

SPYMASTERS: THE *HAFTARAH* OF PARASHAT SHELAH*

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A. INTRODUCTION

Joshua Ch. 2 is the middle section of a larger unit (Ch. 1-4) that makes up the first part of the book of Joshua. In a word, this first unit of four chapters can be entitled: The Narrative of the Entry of Israel into the Land. As Rav Yehudah Kil notes in his commentary to Joshua,¹ our section focuses on the second part of that narrative: the spy mission initiated by Joshua and its consequences. This section was carefully analyzed by the greatest of the commentators and received special attention in the writings of Ralbag and Malbim.

The essay before you is divided into two parts. The first will analyze the structure, key themes and ideas of the various parts of this chapter in its own context. The second part will move to explore the deeper connections between this chapter and *Parashat Shelah* beyond the general statement that both deal with spy missions.

B. JOSHUA 2—CHRONOLOGY

According to the Vilna Gaon² our chapter begins on the very same day (6 Nissan) that Joshua exhorted the tribes of Reuven, Gad and half of Menashe to keep their word and join the conquest of the Land of Israel (Ch. 1: 12-18). In addition, he claims that this was also the very same day that he sent the officers amongst the Israelites to prepare them for entry into the land (Ch.3). Following that approach it emerges that the “internal preparations” and the “external

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¹ *Daat Mikra* on Joshua (Jerusalem, 1994), pg. 3 in the commentary.

² Cited in *Daat Mikra*, pg. 10.

preparations” were synchronized to begin at the very same moment. In this reading Chs. 1-3 take place concurrently. In contrast to that perspective, Radak (in his comments to Ch. 3:2) and many other commentaries take the position that the spy mission initiated in our chapter actually was undertaken prior to the preparations in Ch.3. In fact, Radak claims that the spy mission already began during the thirty day mourning period for *Moshe Rabbeinu* mentioned at the end of the Torah in *parashat veZot haBerakhab*. In that reading of the text, our chapter is a precursor to the events of Ch. 3 and needed to be taken care of before the people could truly begin to prepare to cross into the Land of Israel.

C. STRUCTURE OF THE CHAPTER

- Verse 1—The Sending Out of the Spies by Joshua, their mission and arrival in Jericho at Rahav’s House
- Verses 2-7—The King of Jericho, his agents and their unsuccessful pursuit of the spies
- Verses 8-14—First Dialogue of Rahav with the Spies including Rahav’s request for an oath of protection when Israel conquers the land
- Verses 15-21—Second Dialogue of Rahav and the Spies focusing on the sign of protection, as well as the conditions by which the oath becomes void and the sign that Rahav will use to protect her house and family
- Verses 22 -The Escape from Jericho and the eluding of the pursuit
- Verses 23-24—The return to Joshua, the upbeat and encouraging report of the results of their mission

Note carefully that the chapter is structured in a classical Biblical chiasmic parallelism (A, B, C, C, B, A) or as it is called in Hebrew *hakbalah nigudit*:

Section 1—Verse 1—Joshua’s sending of the spies and their mission

Section 6—Verse 23-24—The return to Joshua and presentation of the results

Section 2—Verses 2-7—The Pursuit of the Spies

Section 5—Verse 22—The Pursuit of the Spies

Section 3—Verses 8-14—The First Dialogue of Rahav and the Spies

Section 4—Verses 15-21—The Second Dialogue of Rahav and the Spies

This structure helps focus the reader on the middle section as the key element of the narrative and in fact the middle two sections take up more than half of the verses of the entire chapter highlighting its centrality. Moreover, in a very interesting twist, while in the first dialogue (section 3) Rahav gets the lion’s share of “air time”, four out of five verses, in the second dialogue (section 4) the spies are the dominant speakers, setting the “stage” for four out of the six verses.

D. SOME KEY THEMES OF THE CHAPTER

Section 1—The text at the outset of the chapter emphasizes that Joshua sends out the spies in a “*heresh*” fashion. Most of the commentaries including Radak and the Vilna Gaon interpret this to mean, that he sent them out secretly, without any foreknowledge of the Jewish people. This clearly highlights the fact that this was a normal covert spy mission. In addition we are not told the names of the individuals involved nor are we given exact details of what their exact mission was beyond the general “*lekhū, ve’u et ha’aretz*”.

Section 2—The text, very significantly, does not tell us if they indeed were successful in “seeing” the land or if they reached Jericho at the end of the mission or was it that they reached Jericho at the very outset of the mission as seems more likely from the plain sense of the verses. In fact, many of the commentators including Malbim³ interpret the phrase “*et ha’aretz ve’Yericho*” not to mean the entire land but the territory around Jericho.

