

RACHAV: THE COURAGE TO CREATE A NEW REALITY PART I

by Leah Kohn

The story of Rachav is set forth in the Book of Joshua, Chapter Two, takes place approximately forty years after the Exodus from Egypt, when the Jewish people are ready to cross the Jordan River to conquer the land of Israel. The entire world is aware of this imminent event, given that the Jewish people have been in the public eye ever since they left Egypt. The Ten Plagues, the Exodus and its ensuing miracles had had a tremendous effect on all of mankind. What's more, the Jewish people had vanquished Egypt - at that time the world's premier civilization - as well as several other nations.

At this point in Jewish history, Moses has just passed away and Joshua has taken over as leader. He decides to send a two man reconnaissance mission into Israel, in order to determine the best way to conduct his conquest of the land. The two he sends are Pinchas and Calev, men of exemplary character and accomplishment. Calev was originally sent by Moshe with eleven others to spy out the land of Israel forty years prior. He (and Yehoshua) accomplished this mission according to God's will, while the other ten failed, and died as a result (Parashas Shelach, Chapter 13, Book of Numbers). Pinchas - a grandson of Aaron - was also distinguished and there are stories about him in the Torah that indicate his greatness (see in particular Parashas Pinchas, Book of Numbers).

So Pinchas and Calev cross the Jordan into Israel, and stop for the night in the city of Jerico, at the house of an innkeeper named Rahav. The Hebrew word for innkeeper is "zonah", which comes from the word "mazon" (food). Rachav is referred to in the Book of Joshua as "isha zonah", which can be translated as "a female innkeeper, who provided food for people".

But the word "zonah" also means prostitute. Rahav was a prostitute, involved with many people, and she supported herself by running a brothel disguised as an inn.

In Hebrew, the name Rachav means "wide" or "broad". In a positive sense, she has a broad heart - she likes to be a host and help people and give. The risk for this type of personality is that some fall into immorality because their good-heartedness makes it difficult for them to say "no". Our sages say that, besides Rachav's giving, open nature, she was physically exquisite and that she channeled these qualities in the wrong direction and fell easily into her profession. Moreover, Rachav started working at the age of ten. So, most likely, she had difficult life circumstances, for whatever reason. As a woman, she was very exclusive in her business, and we are told that many important people, including kings, were involved with her.

Why would Joshua's spies stay in such a disreputable place, given they are from a Nation that at that

point in history is famous for its high moral standards? Precisely because of this moral reputation, Pinchas and Calev choose Rachav's inn because they expect the Canaanites will never look for them there.

And here they find Rachav, a non-Jewish native of Canaan who, through her business, is connected to the leaders of the land of Israel. (The potential for extracting political information is another reason why Pinchas and Calev choose Rachav's inn).

But things go wrong. The king of Yericho is informed of the presence of the spies in his domain and he sends messengers to Rachav, where they have been seen. Surprisingly, instead of giving the spies up, she hides them on the roof of her inn and tells the messengers, "It is true; the men did come to me, but I do not know from where they are. When the city gate was about to close at dark, the men went out; I do not know where the men went. Pursue them quickly, for you can overtake them!" (Joshua 2: 4-6).

What causes Rachav to protect Pinchas and Calev, and to risk charges of treason? As a Canaanite, especially connected to high officials, one would imagine her loyalties would be with the kings she knows and her nation. Our sages tell us Rachav's actions were not a betrayal of state, but a consequence of her sincere conviction that the Jewish conquest was Divinely ordained and that the Jews had a right to their Land. For the past forty years, the world had heard about the miracles that had followed the Jews from the Exodus to the Red Sea, to Sinai and throughout their long sojourn in the desert. Rachav concludes, logically, that God is squarely behind the Jews.

In other words, she knows exactly who G-d is. She approaches Pinchas and Calev in their hiding place on the roof and, at last, reveals her intentions behind the unlikely favor she has done for them. She requests of them, "...swear to me by Hashem, since I have done kindness with you, that you too will do kindness with my father's household and give me a trustworthy countersign...that you will save our souls from death" (Joshua 2: 12-13). Her words reflect an understanding that the Jewish Nation is invincible, given God's protection of them, and that they will destroy those nations who remain in the land without taking on the seven laws of Noach, which Torah requires of non-Jews.

In essence, Rachav tells Pinchas and Calev that she and all of her family will convert to Judaism. If their intention was to remain in Israel after the Jewish conquest, and abide by the seven laws of Noach, she would not even have had to approach the two men, since there was already a guarantee that any nation accepting these terms would be allowed to remain peacefully in Israel. Rather, Rachav sees in the Jewish Nation something awesome in which she wants to participate, even though she understands that she is not expected or obligated by the Jews to do so .

Why didn't everyone in Canaan see this awesomeness and take action, at least to the extent of accepting the Seven Laws of Noach, which was the alternative to their annihilation, were they to stay in the land without changing their idolatrous, immoral practices. Instead, only one nation leaves the country, while the others stay, without accepting the Noachide Laws, which means they are sure to

be annihilated by the Jews. Only Rachav takes a step that everyone else should logically take, and goes even further by expressing her desire to actually become Jewish. As we opened up, everybody knew about what's going on. But she is unique.

The choice that Rachav makes is a choice between action and denial, which is a dilemma that is part of the human condition to this day. Things that are behavioral - not even having to do with Judaism - the diet we should eat, the cigarettes we shouldn't smoke, the habits we should break - we are all capable of sustaining or destroying ourselves in these ways. The goal is not only to know what is right, but to actually internalizing this knowledge. And herein lies the difference between Rachav and the other inhabitants of Canaan, who knew what action to take in order to survive, but did not accept the reality of having to change. By contrast, Rachav not only knew what to do, but turned the new circumstances to her advantage, seeing the opportunity to create for herself a new reality.

The business of change is a hard job for anyone, yet rewarding because it changes our essence. It is a step-by-step job of growing, and slowly bringing into ourselves and into our heart, what our head knows. The difference between knowing and internalizing is that knowledge is something external to us. It is something we know about, something we have, but it is not who we are. What exists in our heart is who we are and what we want to strive for. To turn something from a possession to an essence - that is what life is all about.

Rachav did it, although she was not a likely candidate for this accomplishment. What led her towards such unbelievable behavior, will be the subject of our next class. But before that installment we would like to involve you, our 3,700 readers, in a discussion about the power of change.

Please respond to lkohn@torah.org. Our next class will feature a selection of your responses.

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