

Rahav Visited and Revisited

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THE VIVID RAHAV INCIDENT IN THE BOOK OF JOSHUA

is one of the most straightforward yet enigmatic stories in the Tanakh. As told in chapter 2, the two spies whom Joshua sent across the Jordan to reconnoiter Jericho before the crossing into Canaan hide at the house of Rahav, a *zonah*, that is, a prostitute, though some pious commentators call her an innkeeper. Protecting them from discovery by the king's officers, she allies with them in exchange for protection for herself and her family when the siege succeeds, because of which, the narrator oddly asserts, Rahav "dwells in Israel to this day" (*va-yeishev...ad hayom ha-zeh*, 6:25).

A tiny short story, hardly more than a vignette, it is illuminated by the dramatic intensity through which its one female character emerges as a powerful shaper of events. The Israelite spies, notwithstanding their momentous mission, are merely anonymous pawns; the king of Jericho, a cipher. Rahav herself determines what happens; remarkably, in this narrative she alone bears a name and she is one of the relatively few women who speak in the entire Tanakh.

Why is this episode so vividly realized?

The incident is filled with details seeming to suggest either a precisely recorded but incomplete historical account or else the craft of a storyteller — to quote from W.S. Gilbert in *The Mikado*, providing "an air of verisimilitude to an otherwise bald and unconvincing narration." The spies must be hidden, so we are told they are; yet we are also told that they are hidden by Rahav *on the roof*, specifically under some *flax*, and furthermore that it is flax that *she had laid out there*, particulars that serve no apparent dramatic or homiletic purpose. Her rescue and that of her family during the siege depends not merely on the spies remembering where she lives but on her hanging out a recognizable symbol, a piece of red cord, indeed not any piece but "*this cord*,"

a peculiarly specific phrase made more peculiar because we do not know whether it is supposed to signify something of Rahav's or something belonging to the Israelites.

History is no help. Archeologists have not even found any evidence of walls around Jericho dating from the appropriate period, nor do we know how to interpret the cultural situation of a zonah at that time and place. In the absence of information, we are thrown back on speculation. Maybe within the text we can discern a transformed war story, a version of one of those amusing, racy anecdotes men might recount years later, but with its potential for self-mocking humor obliterated by a pious patriotic redactor. Sent to spy out the land that God has promised, preparatory to the daring and dangerous invasion on which the future of their entire people depends, the two Israelite men end up seemingly at once, like soldiers of all places and times, with a prostitute! Not a word is said about what transpires there except the sober information that the men are given food, drink, and shelter for the night by someone seeming to fit a familiar type, "the whore with a heart of gold." She saves their lives and in a sense turns the tables on them when she extracts from them a safe conduct pass not just for herself but for her entire extended family.

The redactor who shaped this tale into a biblical account garbs Rahav's risky, generous gamble in the language of earnest and profound faith, indeed, phrasing her faith in the covenantal promise of Y-H-W-H common to Joshua 2: 11 and Deuteronomy 4:39, "for Y-H-W-H your God is God in the heaven above and on the earth below." Told in a different tone, the story at that point could invite a cascade of appreciative laughter for her ingenious and foresighted manipulations, amusement mixed with relief that her daring appraisal of the game put Rahav on the Israelite side. Cornered by *her*, even more than by the royal guards, what would the two over-matched spies have made of this woman?

We'd been in the wilderness — well, all of our lives! So Joshua sent us to scout out around Jericho, take a look at the terrain and defenses, see what the mood was like. He picked the two of us because he figured we knew how to keep our mouths shut. We had plenty of experience reconnoitering, moving fast, laying low, quiet on our feet, and we liked being independent. Joshua told us, Go secretly. Secrecy was important for this one. Listen: that was not only because of the Canaanites. Once before, when Moses sent Joshua himself and Caleb to scout out Canaan with the

ten other spies, there was a real blow-up when they all reported back. Two against ten it was, for going on into Canaan. Damn near a full scale rebellion against Moses. This time Joshua wasn't taking any chances. We were supposed to take a quiet look around, come back, and report to him and nobody else.

