

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)
Introduction to the Prophets:

Sefer Yehoshua – Chapter 2 – Conclusion

Shiur #5: Rachav and the Spies
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INTRODUCTION

Last time, we examined the narrative concerning Yehoshua's sending of spies to Yericho. We noted that the text had defined the mission as having been undertaken 'in secrecy,' and considered the possible interpretations of those key words. This time, we will again consider the spies' mission, but we will redirect our focus to the account's unlikely heroine, Rachav the harlot. The spies arrive at her house, where they find refuge, and it is because of Rachav's quick thinking and courage that they are able to escape into the night.

Recall that the spies had chosen Rachav's lodgings for a number of reasons: firstly, there they would be less likely to arouse local suspicions. Rachav's house would typically host many travelers, as well as residents of Yericho, all interested in preserving some degree of anonymity. Secondly, the spies would be able to get a fairly good sense of the town's morale, and might even be able to gather some critical intelligence information. No doubt the mood of the people of Yericho would find expression at such a place, where many inhibitions would be left at the threshold, to be conveniently retrieved upon departing. Lastly, Rachav's home had the advantage of being built into the rampart wall itself, thus offering the option of a quick escape should the mission go awry.

Let us briefly recount the circumstances of Rachav's heroism. When news of the security force's imminent arrival comes, Rachav quickly hides the spies. Rather than arousing more suspicion by denying any knowledge of their whereabouts, Rachav readily acknowledges to the King's officers that she had unwittingly provided lodging for 'the strangers,' and immediately deflects further questioning by stating that they had already fled into the night. She concludes her alibi with a patriotic flourish, "Pursue them quickly, so that you will capture them!" (2:5), to further dispel any traces of her collusion. In short, Rachav's response is quick, clever, and courageous. It is, of course, also treacherous. What prompts Rachav to turn her back on her own town and people, in order to win the confidence and pledge of the 'enemy?' Why does she harbor the men and then abet them in both their immediate escape as well as their eventual return to the Israelite encampment on the other side of the Yarden?

RACHAV THE HARLOT?

It may come as a surprise to learn that some commentaries in fact question whether Rachav was a harlot at all! Now it is true that the text explicitly describes her as 'Rachav HaZonah' (Chapter 6:17), and without doubt 'ZoNaH' elsewhere in Tanakh means a prostitute, or literally 'one who strays.' As a verb, the word is often used to convey the act of being unfaithful or traitorous, whether towards one's spouse or even towards God. The reason for the usage is quite obvious: the prostitute was regarded in ancient

times as the exemplar of one who displayed no loyalty to any man, for she readily had relations with anyone who paid her hire.

Nevertheless, Rashi (11th century, France) quotes the much earlier Targum Yonatan (2nd century, Israel), the authoritative Aramaic translation of the Prophets and Writings, who renders the phrase as 'Rachav Pundekita,' where 'pundak' means 'an inn,' and 'pundekita' therefore means 'an innkeeper.' In other words, Yehoshua's spies did not arrive at the house of a harlot, for such a disreputable destination would be unthinkable for such reputable men! Rather, they lodged at an inn that served travelers, and Rachav was nothing more than the proprietor of the establishment. The linguistic justification for Yonatan's reading is the similarity between the grammatical root 'ZNH' related to prostitution or faithlessness, and the root 'ZON' meaning 'nourishment' or 'sustenance.' In a modest case of interpretive fancy, 'Rachav HaZonah' can therefore be construed as 'Rachav the provider of food,' or 'Rachav who provides room and board.' It should be stressed, however, that although these two roots share two common letters, they do not share a common stem, and in all probability are unrelated.

Of course, our above analysis would probably not suffer terribly if indeed the spies had arrived at an innkeeper instead of at the house of a harlot, but such a reading would nevertheless put a serious strain on the straightforward reading of the text. Although it is beyond the scope of this lesson to examine more fully, readers should be aware that Yonatan's interpretation is indicative of much broader trends in Biblical exegesis, especially among those commentaries more prone to homiletical readings. The larger question concerns how to approach phrases or situations described in the text, that on the surface appear to cast protagonists in a less than virtuous light. When confronted with such examples, some commentaries, often basing themselves on much earlier sources, adopt the less threatening approach of reinterpreting the noxious phrases to connote more benign realities. Thus, for example, Rachav becomes an 'innkeeper,' Chofni and Pinchas the wayward sons of Eli stand guilty only of delaying the sacrifices of childbearing women (see I Shemuel 2:22), and Batsheva is in reality conditionally divorced from Uriah when David takes her (see Shemuel 2:11:1-27).