This ambiguity highlights the fact that they do not seem to actually do much “spying” in the classical sense of the word in terms of checking fortifications, troop movements, size of armies or even in bringing back any physical elements of the territory that they traversed.

They come to the house of Rahav which seems to be either, depending on which view of the commentaries one adopts, either an inn or a brothel.⁴ As Rav Yehudah Kil notes in *Daat Mikra*, the advantage of staying in either of those locales is twofold. Firstly, it is a good place to remain anonymous and under the radar screen as well as a place where many travelers and local residents may pass through thus giving the spies a chance to hear unguarded comments and feelings of the populace to the upcoming battle with the Israelites and gauge their feelings and sense of preparedness or pessimism. This section twice highlights the phrase “*lo yadati*” (verses 4, 5) used by Rahav to indicate her supposed lack of knowledge as to the whereabouts of the spies. Of course, the reader knows that she is fully aware of their locale and has indeed chosen to host them. Why this is so is the theme of the next section.

Sections 3-4—In fact, Rahav not only knows where they are, but the first words out of her mouth in verse 8 is “*yadati ki natan Hashem lakhem et ha’Aretz*”. Her knowledge extends not only to their whereabouts but to the fact that they will be successful. As Rav Yehudah Kil⁵ and others note in the midst of this first conversation Rahav uses the language and imagery of “*Keriat Yam Suf*” such as the phrases “*Namogu kol yoshvei ha’Aretz*” which highlights the fact that the entry of the Jewish people into the Land of Israel will be the culmination of the

³ Commentary to Ch. 2:1 (standard edition).

⁴ See the comments of Radak to Ch. 2:1.

⁵ *Daat Mikra* on Joshua, Ch. 2:8.

Exodus from Egypt and the fulfillment of the Divine plan that Moshe prophetically sung about at the Red Sea. This is made explicit by her mention of the miracle at the Red Sea in verse 10, an event that took place at the very beginning of the Jewish people's journey towards the Land of Israel. In a perfect complement to that she then mentions the miracle that God had done for the Jewish people in battle at the end of their forty year trek in the desert in confronting Sihon and Og, the Pharaoh's of the second generation. The destruction of Sihon and Og on the cusp of the entry into the land was the closing of the circle of the battles in the desert that now had set the stage for the entry into the rest of the Land of Israel. (In fact, from many perspectives, the territory of Sihon and Og is viewed in Deuteronomy and parts of Joshua as actually part of the "promised land" and of one piece with the rest of the conquest. The details and exact parameters of that issue are beyond the scope of this short essay. See for example Deuteronomy Ch. 2 and the comments of the Ramban, Rashbam and Seforno on that chapter). It is also interesting to note that *Hazal* in the *Mekhilta-Yitro Parashah 1* understood her statements in Verse 11 not only as a recognition of the power of God but as a formal declaration of her desire to join the Jewish people in an act of conversion. Her awareness of God's saving hand in Egypt led her to come under the wings of the divine presence.

The remainder of these sections outline the agreement that is made by Rahav with the spies to ensure her safety and that of her family when the Israelite assault begins. As Ralbag notes in his commentary there are actually two conditions that the spies lay out for fulfillment of their side of the bargain. One, only those in Rahav's physical space will be protected. Secondly, only those of her immediate family will be protected. If, however, others are informed of this shelter they will no longer feel bound by their promise of protection to her. Parenthetically, I would like to suggest that the placing of the red string to ensure protection from the impending assault has echoes of the procedure of preparing the first Paschal sacrifice in which the Jewish people were told to smear the red blood on the doorpost so that the impending threat of death would pass over the house. In addition, the emphasis on this sign protecting Rahav's entire immediately family in the house cannot but remind us of the element of the "*seh lebeit avot seh labayit*" which is a critical element of the ritual of the Paschal sacrifice. In effect, then, the Jewish people extend the act of God's protection that was given to them in order to leave Egypt to reach the Land of Israel to the very family that facilitates their reaching that very objective!

Section 5-6—The spies leave the house of Rahav, wait three days, which according to the position of the Vilna Gaon mentioned above overlap with the three days mentioned by Joshua in Ch. 1:11 commanding the Jewish people to prepare and be ready to cross the Jordan in three days time. Thus, while the public is getting ready, Joshua is engaging in secret preparations as well, to ensure the success of the mission. If this is correct, one should not read Ch. 2 as taking

place chronologically after the last part of Ch. 1 but as concurrent events in a sort of split screen fashion moving from what is occurring in the camp of Israel versus what is occurring on the other side of the Jordan. According to Radak and others, of course, these three days take place prior to the actual preparations to cross the Jordan mentioned in Ch. 1 and Ch. 3.

