

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION  
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

Introduction to the Prophets:

Sefer Yehoshua – Chapter 2  
Shiur #4: The Sending of the Spies to Yericho  
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INTRODUCTION

The people of Israel are for now encamped on the eastern side of the Yarden. Yehoshua has already informed them to prepare to cross its meandering course. On the other side of the river, opposite their encampment, is the gateway to Canaan, the ancient city of Yericho (Jericho). Located in the arid and barren Jordan Plain, Yericho is nevertheless a verdant and fertile island in a wasteland sea, an oasis fed by a series of underground springs. Modern study of its ruins has yielded impressive finds and has been able to determine that the original settlement of Yericho was one of the first urban concentrations in the ancient world. Its earliest levels have been dated to the dawn of human agriculture. By the time of Yehoshua, it had already been settled and resettled many times.

In preparation for the Israelite's first encounter with the Canaanites, Yehoshua deems it prudent to first send an expedition of scouts to ascertain the city's defenses as well the morale of its inhabitants. Of course, his plan calls to mind a similar one initiated by his mentor Moshe some forty years earlier. That pivotal mission ended in failure, when the majority of the twelve spies returned with a negative report, the people of Israel panicked and demanded to return to Egypt, and God delayed their entry into the land until the generation of the Exodus died out. Yehoshua himself, as a former leader of the tribe of Ephraim, had been a member of that earlier expedition. He and Calev ben Yefune, of the tribe of Yehuda, had been the only two spies who had spoken out in praise of the land and in support of trusting in God to attempt its conquest, but their encouraging words fell on frightened and deaf ears. The people, already dejected and disheartened by the other spies' disparaging words, threatened to stone the two, if not for the sudden appearance of God's cloud of glory (Bemidbar/Numbers 14:10).

No doubt, that debacle is still vivid in Yehoshua's mind as he prepares to lead the people into Canaan for their second attempt. This week, we shall carefully examine Yehoshua's plan for sending his spies. By carefully comparing and contrasting it to that of Moshe, we shall see how Yehoshua has learned its singular lessons well, and is in fact very careful to avoid the pitfalls that doomed the earlier mission to failure.

A SECRET MISSION #(1) – AVOIDING DETECTION BY THE PEOPLE OF YERICHO

"Yehoshua quietly ('cheresh') sent two spies from the Sheetim and said: 'go see the land and Yericho'. They went and arrived at the home of a harlot ('zona') whose name was Rachav, and they lodged there" (Yehoshua 2:1). Of course, it is perfectly understandable that Yehoshua sends the spies quietly, so that they can secretly infiltrate Yericho and uncover its weaknesses. In fact, some of the early sources quoted by Rashi (11<sup>th</sup> century, France) fancifully read the Hebrew word for 'secretly' – 'cheresh' –

as 'cheres,' meaning 'earthenware vessels,' and remark that the spies were disguised as ordinary purveyors of pots and utensils, in order to avoid arousing the suspicions of the people of Yericho!

According to this reading, the primary purpose of the secrecy surrounding the mission was to ensure that the spies could slip into Yericho undetected, gather the necessary intelligence, and steal away again. If so, this would constitute a marked departure from the spy mission initiated by Moshe, where the text provides no indication that the spies were to attempt to conceal their movements or motives from the Canaanites. After all, a group of twelve men traveling together is going to be conspicuous under the best of circumstances. Even if we are to assume that the group split up in order to spy out different regions (as implied by the Calev's visit to Chevron – see Bemidbar/Numbers 13:22), we do find them together collecting samples of the land's fruits, that they then carry back with them as a group.

In fact, in their report, Moshe's spies exclaim that they felt as diminutive as grasshoppers in comparison to the towering Canaanite inhabitants, and conclude their words by remarking that the natives also regarded them as such (Bemidbar 13:33). This indicates that the Canaanites were well aware of the Israelite's movements but that they apparently did not feel terribly threatened by their presence. The implication of all this is that the mission of Moshe's spies was not so much a military assignment, as much as a morale booster. After all, hadn't God already reassured the people of Israel that they would inherit the land, and that He would assist them? What Moshe's people lacked was not a strategic plan but rather strength of will, and his sending of spies was therefore meant to provide the people of Israel with encouraging reports about the land's fruitfulness, expansiveness, and allure. For Moshe's spies to attempt to infiltrate into Canaan secretly was therefore unnecessary.

