

Rahab: Woman of the Night or Woman of Valor?

Parshat Shelah Lecha

Numbers 13:1 – 15:41 /Joshua 2:1 - 24



*Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt
in memory of their grandson, Oren Jacob Brandt-Rauf
“He was the perfect child.”*

Joshua quietly summoned two men into his tent. He instructed them to go to Jericho and to make an assessment of Israel’s ability to defeat the well fortified city in battle. Joshua must have remembered an earlier incident in which he was one of twelve spies singled out by Moses to spy out the land of Canaan. That mission ended in disaster. Despite the optimistic assessment that he and Caleb brought the nation, the people chose to follow the other spies who convinced the people that they were not strong enough to conquer the land. Maybe that is why he did not tell the people that he was sending spies into Jericho. The juxtaposition of these two stories as the scriptural readings for this Shabbat challenges us to compare them. Why does one end in failure and the other in success?

It is through the assistance of a kindly woman named Rahab that the mission to Jericho succeeds. She is sometimes described as an innkeeper though a literal translation of the text might lead us to a more surprising conclusion. When the king of Jericho comes looking for the Israelite spies, Rahab hides them. She then asks the spies to deal kindly with her and her family when the conquest begins. In the post biblical tradition, Rahab is remembered as a righteous gentile who risks her life to save the Israelites both out of conviction and fear.

Joshua 2:1, 9, 11

Joshua the son of Nun secretly sent two spies from Shittim, saying, “Go reconnoiter the region of Jericho.” So they set out and they came to the house of a prostitute named Rahab and lodged there. She said to the men, “I know that the Lord has given the country to you, because dread of you has fallen upon us and all the inhabitants of the land are quaking before you....when we learned about it, we lost heart, and no man had any more spirit left because of you; for the Lord your God is the only God in heaven above and on the earth below....”

Rashi Joshua 2:1

Zonah: Targum Yonatan, the Aramaic translation of the Bible, translates this word as an innkeeper, or one who sells all types of food. (The word *Zonah* is said to come from the same root as the word *Mezonot*, food)

Radak, Rabbi David Kimchi

It can be understood literally as a prostitute, or it can be understood as one who sells *mezonot*, food as in the *Targum Yonatan – pundakit*. The truth is Yonatan also understands this expression as a prostitute. The prostitute is like an inn which makes itself available to everyone.

Midrash Hagadol Bereshit, Chaye Sara, 23:1

There are the twenty two righteous women who Solomon praised in Eshet Chayil (Proverbs 31) “A woman of valor who can find.* ... “She is not afraid of the snow for her household; for her household is clothed in scarlet.” This is a reference to Rahab who hid the spies. Who were they? Rabbi Yosi said: they were Caleb and Pinchas. And there are those who say they were (the twins), Peretz and Zerah**. When she asked a sign (that they would keep their promise), Zerah said, “You shall place this scarlet thread in the window from which you let us down. This is the thread they tied around my hand when I came forth from my mother’s womb... (Because of her deeds, Rahab) was worthy of giving birth to ten priests. They are Hilkiyah, Jeremiah, Siryah, Baruch, Niriah, Chanamel, Shalom, Buzi and Ezekiel. Some add, Hulda the prophetess. ***

*This passage in Midrash Hagadol interprets each verse of Eshet Hayil as referring to a different woman of valor.

**Peretz and Zerah were the twin offspring of Judah and Tamar. Zerah was supposed to be born first – his hand

*came forth from the womb but his brother emerged from the womb before him. See Genesis Ch 38. Caleb was one of the original spies and Pinchas was the zealous grandson of Aaron the High Priest. ***I leave it to the reader to find out who all these people are. What is relevant is that they were all important personalities in Jewish history.*

Midrash Bemidbar Rabbah 16:1

And they went, and came into the house of a harlot whose name was Rahab and lay there.” She rose and welcomed them. The king of Jericho became aware of their presence and heard that they had come to search out the land... When the (he) came to seek them, what did Rahab do? She took them away to hide them. Pinchas said to her: ‘I am a priest and priests are compared to angels’; as it says, For the priest's lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth; for he is the angel of the Lord hosts (Mal. 2:7), and an angel, if he wishes, can be visible, and if he wishes he can be invisible.... Pinchas, then, said to Rahab: ‘I am a priest and do not need to be hidden. Hide Caleb, my companion. I will stand before them and they will not see me. ‘She did so; as may be inferred from the verse, “And the woman took the two men, and she hid *him*” (Josh. 2:4): not ‘she hid them’, but ‘she hid him’ is written.