TREACHERY IN CONTEXT

It should be noted that here, at least, in contrast to some of the above examples, Rashi himself admits of Rachav's true vocation. Recall Rachav's remarks that "when we heard (of the splitting of the Sea of Reeds and of the victory over the Amorite kings Sichon and Og), our hearts melted. No man has any spirit left to oppose you, for God your Lord is Lord in the heavens above and on the earth below" (2:11). This complete loss of any will to fight was apparently especially obvious to Rachav, for as Rashi explains:

"She told them that no man even desired to sleep with a woman! Every minister and prince had visited Rachav HaZonah. She was but ten years old at the time of the Exodus and had practiced prostitution for the entire forty years that had elapsed since then" (commentary to 2:11).

Of course, understanding Rachav's real profession is essential for comprehending her motives. As a 'zonah,' she is a paradigm for those thankless members of society that tend to be the most vulnerable and mistreated. In all probability, she, like most members of her trade, did not willfully choose her career but was initially coerced to adopt it through an unfortunate combination of abuse and despondency. Stigmatized and marginalized, she cannot easily escape the unfortunate circumstances in which she finds herself. The disloyalty of the zonah, faithful to no one and notoriously insincere, is the defense mechanism of a woman who has lived all of her years under the shadow of desperation and neglect.

Rachav is able to turn her back on her townspeople because they have long since turned their backs on her.

This may be the true meaning of the text's emphatic statement of repetition that "she lowered them by the rope from the window, for HER HOME WAS IN THE SIDE OF THE OUTER WALL, and SHE DWELT IN THE OUTER WALL" (2:15). In other words, to live in 'the outer wall' implies not only a geographic location but a social reality as well. To dwell in the outer wall of the city is also to be peripheral to the pulse of its people, for Rachav has always been a marginalized inhabitant of Yericho. She owes nothing to them and they, in turn, can make no demands of her. How unproblematic it is for her to strike a deal with the spies for the preservation of herself and her immediate family, while fully cognizant that many of those around her will perish during the course of the Israelite conquest.

VALUE JUDGEMENTS

What is most remarkable about the account, however, is that it is completely absent of any value judgment concerning Rachav's harlotry. This stands in glaring contrast to numerous other examples in Tanakh, where to be a harlot is to stand accused of living a life that is immoral and corrupt. When the First Temple prophets decry Israel's waywardness and compare it to harlotry, their censure always includes references to not only idolatry, but also to theft, sexual immorality and bloodshed (see for example Yeshayahu 1:21-23, Yirmiyahu 2:20-28, Yechezkel 16:15-22). Here, however, other than indicating Rachav's line of work for purely narrative reasons, the text offers not a hint of criticism concerning its moral deficiency.

There is another dimension to Rachav's motives, and it provides the most promising key to understanding the text's reticence concerning her line of work, and its implied approval of her character. Recall that she successfully hid the spies on her rooftop and then deflected the suspicions of the King's officers, quickly sending the latter on their futile chase after the non-existent suspects. She then ascends to the roof and haltingly presents her offer:

"She said to the men: 'I know that God has given you the land, for your dread has fallen upon us and all of the inhabitants melt before you. For we have heard how God dried up the waters of the Sea of Reeds for you when you went forth from Egypt. Also, of your victory over Sichon and Og, the two Amorite kings from across the Yarden whom you utterly destroyed. We heard of these things and our hearts melted. No man has any spirit left in him to oppose you. For God your Lord is God in heavens above, and upon earth below. Now, therefore pledge to me in the name of God that having acted with kindness towards you, you in turn will deal kindly with my family. Provide me with a true sign. Preserve my father and mother, my brothers and sisters and all that is theirs, and save our lives from death!'" (2:9-13).

DAWNING AWARENESS

In her soliloquy, Rachav describes how fear and trepidation have seized the heart of every denizen of Yericho. She recalls the astounding reports of two events in particular, the splitting of the Sea of Reeds and the defeat of the Amorite kings. Chronologically, the splitting of the Sea and the drowning of Pharaoh's pursuing hordes in its churning waters (Shemot/Exodus Chapter 14) took place almost forty years before and was the culmination of the Exodus from Egypt. The defeat of Sichon and Og, on the

other hand, had happened but a few months earlier, for Moshe had battled them almost on the eve of his demise (Bemidbar/Numbers 21:21-22-1). Taken together, therefore, the two episodes are recalled by Rachav as a bracketing of the entire Israelite experience, as expressions of their omnipotent God's prowess, a Deity before Whom the Canaanite city-states now trembled and quaked.

But Rachav does not conclude her remarks with these facts of history or her assessments of the town's flagging spirits. Indeed, she terminates her words with an exultant outburst that is both contextually unnecessary as well as unexpected. Immediately followed by her request, she declares, "For God your Lord is God in heavens above and upon earth below!" This phrase raises the possibility that there is perhaps another way to understand Rachav's wonder and alarm as she brings to mind the events of the Sea of Reeds and of the Amorite Kings.

