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Report on the Rabbinic Dissertation Submitted by

Deanna Lory Douglas

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Ordination

From Harlot to Proselyte:
Rahav as a Symbol in Midrashic Literature

This thesis is a collection and close analysis of the extant midrashic traditions concerning Rahav, the prostitute who saves the lives of the Israelite spies in Chapter Two of the Book of Joshua. The author's intent is not only to understand how the rabbis' interpretations of this biblical text accentuate or depart from the *psbat*, but also to determine their attitudes towards converts, conversion, and the role that converts play within the Jewish community.

The first step in her investigation was a very close examination of the biblical text material and the subsequent traditional and modern commentaries written about it. She did so with an eye towards the textual foci of the commentaries, the questions they raised, and the themes which they highlighted. The commentaries led the author to several key issues concerning Rahav and her story, many of which the midrashim also underscored. Three themes seemed of primary importance: (a) the perception of God's role in the spy story and God's relationship with Rahav; (b) the motivation of Rahav and her essential nature--did she in fact know the God of Israel? (c) and finally, how did she come to a relationship with God--did she have a conversionary experience? These were the broad questions addressed which came as a result of the close textual, linguistic analysis in the Commentary literature. They are found in Part One of the thesis.

After closely analyzing the primary biblical material and highlighting the commentators' characterization of Rahav and the purposes she served in the story, the author then gathered the pertinent midrashic texts by utilizing the available verse indices and topical anthologies. Her research basically extended from classic compilations up to and including the midrashic anthologies. In the course of her collection of traditions and her analysis of them, she began to notice several key themes emerging from the rabbis' treatment of Rahav and other non-Israelite biblical personages, including the rabbinic attitudes toward converts, their relationship with God, the model they serve for Jews and non-Jews, and their importance in leading other individuals to recognize God's redemptive power. Having categorized the rabbinic material based on these key issues, the author chose to arrange her data into two basic sections.

The first section, labelled as Part Two, focuses upon the rabbis' views of conversion and the individual convert. "Rahav serves as a benchmark," according to the author, in this regard.

The rabbis' attitude towards her is generally very positive. They emphasize that her past was of no consequence, and it merely serves to show how far she was able to move towards a relationship with God. All that mattered was her recognition of God's presence and power and her willingness to act upon it. Rahav was not only a model for other non-Israelites, but her behavior was a lesson for Israel, too. As a result, she was rewarded for her actions through the progeny she produced. Finally, her actions were crucial in insuring Israel's survival and the coming of the messiah. All of this was the rabbis' way of stressing the importance of proselytes, who were perhaps even more important than the home-born themselves!

In Part Three, the author turns her attention to the results of such an understanding of Rahav on the rabbis' part. They stress that Rahav's story demonstrates that it is possible for every individual to experience God and to draw near to the Divine. Each of us, like Rahav, can be a vehicle for God's presence on earth. In addition, they stress the fact that the possibility of repenting is open to all and that acts of repentance have far-reaching consequences.

Although it is always difficult to gain a clear understanding of such a vast collection of material, the author has handled it in a highly competent and often creative manner. She not only presents the reader with many insights regarding specific biblical and rabbinic texts, but has offered a cogent midrashic picture of Rahav as shaped by the midrashic tradition. In interpreting and enlarging the biblical story of Rahav, the rabbis found a vehicle to address their own constituency. Through their description of her, they discuss the nature of conversion as open to all and the important contribution converts can make to Jewish life and survival. In addition, they conveyed the message to their own constituency that repentance, healing, and return to covenant was open to them as well.

The author also was able to highlight the changing and developing views of Rahav in particular and the convert in general over time. She demonstrated how the early, very positive attitude found in the Exegetic Midrashim, which clearly drew on tannaitic traditions and reflected a pre-Constantine Era, gave way to at best a mixed, even negative view in the Talmuds. Once Christianity became dominant, the rabbis were probably fearful of encouraging proselytizing. Finally in the later midrashic compilations, while they do not totally ignore Rahav's conversion, the clear emphasis is upon her repentance and her divine role.

Ms. Douglas is to be highly commended for her research, analysis and insightful comments on the textual material. She has demonstrated her ability both to analyze texts creatively and to integrate diverse material. In addition, she writes with clarity in a simple, straightforward style. Of course, more could be done to buttress her basic conclusions, e.g., comparing her findings with material on conversion and converts in halachic sources and focusing on issues of Znut. Nevertheless, this thesis provides us with an excellent prism through which to view how the rabbis extend and shape biblical material to buttress their own contextual agenda. The author has succeeded in showing how a very minor no-non-

Israelite biblical figure can play a major role on the stage of rabbinic drama.

Respectfully submitted,

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March 22, 1992

FROM HARLOT TO PROSELYTE:
RAHAV AS A SYMBOL IN MIDRASHIC LITERATURE

DEANNA LORY DOUGLAS

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
Requirements for Ordination

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Graduate Rabbinic Program
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To Dan

Part I: The Nature of Conversion	1
1. The Nature of Conversion	1
2. The Nature of Conversion	2
3. The Nature of Conversion	3
4. The Nature of Conversion	4
5. The Nature of Conversion	5
6. The Nature of Conversion	6
7. The Nature of Conversion	7
8. The Nature of Conversion	8
9. The Nature of Conversion	9
10. The Nature of Conversion	10
11. The Nature of Conversion	11
12. The Nature of Conversion	12
13. The Nature of Conversion	13
14. The Nature of Conversion	14
15. The Nature of Conversion	15
16. The Nature of Conversion	16
17. The Nature of Conversion	17
18. The Nature of Conversion	18
19. The Nature of Conversion	19
20. The Nature of Conversion	20
21. The Nature of Conversion	21
22. The Nature of Conversion	22
23. The Nature of Conversion	23
24. The Nature of Conversion	24
25. The Nature of Conversion	25
26. The Nature of Conversion	26
27. The Nature of Conversion	27
28. The Nature of Conversion	28
29. The Nature of Conversion	29
30. The Nature of Conversion	30
31. The Nature of Conversion	31
32. The Nature of Conversion	32
33. The Nature of Conversion	33
34. The Nature of Conversion	34
35. The Nature of Conversion	35
36. The Nature of Conversion	36
37. The Nature of Conversion	37
38. The Nature of Conversion	38
39. The Nature of Conversion	39
40. The Nature of Conversion	40
41. The Nature of Conversion	41
42. The Nature of Conversion	42
43. The Nature of Conversion	43
44. The Nature of Conversion	44
45. The Nature of Conversion	45
46. The Nature of Conversion	46
47. The Nature of Conversion	47
48. The Nature of Conversion	48
49. The Nature of Conversion	49
50. The Nature of Conversion	50
51. The Nature of Conversion	51
52. The Nature of Conversion	52
53. The Nature of Conversion	53
54. The Nature of Conversion	54
55. The Nature of Conversion	55
56. The Nature of Conversion	56
57. The Nature of Conversion	57
58. The Nature of Conversion	58
59. The Nature of Conversion	59
60. The Nature of Conversion	60
61. The Nature of Conversion	61
62. The Nature of Conversion	62
63. The Nature of Conversion	63
64. The Nature of Conversion	64
65. The Nature of Conversion	65
66. The Nature of Conversion	66
67. The Nature of Conversion	67
68. The Nature of Conversion	68
69. The Nature of Conversion	69
70. The Nature of Conversion	70
71. The Nature of Conversion	71
72. The Nature of Conversion	72
73. The Nature of Conversion	73
74. The Nature of Conversion	74
75. The Nature of Conversion	75
76. The Nature of Conversion	76
77. The Nature of Conversion	77
78. The Nature of Conversion	78
79. The Nature of Conversion	79
80. The Nature of Conversion	80
81. The Nature of Conversion	81
82. The Nature of Conversion	82
83. The Nature of Conversion	83
84. The Nature of Conversion	84
85. The Nature of Conversion	85
86. The Nature of Conversion	86
87. The Nature of Conversion	87
88. The Nature of Conversion	88
89. The Nature of Conversion	89
90. The Nature of Conversion	90
91. The Nature of Conversion	91
92. The Nature of Conversion	92
93. The Nature of Conversion	93
94. The Nature of Conversion	94
95. The Nature of Conversion	95
96. The Nature of Conversion	96
97. The Nature of Conversion	97
98. The Nature of Conversion	98
99. The Nature of Conversion	99
100. The Nature of Conversion	100

CONTENTS

Introduction	v
Part I: An Introduction to Rahav: The Biblical Material	1
Part II: Rabbinic Attitude to Conversion	21
A. The Possibility of Conversion	22
1. All Types of People are Able to Know God	27
2. One's Past does not Prevent Conversion	29
B. A Convert's Understanding of God	32
1. Converts can Know the Ubiquity of God	32
2. Rahav was Aware of the Awesome Power of God	35
3. Rahav Understood that God Accepted Repentance	39
4. Rahav Exalted God's Name by Her Actions	41
C. Converts Serve God's Purposes on Earth	44
D. Converts Serve as a Model of Proper Action	48
1. Rahav's Conversion Saved Many Lives	49
2. Rahav is Rewarded for her Conversion	51
3. Rahav's Behavior Should be a Lesson to Israel	53
4. Rahav's Actions Enhanced Israel	54
E. Converts are Crucial in Bringing Peace to Israel	55
F. A Convert is Equal to or Better than an Israelite	59
1. God Sees Converts in the Same Light as Israel	60
2. A Convert may be Better than Israel	66
Part III: The Results of Conversion: Knowledge of God and Redemption	69
A. An Individual Experience of God is Possible and Leads to Conversion	70
1. The Primary Response to God is Awe and Fear	70
2. Experience of God Leads the Convert to Action	72
3. The Reward for Good Action is God Drawing the Individual Near	74

B. The Breadth of God's Influence is Total; God's Presence is Everywhere	76
1. God is Present in the World	77
2. We are All Part of God's Plan, Fulfilling God's Purpose	78
3. God has a Special Relationship to Israel	82
C. The Possibility of Repentance Comes from One's Connection to God and has Far-reaching Consequences	83
D. The Essential Element of the Covenant: God's Redemptive Power	86

Conclusion 91

Bibliography 98

INTRODUCTION

An essential part of reading the Bible is the understanding that there is more there than meets the eye. Certainly the words are on the page, but what of the words which are not on the page? The dialogue of silent characters often speaks louder than those of eloquent speech. The missing scene, the events which occurred just before we enter, the people outside our view, all cause us to wonder. If we could only know the whole story, how much more would we know!

Knowing is in the purview of the knower. We come to a given text or event or moment with a lifetime of experiences and ways of constructing the world. We see revivals of a play which are entirely different from the original; we reread books years later and identify with different characters or understand the author's purpose in a new way. The work has not changed; the viewer and the reader have. Once, at Syracuse University, I heard Robert Frost being questioned by a relentless student about what one of his poems meant. The more he probed, the more Frost resisted. Finally, Frost responded that he didn't know what the poem meant; the reader needed to bring his understanding to it.

Frost probably didn't know that his answer was a very Jewish one. Rabbinic exploration of the biblical text through

the writing of midrashim is founded on the principle that the reader in seeing the text through his or her unique lens will add something to the larger understanding of what the words on the page mean. A Zen *koan* asks: "Who is God? The answer is: "Who is asking?" The midrashic version wants to know: "What does the text mean? The answer is similar: "Who's reading it?"

In the same manner, if it were possible to read all the midrashim written on a particular verse, or chapter, or person, or event, one's understanding would be greatly enlarged, or even changed. Did all these writers come to the same conclusions? If so, what was the commonalty of their experience which allowed this to occur? If not, what were the exigencies of their lives which caused them to create a new vision? Such is the power and the excitement of study in midrash. Another benefit is to be gained from examining the body of midrashim on a single topic. While it is not mathematically possible, the whole may indeed be greater than the sum of its parts. From the whole may come a vision which was not understood or even known by any of the individual writers of midrash. Such a vision expands one's understanding of Judaism and may, in fact, lead to new awareness for one's own life.

This short statement about my understanding of the nature and some of the purposes of midrash is not merely a philosophical perspective. It has guided my research of which

this thesis is the result. Thus, my attachment to the genre of midrash becomes clear. But yet to be clarified is reason for the particular focus of this study: Rahav the harlot. Of all the possibilities for midrashic investigation in the *Tanakh*, why choose a Canaanite prostitute?

My initial interest in her was engendered by Rabbi Bernard Mehlman of Boston who shared some of his research on Rahav in a *shiur* he gave during his tenure as the Rabbinic Alumnus-in-Residence at H.U.C.- J.I.R., New York in the spring of 1989. His presentation of several texts from the Babylonian Talmud and midrashic collections gave me an early look at the power of midrash to enlarge the original text. When I began to consider topics for my own midrashic investigation for this rabbinic thesis, I had several criteria. I wanted to study an area that had not been a particularly common or popular one for scholars. That meant, more likely than not, so-called minor biblical figures or events. I was also concerned about a tendency which I believed to be true that the women of the *Tanakh* were much less studied than the men. Thus, I felt it important to make a small dent in that long list of little-known women. Finally, I wanted to study someone who was important enough to the midrashic writers that there was a significant body of midrashim about her.

The final selection of Rahav as the focus of my rabbinic thesis occurred at the time of writing my senior sermon. The

parashah for the week of my sermon was *Beshallah*, the Haftarah for which was the story of Deborah from the Book of Judges. It was not Deborah, but Yael who caught my attention. Here was a Canaanite woman who risked her life to aid the Israelite cause in capturing the Land of Israel. What motivated her? Was she noted, rewarded, praised in rabbinic commentaries or midrash? No, in fact she was all but ignored. From her, I began to investigate other non-Israelite women who were a support to Israel. The one who received the most attention in rabbinic literature was Rahav, but not for the reasons which had led me to her in the first place. And so this thesis is an attempt to comment on the issues of the rabbis in singling out Rahav of all Canaanite women.

