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Themes and Ideas in the Haftara
Yeshivat Har Etzion

**This haftara series is dedicated in memory
of our beloved Chaya Leah bat Efrayim Yitzchak
(Mrs. Claire Reinitz), zichronah livracha,
by her family.**

PARASHAT SHELACH

THE CHARACTER OF RACHAV

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The *haftara* for *Parashat Shelach* (*Yehoshua* 2:1-24) centers on the spies that Yehoshua sent to Jericho and their encounter with Rachav. The connection to the *parasha* is clear, and the contrast between the spies sent by Yehoshua and those sent by Moshe is well-known. We wish to focus today upon the character of Rachav and upon the relationship that develops between her and the spies.

The starting point of our discussion of the personality of Rachav is the fact that she was a prostitute. This is the only personal information that Scripture reports about her, and without a doubt it does so because it sees this as a significant factor. We

have no intrinsic interest in knowing the occupations of the biblical heroes, and Scripture is not wont to provide such information without good reason. There is no question then that this point will play an important role in the development of the narrative.

TACTICAL INFORMATION

On the simplest level, the connection between Rachav's being a prostitute and the spies' coming to her house can be understood from a tactical perspective related to their mission. Her house was particularly accessible, as Scripture itself testifies, "for her house was on the town wall, and she dwelt upon the wall" (*Yehoshua* 2:15), and obviously, it was a place where few questions would be asked. Moreover, owing to the nature of intelligence work, the sought-after data is generally collected in questionable places, and then as today, it is easier to come by valuable information in a shady nightclub than in a respectable library. The accessibility to Rachav's house and to relevant information rises also from midrashim dealing with Rachav:

Rachav the harlot would fornicate with the men of her city from within and with bandits from without, as it is stated: "For her house was on the town wall, and she dwelt upon the wall." (*Sifrei Zuta* 10:9)

And similarly:

For the master said: There was no officer or governor who did not fornicate with Rachav the harlot. (*Zevachim* 116b)

PROFESSION REFLECTING PERSONALITY

This is all true on the level of the plain sense of the text, but this does not suffice for us. For surely the prophet comes not to explain the tactical elements of the story and expose the methods of Israelite intelligence gathering, but rather to deal with

the essence of Rachav as a spiritual personality struggling with the problems of her time. We must, therefore, examine the matter based on the assumption that knowing her profession is critically important for understanding her personality.

The first and most important point is that Rachav lives on the fringe of society. This follows from what Scripture states: "For her house was on the town wall, and she dwelt upon the wall." Who would live in such a place, one that is most exposed to external elements, most distant from the hubs of power and activity, and most wretched for residence, in that its location makes it subject to military and governmental disturbances in day-to-day life? Such a place is inhabited by society's poorest and most unfortunate members, and it is to this class of people that Rachav belongs. From a literary perspective, we might also take note of the metaphoric significance of a dwelling located in a wall as representing a split personality, one half belonging to Jericho, and the other half turned outward. As we saw in the aforementioned midrash, half of her contact was with her fellow townsmen and the other half was with random travelers on the outside. [In this context, we should also mention the halakhic discussions that see a wall (or parts thereof) as belonging both to what is inside and to what is outside, regarding its status and location^[1].

PROSTITUTION RESULTING FROM ECONOMIC DISTRESS

Based on the assumption that Rachav lived on the socio-economic fringe of her society, it is easy to understand how she came to her profession. *Chazal* related to this point in another midrash:

The said: She was ten years old when Israel left Egypt, and she engaged in prostitution all forty years that Israel was in the wilderness. (*Zevachim* 116b)

There is no need to expand on the reasons that a ten-year old girl would sink to prostitution, for it is clear as day that this was rooted in her family's socio-economic distress. Rachav did not engage in prostitution out of dissoluteness and immodesty, but because of her own distress and the distress of her family. It was only out of responsibility and genuine commitment to her family, and at the cost of her own

dreams and comfort, that Rachav assumed the burden of supporting her family and turned to prostitution. Whether or not the decision was justified, her conduct reveals a decent person, who was deeply committed to the people surrounding her.

To this we must add the exploitation by the strong of the weak that *Chazal* identified in this story. In that same passage in *Zevachim* cited above, it is asserted that "there was no officer or governor who did not fornicate with Rachav the harlot." As the Gemara itself explains there, this assertion is well-anchored in the plain sense of the text, for were this not so how could a woman living on the fringe of society know the mood of Jericho with respect to the rise of Israel as a regional power and the threat that this posed.^[2] Thus, it fits in with the considerations proposed above regarding Rachav's value as a source of intelligence. But *Chazal's* wisdom and insight allow us also to appreciate how she was exploited by the local elites and to understand the social gaps and the difficult circumstances in which she found herself. All of the town's notables are routinely sleeping with a young girl, nobody sees a moral flaw in their behavior, and not a single officer is disturbed by the poverty that brought her to prostitution.

