people's righteousness, and under Yehoshua they met that condition.

Sefer Yehoshua is therefore probably the most triumphant book in all of Tanach. It contains virtually no great tragedies or great sins — the opposite of the typical Tanach pattern of sin → exile → destruction. It is the book of success: the people were good, God fulfilled His conditional promises, and the land was conquered and settled.

The Meaning of Yehoshua's Name

יהושע means "God's help" or "God saves" — from יהושע The name In Parshas Shelach, יהושע + (the divine name) (help/salvation). the Torah notes that Moshe renamed Hoshea to Yehoshua, in Tanakh adding the divine element. Critically, the verb doesn't simply mean "help" in a generic sense — it typically connotes **military success and conquest**, which is precisely what Yehoshua's life embodies. The name thus directly corresponds to the mission and content of the entire .book

The Two-Part Structure: Kibush ve'Chiluk (Conquest and Division)

The book divides into two main parts, recognized by Chazal as *kibush* (conquest) and *chiluk* (division), each lasting seven years according to rabbinic chronology — fourteen years total.

Part One: Conquest of the Land (Chapters 1–12)

The antagonists are the kings of Canaan. Yehoshua, first introduced as a military leader in Parshat Beshalach during the war against Amalek, organized the entire conquest. Not every battle is recorded — the book presents a selection of battles that are important or instructive. This section concludes with a poetic list in chapter 12 enumerating 31 conquered Canaanite kings, each entry ending with *melech echad*, culminating in "all the kings, thirty-one." This list functions as a kind of epic poem marking the end of the conquest narrative — a stylistic device (ending a section with a *shirah*) found elsewhere in Tanakh.

Part Two: Division of the Land (Chapters 13–end)

The "antagonist" shifts: no longer the Canaanites but the tribes relative to each other. The division addresses the commandment *lo tasig ge'vul re'ekha* (do not encroach on your neighbor's boundary) — a critical issue in a tribal land system. The long chapters of geography — lists of towns, cities, and borders — serve as an authoritative, accepted record of which tribe owns which territory. This functioned throughout the First Temple period as a reference document: when disputes arose, people could point to Sefer Yehoshua as the definitive title deed.

The Tension Between the Two Parts

Chapter 13 reveals that the division began before the conquest was complete — many areas were allocated to tribes before being fully conquered, because war proved more complicated than planned. The division took priority because Yehoshua's personal authority was needed to prevent future inter-tribal conflicts. Even if later generations (as seen at the beginning of Sefer Shoftim) would conquer additional territories, Yehoshua's stamp on the division preemptively resolved ownership disputes.

Framing Narratives

The book's beginning includes the crossing of the Jordan River; the end includes the return of the tribes of Gad and Reuven to their territory and Yehoshua's farewell speech — a covenant renewal urging continued Torah observance, analogous to Moshe's final address and later to Shmuel's. These frame the central two-part structure.

Full Transcript

Introduction to Sefer Yehoshua: The Book of Conquest and Fulfillment

Opening Remarks: The Purpose of an Introduction

So Rabbi Yisrael, we're starting to read today the book of Yeshua, Sefer Yehoshua, the book of Joshua, and as is the custom, I will give a little introduction and overview of the book. As always, an introduction that we do in the beginning of a book cannot be said to be a summary or a true overview — that would be something that we would have to do after we finish reading it. This is some kind of orientation, some kind of GPS, some kind of map to know where we are, where we're coming from, where we're going, and in what kind of structure we're going to be going through the book. So I don't really have a chart for the structure, but I will show you the header from the first part of the book, and we'll be able to understand how the second part works also.

Sefer Yehoshua as Direct Continuation of Sefer Devarim

In general, the book of Yehoshua is a direct continuation of the end of the book of Devarim, Sefer Mishneh Torah, Deuteronomy. As Rashi already noticed in the beginning of this book, Sefer Yehoshua — maybe some other parshanim [commentators] disagree with the precise reading that Rashi does in the first pesukim of this book — but it's definitely agreed by almost everyone that this book straightforwardly continues the narrative that was ended in the end of Sefer Devarim with the death of Moshe.