An attempt was made to read all the extant midrashim about Rahav. Yet one never knows when another document will be uncovered, or a volume will be found which contains one more midrash. I began my search with *Midrash Rabbah*, Ginzberg's *Legends of the Jews*, the *Encyclopedia Talmudit*. I checked all the references in Hyman's *Torah Haketuvah v'Hamesorah* to the verses in the Book of Joshua. Periodical indices and bibliographic works of modern scholarship led to recent articles. One clue led to another. The bibliography in one source directed me to a reference in another. English compilations of rabbinic commentaries led to lesser-known midrashim. While one can never know if one has, indeed, read everything, at a certain point, some repetition in sources

led to the conclusion that the body of midrash available had been found. From that point, thought and then writing held sway.

The body of the thesis is divided into three parts, moving from the biblical text to the midrashim to the conclusions which may be drawn from them. In Part I, the biblical text of the story of Rahav is considered. Both traditional commentaries and modern biblical scholarship were examined to see first what issues they addressed in their reading the relevant biblical verses for their plain meaning. It is no surprise that they saw the text from very different perspectives. What might be surprising is that they raised many of the same questions about the construction of the narrative and the role Rahav played in the Israelite seizure of Jericho.

Part II focuses on the primary concern of the midrashim about Rahav. From the Talmuds and the earliest of midrashic collections to the most recent, Rahav is linked with the topic of conversion. The rabbis consider many questions about converts and the nature of conversion. Is conversion possible, and if so, what is the relationship of the convert to God? What role does the convert play in God's plan on earth, and particularly, for Israel? What is the relationship of the convert to the Israelite community? For all these questions which are of a general nature, Rahav serves as the example.

Having referred to Rahav's conversion whenever they speak about her, the rabbis turn to their understanding of the results of that conversionary experience. Part III considers those questions. What is the relationship of conversion to repentance and vice versa? In what way does the act of conversion reveal the redemptive power of God which is the essence of the covenant?

With all these questions in mind, we may turn to Rahav the harlot to see how she spoke to the midrashic mind and how she still speaks to us.

PART I

**AN INTRODUCTION TO RAHAV:
THE BIBLICAL MATERIAL**

1. *John M. Vicker, "The Rahav Sage (Isaiah 11:1-9) and
Tradition-Historical Observations, The Use of the Old Testament in the
New and Other Essays, James M. Bird, ed. (Dallas: 1971), p. 114.*

The story of Rahav the harlot appears in the Book of Joshua. It virtually encompasses the second chapter, with what might be seen as an epilogue in the sixth chapter. She appears, holds center stage, and disappears from the biblical text. Yet while there, she is compelling, articulate, and intriguing. This part will examine both the biblical text and the major commentaries, both traditional and modern, as an attempt to understand the *pshat*, the plain sense of the biblical text. These commentaries will prove useful in identifying the key questions and presenting the difficulties in understanding the biblical text. Only after a clear view of the *pshat* is seen will we be able to turn to a more symbolic layer of meaning in the midrash.

Chapter 2 of the Book of Joshua as analyzed by Gene M. Tucker has the following structure:¹

- I. / Introductory report of Joshua's sending the spies and their arrival in Jericho (1)
- II. Account of events in Jericho (2-21)
 - A. First scene: Rahav hides the spies (2-7)
 - 1. The report to the king and his response (2-3)
 - 2. General report that Rahav hid the spies (4a)

¹ Gene M. Tucker, "The Rahab Saga (Joshua 2): Some Form-Critical and Traditio-Historical Observations, *The Use of the Old Testament in the New and Other Essays*, James M. Efird, ed. (Durham, N.C.: 1972), pp. 73-4.

3. Rahav's response to the men sent by the king (4b-5)
 4. Specific report that Rahav hid the spies (6)
 5. The pursuit by the king's men (7)
- B. Second scene: the agreement between Rahav and the spies on the roof (8-14)
1. Introduction (8)
 2. Rahav's speech to the spies (9-13)
 - a. Recitation of the history of salvation and account of the fear of Israel (9-11)
 - b. Covenant request (12-13)
 - 1) Request for an oath and a sign (12)
 - 2) Plea for herself and her family (13)
 - 3) Response of the spies: their oath (14)
- C. Third scene: oath at the window (15-21)
1. Rahav lets the spies down through her window (15)
 2. Her instructions for escape (16)
 3. The spies oath and instructions to Rahav (17-20)
 - a. Promise of faithfulness to the oath (17)
 - b. Instructions (18)
 - c. Conditions of the oath: promise and threat (19-20)
 4. Rahav's acceptance (21a)
 5. Report of the departure of the spies and the tying of the cord (21b)

Tucker points out that there is both an overall narrative framework to the chapter which presents the action to the reader as well as three conversational vignettes. In each, Rahav is the central speaker, engaging first the king's messengers and, in the latter two, the spies. To look at the chapter thematically, it is possible to see two main themes intertwined: first, the mission of the spies and second, Rahav's actions and statements. It is the latter theme that is of primary concern here. What Rahav did and said, why she acted thus, and what inferences may be drawn from that exploration are the considerations we shall explore.

2:1 "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 Rahav and lodged there."

The story begins after the mourning period for Moses has ended, and after Joshua has taken the reins of power and leadership of the Israelites. His task is to lead the Israelites in entering, conquering and settling the land of Israel. To begin this enormous undertaking, he sends two spies to survey the place of entry, Jericho. So far the verse follows logically. But the second part is something of a surprise. For not only do they stop at the house of a harlot, they stay there.

The rabbinic commentators are uncomfortable with the fact that the spies go to a harlot's house. Musar HaNevi'im says that the names of the spies were not mentioned in order to spare them the embarrassment of being associated with a harlot. Alshich and Malbim, in an attempt to keep the mission of the spies pure, say that they only went to Rahav's house because all the princes and kings of the land patronized her and used her as a confidante. Thus, she would know all the secrets of the government and have an understanding of the frame of mind of the leaders as well as the people of the land. Malbim further apologizes for the spies by saying that they went to her house because the Canaanites would never think to look for them there, as prostitution was repugnant to Jews. Me'am Lo'ez exonerates the spies by saying that they never had an impure thought while

they were under her roof and left as pure as when they entered. Moreover, they saw that her name was an omen, since *rahav* can mean 'wideness, openness, and generosity.' Not only was she generous with her body; she also had a generous spirit and was open to God. Thus, they understood that she would protect them.

The question of Rahav's occupation also causes great consternation among the commentators. Targum Jonathan, which Rashi seems to accept, says that a *zonah* is not a harlot, but *pundekita*, an innkeeper, a seller of foods. Radak is not willing to let her off so easily and says that just as a seller of food will sell to anyone, so will a harlot. Abravanel seeks a compromise by saying that anyone who ran an inn (i.e., a brothel) sold food as well as sex.

Modern commentators dismiss the possibility that Rahav was a cultic prostitute; if she had been, she would have been called *gedeshah*, not *zonah*.² Robert Boling further suggests that placing Rahav in a brothel served to remind readers of an often close connection between the military and prostitution. Marten Woudstra thinks that the spies went to her brothel in order to escape detection, as that was a logical place for men to frequent.³ John Gray suggests that 'the house' of Rahav may mean, in fact, 'the family' of

² Robert G. Boling, *Joshua: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary, The Anchor Bible*, (Garden City, N.Y.: 1982), p. 144.

³ Marten H. Woudstra, *The Book of Joshua*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: 1981), pp. 69-70.

Rahav, foretelling Rahav's concern for her blood relations later on in the story.⁴ He further questions whether this particular group might not have been known by the Israelites as particularly hospitable, thus making the spies arrival and her actions more natural. None of the apologetics which are so evident in the rabbinic commentaries are evident in these discussions.

2:2. "The king of Jericho was told, 'Some men have come here tonight, Israelites, to spy out the country.'"

The word *hinei*, 'here,' can refer either to the land or the house of Rahav. Abravanel takes it to mean the latter. He reasons that since they went to such a disreputable place, their presence was reported to the king; thus he knew of their existence. Me'am Lo'ez agrees that 'here' means Rahav's house, but for a different reason. As the Canaanites knew that the Israelites were massing for an attack on the city, they were so paralyzed with fear that no man had the strength to go to a brothel. Thus, anyone who did visit Rahav must be a foreigner.

2:3. "The king of Jericho thereupon sent orders to Rahav: 'Produce the men who came to you and entered your house, for they have come to spy out the whole country.'"

Several questions are raised by this verse. The first is to understand why the king did not take the men out of her

⁴ John Gray, *Joshua, Judges and Ruth*, *New Century Bible*, (Greenwood, S.C.: 1967), p. 53.

house by force. Ahavat Yehonatan says that Rahav's house was a place used for idolatrous worship and thus, a place of asylum. The king, therefore, could not take them by force. Another explanation is given in Me'am Lo'ez that Rahav was respected by the community and the king did not wish to get into a dispute with her. This also addresses the question of why the king of Jericho felt that he had to explain to Rahav why he wanted to seize some of the guests in her house. After all, he was a king, she an innkeeper/harlot; he should not have to make excuses for his actions.

2:4. "The woman, however, had taken (*vatiqach*) the two men and hidden them. 'It is true,' she said, 'the men did come to me, but I didn't know where they were from.'"

The two points of discussion in the traditional commentaries are about Rahav hiding the spies, and the meaning of what she said to the king. Radak says that she hid them before the messengers came, stating that the *vav* of *vatiqach* can refer to an action already completed as well as reversing the tense of the verb. A further question is whether she hid one spy or two; this midrashic issue is raised because in one place we are told that "she hid them" while in another it says that "she hid him."⁵ How much Rahav reveals to the king is in some dispute. Lev Aharon says that she admits being deceived by the spies while according to

⁵ See Part II, p. 57 in this regard.

Abravanel, she says only that the men came to have sexual relations with her.

Boling also addresses the problem of a singular verb for hiding the spies used in one place and a plural verb in another. He suggests that this is an issue of no consequence, since "an indifference to logical details in Hebrew storytelling" was common.⁶

2:5. "'And at dark when the gate was about to be closed, the men left; and I don't know where the men went. Quick, go after them, for you can overtake them.'"

The gate could refer either to the city gate or to the gate to Rahav's house; Metsudat David states the former, while Abravanel and Malbim, the latter. Not only did the spies leave abruptly, according to Rahav, but she did not know where they were going. Woudstra accepts that the gate referred to is the city gate.⁷

Did Rahav lie to the king's messengers? Woudstra cites B. Holwerda as saying that "'truth' in Israel is something different from 'agreement with fact,'⁸ It means 'loyalty toward neighbor and the Lord,'" thus, Rahav's words were not a lie. Leaving aside the clearly negative implications of Holwerda's comments, he shows that Rahav's conversion is

⁶ Boling, *Joshua: A New Translation*, p. 145.

⁷ Boling, *Joshua: A New Translation*, p. 146.

⁸ B. Holwerda, *Jozua*, (Seminariedictaat: ND), p. 8 in Woudstra, *The Book of Joshua*, p.70.

evident to the reader quite early in the narrative, a point missed by other commentaries.

2:6. "Now she had taken them up to the roof and hidden them under some stalks of flax which she had lying on the roof."

One issue here is how involved and thorough Rahav was in her secreting the spies. Some commentators state that this verse is an elaboration of verse five by telling how she hid the spies (Radak), while others say that she hid them a second time to make sure that they would not be discovered (Metsudat David). That Rahav chose to hide them in flax is important to Me'am Lo'ez, who insists that Rahav knew that flax (and the linen made from it) had special protective qualities against magic, which the Canaanites would undoubtedly use against the spies. This shows her making an extra effort to protect the spies.

Another problem, raised by Woudstra, is the fact that the king's messengers were immediately trusting of Rahav and so persuaded by her words that they did not search the house.⁹ He cites this as a sign of Divine providence. It is interesting to note that none of the traditional commentaries raise this issue, perhaps because it was assumed to be so.

2:7. "So the men pursued them in the direction of the Jordan down to the fords; and no sooner had the pursuers gone out than the gate was shut behind them."

⁹ Woudstra, *The Book of Joshua*, p.71.

Which gate was shut and who shut it is the focus of the rabbinic commentators. Malbim, whose analysis is accepted by Woudstra,¹⁰ suggests that the king's messengers shut the city gate before taking up their search in case the spies were still in the city. On the other hand, Rashi and Radak explain that Rahav's servants shut the gates of her house to prevent the king's messengers from returning. Me'am Lo'ez and Abravanel see Rahav still actively involved and add that the servants did so at her explicit command.

2:8. "The spies had not yet gone to sleep when she came up to them on the roof."

The commentators see Rahav as continuing to be stealthy in her actions in support of the spies. Me'am Lo'ez says that she walked on the flax to awaken them so they would not be frightened, while Alshich says that she went onto a roof above them so that their conversation would not be heard by the other guests. He adds, in what seems an unlikely comment to make about a harlot, that she also did not want to appear 'too forward' by coming up to where the men were lying.

2:9. "She said to the men, 'I know that the Lord has given the country to you, because dread of you has fallen upon us, and all the inhabitants of the land are quaking before you.'"

¹⁰ Woudstra, *The Book of Joshua*, pp. 70-71.

This is understood by the rabbinic commentaries as the opening statement leading to Rahav's conversion. Me'am Lo'ez points out that the word *yadati*, 'I know,' is used to show that she had absolute certainty about this statement. Malbim says that Rahav gives two reasons for her understanding that the land has been given by God to Israel, whereas Abravanel says that Rahav states three separate opinions: first, "I know that the Lord has given the country to you;" second, "dread of you has fallen upon us;" and third (in v. 10), "For we have heard how the Lord dried up the waters of the Sea of Reeds." This leads directly to her conversion in v. 11.