THE TABLES ARE TURNED

Our *haftara* opens at a point where the tables are finally being turned. Suddenly, Rachav wields power, the king being in urgent need of military information to which she is privy. From hard-pressed existence on the fringe of society, she now occupies an important position, and she must decide whether to comply with the king's request or to reject it. The king asks her to hand over the spies, and he is certain that she will comply with his request, for it is as clear to him as it is to Rachav that it will be very worth her while to answer positively. For if she hands over the spies, she will be rewarded, and if not, she will come to a bitter end. He is absolutely sure that she will agree, despite the fact that she will bring harm to those whom she is sheltering, for what is a prostitute if not a woman who is ready to hand over what is most dear and intimate in exchange for money. The commercialization of intimate relationships is characteristic of prostitution, and the king of Jericho is therefore confident that Rachav will in fact hand over the spies who had arrived in her house.

As we have seen, however, and contrary to what the king thinks, Rachav is a decent woman, who was brought to prostitution by her poverty, but nevertheless embodies the values of responsibility and commitment. Now, what does Rachav see when the king asks her to hand over the spies? On the one side stand the corrupt people of Jericho who had exploited her distress all these years, pressing her and her family to the fringe of society and failing to relate to her as a human being. On the other side stand the two Israelite spies who represent for her the very opposite of the people of Jericho.

THE SPIES

What does Rachav see in the spies? Two people arrive at her doorstep on an exceedingly dangerous mission for the benefit of their people, with total disregard for their personal safety. Despite the fact that their foreignness would make it difficult for them to blend in to the local population, they are ready to penetrate behind the enemy's lines and enter a walled city that has a strong secret police and lacks an escape route,^[3] and in the absence of any alternative they are forced to turn to the local prostitute. From their perspective, the likelihood that Rachav will hand them over to the authorities is real and serious; they don't yet know her or what she is like, and they too take into account that a woman who prostitutes herself for money is very likely to hand them over for the reward, and so she cannot be trusted. But they are ready to risk it, because they view themselves as subordinate to the welfare of the larger community, and therefore they suppress all their personal concerns in favor of the needs of their people. They accept no reward or honor, they seek no fame or personal benefit. They hide their personalities so well that Scripture tells us nothing about their identities.

THE CHOICE

In this context, it is interesting to note that while Scripture does not identify the spies, *Chazal*, in their usual manner, did identify the two spies as Kalev and Pinchas. Common to both of them was the readiness to sacrifice everything and endanger their lives, by standing up to an inflamed crowd, in order to rescue Israel. Both are endowed with absolute integrity and both are ready to act on behalf

of the community without taking their personal needs into account. If we try to imagine the scene in Rachav's house, we see appearing before her the king of Jericho and his entourage, whom Rachav recognizes as corrupt and aggressive exploiters, and opposite them two men who throw everything aside for the benefit of their people. And it falls upon her to decide between them.

We see then that Rachav must decide between two worlds. On one side, the corrupt world of a regime that exploited her for many years and sees her as ready to betray her guests; on the other side, two altruistic people who entrust their fate and their lives to her integrity and rely on her to act toward them in the manner of "loving your neighbor as yourself." Both they and she understand that it is in her hands to decide their fate for better or for worse, and thus we are talking about a moment of truth for her. She can prostitute herself and receive a very considerable reward from the king, and thus extricate herself from the financial straits in which she finds herself. But she can also sacrifice herself on their behalf and justify their trust in her. She must choose her path – will she opt for the first possibility and follow the path of profiting at the expense of others, or will she choose the second path and demonstrate that her occupation in prostitution came about as a result of circumstances beyond her control, but fundamentally, her attitude toward others is one of human commitment and interpersonal understanding.

SELF-SACRIFICE FOR THE BENEFIT OF OTHERS

Rachav does not hesitate; she opts for human decency towards the spies, while putting her own life in great danger. Thus, she follows in their footsteps, viewing herself as ready to sacrifice herself for the benefit of others. Her relationship with them is not commercial, but rather human. She hides them in her house and takes them up to her roof,^[4] thus putting herself into real and tangible danger. *Chazal's* assertion that Rachav converted to Judaism (*Megila* 14b) is a sharp expression of her choosing the world of Israel and its values, as opposed to the Cana'anite world of exploitation and prostitution.

TRANSFORMATION OF PERSONALITY

At this point, it should be noted that Rachav's decision can be presented as a transformation of her personality, she turning her back to the world to which she had thus far belonged. Or alternatively it can be presented as a confirmation of the principles that had guided her all along. We have emphasized the second possibility, but it is possible to propose a model that argues for transformation, this proposal rising from the words of *Chazal* (*Zevachim* 116b):

After fifty years she converted, saying, May I be forgiven in reward for the rope, the window, and the flax.[\[5\]](#)

The very strengths and means that had been used thus far for distancing and exploitation will by way of this incident of the spies turn into means of achieving brotherhood and commitment, and thus they symbolize the world that she now accepts upon herself.

