YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Understanding the haftarot**

**By Harav Yaakov Medan**

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Dedicated in honor of the marriage of our son,   
Aharon (YHE '19) to Ariella Berman   
by Rav Yitzchak and Stefanie Etshalom

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**The Haftara for Parashat Shelach**

**Yehoshua's Spies**

Yehoshua son of Nun had sent two men as spies from Shitim, in secret: "Go forth and survey the land and the region of Yericho." So the men had set out, arriving at the house of a harlot named Rachav, where they lay down for the night. And word reached the king of Yericho: "Listen, people have come here tonight – Israelites – to probe the land." The king of Yericho sent word to Rachav: "Bring out those men who came to you, who arrived at your house, for they have come to probe the land." Now, the woman had taken the two men and hidden them, and she replied, "Yes, men came to me, but I did not know where they were from. Just as the gate was being closed at nightfall, the men left, and I do not know where they went. Go after them quickly, for you can overtake them." She had taken the spies up to the roof and hidden them amongst the stalks of flax she had laid out on the roof. The king's men ran after them toward the Jordan route, over the river fords; and the moment the pursuers left, the gate was closed behind them. They were not yet asleep when she went up to them on the roof. "I know that the Lord has given you the land," she said to the men, "and that dread of you has fallen upon us; for all the inhabitants of the land quake before you. For we have heard that the Lord dried up the waters of the Sea of Reeds before you when you left Egypt, and we have heard what you did to the two Amorite kings across the Jordan – how you utterly destroyed Sichon and Og. We heard it and our hearts dissolved; no one has the spirit to face you, for the Lord your God is God of heaven above and earth below. Now, please swear to me by the Lord – for I have shown you loyalty – that you, too, will be loyal to my father's house. Give me a true sign that you will spare my father and mother and my brothers and sisters and all that is theirs. Please, save our souls from death!" The men replied to her, "We pledge to die in your place, if you speak no word of this, and when the Lord gives us the land, we will show you true loyalty." She let them down by a rope through the window, for her house was built into the city wall; she lived inside the wall. "Flee toward the hills," she said to them, "lest the pursuers run into you. Hide there for three days until the pursuers have returned; only then be on your way." They said to her, "We will be free of this oath you have sworn us to unless, when we come back to the land, you tie this scarlet thread in the window you let us down from. Bring your father, your mother, your siblings, and all your father's household into your home. If anyone ventures outside the doors of your house, his blood will be upon his own head – we will be free of blame – while if a hand is laid on anyone who remains in the house with you, his blood shall be upon ours. But if you speak a word of this, we shall be free of the oath we swore to you." "As you say, so be it," she said, and she sent them away. They left, and she tied the scarlet thread in the window. They set out and arrived at the hills. They stayed there for three days until the pursuers turned back, for the pursuers had searched the entire route but failed to find them. The two men then went back, descended the hills, and crossed over. They came to Yehoshua son of Nun and reported all that had befallen them. "The Lord has delivered the whole land into our hands," they said to Yehoshua, "and what is more, all the people of the land quake before us." (*Yehoshua* 2:1-24)[[1]](#footnote-1)

**I. The Connection Between the *Haftara* and the *Parasha***

In addition to the first word in the *haftara*, which mentions the name of the *parasha*, the *haftara* deals with the spies (*meraglim*)that Yehoshua sent to the land, paralleling the *tarim* ("scouts"; in our *parasha* they are not called *meraglim*) sent by Moshe. Yehoshua's spies returned to him with a message of trust in God, in anticipation of the war of conquest of the land – in contrast to most of Moshe's scouts, who returned with a message of not being able to conquer the land.

There are also linguistic similarities between the two accounts. Yehoshua's spies were sent, in the words of the king of Yericho, to "probe" (*lachpor*)the land. This is also how the mission of Moshe's scouts is defined in the book of *Devarim* (1:22): "And you said, ‘Let us send men ahead of us to explore (*ve-yachperu*)the land." Further, Moshe tries to convince the people not to listen to the scouts' voice of despair, proclaiming: "The Lord your God, who is going before you, He will fight for you, just as He did for you in Egypt before your eyes" (*Devarim* 1:30); in the *haftara*, Rachav says similar things to the spies, based on what happened at the Sea of Reeds.