Boling sees an active involvement of God and a clear relationship between God and Rahav in this verse.¹¹ The entire episode of Rahav and the spies is reflective of God as 'Divine Warrior:'

The spies are saved and their mission is accomplished because of Rahab's [sic] intervention inspired by faith in Yahweh. They are entirely passive, the classic illustration that Yahweh and not men wins wars.¹²

Boling points out that *yadati* is the sign of a covenantal relationship between God and Israel, citing Amos 3:2 in support: "You only have I known (*yadati*) of all the families of the earth..." This further suggests that Rahav had converted by this time.

¹¹ Boling, *Joshua: A New Translation*, pp. 146-147.

¹² D.J. McCarthy, "The Theology of Leadership in Joshua," *Biblica* 52 (1971), pp. 173-174 as found in Boling, *Joshua: A New Translation*, p. 151.

The theme of redemption, both immediate and future is evident here to Woudstra.¹³ He notes the connection between the redemption at the Sea with the present redemption and links Rahav's words to the ultimate redemption at the end of time. This understanding of hers, he says, leads to her conversion (v. 11), although the words which she speaks are as reflective of "pagan literature" as they are of the Bible. Gray adds to this image in pointing out that *namogu*, 'quaking,' can also mean 'melt,' i.e., 'lose coherence.' The Arabic root of the same word, he notes, is used in the Koran to describe "the confusion and incoherence of waves and the helpless bodies of the damned weltering in a sea of fire."¹⁴ The parallel image to the bodies of Pharaoh's armies in the Sea is obvious, and was likely in Rahav's mind as she spoke these words.

2:10. "'For we have heard how the Lord dried up the waters of the Sea of Reeds for you when you left Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og the two Amorite kings across the Jordan, whom you doomed.'"

This statement is support for Rahav's conclusion that the land is to belong to the Israelites. According to Abravanel, if God can part the waters, then it is clear that God can, and will, do anything.

¹³ Woudstra, *The Book of Joshua*, pp. 71-72.

¹⁴ Gray, *Joshua, Judges and Ruth*, p. 53.

2:11. "When we heard about it, we lost heart, and no man had any more spirit left because of you; for the Lord your God is the only God in heaven above and on earth below."

Here is Rahav's statement of conversion, acknowledging the Lord alone. The 'it' here refers to the actions of God at the Sea. Thus, Abravanel concludes, the 'you' mentioned both here and in v. 9 must refer to the Lord, since it was God's actions, and not those of Israel, which caused the fear of the Canaanites.

2:12-13. "Now, since I have shown loyalty to you, swear to me by the Lord that you in turn will show loyalty to my family. Provide me with a reliable sign that you will spare the lives of my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them, and save us from death."

Many commentators including Ibn Ezra, Radak and Ralbag, say that Rahav understands the true meaning of *chesed*, translated here, loyalty. If the spies repaid her, obligation for obligation, they should rescue only her, but she is asking for a like measure of *chesed* from the spies in wanting her family to be saved as well. Not only does Rahav understand *chesed*, she also knows the details of taking an oath. Malbim says that when Rahav says 'swear to me,' she is creating a condition which cannot be nullified once the spies accept. Likewise, he points out, her use of the name of God strengthens the oath. According to Me'am Lo'ez, Rahav also understands that the action of the spies will save her in this life, whereas her conversion will save her soul for the

life to come. As for saving her property, she is totally unconcerned, further showing her lofty response.

Modern commentators echo these traditional perspectives. Boling notes that Rahav understands the nature of oath-taking to be identical with making a covenant.¹⁵ The core of the covenant is *chesed*, which is a word difficult to translate. It is variously rendered as mercy, loving kindness, loyalty, but most accurately understood as 'covenant-loyalty.' Gray comments that the idea of *chesed* is mutually understood by both Rahav and the spies.¹⁶ Woudstra points out Rahav's attention to her extended family and her unselfishness in including them in the covenant.¹⁷

The phrasing of verse 13 suggests that Rahav is making two different requests. Malbim says that the first is to allow her family to live, whereas the second would allow them to convert, as she did, so as also to be saved in the world to come. Rahav asks for salvation only for her family of origin, and not for her husband and children, according to Abravanel, because, being a harlot, they were all the family she had.

2:14. "The men answered her, 'Our persons are pledged to yours, even to death! If you do not disclose this mission of ours, we will show you true loyalty when the Lord gives us the land.'"

¹⁵ Boling, *Joshua: A New Translation*, p. 147.

¹⁶ Gray, *Joshua, Judges and Ruth*, p. 54.

¹⁷ Woudstra, *The Book of Joshua*, pp. 73-74.

Since the spies do not use the same language as Rahav in replying to her, some question exists as to whether they actually made an oath, or only a promise. In either case, it is clear to Radak that the spies say that they will kill anyone who tries to kill her or her family, since they use the plural form of 'you.' They also issue a guarded warning that their words have no force if she or some member of her family discloses the agreement. Me'am Lo'ez presents another caveat from the spies to Rahav. Their fulfilling the agreement is contingent on God giving Israel the land, whenever that happens; only then will the spies be able to fulfill their promise to Rahav.

Woudstra attempts to clarify the question of whether or not the spies took an oath by showing that the phrase which they use in agreeing to her terms, *chesed v'emet*, "faithfulness and truth," is the "standard expression for acts done and kindness shown in connection with covenantal agreements."¹⁸

2:15. "She let them down by a rope through a window -- for her dwelling was at the outer side of the city wall and she lived in the actual wall."

Rahav's life as a harlot comes to the foreground in the commentaries on this verse. Rashi says that the rope and window were the same that her clients used to enter her house

¹⁸ Woudstra, *The Book of Joshua*, p. 74.

for licentious purposes. The window, which faced out beyond the wall, was used rather than the door, according to Radak, so as not to arouse the suspicions of the neighbors who would hear the bolt of the gate opening. Alshich reminds us that the gate was bolted by the king's messengers and so could not be opened from the inside.

2:16. "She said to them, 'Make for the hills so that the pursuers may not come upon you. Stay there in hiding three days, until the pursuers return; then go your way.'"

Rahav gives the spies precise information about how long they should remain in hiding. Radak presents a purely logical explanation, i.e., Rahav estimated that the pursuer would need one day to go from Jericho to the Jordan, one day to search and one day to return, thus accounting for three days. Rashi states that the fact that Rahav was knowledgeable about how long the spies needed to hide in the mountains showed that the Shechinah rested on her.¹⁹ Me'am Lo'ez, asserts that, because of the three days of Abraham's journey in the Akedah, and because of the three days that Israel would stand at Sinai, Rahav knew that God would never let the righteous be in danger for more than three days.

2:17-18 "But the men warned her, 'We will be released from this oath which you have made us take [unless] when we invade the country, you tie this line of crimson cord to the window through which you let us down. Bring your father, your mother, your brothers, and all your family together in this house.'"

¹⁹ See Part II, p. 64 for a fuller discussion of this idea.

One point in question here is the oath which the spies took. Rashi says that the oath was conditional on Rahav's displaying the sign for the spies to see. If she did not, they were absolved of the oath. Ralbag argues, rather, that this statement of the spies restricts and limits their oath because they agree to save only those relatives in the house with her. If they had not so restricted it, all of Canaan could claim to be a relative of Rahav.

The nature of the crimson cord occasions much discussion in the commentaries. Instead of cord, Targum Jonathan reads the phrase *tiqvāt* (תִּקְוָה) *choot hashani*, 'line of crimson cord,' to mean 'a border of a red cloth.' But to Rashi, it is only a line, *gav* (גַּב), or rope. Radak sees more; the cord is made from fibers of red linen. Metsudat David and Me'am Lo'ez comment that the use of the demonstrative pronoun 'this' indicates that the cord is the very rope by which the spies escaped through the window. Me'am Lo'ez further draws a connection between the line, *tiqva*, and hope, *tiqva*, in that the cord was Rahav's hope for salvation. The cord is red as a reminder of the sins of which she repented, reflective of, "If your sins are scarlet, they will become white as the snow" (Isa 1:18).

Modern commentators focus on the crimson color of the cord. Gray suggests that such a prophylactic use has

traditions in the culture of the area.²⁰ He cites as examples the crimson cord attached to the entry to the Temple while the scapegoat is being destroyed in the wilderness (Mishnah Yoma 6:8), and the blood of the Paschal lamb on the lintels of the Israelites on the night of the passover in Egypt. Woudstra notes that some Church Fathers have connected salvation provided by the crimson cord with salvation through the blood of Jesus.²¹ He warns, however, of problems with this tendency to typological connections, and urges a caution that Gray did not seem to exhibit.

2:19-20 "If anyone ventures outside the doors of your house, his blood will be on his head and we shall be clear. But if a hand is laid on anyone who remains in the house with you, his blood shall be on our heads. And if you disclose this mission of ours, we shall likewise be released from the oath which you made us take."

Me'am Lo'ez points out that even though the spies never actually say, at any time in the story, "we swear," this verse shows that they felt bound by their obligations to Rahav and her family. Clearly, a strong bond had been created between her and the two spies.

2:21 "She replied, 'Let it be as you say.' She sent them on their way and they left; and she tied the crimson cord to the window."

The expression 'let it be as you say,' is explained by Abravanel as Rahav understanding why the spies needed to make

²⁰ Gray, *Joshua, Judges and Ruth*, p. 52.

²¹ Woudstra, *The Book of Joshua*, p. 75.

a new agreement with her, as the first was under her coercion. Me'am Lo'ez says that her words show her acceptance of the spies as righteous men, for she says, "Let it be as you say," not "...as you swore." It did not matter to her whether they actually swore an oath or not; she knew that they would uphold their words. Not only does she believe and trust them, but she blesses them before they depart, according to Radak.

The verse says that she tied the crimson cord in the window. But when did she do this? Radak says that the verse merely informs us that she did so at a later time. But Abravanel and Malbim say that she did so immediately, for to wait until the invasion, might lead her neighbors to conclude that she was signaling to the enemy, and they would kill her. In a modern view, Woudstra concludes that the placement of this information is merely the style of the narrative and tells nothing about when the cord was actually tied to the window.²²

The commentaries, both rabbinic and modern, lead us to consider certain issues about Rahav and her story. Questions of word origins, source analysis and the like, while having merit, are for the expert in modern biblical scholarship. This paper, rather, will focus on thematic issues. Three

²² Woudstra, *The Book of Joshua*, pp. 75-76.

themes seem evident. Primary importance must be given to the conception of God's role in this story. What is the nature of God's relationship with Israel, with the spies in particular, and with Rahav? Is there any commonalty of experience of God? A second focus is Rahav, herself. What motivates her to act and speak as she does? How does she acquire, and what is the nature of, her understanding of God? Does she have a conversionary experience, and if so, what is its effect? What causes her to care for others, to act in such a selfless way, to risk her life for the spies, and to insist on protection for her family as well as for herself? And, finally, how did it happen that a woman who was dependent on men for her livelihood and for the good graces of those in power, became so independent and assertive in her actions? The last theme may be considered from the perspective of the author: What attitudes were held toward outsiders, toward sinners, both those without remorse and those who were repentant, and toward proselytes?

More specific questions are raised by the commentators. What is the symbolism of the crimson cord to both Judaism and Christianity? Does it matter that Rahav was allowed to live? Is there any change in the way she is viewed over time, both in the rabbinic literature and in a more modern perspective?

The remainder of this study will attempt an analysis of how the world of midrash attempted to answer these questions.

PART II

RABBINIC ATTITUDE TO CONVERSION

The Talmudic sources on conversion are scattered in the Mishnah, Gemara, and Midrash. The most important sources are in the Talmud, particularly in the tractate *Yevamot* and *Gittin*. The Talmudic sources on conversion are scattered in the Mishnah, Gemara, and Midrash. The most important sources are in the Talmud, particularly in the tractate *Yevamot* and *Gittin*. The Talmudic sources on conversion are scattered in the Mishnah, Gemara, and Midrash. The most important sources are in the Talmud, particularly in the tractate *Yevamot* and *Gittin*. The Talmudic sources on conversion are scattered in the Mishnah, Gemara, and Midrash. The most important sources are in the Talmud, particularly in the tractate *Yevamot* and *Gittin*.

Rahav serves as a benchmark for us to understand the attitude of the rabbis to conversion. It may be assumed that conversion was a topic both fraught with tension and full of hope. It was clearly a way to increase the size and power of Israel, to say nothing of spreading the truth of the One God. But who was eligible to become part of Israel? What role would these converts have vis-a-vis Israel? What would the other peoples, with and under whom the Jews lived, think of the Jews for converting some of their members? And what if two or more groups were competing for the affections and affiliations of the same people? The Jews were, after all, a subject people and could not afford to alienate those with power over them.

A. THE POSSIBILITY OF CONVERSION

The Babylonian Talmud reflects this apprehension and ambivalence of the Jews towards conversion in the way it deals with Rahav. Rahav is mentioned in only four different tractates, and in each, her position is an equivocal one. In *Sotah* 34a, she is mentioned in the context of the narrative of the Israelites crossing the Jordan. The discussion focuses on how high the water was heaped on either side. R. Eleazer

answers that the wall of water was so high that all the kings of the east and west could see it. This leads naturally to citing the comments in Joshua 5:1 of the kings who were terrified of the God of Israel, the cause of natural miracle,¹ Since Rahav's reactions are so similar, they, too, are recalled, by citing Joshua 2:10-11.² It is interesting to see that the two stories of water splitting, at the Sea of Reeds and at the Jordan, are conflated here. The comments of both the kings and Rahav refer to the former but are cited as support for the latter. Here Rahav is linked with the kings of Canaan who have no true understanding of God and about whom there is no tradition of their converting. This mention of Rahav which refers to her as *zonah*, links her with Canaanites who have no knowledge of God and gives no inkling that she is considered a convert elsewhere in the tradition.

