

# Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Shelach

- Gidon Rothstein

Haftarah No. 4: Parshat Shelach, Joshua 2:1-24

## **Ignore Those Spies, They're Not the Real Story**

Despite the temptation to see our haftarah as merely a story of spies who contrast with the ones in the Torah reading by doing their job correctly and faithfully, the haftarah foregrounds Rahab so much that we would be remiss if we did not examine her role here.

The spies, whom tradition identifies as Caleb and Pinchas (and who we would therefore assume are competent at the main task of spies, not being noticed), are detected almost as soon as they arrive in the city and then appear to be at Rahab's mercy--it is she who saves them from the king's men, tells them the information they need to bring back to Joshua, gives them their escape route, and tells them how long to stay hidden before returning to the main camp of the Jewish people.

Explaining the *haftarah* fully, then, must include some understanding of why the prophet stresses her role so much. It seems relevant to note that the prophet also mentions her profession, a "*zonah*," usually translated as prostitute. Rashi translates the word as innkeeper, even though he assumes she was also a prostitute. Seeing her as an innkeeper explains why the spies would have gone to her, but I think it also explains her centrality to the story.

## **The Lower the Person, the More Impressive the Faith**

Rahab will serve as an example of faith so pure that it overcomes everything about her background, turning her into a model of service of God. The lower she starts out, the more impressive the turnaround her faith brings. A woman with a fine livelihood who still turns to prostitution is lower, morally, than an ordinary prostitute. The Talmud in Megillah also details her proficiency at this latter profession, lowering our expectations of Rahab further. She seems, when we meet her, to be so caught up in vice as to be irredeemable.

Her determined and complete turn from that life captures our attention. In Scripture as a whole, the term "*zonah*" signifies faithlessness, unwillingness or inability to commit to a relationship, so the contrast between her description and her actions not only surprises us, it draws attention to that theme as important to the haftarah as a whole. Rahab learns the lesson of Sihon and Og's loss, in sharp contrast to the king and the rest of the inhabitants. She protects the spies, makes a pact to which she adheres rigorously, and insures their safe return, so the message can get back to the rest of the Jewish people.

## **The Purple String and Its Significance**

To my mind, this also explains the end of the story, where Rahab is lowering the spies from her window. They decide to tell her about the sign of the purple string, and do so in a way almost calculated to frighten her, starting their statement with "We are free of the oath you made us take. Unless..."

Why do it that way, I have often wondered, and why demand it at all. Seeing Rahab's faith as a linchpin of the story offers a part of an answer, that the spies were putting her to a final test. By leading off that way, they could see how much she trusted them, and by having her put a purple string in her window, she would already be signaling, to all who paid attention, her belief that the Jews would win this war.

### **This Time, It's About Showing God's Power**

Understanding Rahab as a model of finding faith in God shows how this spies' mission contrasts with the original one. Those earlier spies took action on their own, and were preparing for a natural process of wars of conquest (as Nachmanides notes when he defends the idea of sending spies; to him, the sin lay in how they executed their mission).

The spies of Joshua's time take a more passive approach, relying on outside forces (read: God and agents thereof). Where the first plan of Conquest might have been for the people to take matters into their own hands, to break somewhat free of the the God Who had done all else for them—taking them out of Egypt, splitting the Sea, appearing at Sinai. The failure of the first spies altered reality, changing at least the first stages of the Conquest to one where the Jews were expected to completely rely on God.

Why the shift? Perhaps because of the death of the generation that had seen the miracles of the Exodus. The victories over Sihon and Og were certainly impressive, but the Torah gives us no reason to assume they were supernatural. Since part of the point of this stretch of Jewish history was to make God's power known to the world, the gap between the Exodus and the Conquest may have led to a need to have the Conquest, at least at the beginning, again demonstrate the possibility of Divine and supernatural intervention in history.

### **Back to Rahab**

The centrality of faith might also explain why we care so much about Rahab. Megillah 14b assumes that Hulda was a descendant of Rahab because the later prophetess uses the word "*tikvah*," the word used here for the purple string. The Talmud goes on to claim that 8 prophets, all priests (who are required to maintain the highest level of sexual purity) descended from Rahab, and that Joshua and Rahab married, parenting the girl who became Hulda's ancestor.

The connection of Rahab to prophecy and priesthood seems part of tradition's recognition that her faith transformed her from a woman sunk in the most physical and faithless of pursuits, ordinarily also a barrier to being able to recognize God or His Presence in the world. Having changed, she is the one who sees God in the events around her, and acts to further that Presence.

Our story thus contrasts to the Torah reading both in how the Jews and Rahab experience it. Whereas the original spies were unable to muster enough faith to believe that they could conquer Israel with God's help, Rahab was able to understand how to act based only on the reports of much lesser miracles. She serves as a heroine not just for the haftarah but for much of Jewish history because her abilities and actions were in exact counterbalance to that earlier nadir.

Shabbat Shalom