

A Gendered Look at **Looking Through a Window**

Parashat Toledot

November 18, 2017

(Based on the work of Professor Aaron Demsky, Bar Ilan University)



Naomi Cassuto, *Sippur bemisparayim* (Paper cuts) Jerusalem, 2017

Genesis 26:8:

בראשית כו:ח וַיֵּהי כִּי אָרְכוּ לוֹ שָׁמַיִם
וַיִּשְׁקֹף אַבְיִמֶלֶךְ מִלְּוֹךְ פְּלִשְׁתִּים בְּעַד
הַחַלּוֹן וַיִּרְא וְהִנֵּה יִצְחָק מִצַּחֵק אֶת רֵבֶקָה
אִשְׁתּוֹ.

Gen 26:8 When some time had passed, Abimelech king of the Philistines **looked through the window**, and he saw Isaac being playful with his wife Rebecca.

Through whose window is Abimelech gazing?

Yehuda Kiel, Daat Miqra:

בעד החלון סובל שתי פירושים:
האחד בעד חלון ביתו=ארמונו,
והאחר בעד חלוק ביתו של
יצחק.... והכינוי מלך פלשתים
בא להטעם שההשקפה היתה
מארמון ביתו.

“Through the window” can be interpreted in two ways: One way is “through the window of his house=palace,” the other is “through the window of Isaac’s house.” ...
The use of the modifying phrase “king of the Philistines” comes to clarify that the looking was done from within [Abimelech’s] own house/palace.

Nahum Sarna (JPS commentary):

The definite article [“through THE window”] suggests a specific window, most likely the one in the outer court of the royal palace, at which the king showed himself to the people on ceremonial occasions.

Midrash Sechel Tov (12th century):

אין השקפה אלא מלמעלה למטה

The term *hashkafa* always implies from above to below.^[4]

Herman Gunkel (1862-1932):

The—very idyllic—scene is probably to be envisioned as follows. Isaac and Abimelech live across from each other on a narrow alley where one can see from the window of one house into that of the other.

Mishnah Bava Batra 3:7:

לא יפתח אדם לחצר השותפין פתח
כנגד פתח וחלון כנגד חלון

In a joint courtyard, a person may not make a door facing another person’s door or **a window facing another window.**

Midrash Lekach Tov (on Exodus 38:9):

מה טובו אהליך יעקב. אהלי המדבר, שהיה פתח זה שלא כנגד פתח אחר, לפי שאסור לפתוח פתח כנגד פתח שלא להסתכל בבית חבירו, “How goodly are your tents, O Jacob” – this refers to the tents in the wilderness, that were pitched in such a way that the entrance to one did not face an entrance to another. For it is forbidden to have an entrance opposite another entrance, so that one does not end up gazing into his friend’s home.

The Male Motif – A Window Allows One to Learn the Truth

Proverbs 7:6-23:

משלי ז': כי בחלון ביתי בעד אשנבי נשקפת. וְאָרָא בַּפְתָּאִים אֲבִינָה בְּבָנִים נֶעַר חָסֵר לֵב. עָבַר בְּשׁוּק אֶצְל פְּנֵה וְדָרָה בֵּיתָה יֵצֵעַד. Prov 7:6 From the window of my house through my lattice I looked out, ^{7:7} and I saw among the simple; noticed among the youths, a lad devoid of sense. ^{7:8} He was crossing the street near her corner, walking toward her house.

The Female Version: Quite a contrast

(1) The mother of Sisera (Judges 5:28-31):

שופטים ה:כח **Through the window peered** **Sisera’s mother; Behind the lattice she gazed:**
בְּעַד חַלְלוֹן נִשְׁקָפָה וַתִּיבֵב אִם סִסְרָא בְּעַד הָאֲשָׁנָב
מִדּוּעַ בִּשְׁשׁ רֶכֶב לָבוֹא “Why is his chariot so long in coming?
מִדּוּעַ אֶחְרוּ פַעְמֵי מִרְכָּבוֹתָיו. Why so late the clatter of his wheels?”

(The text continues: *The wisest of her ladies give answer; she, too, replies to herself: “They must be dividing the spoil they have found! A damsel or two for each man, spoil of dyed cloths for Sisera, spoil of embroidered cloths, A couple of embroidered cloths; round every neck as spoil!”*)

(2) **Michal, the daughter of Saul and the wife of David (2 Samuel 6):**

שמואל ב' ו' ט"ז ומיכל בת-שאול נשקפה
בְּעֵד הַחֲלוֹן וַתִּרְאֶה אֶת-הַמֶּלֶךְ דָּוִד
מִפְּנֵי וּמִכְרַכְרַךְ לִפְנֵי ה' וַתִּבְזֶה לוֹ
בְּלִבָּהּ. 2 Sam 6:16 “As the Ark of the Lord entered the City of David, Michal, daughter of Saul, **looked out of the window** and saw King David leaping and whirling before the Lord; and she despised him for it.”

(3) **Jezebel, the Queen Mother (2 Kings 9:30):**

מלכים ב' ט' ו' וַאִיזְבֵּל שִׁמְעָה וַתִּשֹׂם בְּפוּךְ עֵינֶיהָ
וַתִּטָּב אֶת-רֹאשָׁהּ וַתִּשְׁקֹף בְּעֵד הַחֲלוֹן. 2 Kings 9:30 When Jezebel heard of it, she painted her eyes with kohl and dressed her hair, and **she looked out of the window.**

Professor Aaron Demsky: The Window as an Expression of Distance

“The biblical stories use the window motif to underline the aloofness of these aristocratic women. **Unlike men** such as Abimelech and the narrator of Proverbs 7, **who gain the full picture of reality by peering through their windows**, the **women** who peer at the outside world through the window **are unable to comprehend fully the reality that would soon affect them directly.**” “The motif ... highlights ... the woman’s ... inability to get the full picture of what is occurring in the bright space of the outside world [by] peering through the window from the shadow of her home.”



“The Woman at the Window” --
Ivory plaque from Arslan Tash (Northern Syria)