An even more negative presentation of Rahav occurs in Taanit 5b. A discussion of Jacob's progeny and the question of whether they are understood to be all of Israel might have led to a consideration of the place of converts in Israel. But the rabbis focus instead on sex and prostitution. It is as if they thought immediately of Rahav, but could not

¹ "When all the kings of the Amorites on the western side of the Jordan, and all the kings of the Canaanites near the Sea, heard how the Lord had dried up the waters of the Jordan for the sake of the Israelites until they crossed over, they lost heart, and no spirit was left in them because of the Israelites."

² "For we have heard how the Lord dried up the waters of the Sea of Reeds for you when you left Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two Amorite kings across the Jordan, whom you doomed. When we heard about it, we lost heart, and no man had any more spirit left because of you..."

consider her a proper convert, so instead dwelt on her negative side rather than her positive. R. Yitzhak says that merely saying the name, i.e., thinking about 'Rahav' would excite a man to orgasm. He gives this piece of information as if it were common knowledge, but it does not appear in any other place in the Babylonian Talmud or in any midrashim. It seems important that here, in discussing the nature of the people of Israel, that Rahav not be considered a convert, and that such people be discouraged from seeking to become part of Israel.

In *Megillah* 14b-15a, the rabbis continue to minimize the Rahav's conversion. This tractate naturally lends itself to discussions of women since Huldah the prophet is discussed here. Was she a prophet or not? Was she listened to? Who was she, anyway? R. Nachman understands her to be descended from Joshua, relating *ben charchas* (בן חרחס), her grandfather-in-law,³ to *timnat cheres* (תמנת חרס), the place where Joshua is buried.⁴ By way of objection, Ena Saba cites the eight priests and prophets who were descended from Rahav, Huldah not being included among them. In doing so, he seems to have known of some connection between Rahav and Joshua. R. Judah argues back that one of the descendants of Rahav is Huldah, using the connection of *ben tiqvah* (בן תיקוה), her father-in-law,

³ See II Kings 22:14, "...and Asaiah went to the prophetess Huldah--the wife of Shallum son of Tiqvah son of Kharkhas, the keeper of the wardrobe..."

⁴ See Judges 2:9, "Joshua son of Nun...was buried on his own property, at timnath-kheres in the hill country of Ephraim..."

with *tiqvat choot hashani* (תקוֹת חוּם חֲשָׁנִי), the cord of scarlet thread mentioned in Joshua 2:18 in connection to Rahav.⁵ Ena Saba concludes that both what he and R. Judah said are true, i.e., Rahav and Joshua married and produced both the eight priests and prophets named, as well as Huldah.

In any case, this discussion centers on the belief that women are negative beings, prone to haughtiness, soft-hearted, creatures whose beauty leads to lust. Even though Rahav is linked with Sarah, Abigail and Esther as one of the four most beautiful women in the world, such a positive and powerful connection can not be allowed to stand. Thus, Rahav is said to inspire lust by the mere mention of her name, with the proof being the insertion of the story from Taanit. The conclusion one draws is that such a woman, even if she were a convert (which is not mentioned here at all), would be suspect and unacceptable.

Only in *Zevachim* 116a-b is Rahav presented as a convert. This passage begins, as did the one in *Sotah*, with the connection of the splitting of the Sea of Reeds and the Jordan River. Whereas in *Sotah*, Rahav is connected negatively with the kings of Canaan, here she is connected positively with Yitro and Balaam as another non-Israelite who 'heard' and became a proselyte. Yet even here, the rabbis cannot allow themselves the possibility of seeing her in a wholly

⁵ See Joshua 2:18, "When we invade the country, you tie this length of crimson cord to the window through which you let us down..."

positive light. For what does it mean, they ask, that Rahav says: "...and no man had any more spirit left because of you..." (Joshua 2:11)? It really means, they conclude, that all the men lost their ability to sustain an erection, something by which she, who owned a brothel, would be very much affected. Such an answer shows their preoccupation with her occupation, and implies a subtle stab at the integrity of her conversion. Was the only reason that she converted because she lost so much business because of the men's fear of the God of the Israelites? After all, they say, there was no officer or prince who had not known her.

Although her conversion and repentance are acknowledged, with reference to the cord, window and flax that she used to save the spies, the discussion is clearly perfunctory, as if they did not want to dwell on her good qualities and give her more than minimal credit. Yet, the question which follows immediately shows that they did recognize converts. They ask whether such people are permitted to offer sacrifices and under what circumstances. Clearly, converts did exist during the time of the Babylonian Talmud; what status they were accorded was open to some discussion. We shall see below,⁶ that the connection between Rahav and the priesthood might have been drawn here, but it is not, no doubt because of the rabbis equivocal attitude toward her and her conversion. We shall also see in the Mechilta d'Rabbi Ishmael that this very

⁶ Sifre to Numbers, *pisqa* 78.

story is used in a much more positive way to make a strong statement about Rahav, the nature of conversion and its benefit to Israel.⁷

1. All types of people are able to know God.

Once we move beyond the Babylonian Talmud into the midrashic collections, the attitude towards Rahav undergoes a dramatic and consistent change. In part, this is due to the attitude presented towards conversion. Here we find that conversion is a positive, worthy action, open to everyone. All types of people are able to know God. The primary models, found again and again, are Yitro, Balaam and Rahav.

Yitro, a priest of Midian, was a man already attuned to worship, albeit to a different god. A passage in the Mechilta d'Rabbi Ishmael begins with the opening verse of *parashat Yitro*:⁸ "Yitro, priest of Midian, Moses' father-in-law, heard all that God had done for Moses and for Israel, His people; how the Lord had brought Israel out from Egypt" (Exodus 18:1).

The first reason given for Yitro to have heard of God's greatness is because of Israel's military successes, both the Exodus from Egypt, as reported in the text, and because of the war against Amalek, according to R. Joshua. But this does not seem like a sufficiently powerful reason to leave one's

⁷ Mechilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, *Nassechta d'Amalek*, *parashah* 11.

⁸ Mechilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, *Nassechta d'Amalek*, *parashah* 3.

god for another. Therefore, R. Eleazer provides a better one: Yitro had heard of the giving of the Torah, and therefore he 'sh'ma u'va,' he heard and came, coming physically to the Israelite camp and spiritually to God as a convert. In Pesiqta Rabbati,⁹ Yitro is held up as an example of a great proselyte, despite his having been a priest of idolatry. Here he is called *komer*, a term always associated with idolatry,¹⁰ while in the Mechilta d'Rabbi Ishmael he is called *cohen*. Even though his past is seriously marred, he is praised as a model proselyte and a model for others.

While Yitro was a priest to idols, there is no evidence of evil actions attributed to him. As a contrast, however, Balaam was both a priest to a false god and was a potentially evil person who was ready to curse Israel. In the Mechilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, Balaam, there called *ha-rasha*, "the wicked," is the foil who attempts to educate the kings of the world about God. It is clear that he understands God's power.¹¹ God will not bring a flood again, either of water or fire, but God will give Torah to Israel. Balaam shows that he understands that this is more powerful than anything else that God could do, by citing Psalm 29:11, "Adonai will give strength to His people..." The conclusion of the verse affirms God's power, for this strength will lead to peace, as a

⁹ Pesiqta Rabbati, *pisqa* 40:3.

¹⁰ See Marcus Jastrow, A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Bavli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature, New York: 1950, p. 621.

¹¹ Mechilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, *Nassechta d'Amalek*, parashah 3.

result of conquering the nations who have come to question Balaam. While Balaam's story in the Torah is never alluded to here, it does not need to be. It was so well known that the mere mention of his name symbolized those who wished to destroy Israel. If such a person as that could *sh'ma u'va*, convert and know God, then it was clear that the possibility of conversion excluded no one.

2. One's past does not prevent conversion.

But was conversion really available to all? What about someone whose lineage was such that it was forbidden to consort with or marry her, whose lineage made her an outcast forever to Israel? Such, of course, was Ruth, a Moabite who, despite her descent from one of Lot's daughters, married an Israelite, left her own people for Israel and chose to follow God. In *Pesiqta Rabbati*¹² the rabbis say that not only did God accept her conversion, but further rewarded her by making her the ancestor of kings. It is interesting to note that the word used here to signify conversion is *ba*, 'come,' the same as in the *Mechilta d'Rabbi Ishmael* where the phrase is *sh'ma u'va*, 'heard and came.' This clearly emphasized the individual action of the convert in choosing and may be meant to ameliorate the negative past of the person whether by previous actions or lineage.

¹² *Pesiqta Rabbati*, *pisqa* 40:3.

Rahav is the example *par excellence* that neither one's lineage nor one's past life matters in his or her acceptability as a convert. First of all, she was a Canaanite, a member of a nation who was supposed to be destroyed, lest they corrupt the Israelites by their lives and religious practices, when they enter the land.¹³ Yet it was clearly by the action and favor of God that she was saved.

Moreover, though Rahav lived a personally corrupt life, yet she was able to know God. The Mechilta d'Rabbi Ishmael details the extent of Rahav's sinning and corruption.¹⁴ She was a harlot for forty years, exactly the time that Israel was in the wilderness; and at the end, *l'sof* (לסוף) of that time, she converted. This story follows immediately after her statement about understanding the power of God at the Sea of Reeds, *l'suf* (לסוף). Thus she might have converted because of the splitting of the Sea, or at the splitting of the Sea, following the idea that each of us should consider ourselves as if we had come out of Egypt. Here, again, we see the conflation of the two stories of the splitting of the Sea of Reeds and the Jordan, for Rahav does not actually convert until the splitting of the Jordan. She lives as a harlot until the Israelites are ready to cross the "sea" again.

¹³ Note the following as an illustration: "...you shall not let a soul remain alive. No, you must proscribe them--the Hittites, and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites--as the Lord your God has commanded you" (Deut 20:16-17).

¹⁴ Mechilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, *Massechta d' Amalek*, *parashah* 3:23-30.

While Israel was in the literal wilderness for those forty years, she was in spiritual wilderness, bereft of God.

Midrashists seem to go out of their way to show that Rahav's past life is not seen as an obstacle to her conversion. In *Pesiqta d'Rav Kahana*,¹⁵ as part of a discussion of a sermon of Jeremiah's chastising Israel for its sins, R. Abba bar Kahana cites Ezekiel 16:31 to focus on harlotry as the image of the lowest of the low: "...the harlot who enhances her hire."¹⁶ Rahav is the prime example of such a harlot, one who makes herself into a shameless, disgraceful woman, a *mitgalqalta*. And yet it is she who repents, converts, and is the ancestor of the very Jeremiah who is the center of attention here. Who, R. Alexandri asks, was more wicked than Rahav? After all, she received, *m'qabelet*, robbers in her house and whored with them. Yet, when she converted, God accepted her, *qibaltiha*, and rewarded her with prophets and righteous descendants. Clearly her past was no obstacle to conversion. In all of these midrashim, Rahav is used as a symbol of corruption and wickedness, yet she is also seen as a true proselyte. If conversion is open to her, it is certainly open to all.

¹⁵ *Pisqa* 13:4.

¹⁶ "[the work of a wanton harlot] building your eminence at every crossroad and setting your mound in every street. Yet you were not like a prostitute who enhances her hire." *בְּתוֹרֶךְ וּבִלְוֵהָ עָלְיָהָ וְהָיָה עָלֶיהָ כְּמִסְתָּר וְהָיָה עָלֶיהָ כְּמִסְתָּר* It is interesting to note the use of *rechov* and *zonah* which should make the rabbis think of *Rachav ha-zonah*. Perhaps there is that added fillip in the use of this proof text.

B. A CONVERT'S UNDERSTANDING OF GOD

1. Converts can know the ubiquity of God.

In attempting to gain an understanding of what made a person a true convert, the midrashic authors considered the understanding that the proselyte achieved of God. To what extent was there full awareness of the absolute power, presence and nature of God? The examples which are often used to present the differing degrees of understanding that one might have of God are Yitro, Naaman and Rahav. The person to whom they are compared is the one in the tradition who knew God best, *panim el panim*, "face to face," Moses.

We have already seen how in the Mechilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, the tradition presents Yitro as a convert, as one who *sh'ma u'va*, heard of the power of God and came. Farther on in the same tractate,¹⁷ Yitro is presented as the only person among all the 600,000 Israelites at Sinai who blessed God: "And Yitro said, 'Blessed be the Lord...'" (Exodus 18:10).¹⁸ Moreover, Yitro is able to articulate what it is that draws him to God: "'Now I know that the Lord is greater than all the gods...'" (Exodus 18:11). Yitro's conversion is therefore based on his understanding that the God of Israel is greater than all the other gods. This statement might seem

¹⁷ Mechilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, *Nassechta d'Amalek*, parashah 3.

¹⁸ "'Blessed be the Lord,' Yitro said, 'who delivered you from the Egyptians and from Pharaoh, and who delivered the people from under the hand of the Egyptians.'"

all that would be necessary of a convert in the Torah text. For the rabbis, however, this vision of God was limited, for they understood Yitro's statement to show that he still believed in the existence of, and worshipped other gods, which was idolatry for them.¹⁹ The second figure to whom the Mechilta d'Rabbi Ishmael looks, Naaman, the military commander who was cured of leprosy, understood God on a higher level than Yitro: "'See, now I know that there is no God in the whole world except in Israel..." (II Kings 5:15). The midrash sees Naaman's conception of God as higher because he denies the existence of other gods, as Yitro did not.

The rabbis ascribed to Rahav, however, the highest concept of God of all the converts. The Mechilta d'Rabbi Ishmael completes the triumvirate with her statement about the nature of God: "...For the Lord, your God, is God in the heavens above and on the earth below" (Joshua 2:11). Clearly, she sees that God is everywhere. What is intriguing about her statement is that she refers to God as your God, *eloheikhem*, not as her God. Since the author had an agenda in mind, that of demonstrating a hierarchy of understanding of God, he neither comments on this point nor brings an additional proof text to build his case.

