

The Ability to Completely Turn Life Around

Haftorat Shelach Lecha

The Book of Yehoshua 2:1-24

This week's haftorah about Rachav the convert, teaches us about the ability of a person to completely turn her life around from being on the lowest spiritual rung (Rachav was a harlot) to raise her self up to the highest spiritual level of closeness to Hashem. (Rachav merited becoming the wife of Yehoshua the leader of the Jewish people). It is also interesting that Rachav's declaration of conversion includes recognizing the right of the Jewish people to conquer the Land of Israel. The name means Rachav literary means "wide." Rav Tzadok of Lublin explains, the advantage of the ba'al tshuva over the tzaddik is that when a crooked line is made into a straight line, the line becomes broader. I'd like to call on the readers to give examples of the broadness of the ba'al teshuva/convert.

Rachav the Harlot

"Yehoshua the son of Nun sent out of Shittim two men to spy secretly, saying go view the land, and Yericho. They went, and came to the house of a woman harlot named Rachav, and lodged there..." (Yehoshua 2:1). Most commentaries agree that Rachav was a harlot, and although the word *zonah* can also be translated as inn-keeper (from the same root as the word *mazon* which means food), she was only called thus as clean language – to diminish her disgrace. Possibly her "inn" served as both a place for lodging and meals, where even her body became food for the lodgers. Rachav, the harlot was a "loose" woman. Just as she lacked the boundary of morality, her home, rather than being inside of the boundary of the city, was strategically built into the city-wall. Rachav became well-known in the world, since important officials visited her "inn" and confided in her. The spies of Israel went to Rachav, because top secrets were revealed to her through her important connections.

Rachav: Woman of Ultimate Renewal

Upon meeting the Jewish spies, a spark was ignited in Rachav's soul. She was inspired to turn her life completely around and perform the highest *teshuvah* possible. She risked her life to save the Jews from the king of Yericho, as she explained the reason for her heroic action: "I know that Hashem has given you the Land, and that dread of you has fallen upon us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt away because of you. For we have heard how Hashem dried up the waters of the Sea of Suf before you, when you came out of Egypt..." (Yehoshua 2: 9-10). The midrash explains how there was no ruler or noble-man who had not come to Rachav, the harlot. She was ten years old when Israel left Egypt. Although she was involved in an immorality the entire forty years during which Israel journeyed in the wilderness, she converted in the end of her fiftieth year (Yalkut Shimoni, Yehoshua 1:9). What motivated Rachav the harlot to such intense *teshuvah*? It was hearing about the miracles that Hashem had performed for Israel which inspired her, as she stated, "For we have heard..." There are many different levels of hearing. The rest of the Canaanites also heard. They became afraid and were trembling, but their hearing did not motivate them to any personal commitment or action. Only Rachav responded to the truth that she heard – about Hashem's miraculous salvation of the children of Israel, and she processed what she had heard for forty years. Despite all of these years, none of the original excitement of the event had faded in her memory. At the age of fifty, she was finally moved

to act upon what had made such an impression upon her as a little girl. Her recognition of Hashem being the Master of the Universe moved her greatly. However, it was only by meeting the righteous Israelites that she received the impetus to change her life around completely. In response to Rachav's intense *teshuva*, the Jewish spies promised her that they would save the lives of her and her family, at the time of the Jewish conquest of the city.

Elevating the Tools of Immorality

The highest form of repentance is through using and elevating the identical tools employed for the previous sin. This kind of *teshuva* is called *teshuvat hamiskal*. For example, if someone used to cook milk and meat together daily, for a decadent non-Jewish restaurant, then the highest form of repentance would be elevating his cooking skills by cooking for a holy Jewish event, such as a wedding or *sheva bracha*. This kind of *teshuva* transforms the previous sins into merits. Perhaps the reason why Scripture mentions Rachav's previous occupation, calling her "the harlot" even after her conversion (*Yehoshua 6:22*), is to emphasize the greatness of her *teshuva*. *Davka* (specifically) from the lowest place of being a harlot, a person can seek refuge under the wing of Hashem and be saved from both physical and spiritual death. It was actually the extent of her prior sins that eventually brought her to convert and seek closeness with Hashem. Rachav saved the Jewish spies by "letting them down by the rope through the window" (*Yehoshua 2:15*) Rashi explains that by means of this same rope and window the adulterers used to come up to her. She said, "Master of the Universe! Through these I sinned, through these please forgive me! Through these I had my escapades. With these very tools of sin, I'm going to risk my life and let down these two Jewish spies." Rachav teaches us that human beings can use the exact tools of their failure to anchor themselves closer to the *Ribono shel Olam*, and merit to be accepted into the elite of *Klal Yisrael*. Rachav merited becoming the wife of Yeshoshua, and having eight prophets and *Kohanim* descend from her. They were: Yermiahu, Chilkiah, Shariah, Ma'aseha, Baruch ben Niriah, Chanmael and Shalom.... Rabbi Yehudah says even Chuldah the prophetess was descended from Rachav. If someone who came from a people [the Canaanites] about whom it states, "Don't keep any soul alive," could bring herself so close to Hashem, how much more so concerning the Jews when we keep the Torah. There are several pious female converts: Hagar, Osnat, Tziporah, Shifra, Puah, Bat Pharaoh, Rachav, Ruth and Yael the wife of Chaver the Keni (*Yalkut Shimoni Yehoshua 1:9*).