**II. Background**

Chapter 1 of *Sefer Yehoshua* records God's words to Yehoshua immediately after the death of Moshe. According to *Chazal*’s calculations, Yehoshua commanded the people, on the plains of Moav opposite Yericho, to prepare for the journey across the Yarden immediately upon completion of the thirty-day mourning period for Moshe: Moshe died on the 7th of Adar, and on the 7th of Nisan, Yehoshua commanded the people to prepare themselves food and instructed the tribes of Gad and Reuven and the half-tribe of Menashe in their role as the leading force. It stands to reason that the spies were sent out already during the period of Moshe's mourning. The purpose of their mission was to find the best way to enter Yericho, the first city they would encounter after crossing the Yarden, perhaps through a hidden entrance leading to its source of water. From there they would continue on a hidden path, mostly underground, into the city. Because of the search for an underground path into the city, the mission is called one of "digging" (*lachpor*).

Scripture reveals nothing about the identity of the spies, but they appear to be righteous, God-fearing people. *Chazal* identified them as Pinchas and Kalev:

"Yehoshua son of Nun had sent two men as spies from Shitim." Who were they? They were Pinchas and Kalev, who went and risked their lives and succeeded in their mission. (*Bamidbar Rabba* 16)

There is some difficulty with this identification, for the spies are referred to later as "the young spies" (6:23). Let us remember that at the time of his entry into the land, Kalev was seventy-eight. Pinchas, as well, who was a leader and the priest appointed for war (who wears the High Priest's garments) at the time of the war against Midyan, was apparently not a young man.

**III. Was the spy mission in Yericho successful?**

This question might seem puzzling, since the story speaks for itself and indicates, as *Chazal* state explicitly in the *midrash* cited above, that the spies “succeeded in their mission.” But is that true? In fact, we can identify a number of problematic elements of the story, beginning with the very first verse:

Yehoshua son of Nun had sent two men as spies from Shitim, in secret: "Go forth and survey the land and the region of Yericho." So the men had set out, arriving at the house of a harlot named Rachav, where they lay down for the night. (2:1)

None of us would suspect Pinchas and Kalev of any sexual impropriety. But the fact that Scripture chooses to describe their having spent the night in the house of a harlot, which appears indecent, requires explanation.

There also seems to have been an intelligence failure on the part of Yehoshua and his agents, for the "counter-espionage" of the king of Yericho immediately exposed the spies' mission. Because of this exposure, the spies could not complete their mission; they failed to uncover the secret way into the city, and they were forced to flee for their lives. It can therefore be argued that their mission failed.

Furthermore, the spies saved their lives only in exchange for a promise to Rachav, a Canaanite harlot, to save her entire family!

So the young spies went and rescued Rachav, her father, her mother, her siblings, and all that was hers; they rescued her entire family and set them down outside the Israelite camp. (*Yehoshua* 6:23)

How many Canaanites were "her entire family"? Wasn't this a heavy price to pay, to bring so many Canaanites into the camp of Israel?![[2]](#footnote-2)

It is also odd that the *haftara* conveys an impression that the spies learned from Rachav that God dried up the waters of the Sea of Reeds before Israel and delivered into their hands the two Amorite kings, Sichon and Og. But the people's fear of the Israelites following the drying up of the waters was already mentioned in the Song of the Sea! The *haftara* also seems to imply that the spies learned from Rachav that the Israelite God “is God of heaven above and earth below.” Is there not a note of criticism here, that the spies learned this from Rachav rather than in the Israelite camp, and that this is the information they brought back to Yehoshua?

And furthermore, the spies immediately entered the house of Rachav the harlot, which was in the wall, and they left the city from there by way of a rope. Did this limited experience in the city make conquest easier for Yehoshua's army? The walls of Yericho fell before the Israelites' entry into the city, and they entered it from every possible direction. The only place that was blocked for them to enter was the part of the wall that included Rachav's house, on the "route" of the spies, because this part of the wall did not fall. Is not Scripture hinting to us here that the mission was not carried out in the proper place?