Yehoshua's mission, on the other hand, clearly seems to have a different agenda, for God has yet to inform him that the city of Yericho will be easily conquered when its defensive wall miraculously crumbles. Yehoshua is thus planning an assault on its barricades, and his sending of the spies would therefore have clear tactical goals. If the spies are to succeed, then they must enter the city quietly, search out its weak points, and escape into the darkness once again. This would explain their entry under cover of darkness as well as their choice of lodgings, for nowhere would their presence be less conspicuous than at the home of a harlot, where people of all descriptions are wont to frequent, most of them with a great desire to maintain anonymity and discretion. Of course, by staying at Rachav's house they might also be able to gather important intelligence about the city's notables and generals, for no doubt Rachav hears much gossip as well as some verity during the course of her work. If nothing else, at least the spies can get a fairly accurate general impression of the city's mood on the eve of the entry into the land, for whatever hearsay is on the minds of the masses will find its way to Rachav's door.

#### UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

At the same time, it is indeed puzzling that the spies are discovered so quickly. The second verse of the chapter already indicates that the King of Yericho is informed of the spies' movements and quickly dispatches a party to Rachav's lodgings in order to arrest them! It seems that they had scarcely arrived and dropped their bags when the ominous knock of the gendarme could already be heard at her gate. Clearly, the city must have been on high alert, anticipating an attempt by the Israelites to infiltrate and to search it out. Nevertheless, one would have expected the spies to exercise more prudence in their behavior, and to implement with greater success Yehoshua's directive to maintain secrecy.

If we understand their premature discovery by the inhabitants of Yericho to have been due to a combination of the latter's high state of vigilance, excellent counter-intelligence, as well as the spies' lack of caution, then we must submit that their decision to lodge at Rachav's house, built as it was into the city's defensive wall and therefore offering a vista to the outside, was a remarkable stroke of luck. Further, her unexpected identification with the Israelites, to the degree that she was willing to aid them in their hurried escape into the night, was nothing short of miraculous. Had the spies unwittingly lodged within the city proper or else chosen a less sympathetic host, then the mission could just as easily have ended disastrously with their humiliating capture. Surprisingly, when the spies return to Yehoshua with the report of their mission, they offer him no indication that its failure was a distinct possibility.

#### A SECRET MISSION #(2) – AVOIDING DETECTION BY THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL

The above reading is of course predicated upon the primary thrust of the 'secrecy order' to have been directed towards the people of Yericho. "Yehoshua quietly ('cheresh') sent two spies from the Sheetim and said: 'go see the land and Yericho,'" so that they would not be found out by the enemy. There is, however, another possibility that obviates some of the above difficulties that this reading introduces. It is in fact plausible that the 'quiet' sending of the spies was a calculated move by Yehoshua to keep the mission secret not only from the people of Yericho, but also from his own compatriots! Rabbi David Kimchi (13<sup>th</sup> century, Provence), quoting the much-earlier Targum Yonatan (2<sup>nd</sup> century, Israel) explains that "Yehoshua sent the men secretly so that THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL would be unaware of the mission, and therefore not discomfited by the thought of sending spies. Yehoshua, on the other hand, sent them only because he knew that they would be successful in their mission and would raise the spirits of the people of Israel with a positive report" (commentary to 2:1).

The brilliance of Kimchi's remark is cast into sharper relief when we again contrast Yehoshua's spies with those of Moshe. Recall that Moshe selected twelve men, one per tribe, all of them "leaders of the people of Israel," and each one designated by name (Bemidbar 13:3). Recall also that although the text provides no description of their send off, it emphasizes that upon their return, they "came to Moshe, Aharon and the entire congregation of Israel to Kadesh in the wilderness of Paran, and they reported back to them and to the entire assembly and showed them all the produce of the land. They spoke to him and they said: 'We came to the land to which you sent us, and indeed it is a land flowing with milk and honey, and these are its fruits. However, the inhabitants of the land are very strong...'" (Bemidbar 13:26-27). What follows is their assessment that the conquest of the land is impossible, then the subsequent panic of the people, and finally the culminating calumny of their terrified cries to return to Egypt.

Analyzing the text, we conclude that Moshe had made no attempt to conceal the mission of the spies at all. In fact, quite the opposite. They were no doubt dispatched to Canaan and received upon their return with a great deal of fanfare and flourish. We can see them in our mind's eye, leaders all, perhaps bedecked in their official regalia, proudly marching off towards the mysterious distant hills and bearing the buoyant burden of the people's blessings. All of Israel watches them as they disappear over the horizon, the portentous moment charged with the surge of destiny. If only they could have come back bearing a different message, tidings of encouragement, words of fortitude and hope!