If you read the report of the death of Moshe in Sefer Devarim, it even explicitly has a note about Yehoshua ben Nun inheriting his position and continuing the power that Moshe gave him — both the wisdom and prophecy possibly, as Moshe gave him, and the political leadership of the people. That's one of the pesukim in the end of Sefer Devarim.

The Appointment of Yehoshua in Sefer Bamidbar

Going back all the way to the end of Sefer Bamidbar, which as we've seen there, has kind of the end of the story of the travels in the desert as they're preparing to enter Eretz Canaan and Eretz Yisrael — one of the important things that Moshe did when he was told that he will die and not enter the land, was appoint a leader after him. And Hashem gave him Yehoshua to

Sefer Yehoshua's Unique Status in Tanakh

A remarkable statement of Chazal: had Israel not sinned, the Bible would consist of only six books — the five books of Chumash plus Sefer Yehoshua. The Gemara explains: *mipnei she'Sefer Yehoshua hi erkah shel Eretz Yisrael* — because Sefer Yehoshua is the official record (*erkah*, related to *arkas* in Gittin, meaning a land registry or title document) of Eretz Yisrael. It serves as the Jewish people's title deed both against the nations (through conquest) and internally among the tribes (through division).

This statement powerfully implies that every other book of Nevi'im and Ketuvim chronicles failure and attempts to repair failure — the historical books describe the problems, and the prophets try to solve them. **Sefer Yehoshua alone is the successful book of Tanakh:** the promise of Eretz Yisrael is fulfilled, the people are faithful, and the story is one of achievement rather than decline.

be the leader after him, and this is repeated three or four times. There are different steps and stages of that story, of the appointment of Yehoshua, culminating in the last one, where we discuss the pasuk after Moshe died, that says that **Yehoshua ben Nun malei ruach chochmah** [Yehoshua son of Nun was filled with the spirit of wisdom], and so on. It explicitly talks about these two things: that Yehoshua ben Nun had the ruach chochmah, which is what he received from Moshe — the spirit of prophecy or of wisdom — and **v'yishm'u eilav b'nei Yisrael, va'yasu ka'asher tzivah Hashem et Moshe** [and the children of Israel listened to him, and they did as Hashem commanded Moshe]. The people listened to him. In other words, he was an accepted political leader — all of the people listened to him, just like they listened to Moshe.

Foreshadowing Future Leadership Crises

This is in some sense foreshadowing that this will not last, right? After Yehoshua, and especially when we get into later, tekufat ha-shoftim [the period of the judges], or tekufat hamelachim [the period of the kings], there wasn't always one leader who everyone listened to, who everyone obeyed. But Moshe and Yehoshua are the universally accepted leaders — everyone accepts them. After Yehoshua, it's not clear that there was — during the shoftim, although we sometimes count like a succession chain of shoftim, it's not clear from the book of Shoftim that each of them were leaders of the entire people. They might have been leaders only of a tribe or some tribes. But Moshe and Yehoshua were very clearly the original two leaders of the people: Moshe the one who took them out of Mitzrayim, and Yehoshua the one who brings them into the land. And this was the inheritance that Yehoshua received from Moshe.

The Opening Words of Sefer Yehoshua

So that's the end of Sefer Devarim, and now this book just continues the narrative and starts — picks up the story from, as the first word of this first chapter in Sefer Yehoshua starts, **vay'hi acharei mot Moshe eved Hashem** [And it came to pass after the death of Moshe, the servant of Hashem], and we get the first command, or the mitzvah, the statement, **vayomer Hashem el Yehoshua** [and Hashem said to

Yehoshua]. So that's for the context of this book, for the context of where it's coming from.