TRUTH AND KINDNESS

The continuation of the *haftara* should be understood in light of what has been said thus far. The spies are on the roof, knowing not whether they are dealing with a woman with commitment who is ready to endanger herself on their behalf, or perhaps they have fallen into a trap that the prostitute has set for them. Rachav goes up to them; the encounter between them takes place on the roof. As we suggested above, it seems significant that this meeting takes place on the roof, i.e., in a private area where she can expose herself to them as a human being. She turns to them, basing the relationship between them on the principles of truth and kindness. Three people stand there on the roof, each one understanding that the other two live their lives out of recognition for the other and with readiness to sacrifice on his behalf. What she asks of them assumes the spies' world of values to which she has joined herself. She asks of them as follows:

Now therefore, I pray you, swear to me by the Lord, since I have shown you kindness, that you will also show kindness to my father's house, and give me a true token: and that you will save alive my father, and my mother, and my brothers, and my sisters, and all that they have, and deliver our lives from death. (vv.12:13)

As is evident, truth and kindness are the values that she enlists in her request, both of them standing in total contrast to the world of exploitation and commercialization of the world of prostitution, on the one hand, and the world of a corrupt regime, on the other. Attention should also be paid to her use of an oath. Why should an oath be voiced in the house of a prostitute? Surely the validity of an oath is based entirely on the trustworthiness and decency of the one taking the oath, for we are talking about matters of the heart, and it is only one's trustworthiness and commitment to God and one's fellow man that give force to an oath. Rachav uses an oath because she feels herself as belonging to the world of responsibility and values.

Needless to say, her request reflects the responsibility that she feels for her family, and from here we can infer the value of familial responsibility referred to above.

WOMEN WITH COMMITMENT AND RESPONSIBILITY

Before concluding, let us cite the Gemara in *Megila* (15a) that draws a connection between Rachav and other biblical heroines:

Our Rabbis taught: There were four beautiful women in the world: Sara, Rachav, Avigayil and Ester.

What is common to all of them is their commitment to others and the human responsibility that they are prepared to assume. In this framework, we cannot go into a deep analysis of the other characters. Let us briefly say that Sara's actions in her display of faithfulness to Avraham in the house of Pharaoh and in her readiness to

give him Hagar, those of Avigayil when she went to defend Naval against angry and betrayed soldiers, and those of Ester who was ready to stand up to Achashverosh despite the dangers involved, all drew their strength from their devotion and responsibility to others. Thus, the midrash creates a contrast between external beauty that attracts one who sees a woman merely as a sexual object and a source of physical excitement, and the internal beauty and human depth of women who are ready to enter into true human relationships based on responsibility and commitment.

OUT OF SHITTIM

It should be noted that the *haftara* relates not only the story of Rachav's opting for the world of commitment, but also the repair of the people of Israel. It is not by chance that the opening verse mentions that the spies were sent out of Shittim. No place in the wilderness gives greater expression to the pursuit of enjoyment and momentary pleasure at the expense of true values than does Shittim. The general wantonness that characterized that place stands in total antithesis to the world of religious and national responsibility, no less than the world of the spies who wished to return to Egypt. Sending the spies from the Shittim comes to repair the sin of the first set of spies and the sin of Ba'al Pe'or, because this second set of spies was accompanied by an ethos of sacrifice for the community. It should come as no surprise then that *Chazal* attribute this mission to Pinchas and Kalev, for they are the two figures who stood up to the spies and to the sinners at Shittim, and thus the opportunity to repair those sins fell to them as well.

(Translated by David Strauss)

[1] See *Ohalot* 6:3; see also *Pesachim* 5:2.

[2] This argument is based on the assumption that what was important was the mood among the ruling circles rather than the mood of the man on the street, and that this is what Rachav reported to the spies.

[3] As is evident from Scripture, the spies' arrival in the city was immediately known to the authorities and thus the spies were totally dependent upon Rachav to find them an escape route from the city.

[4] It might be suggested that the roof served as the private area of her residence, and her bringing the spies up to the roof expressed the fact that her relationship to them was not one of prostitute-client, but rather a personal I-you relationship. This suggestion, though speculative and unproven, also explains how it was that the king's agents did not succeed in finding the spies in Rachav's house. Would they not have searched for them in every possible place? It would seem that it was not the hiding place on the roof in itself that fooled them, but that they didn't search in her private living quarters, convinced as they were that she would relate to them as clients, rather than as people. Thus, the plain explanation that accounts for the spies' escape and the human drama that bestows existential meaning to the hiding place fit together in a most persuasive manner.

[5] "Saying, May I be forgiven in reward for the rope, the window, and the flax – It is taught in the *Mekhilta*: She said: Master of the Universe, I sinned with three things, and with three things may I be pardoned - with the rope, the flax and the window. For the fornicators would climb up to her with the ropes via the window and they would go down [with them] and she would hide them in the stalks of flax. With those very same three things, she merited to save the spies" (Rashi).