

Small But Mighty – Parashat Sh'lach L'cha

A beautiful *midrash* (rabbinic legend) tells of a mother and son who, after many years spent traveling in the desert, finally reached the Promised Land. Having seen only sand, rock, and parched grass all their lives, they were amazed by the luscious fruit trees and vineyards of *Eretz Yisrael*, the swollen fields of wheat and lush vegetation. Remembering the stories her own mother once told about the produce of Egypt so many years ago, the mother began to identify various items for her child: “You see these brown wooden pillars? They are called trees. And those bright purple spheres over there? Those are grapes, and they have the sweetest taste you could ever imagine.” The little boy was astonished. “I guess that God must have put these trees and grapes right into the ground for us to enjoy, right Mom?” he asked. The mother took her son’s hand and pointed to his pinky finger. “I want to tell you something incredible,” she began. “You see your little fingernail? Well, a farmer takes a seed that is even smaller than that. He plants it in the ground, and with water, sunshine, and air, a tree eventually grows tall and proud. All this, God has given us as a gift.” The little boy threw his mother a funny look. “It’s not nice to play tricks” he said. “Every day I have seen how God gives us manna from heaven and quail falling from the skies. I’ve heard the amazing story of how God parted the Red Sea and gave us Torah on Mount Sinai with thunder and lightning. But really, Mom! To think that such a large and strong tree can come from such a tiny, tiny seed? I don’t believe it for a minute. Something that miraculous could never be possible!”

As Jews, we know better than to be deceived by small size or number. Indeed, our history as a people bears witness time and again to unexpected survival against overwhelming odds – whether it is the little cruse of Chanukah oil that miraculously lasted for eight nights, the modern State of Israel, surrounded on all sides by hostile enemies far larger than she, or even the Jewish people itself – a small fraction of

the world's population that has endured for thousands of years despite unremitting persecution and near genocide. Our Bible is replete with underdog stories – David and Goliath, righteous Queen Esther and wicked Haman, the family narratives of Genesis where younger siblings constantly displace their older ones. Unlike the little boy of our *midrash*, we are not surprised when great strength and success originate from places most humble. Rather, that is the very story of our people.

In our *haftarah* for this morning, the second chapter of the book of Joshua, we encounter a woman whose tale is the very embodiment of this quintessential Jewish narrative of the unlikely hero. Rahab the Harlot is a thrice-marginalized individual: Canaanite – in the annals of Israelite history; female – in the days of male privilege; and a prostitute to boot – never a position that designates high status. Rahab consents to harboring two fugitive Israelite spies, placing herself and her family in great personal danger. Even when the king of Jericho demands that she turn these men over to the authorities, she protects them, insisting that the spies escaped earlier in the evening and encouraging the king's men to pursue after them to the Jordan River. All that Rahab asks for, in return, is that the spies pledge to protect her family and spare them when the Israelites come back to conquer Canaan. Rahab has heard of the might of the Israelite God and places more faith in these powers of Divinity than she places in the human authority of the Jericho king. She lets the Israelite spies out the window by rope, urging them to stay in the hills until their pursuers return empty-handed. In exchange, the spies agree to Rahab's appeal for clemency, telling the woman to place a scarlet cord around her window so as to indicate that her house be left unharmed when the Israelites return to conquer the land.

Parallels to our *haftarah* have, of course, been drawn with our Torah portion for the morning from the Book of Numbers, another story of spies sent to scout out the land of Canaan. But Biblical scholar Tikva Frymer-Kensky, well known to those of us in this community, suggests an alternative counterpoint to

Rahab's tale, emphasizing instead the very beginning of the book of Exodus, another place where, in her words, "the men who act for Israel are saved by women."¹ First, there are the parallels between Rahab's story and that of midwives Shifra and Puah, who attended to the women of Israel during their period of enslavement. Like Rahab, these brave midwives boldly defied the command of civil authority, putting their own lives in danger to save the Israelite baby boys. Like Rahab, they offered weak excuses to Pharaoh, choosing loyalty to the Israelite God over loyalty to the secular ruler. Next, there is the theme of "hiding" – Rahab placing the two spies amongst piles of flax in her attic and Moses' mother, Yocheved, tucking her son into an ark on the banks of the Nile. In fact, a highly unusual form of the Hebrew *l'tzafen* (to hide), is used in both of these incidents – the only two times that this particular verb form occurs in the entire Hebrew Bible, further drawing connection between the two stories. Finally, the red cord that hangs from Rahab's window reminds us of yet another crimson sign that denoted safety – the blood that marked the Israelite's doorposts on the night of their escape from Egypt. Just as Moses' leadership is succeeded by Joshua in the new era of conquest, so, too, have the women of the Exodus found a spiritual heir in the unlikely form of Rahab the Harlot.