The Five Books of Miriam: A Woman’s Commentary on the Torah Page 216

By Ellen Frankel

Our daughters ask: Why does the Torah choose this foreign woman – a prostitute no less – as heroine of this tale?

The Rabbis answer: We choose this story as the traditional Haftorah for this Parsha because of its obvious connection to the story of the twelve of the twelve spies, but we also did so because we consider Rahab a model of the righteous convert. For although she began life as an idolater, she later embraced belief in one God as it is written: “For YHVH Your God is the only God in Heaven above and on earth below.” And though she began as a prostitute she later became Joshua’s wife. And although she began as an enemy of Israel she is the ancestor of many of Israel’s kings and prophets, including Huldah.

Leah the Namer adds: Her very name tells her story for rahav means wide, and that is how she greets the new conquerors of her land. She opens wide her house.

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By Ellen Frankel

Esther the hidden one reveals: Rahab is Israel’s shadow, a mirror of Jewish history. For just as the Israelites escaped the Angel of death by smearing blood on their door posts, so Rahab dooms her people with a crimson cord (2:18). And just as the Israelites leave Mitzraim (Egypt), “a narrow place,” so they come at last to merhav, a wide place of freedom. And just as the ten spies who first scout the land regard themselves as grasshoppers next to the giants of Canaan, so Rahab reports her own people quake before the approaching Israelites.

Questions to Consider

1. Rashi and the Radak disagree about the meaning of the word Zonah. How does each commentator understand this word and on what basis do they arrive at their conclusions? Why does Rashi reject what appears to be the more plain sense meaning of the word Zonah? (Every Hebrew speaker knows this word.) How does the Radak reconcile Rashi and Yonatan’s interpretation of this expression with the plain sense meaning of the word?
2. Why would the spies go to a house of ill repute while reconnoitering in the region of Jericho? How might Rahab’s position as a prostitute have been helpful to the spies and also fertile ground for creating a partnership? This is the only thing we are told about the spies’ visit to Jericho? Why aren’t we told more about what happened while they were there?
3. Why do you think the Bible chooses to tell the reader that Rahab was a prostitute (after all, the bible narrator could have left this out)? What does this add to the biblical narrative? Is there anything in the text to make us assume that being a prostitute was a shameful profession in biblical times?

4. The interpretation of Eshet Hayil, Woman of Valor, in Midrash Hagadol uses one particular verse as a reference to Rahab: “She is not afraid of the snow for her household; for her household is clothed in scarlet.” Is there anything about this verse that could be understood as a reference to the events that took place in Jericho?
 5. Midrash Hagadol offers two different theories about who the spies were. The Bible never mentions their names. Why do you think the Bible chose to remain silent on this question? How does the silence of the Bible on the names of the spies create a different scenario from the story of the twelve spies in the Book of Numbers?
 6. God commands Joshua and the people to destroy the city of Jericho. The narrator never suggests that there were to be any exceptions. How can we reconcile this fact with the decision to “make a deal” with Rahab?
 7. According to Frankel, how is Rahab an interesting foil to the story of the conquest of the land and the Exodus from Egypt? How does she offer a contrast with earlier and later events in Jewish history? Do you think Rahab became a righteous convert? Why or why not? Was she a friend of the Jewish people or simply an opportunist? Compare Rahab with some of the righteous gentiles during the Holocaust.
 8. What do you think Frankel means when she describes Rahab as “Israel’s shadow, a mirror of Jewish history?”
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and a desire to grow a Jewish soul.”*