#### LEARNING THE LESSON OF COVER UP

Yehoshua remembers the moment all too well, and realizes in disquieting retrospect how tragic was the publicity of it all, how reckless and ill advised! Almost forty years have elapsed since the fateful day of those spies' return, and Yehoshua now stands in Moshe's stead, about to embark on his mentor's uncompleted journey. Sending his small party of two anonymous spies to Yericho in the gathering gloom of nightfall, Yehoshua wisely chooses a different course of action, as their trek is tightly shrouded in secrecy lest the news of it sends a shudder down the spine of Israel. Significantly, when the spies return, the text indicates that "they descended from the hills, crossed [the Jordan] and came to Yehoshua ben Nune, and described to HIM all that has befallen them. They said TO YEHOSHUA that 'God has given the entire land into our hands, for all of its inhabitants dissolve in fear before us!'" (Chapter 2:23-24). Here, the spies make no contact with their countrymen, neither when they depart, nor when they return. It is Yehoshua alone who is privy to their account, and if the spies indicate that their mission was unsuccessful, then he can decide on the next course of action while the people of Israel remain blissfully unaware of the failure.

Now, armed with our alternate reading suggesting that it is primarily ISRAEL that must be shielded from the news of the mission, we can also retrace and reevaluate the spies' movements. The spies have in reality made a threefold tactical choice to lodge at the house of Rachav, for they can already anticipate that detection by the unnerved people of Yericho is not out of the question. As they scan the city's outer wall from afar, perhaps they notice a series of beckoning windows belonging to peripheral houses that have been built into its fortifications. Such realities are not unheard of in the chronicles of ancient walled cities, where congestion and thrift often led town planners to expediently and extemporaneously incorporate perimeter houses into the ramparts. For these spies, though, such a condition represents the promise of a daring escape if their movements are detected.

Secondly, is it not possible that Rachav's 'hospitality' is known beyond Yericho's borders, so that their seemingly random arrival at her well-trodden doorstep has actually been planned well in advance? Additionally, as we suggested above, in all probability her inn has a well-deserved reputation for offering its clients the obscurity that they demand. And finally again, her line of work has the added advantage of providing her with useful information concerning a whole array of perhaps pivotal personalities and their plans. Or, as the Sages colorfully described it: "There wasn't a prince or noble who had not come to consort with Rachav the harlot!" (quoted by Rashi, 11<sup>th</sup> century, France, commentary to 2:11).

Thus, rather than suggesting a heavy-handed lack of caution that leads to almost immediate detection, we may suggest in contrast that Yehoshua and the spies have done a remarkable job of gathering their valuable intelligence in advance. They have succeeded in singling out a base of operations that has three distinct advantages, for it offers the possibility of maintaining a low profile while vital intelligence can be gathered, as well as providing the critical option of a quick escape. It is therefore not fortuitous circumstance that guides the spies to Rachav's door but rather deliberation and forethought. Their quick detection by alert informants and their betrayal to Yericho's King should therefore not be understood as the unexpected curtailment of their mission, but rather as a predictable development for which the two were already eminently well prepared.

## RECONCILING THE TWO READINGS

In all probability, both readings offered above are correct. The spies are dispatched in secrecy to avoid triggering anxiety and disquiet among the people of Israel, for this concern is Yehoshua's primary one. Of course, they are also sent with orders to evade detection by the inhabitants of Yericho. With this

twin mandate, the spies begin to chart out their mission. They will need to find a 'safe house' from which they can launch their task of collecting important information, a location that at the same time can provide them with the chance of flight. A harlot's lodgings with access to the outer wall meets the various criteria considerably. Their mission can therefore be recast as a lightning strike into enemy territory, not with the absolute necessity of avoiding detection but rather with the intention of quickly collecting vital data while evading capture, should sudden departure be required.

Presumably, such an operation has the added advantage of sowing the seeds of even more apprehension in the town of Yericho, already on edge with reports of Israel's imminent arrival. To gauge the level of dread of its anxious inhabitants we need only consider the text's observation that as soon as the king's search party leaves the safety of Yericho's gates, in their misguided attempt to capture the spies, "the gates were immediately closed" (Chapter 2:7). In other words, Yericho has already adopted the defensive posture of a city under siege, even though the people of Israel have yet to even cross the swollen waters of the Jordan River. The nerves of its people will certainly not be calmed by the news of Israelite spies who have succeeded in breaching its formidable battlements and subsequently making away into the ominous darkness!

Next week, we shall continue our analysis of the spies' mission. However, we shall shift our focus from their exploits to those of the real (but unlikely) heroine of the story, Rachav the harlot. Who is this woman, and why does she turn her back on her own people by harboring the spies? What are we to learn from her conduct? Those readers who have not yet completed the reading of the second chapter are asked to do so, with particular emphasis on attempting to ascertain the motives of this remarkable woman.

Shabbat Shalom