So, since Joshua told us to scout the land and Jericho, we figured we might as well treat ourselves with some time in the city. After all, we got a pretty good sense of what the countryside was like and the ford of the Jordan, on our way, and as I said, we'd been out in the wilderness for a long time. We hid outside the town, sizing up the walls and fortifications, until we could slip into Jericho with a bunch of traders. We were cobblers. Really, we were. Nothing to it. Out there, you had to learn to do what you needed, and two things everybody needed were tents and footwear. In the city, we could wander around with our tools and supplies, set ourselves down in a likely spot, and stitch or weave. We listened, looked, and didn't have to say much. Not to mention that we earned a nice little pile of coins.

Where would you go then? An inn? Not for long. Too much talk about travels and roads, too many people savvy about trade routes and accents; too hard to explain a couple of guys showing up from nowhere, on foot, travelling light. Plus, I have to tell you, we had something else in mind. After all, aside from the women we'd captured along the way, it was always the same women to look at. Huh! Not that we saw so many beauties in Jericho, let me tell you, at least not where we were. But we did stop at a beer-house not so far from the city gate, along the wall, run by this woman. The way she flirted and joked, we knew that she making herself available. We maybe could have waited until it was darker and made sure that nobody would see us going there before we went in, but it was just as dangerous to hang around in public trying to avoid the guards, and anyway, we were both — I shouldn't say eager, I don't think we were, really — more like, curious. And we figured we had earned it for the risk we were taking. A battle was one thing. But those Canaanites, if they'd caught us...it would not have been a pleasant way to die.

So, she was all right. You know. I mean, better than "all right." And she kept herself nice. Must have done okay for herself, working solo in a good location. A good location for her business, that was. It wasn't such a terrific neighborhood but it was only one street away from the main road to the market. From the bedroom she had what most people probably thought was a terrific view of the hills, even though I was sick of them myself.

Good thing we got there when we did. A couple of weeks later Joshua had all the men circumcised before the invasion. Whoo, what a deal that was! Nobody could, you know, function for...well, anyway — Prostitutes have to be pretty savvy about figuring out guys. I don't know whether she got it from the way we talked or what we wore, or some kind of sixth sense that women have, but she put it together — who we were, what was going to happen. She said, "If you were spotted coming here, the guards will be looking for you." Sure enough, she hears them trotting down the street and hustles us up to the roof, so there we are, under this pile of drying whatever...flax, I think it was, trying not to move, hardly breathing, even though my heart was going bumpa-bumpa so that I thought you could hear it across the Jordan. And you know how piles of straw and all that stuff rustle and slip like a rockslide if you even twitch. We listened and listened, waiting for them to come. But it was the woman, alone.

"They're gone. I sent them to look for you by the river, so you should head for the mountains until they get back. Now — I hid you, but you have to promise to take care of me before the attack starts. Me and my family. My parents and my brothers and sisters, too — the whole family." Sure, we promised, we'll look out for you.

Then she sort of snarls at us, "No!" and does this incredible thing. She grabs each of us by the wrist, pulling us practically right up to her face. We can see her eyes nailing us, and her hands are strong as iron. Down in her room, her breath was soft and warm. Up here, now, it was like the heat of an animal three inches away.

"Swear!"

Swear? You'd figure, what the hell is a promise to a whore, right?

"Swear! Swear to me!"

So what could we do?

Within the biblical account do we not also discern a woman's story edited by a man who has superimposed on this human tale of private initiative and audacity the public agenda of nationhood and monotheism? The redactor's success in doing that can be measured by Rahav's stature in rabbinic midrashim. In them, a woman who on the basis of the plot alone might be depicted more persuasively as a pragmatic opportunist is often raised to heroic status and sanctified as a hero of Israel. Her Deuteronomistic prophetic vision of the Israelite triumph allows her to become (by grace of rabbinic tradition) one of the four

greatest beauties of the world, a proselyte, then Joshua's wife, and eventually the ancestress of eight prophets and priests, including Jeremiah and Huldah. Yet against this, a countercurrent in the same rabbinic tradition registers loathing, even fear. Powerful as she is, she cannot be a *mere* whore but must be a prodigious one, corrupt even at a stage of a normal child's innocence, a whore from the age of ten, "had" by every ruler, a woman whose name alone arouses lust (BT Megillah 15a and Ta'anit 5b).

