

Rachav / רַחַב

Joshua, son of Nun, secretly sent two spies from Sheet'im, saying, "Go, scout out the region of Jericho." So they set out, and they came to the house of a **Zonah** named Rachav and lodged there.

The king of Jericho was told, "Some men have come here tonight, Israelites, to spy out the country." The king of Jericho thereupon sent orders to Rachav: "Produce the men who came to you and entered your house, for they have come to spy out the whole country." The woman, however, had taken the two men and hidden them.

"It is true," she said, "the men did come to me, but I didn't know where they were from. And at dark, when the gate was about to be closed, the men left; and I don't know where the men went. Quick, go after them, for you can overtake them."— Now she had taken them up to the roof and hidden them under some stalks of flax which she had lying on the roof.— So the men pursued them in the direction of the Jordan down to the fords; and no sooner had the pursuers gone out than the gate was shut behind them.

The spies had not yet gone to sleep when Rachav came up to them on the roof. She said to the men, "I know that God 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. For we have heard how Adonai dried up the waters of the Sea of Reeds for you when you left Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two Amorite kings across the Jordan, whom you doomed, which meant the annihilation of the inhabitants. When we heard about it, we lost heart, and nobody had any more spirit left because of you; for God your God is the only God in heaven above and on earth below. Now, since I have shown loyalty to you, swear to me by God that you in turn will show loyalty to my family. Provide me with a reliable sign that you will spare the lives of my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them, and save us from death."

The men answered her, "Our persons are pledged for yours, even to death! If you do not disclose this mission of ours, we will show you true loyalty when God gives us the land." She let them down by a rope through the window—for her dwelling was at the outer side of the city wall and she lived in the actual wall. She said to them, "Make for the hills, so that the pursuers may not come upon you. Stay there in hiding three days, until the pursuers return; then go your way." But the men warned her, "We will be released from this oath which you have made us take [unless,] when we invade the country, you tie this length of crimson cord to the window through which you let us down. Bring your father, your mother, your brothers, and all your family together in your house; and if anyone ventures outside the doors of your house, his blood will be on his head, and we shall be clear. But if a hand is laid on anyone who remains in the house with you, his blood shall be on our heads. And if you disclose this mission of ours, we shall likewise be released from the oath which you made us take."

She replied, "Let it be as you say."

She sent them on their way, and they left; and she tied the crimson cord to the window. ...Joshua rose early the next day; and the priests took up the Ark of God, while the seven priests bearing the seven ram's horns marched in front of the Ark of God, blowing

the horns as they marched.... they marched around the city once on the second day and returned to the camp. They did this six days. On the seventh day....as the priests blew the horns, Joshua commanded the people, “Shout! For God has given you the city. The city and everything in it are to be proscribed for God; only Rachav the **Zonah** is to be spared, and all who are with her in the house, because she hid the messengers we sent....

When the people heard the sound of the horns, the people raised a mighty shout and the wall collapsed. The people rushed into the city, every man straight in front of him, and they captured the city. They exterminated everything in the city with the sword: man and woman, young and old, ox and sheep and ass. But Joshua bade the two men who had spied out the land, “Go into the **Zonah’s** house and bring out the woman and all that belong to her, as you swore to her.” So the young spies went in and brought out Rachav, her father and her mother, her brothers and all that belonged to her—they brought out her whole family and left them outside the camp of Israel.

They burned down the city and everything in it. But the silver and gold and the objects of copper and iron were deposited in the treasury of the House of God.

Only Rachav the **Zonah** and her father’s family were spared by Joshua, along with all that belonged to her, and she dwelt among the Israelites—as is still the case. For she had hidden the messengers that Joshua sent to spy out Jericho.

– Joshua 2:1-22; 6:12-27

רחב = expanse, wide space, broad

Classical Midrash

Her beauty

The Rabbis taught: There were four women of extraordinary beauty in the world: Sarah, and Abigail, Rachav, and Esther...Rachav inspired lust by her name; Yael by her voice; Abigail by her memory; Michal daughter of Saul by her appearance. –Megillah 15a

Rabbi Yitzhak said: Anyone who says: “Rachav, Rachav,” immediately experiences a seminal emission, due to the arousal of desire caused by Rachav’s great beauty. Rav Nahman said to him: “I say ‘Rachav’ and it does not affect me!” Rabbi Yitzhak said to Rav Nahman: When I said this I was specifically referring to a man who knew her and recognized her. With regard to anyone who had met Rachav **in person**, the mere mention of her name would arouse his lust. – *Talmud, Taanit 5b:10*

Her occupation

Zonah – prostitute/madam. Every nobleman and prince had visited Rachav the harlot. She was only ten years old at the time of Exodus and had practiced prostitution for the entire forty years that had elapsed since then. – *Rashi on Joshua 2:11*

Zonah - A lady innkeeper. According to Targum Yonatan, an innkeeper who sold various kinds of foodstuff. – *Rashi on Joshua 2*

Her name was known to all of the great men in the land. They would reveal the secrets of the land to her. If the spies stayed there they would be able to find out about all of the aspects going on around the land. Therefore, the spies did not go to any other place, they just “slept there.”
– *Malbim*

Her Heroism

And the families of the linen factory (1 Chronicles 4:21-23) this is Rachav, the harlot who hid the spies in linen; see it is written: “Now she had taken them up to the roof and hidden them under some stalks of linen.” Rabbi Yehudah the son of Rabbi Simon: “linen was her business.” ...Rabbi Shimon son of Yochai the Tanna taught that even if her family was two hundred men, and they were joined to two hundred other families, they all were saved by her merit. Note that it does not read, “all her family” - rather “all her *families*.” ... she came and joined herself to Israel and her deeds ascended to God in Heaven.
– *Ruth Rabbah 2*