The Pattern of Succession Across Biblical Books

It's similar to some other books in the Tanach that also continue each other straightforwardly, like possibly Sefer Shoftim, which also starts after Yehoshua died. The first pasuk of Sefer Shoftim is **vay'hi acharei mot Yehoshua** [and it came to pass after the death of Yehoshua]. So very clearly there's Torat Moshe, which is the five books of Moshe which end with his death, and then the next book starts, **vay'hi acharei mot Moshe** [and it came to pass after the death of Moshe]. Then the book of Yehoshua is very clearly the book of the life of Yehoshua, so very clearly modeled — there's books of Moshe which end with his death, and Sefer Shoftim starts, **vay'hi acharei mot Yehoshua** [and it came to pass after the death of Yehoshua], which is the end of Yehoshua's life.

The Succession Crisis in Sefer Melachim

Then the book of Shmuel doesn't straightforwardly continue the death of someone, because it's very clearly the beginning after some kind of breakdown, which we read in Sefer Shoftim. But the beginning of Melachim does — not entirely in the same exact way because it starts when David HaMelech is still alive, because Sefer Shmuel is basically the book of Shmuel HaNavi, and then his appointment of David as the first monarch of the Jewish people, or Shaul, and then David, and so on. And then Sefer Melachim picks up with David about to die, and really about the succession conflicts that happened to David.

So it's very important to notice that, distinct from the story — Sefer Melachim starts very clearly that David HaMelech did not succeed in creating a clear succession, or at least there were several pretenders to the throne: Adoniyahu, and Avshalom, and others. And then later with Shlomo, there's continuously the same problem, until it comes to the big split after Shlomo dies with Rechavam and Yaravam.

The Clean Succession of Moshe and Yehoshua

For Moshe and Yehoshua, we can start safely after they die, because Moshe in his lifetime appointed the leader after him very clearly — Yehoshua. It's not clear who Yehoshua appointed after him — it might have been Pinchas, or Calev — but in any case, it doesn't lead to the same kind of leadership crisis as we have later. The entire book of Melachim in some sense can be said to be a chronicle of that. Similarly we have in Divrei HaYamim [Chronicles] that ends and Sefer Ezra picks up the thread, and so on.

Sefer Yehoshua's Place in the Great Narrative

So this is enough to give us the space, the place of Sefer Yehoshua within the great narrative of beginning in Sefer Shemot, and ending in the end of Sefer Melachim, maybe in the end of Sefer Ezra, with the history of the people from its time all the way until Shivat Tzion [the return to Zion] — basically the biblical stories which we call Nevi'im Rishonim [the Early Prophets], the first prophets. But really they are by their content to be called historical books, as it's called in the Septuagint. And this is the first book of the prophets, because it's the narrative of the life of Yehoshua, which is the first leader after Moshe, and enjoys this prestige, similarly to Moshe, to be an accepted leader, to be a divinely anointed leader. Moshe himself appointed him, God himself told Moshe to appoint him, and he had the obedience of the entire people

in his entire lifetime, and the people were also good at all times of Yehoshua, as we'll say one more point now.

The Central Theme: Yehoshua's Great Act

Now what is this book about? It's about the great act of Yehoshua. So Moshe had one great act, called Yetziat Mitzrayim [the Exodus from Egypt], then a second, maybe we could say less great act, which is the sojourn, the travels in the desert, which is always Moshe's great act for the people, but accompanied by all the nisyonot [trials], all the tribulations, all the avedot [losses]. We're reading now in Sefer Bamidbar in the Torah, full of problems, culminating in the great tragedy of Moshe's life, where he himself didn't exit the desert ever, never arrived in the promised land.

The Conquest and Division of the Land

Yehoshua has one great act, which he does, which is the conquering of the land, which is divided, then subdivided into two great acts, which might themselves show some kind of weakness in the first act, as we'll see when we get to chapter 13, 14, I think, in the beginning of that part of the book. But in any case, Yehoshua has one great act, which is the conquest of the land.

Fulfilling Moshe's Promise

And in this sense, Yehoshua is also the one who fulfills the promise that Moshe promised and didn't himself fulfill, and this is a point that the book makes explicitly several times, and can be said to be the main theme of this whole book. Moshe took the nation out of Mitzrayim, and promised them to give them the land — he never did that, that never happened, of course, because of their sins, because of the meraglim [the spies], because of the other problems that happened in the desert, because of Moshe's sins, because of people's sins, all of that.