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her own advantage the men who have come to outwit
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Rahav is a boundary-crosser, as both prostitute and as rebel against her people and her city-state. It might seem more appropriate to put her in other biblical company: that of Shifrah, Puah, and Esther, for example, women who by ingenuity, courage, and daring become saving figures of resistance and political independence. This group could show how to imagine a Rahav as she might emerge through women's storytelling. Unarmed, she proves superior in courage and daring to the soldiers whose lives she spares and secures. They are the experienced warriors, the wilderness scouts, the resourceful spies; but she, the urban woman whose livelihood is her bed, has to tell them in detail how to escape. In almost picaresque fashion, she outwits and uses for her own advantage the men who have come to outwit and use her, at least for information if not for sex. She takes control of the action, and she sets the terms of their pledge, virtually forging a covenant with them, predicating the future in terms suggestive of both sage and prophet.

Perceiving this story as a women's narrative also underscores the concept of *hesed* (loving kindness) that Rahav explicitly expresses; as she reminds the spies when they emerge from hiding, she has treated *them* with *hesed*. If this is to some extent a story of *hesed*, that quality also places Rahav in the company of Ruth, choosing against her own homeland and people but not against family. For Rahav, family solidarity is also a form of *hesed*. Facing the representatives of an evolving national force, she speaks on behalf of personal and familial loyalty.

We do not have what perhaps has never existed, Rahav's version of the story, not even as another woman might imagine it. What could motivate Rahav to take such risks, to venture all for an uncertain future, dependent on an unknown people to rescue her family while abandoning her own city and its people? We are, so to speak, tone-deaf when we try to listen at this distance for her unarticulated *private* voice, the voice that makes human sense out of this preserved historical record, rather than the received text's articulated *public* voice transmitting a national legend.

Paradoxically, we get closer to that voice and the integrity of the story through midrash than through history. A midrash informed by modern sensibilities better answers our questions than the ancient commentaries will. Trying to discern some semblance of the principal actor's revealing narrative takes us necessarily from the constructed text that we have into a text that might speak to us from the private imagination and our timeless, collective human experience channeled through Rahav, who ought to have not only a voice in this story but also the last word.

Was it a gamble? All of life is a gamble, isn't it? Every time I opened the door for a customer, it was a gamble. No telling who they were, where they came from, how they wanted it, what they were going to be like. Jericho — we get all kinds of people there! From every tribe and country you'd ever heard of, they all came to Jericho. What else was around? I can tell you something else: wherever the men were from, they were glad to find a woman available.

It was a good thing I liked men. I'm not talking about sex: you don't become a prostitute to enjoy sex but to give it. Or at least to give a play-acted version of it. The men never noticed the acting; they were too involved in their own performance. My pleasure was never the issue. Fortunately.

No, for me it wasn't anything to do with sex. I liked their talk, their humor — was amused by their vain, silly desire to show off, even when they were paying for it, and I was touched by their vulnerability. Whoever they were outside, whatever they bragged about, however fancy their clothes, once they were in bed, working away, they became needy and infantile, like overgrown elderly babies, and you could see all of their scars and flaws and age, the weathered skin, sagging bellies and white pubic hair, sniff their eager smell. You'd listen to them, the things they'd say and do, what they'd tell you and what they'd ask for, how they'd talk to you, and you knew them. You knew them in a

way that nobody else did — their mothers and sisters and wives, or for that matter their fathers and brothers and buddies, not even the men they did it with and didn't talk about when they traveled for days to the next market or went into the hills with their flocks and got so hard-up for it that they would hump a sheep. Not the temple prostitutes, either — that I'm sure of, because that was completely different.

Before I had my first period, men were looking at me. I overheard them say things like, "Hair black as night," or wonder about my breasts. Mine developed early. Boys my own age would call after me flirtatiously, "Raaaa-khaaav," drawing the sounds out into the air like a long caress. I figured I had one thing to trade, and I gave it up on my own terms.

I did all right for myself. There were a bunch of regulars, plus the travelers who found their way to me. I gave them what they wanted, along with some food and something to drink when they needed it. Once in a while, what they wanted was just a woman to listen to them and pay them some attention. Even phony interest would do. It was men's company that I enjoyed, and basically I learned pretty early not to mind their smells and their sweat. They went places, saw things, had experiences. That's what those scars were, and the wrinkles, the calluses and even the smells: their experiences.