THE GOD OF THE ISRAELITES

Recall that some four decades earlier, the Israelites had left Egypt and confidently marched astride their leader Moshe into the barren wilderness. Behind them, the Egyptian countryside lay in ruins, its people demoralized and its god king Pharaoh bent over in terror. From an ethical perspective, the Israelite Exodus, the liberation by God of hapless slaves from the cruel and unjust grip of state-sponsored injustice, entered the annals of human history as the most forceful denunciation of man's heartlessness towards the weak and the downtrodden. Henceforth, every tyrant and totalitarian oppressor would stand condemned by the thundering echo of its timeless message. There was after all, and to the relief of all, an absolute moral law that no man, not even a god king, could abrogate with impunity.

Similarly, the defeat of Sichon and Og was not simply expressed by Rachav as an example of an unusual and surprising military triumph, one more bloody battle in the long line of conflicts and confrontations that from time immemorial have stained human hands with shades of crimson. Rather, Sichon and Og were the regional superpowers, merciless despots that bound many of the petty kings of Canaan as vassals in the throes of tribute (see Yehoshua 13:21). Their miraculous downfall was greeted on the Yarden's western side with expressions of wonder as well as with hushed sighs of relief.

Rachav ponders these two events, both of them indicative of a different 'world order,' both of them extending the pledge of hope in an otherwise bleak and dreary moral landscape. The overthrow of Pharaoh implied that even a serf was precious in the eyes of this unusual Israelite God; the defeat of Sichon and Og suggested that what was meaningful to Him had little to do with might and brute force, and much to do with decency and goodness. What revolutionary ideas in a polytheistic world drunk with dreams of bloodshed and plunder, but deaf to the cries of the vanquished and the oppressed!

THE WHISPER OF TESHUVA

As the spies embark on their mission, the winds of spring accompany them, bearing the promise of vitality and life. Facing them on her rooftop abutting the noisy and noisome city, under an ink-black canopy illuminated by a thousand points of silent light, Rachav surveys her small and nasty world, and her heart aches. The strangers speak of a God who cares, of a Deity concerned with human destiny, of a Being for whom injustice and oppression are anathema. Who understands better than her, the humbled prostitute, the pain of dwelling in the 'outer wall,' the myriad little acts of callousness and cruelty that

together compose the brutish streetscape of Yericho and its allies? Recounting the Sea of Reeds and Sichon and Og, Rachav now realizes that there is another way. Yericho and the kings of Canaan may bravely oppose the military onslaught of the Israelites, but the message of their God will inevitably prevail. Promising relief but demanding responsibility, their God's teachings will undermine the rotting foundations of Yericho and send its ramparts tumbling down.

Her life a sham, its unfortunate circumstances a travesty, Rachav ponders her fate. To betray the spies may finally win her the empty accolades of the King of Yericho, the short-lived respect of those that uphold its 'way of life.' But to betray the spies is also to confirm the validity of their claims, that all of the idols of Canaan cannot comfort a broken heart, a spirit sickened by the constant sight of her clients' selfish parade to her dilapidated door. Perhaps the spies are the very first men to ever have arrived asking for her help, instead of demanding her self-abasement.

Gathering the threads of her dignity about her, embracing the consoling words of her curious visitors, Rachav decides that all is not lost. Seizing the hope of a better future for her, of a better life for her family, and, ultimately, of a better world for all, she casts her lot with the Israelite spies and with their God: "For God your Lord is God in heavens above, and upon earth below. Now, therefore pledge to me in the name of God that having acted with kindness towards you, that you will deal kindly with my family. Provide me with a true sign. Preserve my father and mother, my brothers and sisters and all that is theirs, and save our lives from death!" (2:9-13). How poignant are the comments of the Mekhilta (Rabbinic Midrash Halakha, 3rd century) concerning this passage:

"When Yitro saw that God has taken the Israelites out of Egypt, he exclaimed: 'Now I know that God is greater than all other gods!' (Shemot 18:11). Yitro himself had worshipped all manner of idolatry, for he states '...all other gods.' Naaman, however, acknowledged God even more, for he states 'Now I know that there are no other gods on earth save for the God of Israel' (II Melakhim 5:15). But Rachav the Zonah surpassed both of them, for she said 'For God your Lord is God in heavens above, AND upon earth below!'"