The Wall, the Rope and the Window

There are different opinions as to which tools of sin Rachav elevated through her *teshuva*. According to *Yalkut Shimoni* they were the wall, rope and window. These three things can be compared to the three main mitzvot of women: *Chalah*, Family Purity and Candlelight. The wall protects the home and teaches us proper boundaries, this corresponds to the mitzvah of *chalah*. Taking a piece of our bread and giving to the Kohen teaches us the proper boundary of holding ourselves back from grabbing everything for ourselves. Like the wall, the gift of *chalah* protects and blesses the rest of the fruits in our orchard. It is interesting that only after her realization of Hashem's oneness does Scripture emphasize that Rachav lived in the wall (*Yehoshua 2:15*). Now she has learned to place the proper wall around her being, which used to be open for all to take. However, she keeps a window open in order to interact with the outside world. She is learning when to open herself to others and how to elevate her vulnerability. Instead of being taken advantage of by men, now, with full

consciousness, she allows herself be vulnerable, by risking her life for the sake of saving these holy men of Israel. From the window light emanates into the home. This corresponds to the mitzvah of candlelight, which enlightens the home. With the rope you connect. This corresponds to the mitzvah of family purity through which a woman connects herself to her husband. Possibly, the rope can also symbolize how Rachav elevated her past sins and thus connected her past and her future.

The Flax and the Rope

According to the *Maharal of Prague*, it was the flax, the rope and the window that Rachav used to help the men who came to her. She would hide them with the flax, to save their reputation. Through these same three objects, she merited to rescue the spies. The Maharal explains that someone who commits illicit relations, sins first with his eyes. This can be compared to the window as we know the eyes are the windows of the soul. Afterwards he begins to sin with lustful thoughts, and finally, G-d forbid, through the deed itself. Just as flax is used to produce the rope, so is the thought (*hirhur*) the beginning of actual sin. The lustful thought is still present during the sin, in the same way as flax continues to be part of the rope. The rope is compared to the act itself, as the rope can be used to connect two people together for bad or for good (*Chidushei Agadot, Part Four, Page 74, Mesechet Eduyot*).

Becoming White as Snow

“She bound the scarlet cord in the window” (*Yehoshua 2:21*). The red thread of our *haftorah* ties together with the blue thread of this week’s *parasha* reading, where we read about the mitzvah of the *techelet* string in the *tzitzit*. Why was Rachav instructed specifically to hang a red thread of scarlet from her window as a sign to Yehoshua’s men that her family was to be saved? The color scarlet, in Hebrew is usually referred to as *tola’at shani*. The word “*tola’at*” means “worm” and “*shani*” refers to the dye (or the dyed material) obtained from the eggs of the insects which attach themselves to the kermes oak. The red color carries associations to Rachav’s previous occupation, such as the “red light” district. However, just as the red color of fire turns in to white ashes, the red string is a vivid symbol of no matter how immoral and wormy anyone has become, there is always hope of returning. Actually, the Hebrew word used for cord in our verse, is the very unusual “*tikva*,” which means hope, like in Israel’s anthem “*Hatikva*.” The exquisite Torah verse that we read in Shabbat *hachazon* eternally reminds us that “Although your sins be like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be like [white] wool” (*Yeshayahu 1:18*). Even if our sins are as striking as a red dye, through teshuva we can rise above them, like Rachav, the harlot, who became the wife of the leader of Israel.

Transforming the Fire of Lust into Passion for Holiness

While the color scarlet contrasted with white usually is a negative color symbolizing sin, The *Eishet Chail* uses the color of scarlet in the reverse way, to protect her household against the cold of snow. “She does not fear the snow for all of her household are clothed with scarlet” (*Mishlei 31:21*). The color of scarlet – deep red – is the color of fire. Perhaps we can say that the *Eishet Chail* has her own and her family’s fire in control. She protects her family by channeling the very same fire which usually causes people to sin, into fire and passion for Hashem’s mitzvot. One of the problems of our time is that even when a person is able to overcome his passion for sin; he sometimes forgets to remain hot

for holiness. This makes him susceptible to Amalek's influence, which cooled down Israel's desire and yearning for holiness. Pursuit of holiness such as Torah learning, *tefilah*, yearning for the Temple and for *Mashiach* requires deed, initiative and warmth. The scarlet string may symbolize how Rachav transformed her fire for immorality into the greatest passion for holiness.

Her Name of Space

Our Rabbis taught that Rachav was one of the four strikingly beautiful women in the world. While Yael evoked passion with her voice, Avigail by remembering her, Michal the daughter of Shaul by seeing her, Rachav's attraction was so great that she evoked passion only through mentioning her name (*Babylonian Talmud, Megilah 15a*). Her name "*Rachav*" literary means "wide." *Rav Tzadok of Lublin* explains, the advantage of the *ba'al tshuva* over the *tzaddik* is that when a crooked line is made into a straight line, the line becomes broader (*Sefer Chesbonot Charutz, Chapter 6*). It is interesting that "*Rachav – Broad*" represents the ultimate *Ba'al Teshuva* in the way she used the means to her sins for mitzvot. Likewise, her name is connected with widening the border, just as the Torah emphasizes that her house was in the wall, meaning the border of the city of Yericho, which in itself is a city on the border of the land of Israel. Rachav also had the key role in enabling Israel to conquer the border of Yericho and the entire Israel. By straightening herself she extended her borders to become part of the land of Israel.

Pious Convert

Rabbi Shmuel son of Nachman said this can be compared to a king who had an orchard wherein has planted rows of nut, apple and pomegranate trees, which he gave to his son. When his son would do his will, the king would return and see a beautiful plant in the world which he would uproot and plant in his orchard. However, when his son would not do his will the king would see a beautiful plant inside the orchard, and uproot it. Likewise, all the time that Israel is doing the will of G-d (the Place), He sees a Tzaddik among the nations of the world like Yitro, and Rachav and brings him to cleave to Israel. But at the time when Israel is not doing the will of Hashem, he sees a Tzaddik and righteous, kosher and fear of heaven among them and expel him from within them (*Midrash Rabah, Shir Hashirim, Parsha 6 Piska 10*).