**IV. The Mistake in the Sending of the Spies**

We can discuss at length the need to send scouts to get a feel of the land, as the tribal princes were sent in our *parasha*.[[3]](#footnote-3) There seems to be no doubt about the necessity of sending spies for the military task of uncovering the hidden entrances of a city to be conquered. This is also what Moshe did:

And Moshe sent spies to Yazer. And Israel captured its surrounding settlements. (*Bamidbar* 21:32)

Rabbeinu Bachya understood the sending of the spies in our *parasha* as such a military mission, undertaken at God's command:

"The horse is prepared for the day of battle; but victory comes from God" (*Mishlei* 21:31). In this verse, King Shlomo warns everybody to do whatever is in his power by using natural means to achieve his success. Beyond that, he must leave things to God. A miracle occurs only when all the natural means have been exhausted and have proven to be inadequate. Man was created in such a way that he can cope with most problems by using natural means… One who wishes to go out to war against his enemies must strive to equip himself with the weapons, horses, and chariots needed for battle. For if he does not make adequate preparations and relies on a miracle, he will be handed over to his enemies… After one does everything in his power and makes all the natural preparations, he should not trust that he will reach the desired end because of these preparations, but only because of God… Therefore, the Torah commands Israel to make these preparations when they go out to war against their enemies, and that they set up ambushes and send out spies to their enemies' cities… For the Torah never relies on a miracle… This is the very reason for the spies sent by Moshe in the wilderness of Paran, that God commanded to do so. (Rabbeinu Bachya, *Bamidbar* 13:2)

Why, then, would we look for criticism of Yehoshua's sending spies to Yericho?

It is possible that the answer lies in the continuation of the story of the conquest of Yericho:

When Yehoshua was near Yericho, he looked up and suddenly saw a man standing opposite him, drawn sword in hand. Yehoshua approached him and asked, "Are you for us or for our enemies?" He said, "No, for I am the commander of the Lord’s hosts. Now I have come!" Yehoshua flung his face to the ground and prostrated himself, asking him, "What does my lord bid his servant?" The commander of the Lord's hosts said to Yehoshua, "Remove the shoes from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy." And Yehoshua did so. (*Yehoshua* 5:13-15)

Yehoshua, as the commander of his army, is well prepared for the battle to conquer Yericho, and when he sees another commander standing before him, he goes out to him wearing his military boots and probably his sword as well, ready to face the enemy. But the commander at the gate of the city introduces himself as the commander of God's hosts, and demands of Yehoshua that he remove his shoes. What this means is that the battle of Yericho, the first city to be conquered, will be conducted by God through His army of angels, not the army of Israel. Yehoshua is asked to remove his military boots and is told that the city will not be delivered into his hands, but into the hands of the commander of God's hosts. *Chazal* "fault" Yehoshua for causing the people to neglect their Torah studies in order to prepare for war:

"When Yehoshua was near Yericho, he looked up and suddenly saw a man standing opposite him."… He said to him: This evening you neglected the regular afternoon sacrifice, and now you have neglected the study of the Torah… Straightaway, “Yehoshua tarried that night… in the midst of the valley [*ha-emek*]” (8:9-13), and Rabbi Yochanan said: This shows that he tarried in the depths [*umka*] of Halakha. (*Megilla* 3a-b)

The Radak (*Yehoshua* 5:14) raises an objection against this *midrash*:

This midrashic exposition is difficult, because the time of war is not a time for Torah study.

But it seems that this is what the Sages are teaching us – that it was in fact not a time of war, but a time for Torah study. The war was conducted by God and His angels, and it was decided by the miraculous fall of the walls of Yericho. Thus, there was no need for military espionage or a hidden place to penetrate the city. However, Yehoshua did not yet have the tools to know this when he sent the spies.

**V. Notes Regarding Rachav**

1. The entry of two respectable men into the house of a harlot was unacceptable to Rashi, and so he explained the verse based on the Targum:

"A harlot [*isha zona*]" – Yonatan translated this as "*pundekita*," a woman who sells various kinds of food [*mezonot*].

The Radak drew a connection between the Targum and the plain meaning of the word *zona*: A woman who maintains a Canaanite lodging place at the gate of a city, where people come to eat and drink, often also provides them with sexual services. A place where there is wine drinking and prostitution is a place where many secrets, including military secrets, are revealed. The spies went there to gather information about the city.