¹⁹ Sifre to Numbers, *pisqa* 78, presents an unabashedly positive view of Yitro as a convert. Each of the names he is called in the Torah reveals another understanding of his conversion. He is called Reuel because he was a friend of God, *re'eh el*. He is called Qeni because he removed himself from that which made God jealous, *m'ganim*, and because he possessed, *gana*, heaven and earth and Torah. He is called Chovav because he loved, *chaviv*, the Torah.

On the other hand, the authors of Deuteronomy Rabbah were obviously uncomfortable with this earlier tradition. In their retelling, they expand it, and attempt to minimize Rahav's understanding of God.²⁰ After repeating the statements of Yitro, Naaman and Rahav, they add Moses' conception of God: "...the Lord is God in the heavens above and on the earth below; there is none else" (Deuteronomy 4:39). They interpret this to mean that Moses knows that God is also in all the spaces of the universe between heaven and earth. This is the highest conception of God; God's presence is everywhere. Now, we see that Rahav did not have a total understanding of God, as the passage in the Mechilta d'Rabbi Ishmael wanted us to assume. Moses' is the greatest of all. This seems to denigrate Rahav; in the end, she is not the one with the clearest view of God. Still, she, a harlot turned proselyte, is close to Moses, the one who knew God *panim el panim*, in her understanding of God. As if realizing that they had not succeeded in having Moses stand alone in his knowledge of God, the authors bring another proof text, this from *eshet chayil*: "Give her from the fruits of her hand, and they will praise her at the gates for her deeds" (Prov. 31:31). This text is meant to be read as a description of Moses. As a consequence of God giving Moses the "fruits of God's hands," Moses, in turn, praises God by saying *ein od*, "there is none else." Yet, the choice of text is a problem. After all, it

²⁰ Deuteronomy Rabbah 2:28.

is part of a poem which is traditionally seen as the consummate praise of a woman; yet, the only woman under consideration here is Rahav. She, too, had been given 'the fruits of God's hands, i.e., the spies, whom she hid; surely that deed is worthy of praise at the gates, perhaps the gates of Jericho when the Israelites come to destroy the city? It seems that even though the authors of Deuteronomy Rabbah wanted Rahav to lose, she still appears to have won!

2. Rahav was aware of the awesome power of God.

In addition to Rahav knowing that God was in the heavens and the earth, she was also acutely aware of the awesome power of God. It is that awareness which is the core of her conversion. Rahav says in the text that she knows the God of Israel split the Sea and defeated the kings of Sihon and Og. Because of these feats, it is clear to her that the Lord is God on earth and in heaven.²¹ The Mechilta d'Rabbi Ishmael develops this idea in connecting Rahav to the Song at the Sea, specifically in a discussion of "...my father's God and I will exalt Him..." (Ex. 15:2).²² Here, too, Rahav's words showing her awareness of God's power are cited. What the text does is make explicit the connection between this understanding and her conversion. The full verse in the Song of the Sea reveals this connection, particularly the part not included in the midrash text:

²¹ See Josh 2:10-11.

²² Massechta d'Shirata, parashah 3,

Here, the description is about the Israelites, while in Exodus it is about their enemies. The tables have been turned. There is no hint of the original meaning in the Mechilta d'Rabbi Ishmael because the purpose of the midrash is to show how Israel is the special possession of God and how God's power has led Israel to this moment and will lead in the future to the Temple in Jerusalem.

The author brings a second proof text to bolster the first. "Earth and all its inhabitants melt; it is I who keep the pillars firm" (Psalms 75:4).²⁶ Here, the meaning in the original supports directly the meaning of the midrash in that both describe the ultimate power and victory of God. But it still is not an ideal proof, for the psalm refers to all the inhabitants of the earth and not just the enemies of Israel or the residents of Canaan. Thus, the necessity of a third proof text, this one just beyond the first in Ezekiel: "Thus, hearts shall melt and many shall fall" (Ezek 21:20).²⁷ With the parallel construction, it is easy to see that *lamoog* has the meaning of 'lose courage.'²⁸ Thus, all three contribute something to the understanding of the phrase.

It is, however, in the explanation of the next phrase that the whole midrash comes together. "Fear and dread fall

²⁶ *וְהָאֵרֶץ וְכָל יֹשְׁבֶיהָ יִמְצָאוּ מָוֶת*

²⁷ *לֵאמֹר לֵב וְתִרְדָּה וְהִכָּשְׁלוּ עַל כָּל עַמֵּיהֶם וְהָיָה אִתָּהּ מָוֶת לְכָל עַמֵּיהֶם לְכָל עַמֵּיהֶם לְכָל עַמֵּיהֶם*

²⁸ Note that the 1978 edition of the Jewish Publication Society's Tanakh translates *lamoog lev* (לִמְעוּג לֵב) as "lose courage," as if it were taking the meaning from the Mechilta d'Rabbi Ishmael.

on them...," *tipol aleihen eimatah vafachad*. First, the statement of the Amorite kings terrified at the drying up of the Jordan is offered.²⁹ Clearly, there is a connection in the Sea splitting and the Jordan being divided, as there is in the use of *vayimas l'vavam*, 'and they lost heart,' which has already been shown to mean "melt." Yet there is a much more direct, clear and parallel text, that being Rahav's own words.³⁰ For she uses the same phrase, "our hearts melted/we lost courage," *vayimas l'vaveinu*, with reference to the Sea, not the Jordan. However, the best proof text is not v.11, rather v.9 which is not cited at all. "...Because your terror has fallen on us, and all the inhabitants of the land melt away because of you" (Josh 2:9).³¹ Here, all the key words that have shaped the discussion are used in one sentence, and the whole connects to the Sea and to the Canaanite kings. One senses that her words are the most appropriate of all, more so than the passages in Ezekiel or Psalms. The midrash is crafted with an eye to building to that point, so that by the time her words are presented, the sense of rightness and completion is evident.

A midrash in Exodus Rabbah carries the theme of God's strength to its logical conclusion. The midrash, on the opening verse of *parashat Yitro*³² begins with a verse from

²⁹ See n.1 above.

³⁰ See n.2 above.

³¹ וְכִי-יִשְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת-כָּל-אֲשֶׁר-עָשָׂה יְהוָה לְרַחֲבָה וְלָאֲמֹרִית וְלָכָנִי וְלָכָנִי וְלָכָנִי...

³² For a different use of this verse, see the *Mechilta d'Rabbi Ishmael*, *Massechta d'Amalek*, *parashah 3*.

Jeremiah: "Lord, my strength and my stronghold and my refuge in a time of trouble, the nations of the world will come to You from the ends of the earth" (16:19). The rabbis begin by stating that Jeremiah says that the Lord is one's strength, i.e., God's power can be internalized. Being aware of the miracles the God performs leads to the affirmation that, "The Lord is my strength and song..." (Ex 15:2). This is, of course, the song the Israelites sang at the Sea. We know that Rahav came to God after she heard of the splitting of the Sea. Thus, the first part of the Jeremiah verse, that God's strength is one's refuge in time of trouble, is the cause of the second part; once knowing this, all the nations will come to God. Here Rahav represents all the nations of the earth who will come to God once they hear, as she did, of God's power.

3. Rahav understood that God accepted repentance.

This discussion of God's power shows why Rahav converted; the passage which follows it examines the act of conversion. It is not just that she acknowledged God and asked for forgiveness; she came in repentance. Thus, she clearly understands that experiencing the redemptive power of God is not just a one-time occurrence at the Sea, but is available any time one is willing to repent. The midrash, describing her repentance for her life as a harlot, says that for the entire forty years that the Israelites wandered in

the wilderness, she lived as a harlot.³³ She was in a spiritual wilderness akin to the physical wilderness of the Israelites. When they were about to leave theirs and enter the land of Israel, she was also ready to leave hers and acknowledge God. She asked forgiveness from God, since the three objects which were once her means of sin, she has used in an honorable way to save the spies: "With three things I sinned; with three things forgive me -- the cord, the window and the wall -- *bachevel, bachalon, uvachomah*,"³⁴ echoing the verse in Joshua which details how she helped the spies escape.³⁵

One might argue that this discussion of her sinful life is designed to give Rahav a negative cast, but the opposite seems to be true. The story is told in the context of those

³³ Mechilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, *Massechta d'Amalek*, parashah 3.

³⁴ Another version of this prayer is found in Me'am Lo'ez to Josh 2:15: "Master of the Universe, with three things I have sinned; with this rope, with this window and with this wall. How many times have I used them to let men in and out to sleep with me! How many times have I used them for evil! But now I am using them for good. I am using them to help these righteous men escape. May this good deed be an atonement for all the sins that I did with them. O merciful One, please accept my repentance and my prayer!"

³⁵ See Joshua 2:15: "She let them down by a cord through the window--for her dwelling was at the outer side of the city wall and she lived in the actual wall". It is interesting to note that in Mechilta d'Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai to Ex 18:1, this story is told almost verbatim. The only difference is the list of items by which she asks to be forgiven. There it is *bachevel, bachalon, uvasukkah*, citing a different proof text for the third item: "Now she had taken them up to the roof and hidden them under some stalks of flax which she had lying on the roof" (Josh 2:6). This text is not as literarily satisfying as that of Mechilta d' Rabbi Ishmael because of the break in the alliteration. Further, the use of two proof texts when one is fully adequate suggests a different agenda. The author might be wanting to connect her more with the Israelites, as if to say: "See, she, too, had a sukkah." According to Hoffman's notes, the Shulchan Aruch, a much later work, says that she sinned in a sukkah of wood; thus the means of sinning was the flax that she used for the roof of the sukkah, showing that she whored in the sukkah.

who "heard and came" to God. The people who are described prior to her, Yitro and Balaam, both put aside their idolatry and came to know God. Their idolatry was the extent and cause of their sinning. Rahav is different. Therefore, her sins need to be described, so that the reader can know how she came to conversion. It is very much in her favor that she turns the very instruments of her life into objects of salvation. In essence, they save both the spies and Rahav.

4. Rahav exalted God's name by her actions.

In coming to understand and accept God, a convert influences more than her own life. Consider, in this regard, a midrash to the following from Song of Songs Rabbah,³⁶ "Your ointments yield a sweet fragrance Your name is like the finest oil; Therefore, do maidens love you."³⁷ The discussion begins with Abraham who was said to resemble a container of perfume that is hidden away and has no scent, until someone touches it and moves it, so that its scent is released. So it was with Abraham, who moved in response to God's call: "Go forth from your country and from your father's house..." (Gen 12:1), with the result that "I will make of you a great nation..." (Gen 12:2) Thus, the Song of Songs verse may be read: "...therefore, the nations of the world love you," playing on 'maidens,' *almot* (עַלְמוֹת) and 'nations,' *olamot*

³⁶ Song of Songs Rabbah 1:3:3.

³⁷ Song of Songs 1:3.

(שלמות). The midrash continues to ask how the nations of the world came to know and love God. Because of the *nefesh*, souls (or 'lives') which Abraham and Sarah had acquired (or 'made') in Haran, as it says in Genesis 12:5: *v'et hanefesh asher asu b'Haran*. And how do you make a life? Through conversion. It is as if they created life by bringing these new souls under the wings of the Shechinah. How did they do this? By bringing them into their house and befriending them; thus they were converted.³⁸ R. Berechiah takes this one step further. Because God brings light into the world, God's name is magnified. The light which God brings is the light of redemption. Thus Abraham, in creating proselytes and facilitating their redemption, brought more light into the world, exalting God's name.

The midrash goes on to say that Yitro and Rahav both became proselytes who *nos'fim aleinu*, which can be read "joined us" or, more in line with the meaning of the midrash, "added to us." It is certainly in the tradition that Rahav, in addition to her own conversion, brought into Israel all her relatives, which some midrashim estimate in the hundreds.³⁹ While no text is offered in support of Rahav and Yitro, one is offered for the next example of those responsible for bringing converts to Israel: Hananiah, Mishaël and Azariah: "For when his children behold what My

³⁸ Here we have an allusion to Rahav, for she brought the spies into her house and befriended them. Yet, ironically, it is she who was converted.

³⁹ Ecclesiastes Rabbah 5:6:1.

hands have wrought in his midst, they will hallow my name... They who err in spirit shall come to understanding" (Isa 29:23-24). While the verse clearly can be understood to support the miracle of salvation of the three men in the fire, it is also resonant of Rahav and her understanding of the salvation of Israel at the Sea. Moreover, both she and Yitro can be seen as *to'ei ruach* (תועי רוח), ones who were errant in spirit but came to understanding. In comparing them to Abraham, they are presented as crucial influences on, and shapers of the future of Israel.

It is clear that the midrashic understanding of conversion was one of deep admiration and respect. Rahav has been compared to Moses in her understanding of God, and to Abraham in her influence in bringing others to Israel. She accepts God's power and ubiquity, turning to God in repentance as a result. She is described in the most positive way, as if her past life is no longer of any consequence now that she had become a proselyte.

It thus appears that proselytes are described in the most favorable terms in the midrash, and seem to be incorporated into the body of the Israelite people. Are they, nevertheless, considered a special people? Does their action of *gerut* have a particular effect in the greater scheme of things? It appears that, according to the rabbinic world

view, proselytes play several very important roles by their conversion. They serve God's purposes on earth. They can be seen as models of proper action. They clearly benefit Israel. Each of these roles will be closely examined.

C. CONVERTS SERVE GOD'S PURPOSES ON EARTH.

One topic that the rabbis sought to understand fully was the nature of God's covenant with Israel. If, as they absolutely believed, this covenant was real, true and perpetual, how was it to be fulfilled? While they understood that their part was the observance of mitzvot, how was God to fulfill the Divine's role? Moreover, did the actions of one party affect those of the other? As regards conversion in general, and the person of Rahav in particular, it is clear that the act of conversion was intrinsic to the fulfillment of the covenant.