Yehoshua did have one promise to fulfill, and Hashem and Moshe explicitly gave him this promise, that you, unlike me, will succeed in giving the people the land. And he succeeds at that, and that is also ascribed to the same kind of theological justification that explains why Moshe didn't manage to get it. Moshe didn't manage to get it because the people weren't good enough, and for Yehoshua, the people were good enough.

The Most Triumphant Book in Tanach

So the book of Yehoshua is probably the most triumphant book in the whole Tanach. It doesn't describe any — or almost any, there's one or two stories that we could talk about — but it doesn't describe any great tragedies, great sins, which is like the basic story of Tanach, where people sin, and then they get exiled, and they get destroyed, all of that. Yehoshua is the exact opposite. It's the book of: we have succeeded, and we have succeeded because we were good, and God fulfilled his promises to us, which were conditional on us being good, and we were good and fulfilled that. So that's the main theme of the book of Yehoshua.

The Meaning of Yehoshua's Name

And I think it's proper to his name. Like Yehoshua means literally "the helper," or "God's help" — Yah, Yah hoshia [God saves], right? Like the Torah itself in Parashat Shelach gives a kind of meaning for Yehoshua's name. It says that Moshe called Hoshea **Yehoshua** [Moshe called him Yehoshua], which doesn't say explicitly why, but we could assume that it's adding God's help to Yah, as the beginning of the Shem, the Shem ben arba otivot [the four-letter Name] is God's main

name, and adding that to hoshia, which is help. So not just a helper, but God's helper. And I would say that Yehoshua itself is kind of a shortened version of that to begin with, but in any case it's very clear that Yehoshua's name itself symbolizes this help, this success. "Help" is not a very good word — something like military success, conquest is what's usually meant by the verb hoshia, yeshua [salvation/victory].

Sefer Yehoshua: The Two-Part Structure of Conquest and Division

The Two Main Parts: Kibush V'Chiluk

The book of Yehoshua describes mostly two parts of this act, and within this division of two we can work divisions, but I think the most simple way to read the book is that it's comprised of two main parts. The first part is — and these two parts are known in Chazal [the Sages], and when they count the years in other contexts — **Kibush V'Chiluk** [the conquest of the land and the division of the land]. Chazal say that there were seven years for each; they make the whole book, or at least most of it, last only 14 years. But that's already calculations of chronology. The point is that there's two main parts of Yehoshua's act which are the conquest of the land and the division of the land among the tribes, among the people, which is again a very important part, and I'll explain both of these why they're important.

Part One: The Conquest of the Land

So conquest of the land is of course important, and in some sense the antagonist of this story are the kings of Canaan, the kings that were living there. This was what was promised to the people — that they will conquer the people. And Yehoshua was also a military leader. We met him the first time in Parshat Beshalach by **Hamas Amalek** [the war with Amalek]. He was the military leader who organized the war or the battle against Amalek, and he's the one obviously organized the entire conquest of the land. So that's the first part, and this part is divided into several wars that are described. And we could — there's some structure to which wars. Obviously not every battle that Yehoshua had to conquer the land is described in this book, but in some sense seems like there's a selection of the battles that are important or that teaches something or that have certain kinds of battle. In some sense that's one aspect of this part of the book.

Part Two: The Division of the Land

And then the second part is the part of the division of the land. And that is there probably mostly, or the most important reason to be seen for what being there is in order to serve as sort of the record of who to whom belongs which part. So we could say the antagonist of the second part is each tribe relative to the other tribe. It's not solving a problem between the people and the people that lived in the land before them, but it's on the problem of the people between each other. As we've read already in Sefer Devarim, **Lo Tasig Gevul Re'acha** [Do not encroach on your neighbor's boundary] — it's a very important problem. And especially in tribal lands, lands belongs to a tribe, and then sometimes one tribe comes and claims the other tribe's land. So it's very important that we have Yehoshua ben Nun, who is again this universally obeyed original leader of the people in Canaan and the Jewish people in Israel, that he established the borders of each tribe and saying who lives where and so on.