2. We saw above (in note 2) what *Chazal* say about the great people who descended from Rachav and Yehoshua. The Gemara makes a point of telling us that Yehoshua married her after she converted:

She converted and Yehoshua married her. (*Megilla* 14b)

It seems that this *midrash* alludes to a comparison between Rachav and Yitro, the Midyanite priest:

Rabbi Eliezer said: He [Yitro] heard about the parting of the sea and came, as it is stated: "When all the Amorite kings heard." And so too Rachav the harlot said to Yehoshua's agents: "For we have heard that the Lord dried up the waters of the Sea of Reeds." (*Zevachim* 116a)

Both Yitro in his *parasha* and Rachav in our *haftara* praised God for His might and for the good things that He did for Israel. Moshe married into Yitro's family, and it is possible that *Chazal* learned from this about his disciple Yehoshua, that he married Rachav.

We cannot ignore the words of *Chazal* in praise of converts coming from foreign, and even disqualified, nations, who recognize God and His kindness to the people of Israel, and come to adhere to Him and His people.[[4]](#footnote-4)

3. There are many similar details in the story of Rachav and the spies and the account of David's spies when he was on his way to cross the Yarden. The spies were Yonatan son of Evyatar and Achimaatz son of Tzadok, who went to bring information about Avshalom's decision to pursue David. These spies were discovered by Avshalom, and Avshalom sent his men to capture them when they arrived in Bachurim, northeast of Yerushalayim. A woman (perhaps Michal, the daughter of Shaul?) rescued them in a manner similar to the way that Rachav rescued Yehoshua's spies. It is related as follows:

But when a boy saw them and informed Avshalom, the two of them left in a hurry. They came to the house of a man in Bachurim who had a well in his courtyard, and they climbed down inside it. The man's wife then took a cloth, stretched it over the mouth of the well, and spread groats over it, so nothing was revealed. Avshalom's officials came to the woman's house and said, "Where are Achimaatz and Yehonatan?" "They have crossed over the river fords," the woman said to them. They searched but found nothing, and they went back to Jerusalem. (II *Shmuel* 17:18-21)

4. There is room to ask whether it was within the spies' authority to guarantee the lives of Rachav and her family, considering that it was God's will to destroy the Canaanites:

For the Lord determined that their enemies' hearts would be obdurate when waging war against Israel, so that Israel might destroy them without mercy – so that they might annihilate them as the Lord had commanded Moshe. (*Yehoshua* 11:20)

The fact that Rachav's house was in the wall of the city means that her house would have collapsed when the wall fell, but the house survived the fall of the wall. This indicates that God supported the spies’ oath to rescue Rachav. From this as well there is much for us to learn.

5. According to the calculation that emerges from the verses, Yericho was captured on Pesach. The scarlet thread in Rachav's window is somewhat reminiscent of the blood on the doors of the Israelites in Egypt, that when God saw it, He protected the house and the calamity passed over it. This is also what happened to the house of Rachav.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Unless otherwise specified, all references to Biblical books are to the book of *Yehoshua.* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. a. Indeed, the Midrash (*Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* 13) criticizes the rescue of all the members of Rachav's Canaanite family: "Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachman expounded: 'But if you do not drive the inhabitants out of the land before you’ (*Bamidbar* 33:55). God said to Israel: I said to you: 'The Hittites and Amorites… you must utterly destroy' (*Devarim* 20:17), but you did not do so. 'But the harlot Rachav, her father's household, and all that was hers were spared by Yehoshua' (*Yehoshua* 6:25). Surely Yirmeya came from the descendants of Rachav the harlot, and he does for you matters of 'barbs in your eyes and thorns in your sides' (*Bamidbar* 33:55)."

   According to this, we learn that Yirmeyahu was a descendant of Rachav. The Gemara (*Megilla* 14b) expands on the descendants of Rachav: "Eight prophets who were also priests were descended from Rachav the harlot, namely, Neriya, Barukh, Seraya, Mahseya, Yirmeya, Chilkiya, Chanamel, and Shalum. Rabbi Yehuda said: Chulda the prophetess was also one of the descendants of Rachav the harlot."  
   b. In the Jerusalem Talmud (*Berakhot* 4:4), Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai estimates that Rachav rescued about two hundred Canaanites of her family. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I dealt with this matter in detail in my book *Ki Karov Eilekha* on *Bamidbar* (pp. 221-241). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. It also seems to me that we can't ignore the comparison between the actions of Yitro and Rachav and the very different phenomenon of young German women who in their day wished to adhere to the people of Israel precisely because of the severe shock that they experienced from what their people did to the Jews during the Holocaust. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)