

AVODAH: The Jewish Service Corps
Torah Portion: *Shelakh Lekha*

CENTERING THE MARGINS

This week's haftarah tells how the Israelites prepared to enter the land after 40 years' wandering in the desert. Joshua, their leader, sent spies to reconnoiter the city of Jericho, but the spies were nearly caught by the King. A local prostitute named Rahab hid them and saved their lives. In exchange for her assistance, she asked them to spare her family in the coming battle.

Joshua son of Nun secretly sent two spies from Shittim, saying, "Go reconnoiter the region of Jericho." So they set out and they came to the house of a harlot named Rahab and lodged there. The King of Jericho was told, "Some men have come here tonight, Israelites, to spy out the land." The King of Jericho thereupon sent orders to Rahab: "Produce the men who came to you and entered your house, for they have come to spy out the entire land." The woman, however, had taken the two men and hidden them. She said to the men, "I know that the Lord has given the country to you; for we have heard how the Lord dried up the waters of the Sea of Reeds for you when you left Egypt. Now, since I have shown loyalty to you, swear to me by the Lord that you in turn will show loyalty to my family. The men answered, saying, "We promise you, upon pain of death, if you do not disclose this mission of ours, we will show you true loyalty when the Lord gives us the land" She let them down by a rope through the window, for her dwelling was at the outer side of the city wall, and she lived inside the wall itself. She said to them, "Make for the hills..."

[Joshua, Chapter 2]

Jewish tradition teaches that not only did the Israelites keep their word to Rahab, but that God rewarded her as well by making her the ancestor of a line of priests and prophets.

Rabbi Ena Saba [said]: Eight prophets who were also priests were descendants of Rahab the prostitute. Rabbi Judah said: Huldah the prophetess was also one of her descendants. Rabbi Nahman said: She converted and Joshua married her.

[Megillah 14b]

According to this teaching, Rahab emerged from the margins of society to take a prominent place in the lineage of Israel. By identifying her as the ancestor of our teachers the prophets, the rabbis appear to be making a radically democratic point: courageous acts have the power to overcome even the most impenetrable social barriers. They can bring marginalized people to society's very center.

The idea that visionary leadership comes from the margins is hardly original with the rabbis. The Torah states that no Moabite or Ammonite shall enter the community of Israel (Deuteronomy 23:4). Yet Ruth the Moabite married a Jew named Boaz and became the great-grandmother of King David, the Hebrew Bible's most heroic figure (Ruth 4:18-22). Nor was Ruth the only marginalized woman among David's foremothers. Ruth's husband Boaz traces his lineage back to Peretz, who was conceived when a woman named Tamar disguised herself as a prostitute and slept with her father-in-law, Judah.(Genesis, Ch. 38)

The theme of greatness emerging from the margins is expressed in the Christian Scriptures as well. The Gospel of Mark identifies Rahab as Boaz's mother, making her not only the ancestor of Israel's greatest kings, but the foremother of Jesus. (Matthew 1:5)

QUESTION: Why do you think that tradition insists that our greatest heroes are born from women such Rahab, Ruth and Tamar?