

RACHAV: THE COURAGE TO CREATE A NEW REALITY PART II

by Rebbetzin Leah Kohn

This week Women in Judaism continues to explore the life of Rachav and her enormous capacity to change. From our perspective, the prospect that a woman of her repute would turn her life around seems unlikely, but as we saw in Part One of this essay, this is precisely what she did.

How was Rachav able to manage such an accomplishment? Our sages tell us that any perceivable change is the culmination of a longer process of change that was internal. Over the past forty years, the world had been hearing about the Jewish Nation (see Part 1 of this essay). The news of their miraculous progress had a deeply personal impact upon Rachav, in spite of the pagan reality she inhabited. Considering Rachav had for the past forty years consorted with kings and heads of state, perhaps over time she recognized the emptiness of what some may consider "having it all".

Change is not simple for anyone. It is not easy to admit that we are not perfect and to embark on a journey into an unknown realm of self-growth. Nonetheless, the Torah tells us - as does our own life experience - that when a person makes the effort, when he really goes through the internal process that paves the way for change, God will send him a messenger - a person, a book or a turn in life circumstance - that will lead the way.

Rachav had the courage to proceed towards a new reality and, when she was ready, Hashem sent Pinchas and Caleb to help her along. As noted in Part One of this essay, chances were slim that two men of such high moral caliber would arrive at Rachav's establishment. But arrive they did, sent by Hashem to present her with the opportunity for change. From Rachav's point of view she received two guests who were angelic, in terms of their behavior and inner purity. These were people who lived according to the direction of their souls, not their bodies - the opposite of Rachav. In her guests she discovers the personification of the new reality she seeks. She risks her life to protect Pinchas and Calev, and then requests their assistance in seeing to her conversion to Judaism.

In addition, Rachav sets out to sanctify three physical trappings of her life, as it had existed, by using them to help Pinchas and Calev escape. These are: her window, the rope that hung from her window and the location of her house, attached as it was to the wall surrounding Jericho. Previously, Rachav's high-profile clients had used the rope to arrive and depart through her window unnoticed, and to leave the city precincts without passing through the central gates.

Our sages tell us that Rachav approached God and expressed her desire to rectify her deeds by using her window, rope and wall to help Pinchas and Calev escape from the authorities in Jericho.

What she realizes with this gesture is that physical aspects of life are only tools, which we ourselves decide to use for benefit or detriment. In other words, Rachav understands that she can continue to use the rope attached to the window for her business purposes - or she can use for the sake of Hashem and in so doing become an exemplary woman. The principles behind Rachav's insight and her internal change indicate she has embraced a new reality.

Rachav's message to us is that no excuse should impede our ability to change. Whatever our life circumstances, we are free either to take responsibility or ignore opportunities for our own self-growth. Rachav decided to use the very same things she had used all along, in order to do the Will of Hashem, in order to create a relationship with him.

Rachav ultimately marries Yehoshua and our sages tell us that from her came eight high priests, who were also prophets - among them Jeremiah and Ezekiel. How did she merit such offspring, when in fact there have been others through history who saw God and committed to Him, yet did not merit such rewards? The answer lies in the fact that Rachav saw God in a situation where others might have asked, "Where is God?" Consider Rachav's position: she is attached to 31 kings and knows their secrets; she lives on the border the Jewish people are about to overrun; she has no idea whether the two men she hides will accept her. Nonetheless, she sees God's hand in these tribulations, and to this she commits everything.

Rachav understands that, good or bad, everything that happens points the way to God. To be in a difficult situation and make the best of it - to see God in the midst of uncertainty and chaos - is a quintessentially Jewish trait, whose foremother is the great Rachav.

Women in Judaism Student Anthology:

SELECTED RESPONSES FROM RACHAV PART 1 EMAILS...

"IS CHANGE POSSIBLE?"

Hello:

...Change is possible . In my estimation this is why G-D brings you to a point which may appear like lowliness before you see his hand to comfort you. You must reach out to G-D with your heart and soul cry from your insides and feel where it comes from. This is the place where change can take place. It is not easy to find or easy to feel, but it is inside of you and it is recognizing the bad as good in your life and finding the courage to see it and embrace it so that change can happen. In my own life I have been to the point of not understanding why things may be the way they are. Difficult at times. Very difficult. I learned to trust that G-D would watch over me and take care of my children and guide us through. It was faith through my soul that made me recognize what was and is happening . Courage to find that point is what has effected change and made it so that I can understand.

Stacey

Shalom!

Unfortunately, people tend to fall to the lowest common denominator. They get lazy & take what appears to be the "easy way out", that's why they do not change detrimental behavior. People don't realize the consequences of their actions are not always immediate, but long term. People can change bad habits by taking one hour at a time, finding the inner strength not to smoke or eat junk foods (examples) and building on that until the habit is out of one's life . Judaism allows me to see that we are responsible for ourselves & others. I need my health to perform mitzvot and to care for my family; do my job well. I am also grateful for the life Hashem has given me (including the flaws...for learning) and will take care of it, trying to live up to my potential.

Take care,
Roberta (Rivkah)

Dear Mrs. Kohn:

Being committed to Torah has enabled me to set limits. Like Rahav, I had a hard time saying "no" and was always finding myself overcommitted. By becoming religious, I found it possible to say , "No, I can't work Friday night." It made it possible for me to set all kinds of necessary limits.

Ellen

Hello:

I think that one of the things that keep people from changing is the illusion that they can do it later. Rachav saw that time was running out for the Canaanites. Much of Judaism can help people change for the better. At the very least, kashrut and other laws provide a restraint on impulse that can be enormously helpful.

Judith

Dear Mrs. Kohn:

In response to these questions. I see that people are afraid of change, even if they know it will be for the better. There is pain involved with change. You start by taking a look in the mirror and really seeing who you are and that is a scary thing to do. It is hard to let go of behavior that comforts you, because you are used to it. It is comforting to have consistency even though it might not be good for you.

Everyone has the ability to change and it starts with determination and discipline. You have to really want to change or else you will just be going through the motions and their might be an outward change, but what matters is the inward change of heart or else it won't really be true change. Everything starts with the heart.

For me knowing that Hashem loves me and has given me his Torah as boundaries in my life makes me feel protected and secure. I know that if I obey his commandments because I love him not

because I have to makes me want to change for the better. Everytime I read the Torah and reflect on where I am in my life, I want to achieve more. By having examples in the Torah of people who are just like us and they also had problems gives me hope that I can also work towards becoming kadosh (holy). Shalom, Janet (Hannah)

"Have You Found Anything In Judaism That Has Helped You To Change For The Better? "Yes, absolutely. I was brought up in a live-&-let-live atmosphere, and I felt tremendous pressure to say, in public and in private, that people's lifestyle choices, whatever they might be, were OK. Learning about Judaism helped me admit to myself that there was such a thing as immorality. It also helped me learn that there were ways to work on problems in my own behavior.

Jennifer

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

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