As early as the redaction of the Palestinian Talmud, the rabbis understood this role of converts. In the Tractate Berachot,⁴⁰ in the context of a discussion concerning the comforting of the bereaved, Resh Lakish offered a *marshal* on the following verse from Song of Songs 6:2: "My beloved has gone down to the garden, to the beds of spices to pasture his flock in the gardens and to gather lilies." He interprets each phrase of the verse: 'My beloved,' *dodi* is not a person,

⁴⁰ P.T., Berachot 19b-20a.

but God who descends 'to the world,' *l'gano*, for Israel's sake, *l'arugot habosem*. There God tends to 'the other nations of the world,' *lirot baganim*, 'and brings the righteous of other nations into Israel, *v'lilqot shoshanim*. Clearly, this midrash stresses that the the righteous of other nations are sufficiently worthy to join Israel and that it is through God's actions that both the proselytes and Israel benefit. To confirm and expand this meaning, another *mashal* is offered. A king plants an orchard for his son and, when the son is obedient, searches far and wide to find and transplant beautiful saplings into it. When the son disobeys, the king destroys the saplings already there. Thus, as long as Israel is righteous, God will enlarge it by causing the righteous of the world to join Israel, but when Israel is not righteous, God will destroy the righteous within Israel. The specific examples given of the righteous of the world, Yitro and Rahav, show that their conversions were motivated by God and existed to benefit Israel, by enlarging it and moving toward the fulfillment of the covenant.⁴¹

One interesting characteristic of the text of the Palestinian Talmud is that proselytes seem to have no will of their own; they are vehicles of God, doing the will of God. While this might be read as a denigration of their intent or actions, no evidence of that is present. Rather, they are

⁴¹ These midrashim are also found in Song of Songs Rabbah 6:2:3, but the second and the third in the P.T. are reversed here. The effect is a lesser focus on proselytizing and a greater emphasis on Israel's behavior. See the discussion below, p. 67, on Pesiqta d'Rav Kahana 13:4.

aware of the presence of God who moves them to act. This theme is also present in a midrash found in Midrash Tanhuma.⁴² The midrash begins with a consideration of when it is permissible to break the laws of Shabbat. If you are a 'messenger of mitzvah,' *shaliach mitzvah*, i.e., in the process of fulfilling a commandment, you may break the laws of Shabbat.⁴³ Such people are dearest to God, especially those who give their lives (or souls), *natnu nafsham*, to succeed. The ideal messengers were Pinchas and Caleb who went to the house of a harlot who received them.⁴⁴ Possibly, this is the author's way of saying that they had lost their souls in the pursuit of their mission because they had lodged in a brothel. Or more likely, God saved them from sinning, thus proving the statement earlier in the midrash that God protects those who go on a mission for a mitzvah. The means that God used to save them was the very potential means of sinning: Rahav.⁴⁵ This is a fine parallel to the midrash which says that Rahav's repentance was accomplished by her turning the means of her sinning to the means of her salvation.⁴⁶ What did she do? She 'took them up to hide them,' *natla otam l'hatminam* (נָטְלָה אוֹתָם לְחַתְּמִינָם). This phrase can also be read,

⁴² Tanhuma Buber, *Shelach Lecha* 1. Also see Numbers Rabbah, 16:1.

⁴³ The midrash interjects that such a person may also break the laws of *sukkah*. See n.33 above for a discussion of *sukkah*, as it relates to Rahav.

⁴⁴ "...So they set out, and they came to the house of a harlot named Rahav and lay there" Josh 2:1.

⁴⁵ Note the idea parallel to that in Mechilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, in which she repents by means of the very items by which she once sinned.

⁴⁶ See the discussion above, p. 40, of the Mechilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, *Massechta d'Amalek*, parashah 3.

'she was purified by them in her hiding them,' for נִטְלָה in the *nifal* has the meaning of 'purify, wash clean,' and can be read here as *nitla* (נִטְלָה). With this interplay of words and ideas, we see that Rahav saves the spies through God's action, and the spies are the means to her own salvation, also through God's doing. It is clear that God is in charge of the success of the spies' mission and of Rahav's conversion.

The idea that a convert serves God's purposes on earth is most fully realized in a midrash from *Pesiqta d'Rav Kahana*.⁴⁷ It is part of a sermon for one of the sabbaths preceeding Tisha b'Av, for which the *haftarah* is the beginning of the book of Jeremiah: "The words of Jeremiah..." R. Shmuel bar Nachman begins by citing a verse from Numbers: "But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land, those whom you allow to remain shall be as stings in your eyes and thorns in your sides, and they shall harass you in the land in which you live..." (Num 33:55). The logic of the midrash is as follows: all the people of the land of Canaan are to be destroyed so that the Israelites will not absorb their idolatrous practices. The proof offered, "You shall utterly destroy them..." seems to repeat the Numbers text without giving any more information, but the following verse provides what we need to know: "lest they lead you into doing all the abhorrent things that they have done for their gods..."

⁴⁷ *Pesiqta d'Rav Kahana*, *pisqa* 13:5. See also *Lamentations Zuta* 34.

(Deut 20:17-18). But it did not happen that all the inhabitants were destroyed, for Joshua saved Rahav and her family. That was good and not bad because that enabled Jeremiah, a grandson of Rahav, to be born so that his words could come and sting and prick them. Thus, it is necessary for the Book of Jeremiah to begin with, "The words of Jeremiah..." to show that it is not the Canaanites who are the pricks and thorns to the Israelites, but their descendants who do a better job than they ever could. Clearly, even though God orders the Israelites to do one thing, i.e., destroy the inhabitants of the land, God had a different intent when all of them are not destroyed. All is according to God's plan, even the unlikely conversion of a single harlot in a Canaanite town.

D. CONVERTS SERVE AS A MODEL OF PROPER ACTION.

It was not sufficient for the rabbis to emphasize that conversion was possible and that those who converted had a clear connection to and understanding of God. They went on to question the function converts served, especially vis a vis Israel. We have seen how the rabbis laud the convert as one with a pure faith, as one who does God's work on earth. The midrash presents the convert, particularly Rahav, as a model of proper action, of right behavior, with the benefits of that behavior accruing both to her and her descendants, and to all Israel.

1. Her conversion saved many lives.

At the most obvious level, Rahav's conversion and subsequent action saved the lives of the two spies who had come to scout out the land prior to the Israelite invasion under Joshua.⁴⁸ It is easy to extrapolate from this event that Rahav was responsible for saving all Israel, for by her actions, the Israelites are able to come into the Promised Land. The lesson is clear: "Whoever saves one life, it is as if the whole world were saved."⁴⁹

But Rahav is concerned not only with saving the lives of the spies; she wants to save the lives of her family.⁵⁰ Furthermore, she connects the two actions. Because she has saved the lives of the spies, they are obligated to save her family in return. Here is a powerful lesson: If you are the beneficiary of a good deed, you may not just walk away and take it as your due; you are obligated to your benefactor. Rahav understands this for she tells the spies, "Now since I have shown loyalty to you, swear to me by the Lord that you in turn will show loyalty to my family" (Josh 2:12) It is especially noteworthy that Rahav does not asked to be saved herself; her concern is for her family. In fact, she, too, is

⁴⁸ See Josh 2.

⁴⁹ Avot d'Rabbi Natan, chapter 31 (45b-46a).

⁵⁰ "[Provide me with a reliable sign] that you will spare the lives of my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them, and save us from death..." (Josh 2:13).

saved when Jericho is about to be levelled,⁵¹ thus reaping a greater reward than what she requested.

A midrash in Ecclesiastes Rabbah takes note of the consequence of her actions.⁵² When Hezekiah is dying and Isaiah urges him to set his house in order, Hezekiah refuses to listen and turns his head away to face the wall. Even though it was destroyed in the battle of Jericho, the wall is identified as Rahav's wall. Thus, it is possible for Hezekiah to protest to Isaiah that God is unfair for he is about to die, but God saved Rahav. He complains that Rahav saved only two *n'fashot*, lives, but God saved many for her. To save a *nefesh* can mean, in its literal sense, to save a life, but it can also be understood to mean to save a soul through conversion. R. Shimon bar Yochai explains that Rahav may have saved hundreds of lives, for the text says that it was not her family, *mishpakhta*, who was saved, but her families, *mishp'khotiha*.⁵³ Then Hezekiah should also be saved because his ancestors gathered, *kansu*, converts for God, as it says, "And Solomon *yispor*, numbered, all the *gerim*, alien residents/converts, in the land..." (II Chron 2:16). While it is clearly possible to understand *gerim* to be converts, to equate *yispor* and *kansu* stretches the point; numbering is a more passive activity, while gathering has a more pro-active quality about it.

⁵¹ See Josh 6:22-23.

⁵² Ecclesiastes Rabbah 5:6:1. See also Ruth Rabbah 2:1.

⁵³ See Josh 6:23.

2. Rahav is rewarded for her conversion.

In addition to the saving of life, Rahav earns other rewards for her meritorious actions. In Sifre Numbers, the rabbis discuss the rewards of drawing near to God, one of which is that the lineage of a convert will endure forever.⁵⁴ The two examples given are Yitro and Rahav. The descendants of Yitro were the Rechabites who became members of the Sanhedrin,⁵⁵ and who, according to Jeremiah, will endure.⁵⁶ Others said that the daughters of the Rechabites married priests so that their grandsons offered sacrifices in the Temple. Both the proof text from Jeremiah and the discussion about the priests are directly connected to the discussion about Rahav which follows.

Rahav was also rewarded through her descendants. R. Eliezer says that eight priests and prophets descended from her -- Jeremiah, Hilkiah, Seraiah, Machsaiah, Baruch, Neriah, Hanamel and Shallum, with R. Judah adding Huldah.⁵⁷ While it is not stated explicitly in Sifre Numbers, Rahav must have given birth to daughters who were able to marry priests. But her descendants were prophets as well as priests. Since prophecy was considered a gift, and a sign of direct

⁵⁴ Sifre to Numbers, *pisqa* 78.

⁵⁵ See also B.T. *Sanhedrin* 106a.

⁵⁶ "...because you have obeyed the charge of your ancestor Yonadab and kept all his commandments... there shall never cease to be a man of the line of Yonadab, son of Rekhav, standing before Me" (Jer 35:18-19).

⁵⁷ This is a popular midrash, told also in B.T. *Megillah* 14b and *Ruth Rabbah* 2:1.

communication with God, Rahav's actions surely brought her great rewards.⁵⁸

Rahav's rewards reach far beyond her own family and descendants.⁵⁹ In a larger discussion about when the world and Israel are judged, R. Levi comments on a verse from Psalms 9:9. "He will judge the world with righteousness; He will give judgment to the peoples with equity (*v'hu shofet tevel b'tsedeq; yadin l'ummim b'meisharim*). This must mean, he says, that God judges Israel by day and the nations of the world at night. But then the meaning of "with equity," is still unclear. That must mean, according to Shmuel, that the nations of the world are judged according to the best among them, who are none other than Yitro and Rahav. It is intriguing that there is one man and one woman; is each the standard by which their sex shall be judged? While the rabbis are clear that God is judging Israel and the nations of the world by different standards, they still have extraordinary people to serve as those standards. For the word used to describe Yitro and Rahav is *k'sharim*, the key word associated with proper Jewish living. This is high praise, indeed.

⁵⁸ It is interesting to note that in this midrash, R. Eliezer says that Rahav was really an innkeeper, playing both on *zonah* and *m'zonah*, and on the name of the linen factory with which she is associated, *Ashbia*, *אשביא* (I Chron 4:21), and her occupation which was to satisfy, *sava*, *אש*, her guests. This appears to be an attempt to make Rahav look as good a possible since all these rewards were heaped on her.

⁵⁹ P.T. Rosh Hashanah 7a.

3. Rahav's behavior should be a lesson to Israel.

Moreover, converts, by their actions, should serve as a lesson to Israel. In Sifre Numbers, all the converts cited are rewarded for their actions.⁶⁰ Yitro is told that his line will endure forever. Rahav is honored through her grandchildren, who are priests and prophets. The Gibeonites are preserved as a group and serve in the Temple, albeit in a menial state. While these three, Yitro, Rahav and the Gibeonites earn the reward of life here on earth, Ruth gains both life here, through her marriage to Boaz, and life hereafter, through her role in the messianic line. Yet, the message is even more profound. All of these people are in the same lowly condition: Yitro once was an idolatrous priest; Rahav once was a harlot who lied to the Cannanite king; the Gibeonites (who, it might be argued, are not true converts) once lied to Joshua;⁶¹ and Ruth, whose actions were impeccable, was born a forbidden Moabite. If these people, whose origins and former life are problematic, can be wholly accepted by God, then, by the *gal v'chomer* implication drawn in this midrash, Israel, who is God's chosen people, should act at least as well. Israel is not the only one to have a relationship with God, it seems to say. Moreover, these others are able to teach Israel the nature of a true relationship with God.

⁶⁰ Sifre to Numbers, *pisqa* 78.

⁶¹ See Joshua 9.

4. Rahav's actions enhance Israel.

Converts do not exist in the rabbinic mind for their own sake, but for the sake of the glory of God and of Israel. This is clearly seen in the midrash in the Palestinian Talmud which expands on the verse from Song of Songs 6:2, "My beloved has gone down to the garden, to the bed of spices to pasture his flock in the gardens and to gather lilies."⁶² Here God descends to earth on account of the righteousness of the proselytes. Because of their goodness, God draws them to convert and rewards them with entry into the community of Israel. Thus, both they and Israel benefit. In the analogy of the planting of the orchard which follows, a double meaning may be found. The story ends: *u'vashaah sh'hen makhisin oto hu m'saleq ha-tsadiqim sh'beineihem*, "But at the time that they anger Him, He removes the righteous from among them." If the righteous mean those among Israel, then there is no reference to converts at all. Since Yitro and Rahav were cited as examples in the preceding sentence, this sentence may be also be read: "But at the time that they (Israel) anger Him, He removes the righteous converts from among Israel," Thus, Israel, by not following the exemplary behavior of the converts, is responsible for weakening themselves, whereas the converts are only responsible for strengthening Israel.