The spies return and significantly do not report any military intelligence, description of the land or its cities but simply tell what happened to them and paraphrase Rahav's first words to them: "*Ki natan Hashem beyadeinu et kol ha'aretz vegam namagu kol yoshvei ha'Aretz mipaneinu*". The stage is set for the entry into the land.

D. RELATIONSHIP OF THE HAFTORAH TO THE TORAH READING

Beyond the obvious fact that both *Parashat Shelah* (Numbers 13-17) and Joshua 2 deal with spy missions, what exactly is the connection between the two portions? It is clear from our analysis of the text that the Bible does not really seek to compare the two missions but in truth seeks to contrast the two. Malbim in his commentary to Joshua Ch. 2 has a lengthy comment outlining five significant differences in mission. In addition, Rabbi Yehudah Shaviv in a wonderful little volume on the *haftarot* entitled *Bein Parashah leHaftarah*⁶ explores the pointed contrasts between the two spy missions of Moshe and Joshua. A number of the ideas that will be mentioned below are based upon the insights of the Malbim and R. Shaviv though we have added some of our own notions as well.

Though the spy mission that Moshe sent to "peruse" the land, (*latur et ha'aretz*) turned into a great debacle, this does not mean that using the tactic of spy missions was automatically to be seen as unwarranted or improper. Indeed, Moshe himself later on in the book of Numbers sends two *meraglim* to investigate the area of Ya'azer before its capture (Num. 21:32). Moreover, as the Ramban comments in his lengthy analysis of the *meraglim* episode at the beginning of his commentary to *Shelah*, the act of sending spies was not in and of itself problematic: "For this a proper tactic in all conquest of lands . . . and the Torah does not expect us to rely on miracles in our actions, but rather commands soldiers that they explore and spy out, guard carefully and plan ambushes".

In contrast to the mission in *Shelah* which went far beyond normal reconnaissance the mission in Joshua was at first blush a classic spy mission. In *Shelah* Moshe sends twelve well known leaders, identified by name, in the presence of the entire nation, to report on the land, the people and its status. This public display, the use of so many people to represent every tribe, and the expanded mission clearly highlight that this was no regular affair. In addition, the Hebrew terms "*leragel*," or "*lahpor*," to spy or search out, are never used in *Parashat*

⁶ (Jerusalem, 2000), pp. 146-150.

Shelah. The *tarim* return and present their findings not just to the general's staff but in front of the entire people. In contrast, Joshua sends out two anonymous souls, in secret, to find out vital information that will be crucial in achieving the mission. On one level, the placing of the Haftarah in juxtaposition to the Torah portion may highlight that while a spy mission along the lines of Joshua's would have been appropriate and successful the very nature of the mission and the modality of its execution were flawed from the outset. (Of course, this point needs to be examined in light of the relationship of the presentation of the narrative in *Parashat Shelah* (Chs. 13-14) and its recounting in *Parashat Devarim* (Ch.1), upon whose initiative the mission was begun and other factors beyond the ken of this essay.)

And yet though the spies in Joshua are sent off on a classical military spy operation, they are immediately discovered upon entering the land and their mission is compromised. They do not seem to be able to achieve any of their goals in searching out the land and providing military intelligence. In fact, the very discovery of their mission could and maybe should have led them to an extremely pessimistic assessment of the prospects of success for the Israelite invasion. One, in fairness, might have concluded that the intelligence capabilities of the enemy are first-rate and they are ready and waiting for us. In addition, nowhere in their report or their travels do we get any sense of the military might that awaits the Jewish people. Indeed, one might safely conclude that not much had changed in forty years since those first twelve *tarim* had come. The land continued to be full of giants and military strongholds and fortified cities and real dangers. And yet it is precisely here that our two spies part company from their predecessors.

In *Parashat Shelah* the Torah tells us the description of the powerful forces of the enemy nations and the conclusion that the 10 *tarim* reached "*lo nukhal la'alot*". In this move the *tarim* went beyond their mandate and challenged the power and ability of God to bring them to the promised land.

The text of Joshua in no way challenges the reality that the Canaanite nations were strong and powerful. However, it does point to the real truth behind the numbers of horses and arrows and fortifications that they had. Namely, that the people of the land had lost their spirit to fight and were scared and defeatist in their attitude. The text of Joshua ch. 2 clues us in into the only real piece of "intelligence" that was necessary (and in fact it is this discovery in Section 3-4 that forms the heart of the chapter as we noted above). The two groups probably saw the same things on the ground, but the *meraglim* of Joshua listened carefully to the people who reflected the true picture beyond the weapons and the chariots. God's outstretched hand in the destruction of Egypt and his leading the Jewish people throughout the desert period had in fact transformed the region and the balance of power. The prophecy uttered at *keriat yam suf* "*namogti kol yoshvei Kanaan*" had indeed come true.

