

Haftarah Helper 5781: Shelach

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Joshua 2:1-24¹

After Moses' death, Joshua is confirmed as his successor², and immediately prepares to conquer Canaan. The Haftarah recounts his first act: covertly sending two spies³ to scout out the Israelites' initial conquest, the walled city of Jericho. The spies enter the residence of Rahab, a righteous gentile, who risks her life to save them, with subterfuge, from Jericho's king. She informs them that Canaan's residents know that God dried the Red Sea during the Exodus forty years earlier and that the Israelites recently defeated neighboring powerful kings, Sichon and Og. Echoing the Song of the Sea (Ex. 15:15-16), she describes the Canaanites' terror at these events and their understanding that God is giving their land to the Israelites. Rahab requests that she and her extended family⁴ be spared from the oncoming slaughter. After specifying what her family must do to be saved, the spies agree to the vow⁵. Rahab instructs the spies how to avoid capture by Jericho's king's men. The Haftarah concludes with the spies' resulting safe return to Joshua, to whom they privately transmit Rahab's reports. Unlike the twelve spies' public mission described in the Parashah, the two spies' covert mission was a complete success.

Haftarah Breakdown

Verse 1: Preparing to conquer the Land, Joshua covertly dispatches two spies to Jericho. They enter Rahab's residence in Jericho's exterior wall.

Joshua 2:1	יהושע ב:א
Joshua the son of Nun sent two men from Shittim to spy secretly, saying, "Go see the land and Jericho." They went, came to the house of an innkeeper [or: harlot ⁶] whose name was Rahab, and reclined [to sleep] there.	וַיִּשְׁלַח יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בְּנֵי־נֹון מִן־הַשְּׂטִיִּים שְׁנַיִם־אֲנָשִׁים מְרַגְלִים חָרָשׁ לֵאמֹר לְכוּ רְאוּ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ וְאֶת־יְרִיחוֹ וְיִלְכּוּ וַיָּבֹאוּ בֵּית־אִשָּׁה זֹנָה וּשְׁמָהּ רַחַב וַיִּשְׁכְּבוּ־שָׁמָּה:

Verses 2-8: Jericho's king hears that Rahab is harboring Israelite spies. Hiding them on her roof, she deceives him, stating that they fled the city. The king's men pursue them eastward towards their camp at the Jordan River.

Joshua 2:4	יהושע ב:ד
The woman took the two men and hid them. She said [to the king], "Indeed, the men came to me, but I do not know where they're from."	וַתִּקַּח הָאִשָּׁה אֶת־שְׁנֵי הָאֲנָשִׁים וַתַּצְפֵּנּוּ וַתֹּאמֶר כֹּן בָּאוּ אֵלַי הָאֲנָשִׁים וְלֹא יָדַעְתִּי מֵאֵי הָמָּה:

¹ With emendations, all translations are from Sefaria.org. To dedicate, comment, or subscribe, email haftarahhelper@gmail.com.

² Recounted in the [Haftarah of Simchat Torah](#), Joshua 1:1 - 1:18.

³ Bemidbar Rabbah 16:1 identifies them as Caleb and Phineas.

⁴ Rahab mentions no husband or children of her own.

⁵ During Jericho's downfall, the spies indeed spare Rahab and her family, who then live among the Israelites. (Josh. 6:22-25)

⁶ The Hebrew word, זֹנָה, bears both translations.

Verses 9-11: Rahab tells the spies that Canaan's residents know of the miracles and victories that God, who rules over all, has granted the Israelites. They are terrified of the Israelites and know He is giving them their land.

Joshua 2:11	יהושע ב:יא
[When] we heard [these things], our hearts melted; courage no longer arose in any man, on your account- for the Lord your God, He is God in heaven above, and on the earth beneath.	ונשמע וימס לבבנו ולא קמה עוד רוח באיש מפניכם כי ה' אלקיכם הוא אלקים בשמים ממעל ועל הארץ מתחת:

Verses 12-15: In return for her kindness to the spies, Rahab adjures them that the Israelites should spare her and her family during the conquest; they agree on the condition that she never reveal their visit.

Joshua 2:14	יהושע ב:יד
[The men] said to her, "Our life for yours [and your families', even unto] death- if you [all] do not tell of this, our business. [Then] it shall be, when the Lord has given us the land, that we will deal kindly and truly with you."	ויאמרו לה האנשים נפשנו תחיתכם למות אם לא תגידו את דברנו גלה וזה בתתה לנו את הארץ ועשינו עמך חסד ואמת:

Verses 16-21: Rahab frees the spies, directing them to hide in mountains to Jericho's west for three days. They instruct her to mark her window with a scarlet thread, and that only family members in her house will be saved.

Joshua 2:18	יהושע ב:יח
[You will not be saved unless,] when we come into the land, you shall bind this cord of scarlet thread in the window you lowered us from; you must [also] gather your father, mother, brothers, and all your father's household, unto you into [your] house.	הנה אנחנו באים בארץ את תקלת חוט השני הנה תקשרי בחלון אשר הורדתנו בו ואת אביך ואת אמיך ואת אחיך ואת כל בית אביך תאספי אליך הביתה:

Verses 22-24: After following Rahab's counsel, the spies return and report their findings to Joshua.

Joshua 2:24	יהושע ב:כד
They said to Joshua: "For the Lord has delivered the entire land into our hands. Moreover, the land's inhabitants have melted away before us."	ויאמרו אליהושע כיינתן ה' ביחנו את כל הארץ וגם נמגו כל יושבי הארץ מפנינו:

Connections

In the view of the Sages, Rahab was one of history's most beautiful women, a harlot from her youth who inspired irresistible lust in men. After encountering the spies at the age of 50, she converted powerfully to God and married Joshua. Despite her age, the Talmud asserts that an illustrious group of descendants came from their marriage.

Megillah 14b	מגילה י"ד עמוד ב
Eight prophets, who were also priests, descended from Rahab the harlot. They are: Neriah; [his son,] Baruch; Seraiah; Mahseiah; Jeremiah; [his father,] Hilkiyah; [Jeremiah's cousin,] Hanamel; [and Hanamel's father,] Shallum. Rabbi Yehuda says: "Huldah the prophetess was also a descendant of Rahab the harlot." [Regarding Huldah's husband,] it states, "...the son of Tikvah" (2 Kings 22:14); and [regarding Rahab's escape from Jericho] it states, "This cord of [tikvat] scarlet thread." (Josh. 2:18)	שמונה נביאים והם כהנים יצאו מרחב הזונה ואלו הן גריה ברוך ושריה מחסיה ירמיה חלקיה חנמאל ושלום רבי יהודה אומר אף חולדה הנביאה מבני בני של רחב הזונה היתה כתיב הקא בן תקנה וכתוב הקם את תקנות חוט השני