So why *is* the theme of thwarted expectations, of the weak conquering the strong and the few vanquishing the many, such a prevalent Jewish trope? One possibility is that the stories of the Hebrew Bible were canonized during our people's period of exile, when they were living as a minority group under foreign rule. Just as the Torah ends not with entering Israel but rather with gazing upon its borders – a reminder to a nation dispossessed of its land that emotional attachment can be as important as physical presence – so, too, the idea that the meek and vulnerable could ultimately defeat the strong and sovereign must have had great psychological power for a small nation living under the authority of others. Frymer-Kensky takes this argument one step further, positing that the metaphor of the

¹ Reading the Women of the Bible, Tikva Frymer-Kensky, p.33-44.

righteous harlot not only provided hope and encouragement to the Israelite people but that it also taught them – and continues to teach us - an important lesson about God and what the Divine expects of us. In her words, “YHWH interrupts normative societal expectations by exalting the prostitute just as YHWH interrupted expectation by choosing the younger sons and freeing the slaves. The saving of Rahab is part of an example of God’s nature and Israel’s mission.” For Frymer-Kensky, the Jewish God, by definition, is one who cares about the weak and downtrodden. It is our responsibility to do the same.

I encountered Frymer-Kensky’s incredible analysis of Rahab a few years ago, and it completely changed the way in which I view our *haftarah* from this morning. To begin with, I love that Frymer-Kensky locates this one tale about a strong woman in the broader tradition of narratives of the same variety, connecting the episode back to the unsung female heroines of the Exodus story. While we are quick to praise Moses’ humble leadership and Aaron’s passionate intercessions on behalf of the people, we often forget that were it not for Miriam and Yocheved, Shifra, Puah, and Pharaoh’s daughter, our illustrious champions would never have come to be in the first place. Similarly, while we immediately recognize the bravery of the two fugitive spies and commend Joshua’s military acumen, the story of a little known Canaanite prostitute often slips by unnoticed – despite the fact that the text itself tries its best to make things otherwise. It is interesting to note that Rahab is named by the Biblical author while her two houseguests remain anonymous. In the story of the Exodus, too, lowly midwives Shifra and Puah bear their names proudly while powerful Pharaoh is referred to simply as the “new king.” In a work where names are significant, the Bible is tipping its hand and telling us – quite consciously – to whom we should pay attention and to whom we should bear no heed. Despite difficult circumstances, these extraordinary women find ways to do nothing less than change the very course of Jewish history.

Frymer-Kensky's juxtaposition of Egypt and Israel, exodus and conquest, also made me notice another striking place of contrast between these two narratives. While the Hebrew word for Egypt, *Mitzrayim*, means "narrow place," suggesting limitations and constraint, the Hebrew name of our protagonist Rahab, means "broad" or "wide," suggesting expansiveness and possibility. On the one hand, this seems a simple statement about slavery versus freedom, the confines of living under oppressive authoritarian rule versus the liberation of self-governance and autonomy. But it is not Israel that means "wide" nor is this title given to Joshua, whose own name, quite aptly, means "deliverance." "Wide" is the name of the Canaanite harlot, a choice which Frymer-Kensky sees as playfully ironic in that Rahab "is the 'broad' of Jericho." While Frymer-Kensky views Rahab's name as pejorative, indicating her "wide-open" ways, I wonder if the text might be interpreted differently. Perhaps Rahab – the Canaanite, female prostitute who utterly defies expectations and saves the Israelite spies – is meant to open our minds to the fact that heroes come in all shapes and sizes, all nationalities, genders, races, and professions. Rahab is "wide" indeed; she throws the playing field of leadership wide open.

I would like to suggest that Rahab's story is meant to reinforce the lessons of early Exodus, the lesson of the *midrash* with which I began this morning. It may be a comfort to remember that neither size nor status nor physical strength can ultimately dictate one's ability to succeed, but this is also a challenge – it means that we can never use our lack of size or status or physical strength to serve as an excuse not to act. Imagine how Israelite history might have played out differently were it not for the courageous Rahab. The two spies would have been killed, of course, but the story wouldn't have ended there. To lose two men to the enemy before conquest had even begun, when war had not even yet been waged – what impact might that have had on the fledgling Israelite army? Might they not have had a crisis of faith, much like their ancestors mentioned in our Torah portion this morning, giving up the fight in the face of early obstacles? "The Lord has delivered the whole land into our power, in fact all the

inhabitants of the land are quaking before us,” the spies report back after their encounter with Rahab (Joshua 2:9). Without that early boost of confidence and morale, would their company have had the strength to go on? Even a person as marginalized as Rahab can affect the entire course of Israelite history, our *haftarah* affirms. What in the world, then, is stopping us?

We look at a tiny seed or a scant cruse of oil or a dishonored harlot and it is not always easy to see the amazing potential that lies within. And so too, it is, with the circumstances of our own lives. Who am I, we ask ourselves, to take on this cause, or to fight this injustice, or to right this wrong; I’m just one person, I don’t know as much about the issue as the next guy or gal, there’s so very much to fix that my efforts will be but a drop in the bucket. People won’t listen to me, we worry, or worse they’ll think me arrogant or strident or a hypocrite; someone else would be better qualified to take the charge; I’m not really leadership material in the first place. Amongst all the voices telling us why we can’t be agents of change and deliverance in our world may our *haftarah*, this week, be one that tells us that we can. Heroes rise up from the most unlikely of places.

To think that a large and strong tree can come from a tiny seed is, perhaps, a leap of faith – the same sort of leap of faith and imagination that might inspire us, this Shabbat, to consider ourselves anew, with eyes wide open to both promise and responsibility. May we follow the example of a marginalized Canaanite prostitute and perhaps even change the world just a little bit for the better.

Shabbat Shalom.