You know where I lived, where my house was: in the damn wall of the city. How's that for a life, eh? I made money on my back (if that was the way they wanted it, of course), and I lived with my back against the wall. And that was as far as I was ever going to get, stuck in the wall of that town I was half-sick of. Only half-sick, of course; I'd grown up there, and my whole family was scattered around town. What else was there? Where else were we going to go? To Ai? However much I liked my family, each more or less, the petty differences don't matter now, and I didn't want any harm to come to any of them.

For pity's sake, we were poor! Poor people in a town that one invader after another had been running over for as long as people's stories went back — not to mention the earthquakes. Of the whole family, I was the only one who lived one step above dirt. I was the good-looking one. And if they minded how I made my money, they never said. After all, it was money. I couldn't have lived with myself, at least not very well, leaving behind any of my own for what was to come. I'd been told stories about what happened to other places from my customers. Those stories, I believed! To tell the truth, as we fled I heard the horrible sounds behind me, saw the smoke, smelled it — it stuck in my nostrils for

days, weeks. But I never looked back. I couldn't. I couldn't look at it. I don't think about. Not because I don't care. I won't think about it.

The Jordan was as far from town as I had ever been, before we all fled. My bedroom did look out to the west. You can figure out why I liked to stare out that window, trying to imagine what lay beyond where the river was, at the hills and the setting sun, to wonder and daydream about being somewhere else, living a different kind of life.

*You don't sell yourself. You let them use one part of you
for a while, and they pay you for the privilege.*

The flax up there on the roof — a deal I made for myself. You know that flax is wonderfully useful. Clothes, you can make from it. And oil. You buy it cheap, spread it out on the roof, let it dry — as good as money and it doesn't lose its value. Barter here, trade there, it was all private. I wasn't getting rich doing customers, and I can tell you I wasn't getting any younger doing it. Who knew? A few more years... Do I have to spell out for you what life is like for a woman like me who gets too old or loses her looks? You bet I had some trade going on alongside. It was legal but it was private.

You know how they say about us, "She sells herself"? Don't believe it! Not for anything. You don't sell yourself. You let them use one part of you for a while, and they pay you for the privilege. If they want to think that's you — pfff! If you're smart, they get less of you than they get of any other woman. Just that part. All the rest is you, and for you, and it's private. Always.

Let me tell you something. That bed where I took my customers wasn't really my bed, not the mattress I slept on. They didn't need to know that. There were always things I kept for myself. For instance, I would get myself decked out fancily for my clients if they were the sort that liked a fancy woman — the red sash was a little faded but nice material — and I had a couple of little trinkets that I never wore for any of them, only for myself or when I went to the shrine. Of course I went. Just because I was a prostitute didn't mean that I didn't believe in anything. Believe me, prostitutes believe in God more than lots of fine citizens do. Doing that kind of work, you need all the protection you can get, on earth and from your god. I sacrificed, just as faithfully as I paid off the city guards.

Those two Israelite spies? You know what pushed me over, to hide them

and then make that deal? The look in their eyes, when the guards were coming searching for them. I know that look, that darting about in the eyes, and all the time what I call the edge-of-the-wall look. Oh, do I know it. From the inside. Too many options and not a single real choice. I looked at them, felt sorry for them, then felt sorry for myself if I got caught with them, and I shoved them up the ladder onto the roof. Sure, I was taking a chance with them. I knew the rest of them had to be out there somewhere, waiting for the right time and place. But their men were on their way, whether my gamble paid off or not, so it was worth the risk. Dirt, they were supposed to be — the refuse of Egypt, turned into a murderous horde out to destroy and conquer. So what was I, coming home at night with a customer, past the men pissing against the wall five feet from my door? What was I to anybody, other than dirt? I took my chances. Better with them than with that pathetic little band of palace guards that passed for Jericho's army, coming to me for free sex in exchange for letting me work. Look, it was a chance to save our necks. And to be with people who were making things happen, instead of letting things happen to them. A chance to break out of that town, to go wherever that army was going, and the whole tribe of their people. You know. Someplace else.



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