⁶² P.T. *Berachot* 19b-20a. It is also found in a slightly different form in Song of Songs Rabbah 6:2-3.

E. CONVERTS ARE CRUCIAL IN BRINGING PEACE TO ISRAEL.

As described in Part I, the story is told in the second chapter of the Book of Joshua about how Rahav risks her life by lying to the Canaanite king and by hiding the spies. Her actions save her life for when the Israelites are about to destroy Jericho, Joshua sends the two spies whom she has saved to rescue her and her entire family. Her actions allow the Israelites to gain a clear picture of the land they are about to conquer and to succeed in that conquest. So Rahav, literally, saves Israel, the people, for Israel, the land.

Beyond saving Israel, converts add immeasurably to the fabric of the life of the people of Israel. A midrash in Numbers Rabbah develops this theme.⁶³ The discussion is on the verse: "Each one's sacred things will be his; that which a person gives a priest will be his" (Numbers 5:10). The rabbis use Psalm 128 extensively and weave it elegantly into the fabric of the midrash. They begin with the first verse: "Happy is each one who fears God, who walks in God's ways." The discussion focuses on *kol*, each one, because it is not just Israel, or the priests or the levites, but everyone to whom this applies, including *gerim*, strangers/ gentiles. At the conclusion of a long, quasi-halachic discussion about who is a *ger tzedeq*, a righteous gentile, and what the rewards are for being one, the prime example given are the first

⁶³ Numbers Rabbah 8:9.

gerim, Abraham and Sarah. They set the standard both for those who would emulate their actions and for the rewards which such people would receive, i.e., the continuity of untold generations after them.

To appreciate this midrash more fully, it is necessary to present it in some detail. The interweaving of Psalm 128 with the rabbis' commentary about Abraham and Sarah is elegant and powerful. Verse 4, "So shall the one who fears (יִרֶה, *y'reh*) the Lord be blessed," is used to show that Abraham and Sarah were blessed because they feared God. How will they be blessed? Verse 5 provides the answer: "The Lord will bless you from Zion and you will see (רִיֵּה, *r'eh*) the good of Jerusalem all the days of your life." The rabbis interpret this to mean that the two will see the Messianic Age because those who fear (*y'reh*) will see (*r'eh*). Not only will they see the Messianic Age, but they will see that their grandchildren will also be present at that time, "And live to see your children's children...", as it says in verse 6. What, the rabbis ask, is the connection between the proselyte seeing grandchildren and peace coming to Israel? It is that a *ger tzedeq* will have daughters who will marry priests, who, because they are priests, will be able to bless Israel by the priestly benediction, *...v'yasem l'kha shalom*, "...and give you peace" (Num 6:24-6). In this way the proselyte brings peace to Israel through the priests. As the psalm ends: *shalom al*

yisrael, "...peace be upon Israel," tying together the threads of proselyte, priest and psalm.

It appears as if Abraham and Sarah were not a good enough example of proselytes, because the rabbis bring the case of Rahav to embroider the message further. First of all, she saved the spies by bringing them into her house. In this, she is modeling Abraham and Sarah who are the paragons of hospitality. But, in rescuing the spies, it is as if she brought God into her house, for it says: *vayiqach ha-ishah et sh'nei ha-anashim vatits'p'no*, "She took two men in and hid him" (Josh 2:4). Who is it whom she hid? God. The reward she receives is precisely what the midrash detailed above--that her children would marry priests and that their children would make sacrifices at the altar and bless Israel from the Temple with the priestly benediction. Not only is Rahav parallel to Abraham and Sarah in her conversion, but in her influence on bringing peace to Israel.

What is the ultimate peace that can be brought to Israel? It is alluded to in the above midrash, for Abraham and Sarah are promised that they will witness the coming of the Messiah. Can Rahav be linked in the same way to the Messiah? There is a reference to Rahav as part of the messianic line in the Gospel of Matthew.⁶⁴ In Jewish sources,

⁶⁴ See Matthew 1:5. She is called the mother of Boaz, wife of Ruth. Whether this is 'our' Rahav is not a question to be addressed here, for Biblical genealogy is complicated and fraught with pitfalls. Suffice it to say that there is no other Rahav in the *tanakh*. Moreover, since the early Christians were steeped in the pharisaic/rabbinic tradition, they

it is possible that the only explicit discussion which connected Rahav to the Messiah was in Midrash HaGadol.⁶⁵ In a discussion on the opening verse of *parashat Chaye Sarah*, the rabbis ask, "Who are the twenty-two righteous women that Solomon praises in the poem, *eshet chayil*, 'a woman of valor,' (Prov 31:10-31)? Beginning with the wife of Noah, and ending with 'all of the women of the community of Israel,' each verse is applied to a different woman. Some of the women are Israelites, as Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, and Rachel; others are foreigners, as Bitya, daughter of Pharaoh, and Yael. Two are proselytes: Rahav and Ruth. Each is praised in the most glowing terms; no shade of the negativity of the Babylonian Talmud towards women finds its way here in this Yemenite anthology of midrashim.

The verse reserved for Rahav is v. 21: "She is unafraid of the snow for her family/household (*beitah*); for all her family/household (*beitah*) are clothed in scarlet." We immediately recognize the connection to the cord of scarlet by which she let down the spies from her window.⁶⁶ But a better verse to have chosen might have been the one which follows: "She makes covers for herself; her clothing is linen and purple," or v. 24: "She makes linen garments and sells them..." for we have already seen the connection of Rahav to

most likely did not create this connection out of thin air. However, except for the discussion which follows in the text, I have found no other connection of Rahav to the messianic line in extant Jewish sources.

⁶⁵ Midrash HaGadol to Genesis 23:1.

⁶⁶ See Joshua 2:18.

linen manufacturing;⁶⁷ this would not be unknown to the anthologizers. However, the choice of the verse with the reference to scarlet enabled the author to move to a different topic, that of the identity of the spies.

The usual determination of the names of the spies, according to this midrash, are Caleb and Pinchas.⁶⁸ They are named here, too, but dismissed in favor of Peretz and Zerach. It is Zerach who is connected to the scarlet thread at his birth: "Afterwards, his brother came out, on whose hand was the scarlet thread [which the midwife had earlier fastened to his wrist]; he was named Zerach" (Gen 38:28-30). The same word for 'red' or 'scarlet' (*shani*) is used both in this verse, in the verse from *eshet chayil*, and in the story of the spies. This makes Rahav directly responsible for the coming of the Messiah, for in saving the spies, she allows the line of Peretz to continue. Both brothers have a role in this, for the one provides the red cord, while the other is the progenitor of David. Thus, Rahav's actions are crucial in bringing the ultimate peace to Israel--the coming of the Messiah.

F. A CONVERT IS EQUAL TO OR BETTER THAN AN ISRAELITE.

We have seen so far that the midrashic understanding of conversion was a very positive one. Conversion was open to

⁶⁷ Ruth Rabbah 2:1.

⁶⁸ Numbers Rabbah 16:1.

all. There existed a clear relationship between the convert and God; on the one hand, the convert had an experience and understanding of God, while on the other, God used converts to fulfill divine purposes on earth. As an example of the latter, converts were shown to be models of behavior for all, and, particularly, for Israel. Moreover, these actions could be of direct benefit to Israel. The question which then comes to the fore is: "What was the relationship between a convert and Israel?" The example of Rahav shows that the rabbis considered converts to be equal to, or even better than, Israel.

1. God sees converts in the same light as Israel

The authors of Exodus Rabbah develop the theme that converts have the same experience of God as that of the Israelites in a discussion of the opening verse of *parashat Yitro*:⁶⁹ *vayish'ma Yitro*, "And Yitro heard..." (Ex 18:1). In opening with a verse from Jeremiah: "Lord, my strength (*יְיָ*, *uzi*) and my stronghold and my refuge in a time of trouble, the nations (*goyim*) will come to You from the ends of the earth" (Jer 16:19), the author's first expands on the word *uzi*. Jeremiah says the the Lord is his strength. After seeing God's miracles, the Israelites, too, affirmed, *azi* (*יְיָ*) *v'zimrat yah*, "The Lord is my strength and song" (Ex 15:2) as they sang at the Sea. Rahav comes to God because she heard,

⁶⁹ Exodus Rabbah 27:4.

the implication being that she heard not only about the splitting of the Sea, but the singing of the Israelites. Thus the first part of the Jeremiah verse is proven by the second part, for it is Rahav who represents all the nations of the earth who join Israel and come to God. This expansion of *uzi* continues with another text: *Adonai oz l'amo yiten; Adonai yivarekh et amo vashalom*, "May the Lord Give strength (*וְזִי, oz*) to His people; may the Lord bless His people with peace" (Ps 29:11) In this psalm verse, *amo*, people, are always understood by the tradition to be Israel. Yet in the midrash, *amo* is equated with the *goyim* of the opening Jeremiah verse; thus, those who hear and come to God from the *goyim* must be equal to *amo*, the people of Israel.

In the discussion of the same opening verse of *parashat Yitro* in the *Mechilta d'Rabbi Ishmael*,⁷⁰ the Israelites crossing the Sea and the Jordan are conflated into one event. Further, when R. Eliezer says: *q'riat (קריאת) yam suf sh'ma*, "[Yitro] heard of the dividing of the Sea...", the language is resonant of *q'riat (קריאת) sh'ma*, the recitation of the *Sh'ma*, which is the obligation of all Jews. One is left with the feeling that the author is trying to tie Yitro and Rahav to the Israelites in subtle but strong ways, to make them part of the people.

Farther on in this tractate, R. Eliezer says that Moses told Yitro of the six portions that Israel will receive from

⁷⁰ *Mechilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, Massekhta d'Amalek, parashah 3.*

God. They are: the land of Israel, the world-to-come, the new world, the rule of the house of David, the priests, and the Levites. Of these, Rahav can be associated with several. She is connected to the land of Israel for it is her actions which help Joshua and the Israelites conquer the land. She is connected to the messianic world if the midrash from Midrash HaGadol is accepted and she can trace her descendants through Peretz and Boaz to the line of David.⁷¹ That she is mother-in-law and grandmother of priests is clear in the tradition, as has been discussed above.⁷² These certainly place her at least on a par with the people of Israel.

We have seen that the rabbis held that Rahav had a truer understanding of God than any other proselyte.⁷³ They were even willing to compare her favorably to Moses in her awareness of God. Not only is her understanding closer to Moses' than anyone else's, she is spoken about in the same context, as if Israelites and converts were one and the same.⁷⁴ R. Hoshiah quotes from *eshet chayil*: "Extol her for the fruits of her hand, and they will praise her at the gates for her deeds" (Prov 31:31) This is proffered to show that as Moses praised God, so did God praise Moses in saying: "Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses..." (Deut 34:10). However, since, in its literal meaning, the verse describes a woman, and that it follows a discussion of Rahav,

⁷¹ See notes 634-65 above.

⁷² See discussion above, p. 57ff.

⁷³ See *Mechilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, Massechta d'Amalek, parashah 3*.

⁷⁴ *Deuteronomy Rabbah* 2:28.

leads to the interpretation that it is Rahav's deeds which should be as highly praised as those of Moses.⁷⁵

Being equal to Israel would mean that converts would engage in the same activities as Israel, the primary one of which was the study of Torah. In a discussion of a verse from Song of Songs,⁷⁶ "Behold, you are beautiful, my beloved; beautiful as eyes of doves" (Cant 1:15), the rabbis equate Israel with the dove, clinging to God, studying Torah, and doing *mitzvot* despite the circumstances of their lives in exile. Then Rabbi switches the imagery so that the dove is the Israelite studying Torah who draws others to her, the prime examples being Yitro and Rahav. Here, as in the earlier discussion of a midrash from Song of Songs Rabbah,⁷⁷ there is a reference to Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah with a prooftext from Isaiah:

"For when his children behold what My hands have wrought in his midst, they will hallow my name...They who err in spirit will come to understanding (*v'yad'u binah*); and they who murmur shall learn (*yil'm'du*) instruction."
(Isa 29:23-24)

But the effect of the text is quite different here. Having just spoken about the study of Torah, the rabbis' repetition of these verses resonate with words of study and learning: *yad'u* -- they will know, *binah* -- understanding; *yil'm'du* -- they will learn. Because Israel studies Torah, others come to

⁷⁵ See discussion below, pp. 67-68, in which the authors of Tanna d'be Eliyahu imply that, in some respects, Rahav may stand higher than Moses.

⁷⁶ Song of Songs Rabbah 1:15:2.

⁷⁷ See above, p. 54.

do likewise; and if converts act so, they must be considered the same as Israel.

Not only is Rahav one with Israel, she is among the greatest of Israel. We have seen how she was linked with Moses. She is also named along with the most illustrious women of the tradition. In Midrash HaGadol, she is included not only with the Mothers of Israel, Sarah, Rebecca, Leah and Rachel, but also with the lesser known women who do great deeds for the sake of Israel.⁷⁸ These include some whom we might expect, such as Yocheved, Miriam, and Hannah, as well as some who are lesser known, such as Serach bat Asher.⁷⁹ The theme that runs through all the deeds of these women is their devotion to their people. No distinction is made between Israelite, convert, or foreigner. Their actions bring them honor.

Rahav, however, is not acting alone. A midrash commenting on "And they turned and went up the mountains" (Deut 1:24) in Sifre Deuteronomy shows that Rahav is able to know how to help the spies escape because the Shechinah, the spirit of God, rests on her.⁸⁰ The rabbis call the spies, *meraglim*, but Rahav uses the alternate term, *sheluchim*, which has the sense of messenger, perhaps messenger of God. The

⁷⁸ Midrash HaGadol to Genesis 23:1.