Then she lowered them down with the rope. With the same rope and through the same window her admirers would use to come up to her. She said: “Master of the World with these I have sinned, with these forgive me.”
– *Rashi on Joshua 2:15*

The use of the definite article in the phrase, “She lowered them by **the rope** through **the window** is a reference to the very same rope and window that her paramours would use to ascend to her chambers. She thus proclaimed, “Master of the Universe! By these very things I transgressed, let me now achieve absolution by them.” – *Rashi on Joshua 2:11*

After having engaged in prostitution for forty years, Rachav converted at the age of fifty. She said: “Master of the Universe! I have sinned with three things [with my eye, my thigh, and my stomach]. By the merit of three things pardon me: the rope, the window, and the wall [pardon me for engaging in harlotry because I endangered myself when I lowered the rope for the spies from the window in the wall]”
– *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*

Her Legacy and Reward

When Rachav heard of the miracles that God had performed for Israel when Adonai parted the Red Sea for them, she wanted to cleave to Israel, as portrayed in Jer. 16:19: “O Adonai, my strength and my stronghold, my refuge in a day of trouble, to You nations shall come from the ends of the earth.” When God performs miracles for Israel, the non-Jewish nations shall come to adhere to Adonai.
– *Shemot Rabbah 27:4*

Rachav converted and married Joshua, and therefore [the Prophetess] Huldah descended from both Joshua and Rachav. The Gemara raises a difficulty: But did Joshua have any descendants? But isn't it written in the genealogical list of the tribe of Ephraim: “Nun his son, Joshua his son?” (I Chronicles 7:27) The listing does not continue any further, implying that Joshua had no sons. The Gemara answers: Indeed, he did not have sons, but he did have daughters.
– *Talmud Megilla 14b*

In Jericho the spies put up with Rachav. She had been leading an immoral life for forty years, but at the approach of Israel, she paid homage to the true God, lived the life of a pious convert, and, as the wife of Joshua, became the ancestress of eight prophets and of the prophetess Huldah. She had opportunity in her own house of beholding the wonders of God.
– *Legends of the Jews* 1:1:35; 4:1:6

When King Hezekiah learned that he was about to die, he turned his face to the wall and prayed, as portrayed in Isa. 38:2: “Thereupon Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to God.” The Rabbis understand the “*wall*,” not as the place where Hezekiah prayed, but as the subject of his prayer. He said to God: “Master of the Universe! Rachav saved the two souls of the spies by means of the ‘city wall’ by merit of which You saved many souls for her, as it is said, ‘Only Rachav the *Zonah* and her father’s family were spared by Joshua, along with all that belonged to her.’ Even if there were two hundred people in her family, and they went and adhered to two hundred additional families, they were saved by her merit. Will You not save me, whose forefathers brought many converts to You?” Hezekiah’s prayer was accepted, and God added fifteen years to his life.
– *Talmud Yerushami, B’rachot* 1:3 58b

Contemporary Midrash



Rahab

Bernardien Sternheim, Amsterdam 1947-

Rachav has a special function in the biblical narratives of Israel’s existence in the land. When uncovering the men, she explains that she knows that God will give Israel the land. She has heard about the events of the Red Sea and the defeat of the Amorite kings Og and Sihon, and she declares, quoting from the Song of Miriam in Exodus 15, that “dread” has fallen on the inhabitants and that they all “fear” Israel. This is the message that the men bring back to Joshua. Rachav is thus the oracle, or prophet, of Israel’s occupation of the land. Another woman, the prophet Deborah, announced a major victory in the taking of Canaan; and the end of Israel’s occupation of the land is pronounced by yet another woman, the prophet Huldah. Rachav, who begins as triply marginalized—Canaanite, woman, and prostitute—moves to the center as bearer of a divine message and herald of Israel in its new land. Even though later generations of readers have been squeamish about her occupation, preferring to think of her as an “innkeeper,” she is remembered in Jewish tradition as the great

proselyte, as ancestress of kings and prophets, and, in the New Testament, as ancestress of Jesus.

– *Tikva Frymer-Kensky, Carol Myers*

Like her name, Rachav, which means “broad” or “wide,” she is remarkably broad-minded. More than this – the breadth of her spirit makes her one of the Bible’s great heroines...let’s remember where Rachav lives, in a house on the edge of Jericho, which is on the edge of the land of Israel. As a prostitute, she lives on the edge of society. Paradox of paradoxes, the redemption of the Jewish people, the quintessential outsider people, comes through the agency of the quintessential outsider woman. It is a wonderful literary device....The parallel of Rachav’s story with that of the Exodus from Egypt is stunning; in the Exodus, it was the red blood on the doorposts...that warded off the Angel of Death. Here, Rachav’s red thread warded off the human forces of death. This is probably the origin of the red thread that some kabbalah devotees wear around their wrists.

Let us now give Rachav her due. Rachav may have started her life as a prostitute, but her real talents were as a preacher and a theologian. She is the first woman in history to proclaim the will of God, as expressed through Jewish history. Rachav uses the words “I know” to acknowledge God...The phrase *I know* is not mere intellectual knowledge; it seems to have been the precise language that strangers used when they came to acknowledge God (Professor Frymer-Kensky wonders whether the phrase itself was once part of a rite of passage, a kind of proto-conversion that may have been practiced in ancient Israel.) Generations later, the editors of the Jewish prayer book will choose her words of faith...for a most prominent place in the liturgy: at the core of the Aleinu prayer...In fact, say the Rabbis, Rachav’s acceptance of God was superior...for she said publicly that God was the only God in heaven and earth.

– Rabbi Jeff Salkin, *Righteous Gentiles in the Hebrew Bible* pp. 72-74