SINCERE AND LIFE-ALTERING TRANSFORMATION

The Mekhilta thus understands Rachav's exclamation as relating to those of other seasoned idolators who came to question their beliefs and values, eventually reject them, only to instead sincerely embrace the God of Israel. Yitro, Moshe's father-in-law, was the priest of Midian, and loyally served the local desert fetishes of the southern Arabian Peninsula. When he heard of the Exodus and the splitting of the Sea, of the oppressiveness of Pharaoh and his overthrow by the concerned God of the Hebrews, he rejected his former faith and joined the people of Israel. Naaman was a 9th century BCE northern Syrian warlord who was stricken by a debilitating skin disease and cured by the advice of the miracle-working prophet Elisha. As a result of that experience, he came to venerate the God of Israel, rejecting the worship of his own deities as empty ceremonials. Significantly, the impetus for both Yitro and Naaman to begin their journey of faith was their realization that God's intervention suggested the existence of an aware and involved Deity, Who ruled the cosmos according to moral principles. In a similar vein, therefore, and to an even greater degree, Rachav HaZonah's rooftop realization represents a transformative event that recasts her life and the lives of her loved ones. They will be extricated from the mire of Yericho in order to live.

Or, to consider the matter from a textual standpoint, we should carefully note that the spies advise Rachav to make her household discernible to the Israelite invaders by suspending a 'crimson cord' from its window (2:18). In the original Hebrew, this is described as 'tikvat choth hashani,' where the word for 'cord,' 'tikVa,' comes from the same root that means 'hope.' The allusion is clear: Rachav's fateful decision represents not only the promise of survival but also the supernal hope afforded by the prospect of a new beginning.

Significantly, later commentaries adopt a similar approach, perceiving the catalyst of Teshuva to be the engine that drives Rachav's decision. Commenting on the escape of the spies through her window, dangled by her saving chord, Rashi (11th century, France) comments:

"Use of the definite article in the phrase 'She lowered them by THE rope through THE window' (2:15) is a reference to the very same rope and window that her paramours would use to ascend to her chambers. She thus proclaimed: 'Master of the Universe! By these very things I transgressed, let me now achieve absolution by them!'" (commentary to 2:15).

In other words, by aiding the escape of the spies, Rashi understands that Rachav has decided to altar the fundamental trajectory of her life, to abandon Yericho and its turpitude, to accept Israel and its God.

This new-won acceptance of Israel and by Israel is actually suggested by the text that describes her rescue after the fall of the city: "They burned the city and all that was in it...but Rachav the Harlot and her family, everything that was hers, was preserved by Yehoshua. She henceforth dwelt among (beKeReV) Israel until this very day, for she hid the spies whom Yehoshua had sent to search out Yericho" (6:25). It is noteworthy indeed that the preposition 'among' or 'bekerev' used to describe her changed status is the very same one consistently utilized by the Torah to emphasize the reception due to the new convert by his adoptive people Israel (see Devarim 16:11, 26:11, 29:10).

In fact, some early sources go so far as to acclaim Rachav as the ancestress of prophets and priests!

"Rav Nachman said: 'Chulda the Prophetess (see II Melakhim 22:11-20) was a descendent of Yehoshua...Rav Eina the Elder raised an objection from the following text: 'Eight prophets who were also priests were descended from Rachav the Harlot. These are Neriah, Baruch, Serayah, Machseyah, Yirmiyah, Chilkiyah, Chanamel and Shalum' (individuals all associated with the kin of Yirmiyah the First Temple Prophet and Priest, and almost all mentioned in Yirmiyahu Chapter 32). Rav Yehuda added: Chulda the Prophetess was also one of her descendents.' Said Rav Nachman: Rachav converted and became married to Yehoshua" (Talmud Tractate Megilla 14b). According to the above source, not only did Rachav convert and become accepted by the people of Israel, but she became married to none other than Yehoshua their leader! Thus, although Rachav disappears from the Biblical sources after the conquest of Yericho, her fateful decision apparently lives on with surprising results.

CONCLUSION

Whether or not the above Talmudic source represents an unassailable tradition, it is clear that for the Rabbis, the thought of Rachav the harlot becoming an earnest and legitimate convert and bringing forth vital and illustrious descendents was not considered fantastical or obscene. This very fact in and of itself offers perhaps the most striking evidence that our above analysis concerning Rachav's embrace of

the spies and rejection of her townsfolk is correct. It is motivated by more than simply her calculated appraisal of Yericho's imminent capture and fall – it is motivated by Teshuva.

The lessons offered by the personal tale of Rachav are many, but the most important one is this: every person is capable of changing the direction of his or her life by willfully choosing a different moral path. The opportunity for such a transformation may not be as striking as the one presented to Rachav the harlot, but neither are the circumstances typically so stark, nor the immediate consequences so severe. The art of conscious living is to seize the more mundane and numerous occasions provided by our daily lives in order to come to our own self-realizations, both of who we really are but also of who we can yet become. How incongruous but now intelligible that the rejected and uncelebrated harlot should become the instrument for her family's salvation as well as the ancestress of Israel's most outspoken prophetic line!

For next lesson, please begin reading Chapter 3, and consider the means by which the Yarden was traversed, as well as the critical role played by the Ark of the Covenant in the event. We will begin our studies by considering the special significance of the Ark, ancient Israel's most precious artifact.