The Geographic Lists as Authoritative Record

And there's a long series of chapters that are just geography. Some — we, most of them are not identified, at least not a hundred percent exactly what they mean, which place is which place — but there's long descriptions of lists of towns, of cities, list of borders to describe. And the point of all of this is to serve as like an accepted authoritative list of what belongs to who. And I'm assuming that along the times which people lived in the land, what we call Bayit Rishon [the First Temple period], all the way until the **Churban Beit HaMikdash** [destruction of the Temple] and Tzadkiyahu's times, we could assume that people would refer to this book or some version of it — whether it was canonized in the way the form that we have had, but some version of it which was like ascribed to Yehoshua ben Nun — and said, "Okay, if there was a conflict, we knew this land belongs to you because it says in Sefer Yehoshua, this land belongs to you because it says Sefer Yehoshua," and so on.

The Transition Between the Two Parts: Chapter 12

There's a very clear division in the book between the two parts, which is a style that happens in the Tanakh many times, is that it ends with a sort of poem. It's hard to see great art in this poem, but there's a sort of poem or song. It's written Tanakh also and it's considered a **shirah** [song], a song or a poem. And it's a list of 31 kings of Canaan — kings of cities basically in Canaan — that Yehoshua conquered. And each one says and finishes — it counts at 31 kings. And this is some kind of version of an epic list of the kings that Yehoshua conquered, and that's in chapter 12. And that ends the first part of the book, which is the conquest.

And then explicitly starts the second part of the book, which is the division of the land among the tribes.

The Tension: Division Before Complete Conquest

There is some kind of conflict between these two parts, as I've mentioned, which is that if you read the story in the beginning of chapter 13, which starts the division, you will see that it's not that he divided everything after he conquered it. Many parts were divided before he conquered it, because the conquest turned out to be more complicated than planned, as always happens in war. But the division was more important. And I think this goes to show the point that I'm making: that we need Yehoshua's authority to resolve the conflicts that would have arisen between the tribes without this. So even if later people conquer and different tribes will conquer different parts and so on — I've seen Sefer Shoftim [the Book of Judges], beginning some of these stories — it's important, it was important for Yehoshua himself to already sort of put a stamp on the division of land so that people later shouldn't have conflicts over what belongs to who.

The Framing Narratives

So that's the basic description of Sefer Yehoshua. Of course the beginning and end of some more stories — and beginning the story of the crossing of the Jordan River to enter into the land. The end has some stories of how the tribes of Gad and Reuven went back to their place and what happened with that. And a very important story of Yehoshua ben Nun's last sort of will, or last sort of speech to the people, trying to ensure that they still keep the Torah after Yehoshua dies, and sort of created a covenant, another again on that, very analogous to what Moshe did before he died and other leaders, Shmuel and so on. But those are sort of — we could see as additions to the main thrust of the story.

Chazal's Statement: The Six Books

And all of this was recognized by Chazal, by the Gemara, by the Midrash, that said that if the Jewish people have not sinned, we would have had only six books of the Bible, which are the five books of Tanakh, of Chumash, of Moshe, and Sefer Yehoshua. And they explain, **Mipnei she'Sefer Yehoshua** [because Sefer Yehoshua] — by this they mean mostly the second part — **Erkah** [means something like the worth, or I think some word that means like a record], like — and in [Masechet] Gittin we talk about if you buy a land you have to be **mal of a erkah** [register it in the official record], which means something like put it into the record, the official record, like when now we have a land registry or something where people record which land belongs to the title.

Sefer Yehoshua as Title Deed

And Sefer Yehoshua is our title — not only so, both relevant relative to the nations which were conquered, and also relative to the tribes relative to each other. And this is very important. And this statement, "If we had not sinned," very clearly expresses what I just said: that all the other books are stories of failure and trying to fix those failures, which is the job of the prophets. And the historical books describe the situation, and the prophets are the ones trying to actually solve the problems.

The One Successful Book

Sefer Yehoshua is the one successful book in Tanakh, where it just describes how the promise to get Eretz Yisrael happened and was fulfilled, and the people were good. And that's the story of Sefer Yehoshua.