⁷⁹ Serach bat Asher is named as the woman who told Moses where Joseph's coffin was buried so that Moses could take it with him when they were leaving Egypt. Exodus Rabbah 20:19. See also Louis Ginzberg, The Legends of the Jews, (Philadelphia: 1966), vol. 2, p. 330.

⁸⁰ Sifre Deuteronomy, *pisqa* 22.

word *derekh* is used in the midrash to explain that it is usual (*derekh*) for spies to ascend (יעלו, *ya'alu*) mountains to hide in them, but it may also be the way (*derekh*) the Shechinah comes to Rahav. Further, there is a play on the word *ya'alu* which, in the verse in Deuteronomy, literally means 'ascend,' but here is used by the author as *la'alot* (לעלות) *hahar*, going up the mountain, clearly a connection to Sinai. In case we miss their point, the rabbis explain the next part of the verse with a reference to Moses at Mt. Horeb. Rahav is clearly connected to God as were Moses and the Israelites at Sinai.

Through the Shechinah, Rahav was able to save the spies. We have seen that she is known as a person who saved souls. In Midrash Shmuel, she is linked with the greatest of Israel in this regard.⁸¹ R. Yehoshua of Sikhnin in the name of R. Levi describes the reward of those who have saved souls for God. Since Judah saved four: Tamar and her two [unborn] sons from the fire, or, and Joseph from the pit, *bor*, God will save four for Judah (i.e., Israel): Hananiah, Mishael and Azaria from the fire and Daniel from the pit. In other words, measure for measure. Because Moses proclaimed God's name everywhere, God will guarantee that there will never be another prophet like Moses. Because Rahav proclaimed God's name on heaven and earth, God will guarantee that her descendants will live to see what no prophets have ever seen.

⁸¹ Midrash to Samuel, chapter 9.

Because Hannah praised God more than anyone since creation, God will give her a son who will communicate God's word to Israel. In each case, God is responding to an action in like measure. What is noteworthy is that Rahav is here associated with Judah, who inherits the kingdom, with Moses, than whom no one was greater, and with Hannah, whose son is the first of the prophets. In addition, we have already seen how the rabbis paralleled Rahav with Abraham and Sarah in their proselytizing activities.⁸² The message is repeated in a myriad of ways: A convert, as exemplified by Rahav, is the equal of an Israelite and may be favorably compared with the greatest of Israel.

2. A convert may be better than Israel.

It is one thing for a convert to be equated with an Israelite; it is something else, indeed, for a convert to be considered better than an Israelite. Yet this is what some midrashim conclude. In the discussion above of the death of Hezekiah,⁸³ he is compared unfavorably with Rahav who saved hundreds of souls while he saved only two. The implication seems to be that she is a better person than he; therefore, she was allowed to live while he must die. While this is not a major theme in the midrashic literature, it appears in several places, sufficient for us to conclude that the rabbis

⁸² See Song of Songs Rabbah 1:3 and the discussion above, p. 41ff.

⁸³ See Ecclesiastes Rabbah 5:6:1 and the discussion above, p. 50.

had no problem in seeing a convert, both in actions and in the reward for those actions, as better than an Israelite.

In Tanna d'be Eliyahu, Rahav is once again discussed in comparison to Moses.⁸⁴ Whereas in all other midrashim, there has been a desire to have Moses be the greatest, here a different conclusion is drawn. Whereas the prayer of Moses (to enter the land of Israel) was not answered, the repentance of Rahav (*rachav*) was so great (*rechovah*), that her petition was granted, and her life was spared. The conclusion is unavoidable; in this particular instance, Rahav has a more favorable response from God than Moses.

A more elaborate midrash in which the comparison is clearer and absolutely unavoidable is in the Pesiqta d'Rav Kahana.⁸⁵ Both Rahav and Israel are called harlots, but beyond that they are mirror images. Israel is the beautiful woman who acts shamelessly, but Rahav is the shameless woman who acts beautifully, i.e., repents. Each positive statement and action by Rahav (as told in Joshua 2) is contrasted with a negative action of Israel as detailed in the words of the prophets. To emphasize the oppositional qualities of Rahav and Israel, the following verses are contrasted:⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Tanna d'be Eliyahu (Seder Eliyahu Zuta), pereq 4.

⁸⁵ Pesiqta d Rav Kahana 13:4 See Also Lamentations Zuta 34.

⁸⁶ Pesiqta d'Rav Kahana 13:4.

RAHAV SAID/DID:	SAID ABOUT ISRAEL:
"swear by the Lord" Josh 2:12	"they swear falsely" Jer 5:2
"save my parents" 2:13	"parents are humiliated" Ez 22:7
"brought them to the roof" 2:6	"bow on the roof to idols" Zeph 1:5
"hid them with flax" 2:6	"pray to wooden idols" Jer 2:27
"Go to the mountains" 2:16	"sacrifice on mountain tops" Hos 4:13
"Give me a true sign" 2:12	"do not speak the truth" Jer 9:4

Each action of Rahav's is wholly positive, either showing her repentance or her willingness to live a pure life through helping others. Each action of Israel's, which is detailed in graphic description by the prophets, is sinful and represents a turning away from God. Since Israel remains a harlot, it is punished, whereas Rahav repents and is, therefore, rewarded.

In this examination of the rabbinic attitude toward conversion through focusing on their discussions of Rahav, it is evident that both were viewed most favorably. She knows God's power, role on earth and forgiving nature. Her actions serve God's purposes, particularly in benefitting Israel. She is so identified with Israel that she is paralleled to the greatest figures in the *tanakh*, and in several instances even supercedes them in the importance of her actions and in her relationship to God.

PART III

THE RESULTS OF CONVERSION: KNOWLEDGE OF GOD AND REDEMPTION

It is clear from the foregoing discussion that Rahav serves in the rabbinic tradition as the model of an ideal convert. The rabbis, virtually without dissent, see her as sincere and exemplary, both in her conversion experience and in the life she lives afterward. It is also possible to look at Rahav and her life from a more theological perspective, i.e., to consider what an awareness or experience of God might be like and what the results of such an awareness might be. The rabbis begin with the assumption that an individual experience of God is possible. Such an experience was certainly true for those people who lived in biblical times. The question to consider is whether the rabbis believed that such an experience was available in their own time, and if so, what its consequences were.

A. AN INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENCE OF GOD IS POSSIBLE AND LEADS TO CONVERSION.

1. The primary response to God is awe and fear.

Witnessing the power of God is described as a truly terrifying experience. The Israelites communicate that in

¹ Exodus 15:1-18; Deuteronomy 10:17-19; Psalm 111:2-10. For a similar discussion of these verses, see also S. M. Scahill, "The Conversion of Rahab," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 74:1 (1955), 1-14.

their song following their crossing the Sea of Reeds and escaping from Pharaoh's army:

"The peoples hear, they tremble;
Agony grips the dwellers in Philistia.
Now are the clans of Edom dismayed;
The tribes of Moab--trembling grips them;
All the dwellers in Canaan are aghast;
Terror and dread descend upon them;
Through the might of your arm they are
still as stone... (Ex 15:14-16)

When these verses are considered in the Mechilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, they are connected to the words of Rahav, who describes the people of Canaan having the same reaction as the Israelites to God's splitting the Sea: "...dread of you has fallen upon us, and all the inhabitants of the land are quaking before you. When we heard about it [the splitting of the Sea], we lost heart, and no man had any more spirit left because of you..." (Josh 2:9,11).¹ Both the Israelites and Rahav are reporting identical reactions to God's power: fear. What is different, however, is the reaction engendered by this fear. Israel's enemies were paralyzed by the experience, perhaps because they saw God as an alien god, belonging to the enemy. Rahav, on the other hand, was moved to action by this fear, perhaps because she was able to go beyond fear to awe and relationship.

¹ Mechilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, Massechta d'Shirata, parashah 9. For a similar discussion of these verses, see also B.T. Sotah 34a, Zevachim 116 a-b, and Exodus Rabbah 27:4.

2. Experience of God leads the convert to action.

Because Rahav had an experience and awareness of God different from that of the Canaanites around her, she responded in a more positive and proactive way. A passage in Sifre Deuteronomy states explicitly that Rahav was able to act because the Shechinah (here called *ruach haqodesh*, the holy spirit) rested on her.² What is implicit is that she was personally aware of the presence of the Shechinah and responded to it. Her awareness of God had moved from fear to awe to a desire to act in response to that presence.

Rahav acted in a number of ways after experiencing God. That she hid the spies is documented in the second chapter of the Book of Joshua.³ Immediately after the narrator tells us that she has hidden the spies, she speaks of her knowledge of God. We have seen that the rabbis connect these two statements in a causal way. She hid the spies because she had come to know God and converted. In being able to act so assertively, Rahav had to move beyond fear of God to trust or faith in God. Midrash Mishle points out this development in Rahav.⁴ She is identified with the verse, "She is unafraid of the snow for her family; for all her family are clothed in scarlet" (Prov 31:21). The verse is interpreted to mean that, at the time that Israel came to destroy Jericho, Rahav was not afraid, because the spies had given her a sign, a cord of

² Sifre to Deuteronomy, *pisqa* 22.

³ See Josh 2:4-6.

⁴ Midrash to Proverbs, chapter 31.

scarlet thread. Through the persons of the spies, God sent her a sign, reaching out to her; the cord, given by the spies/God gave her life. The implication is that because she trusted in God, she was unafraid.

Not only are her actions in hiding the spies a great change from her behavior as a harlot, the midrash details how Rahav, herself, changed. The primary change in her was that she repented. We have already seen how, in the Mechilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, Rahav changes from a harlot to a penitent because of her new awareness of God.⁵ A discussion in Ecclesiastes Rabbah develops this idea also.⁶ The verse, "...vava'u u'mimqom qadosh y'halekhu v'yishtachakhu ba'ir asher ken asu," "[And I saw the wicked buried,] and they entered into their rest; but those who had done right went away from the holy place, and were forgotten in the city..." (Eccl 8:10), is reinterpreted to refer to proselytes who come and repent of their sins. Here, as in many midrashim that have been considered, the verb *ba*, 'come,' is understood to mean 'come to know God,' i.e., convert. *U'mimqom qadosh y'halekhu*, 'they went to a holy place' is interpreted to mean they went to a synagogue; *v'yishtachakhu ba'ir*, to mean 'their sins were forgotten in the city' and *asher ken asu*, 'their good deeds were found out.' Thus the verse may be understood: "They [the converts] repented and went to a synagogue; their sins were forgotten while their good deeds

⁵ Mechilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, Massechta d'Amalek, parashah 3.

⁶ Ecclesiastes Rabbah, 8:10:1.

were found out." In the midrash, Rahav is one of the proselytes named who fit this pattern. She repents of her former life as a harlot, is welcomed into the community, and gains a good reputation for her actions. Thus, while the biblical text is not specific about her conversion and repentance, the midrash is.

3. The reward for good action is God drawing the individual near.

What is the relationship between faith and action? Does the individual act in such a way that God draws him or her near, or does God choose the individual first, thus enabling him or her to act accordingly? A midrash in Numbers Rabbah raises the topic of 'choosing' and 'drawing near.'⁷ Is it the penitent or God who acts first? Who is doing the choosing? Who is drawing near? The verse "Bring the tribe of Levi near..." (Num 3:6) is discussed in reference to the Psalms' text, "Happy is the one whom You choose and bring near" (Psalms 65:5). In attempting to answer the questions above, the rabbis understand the verse from Psalms as follows: "Happy is the one whom God has chosen, even though God did not bring him near, and happy is the one who draws near [to God] even though God did not choose him." Abraham and Moses were chosen but not drawn near, for the former could walk in God's ways without support,⁸ while the latter was unable to

⁷ Numbers Rabbah 3:2.

⁸ Genesis Rabbah 30:10.

enter the Land of Israel. This would seem to say that Abraham and Moses, individuals who are chosen but not drawn near, are better than Yitro and Rahav, who are individuals who are drawn near but not chosen. R. Yose concludes with a story of a Roman woman criticizing God for being indiscriminate in bringing people near to the Divine. R. Yose parallels her selection of the best figs in a basket with God, who chooses and draws near those people whose actions are good. This story can be seen as an appended commentary to the above discussion in which Yitro and Rahav are said not to be chosen. Clearly R. Yose thinks they are.

One particular way God drew a person near was to have him serve in the Temple, offering sacrifices. A midrash in Numbers Rabbah shows that the reward for being a proselyte, i.e., drawing near to God, is that God draws the person near.⁹ The reward for Rahav, one of many converts discussed here, is that her descendants were priests and prophets who served in the Temple and who heard the word of God. She acted first, i.e., repented, then reaped the benefits of that action. The imagery used in the midrash is that of life and death, life being one with God, the Temple, and Torah, and death being the lack thereof.

The idea of life being equated with Torah and God is also reflected in a midrash in Song of Songs Rabbah.¹⁰ The

⁹ Numbers Rabbah 3:2. See also Ruth Rabbah 2:1.

¹⁰ Song of Songs Rabbah 1:15:2.

verse, "Behold, you are beautiful, my beloved; beautiful as eyes of doves" (Songs 1:15), first is explained to mean that Israel, the dove, clings to God, Torah, and mitzvot despite the circumstances of life in exile. Then, Rabbi expands the imagery by describing a particular type of dove who draws to the nest other doves who are attracted by the smell of food. This type of dove is the Israelite studying Torah, the food of life, who draws others, specifically Yitro and Rahav, to her. It is as if God is using Israel to draw proselytes to God. We have seen many examples of God aiding Israel by working through Rahav; here is an example of God aiding Rahav by working through Israel!

B. THE BREADTH OF GOD'S INFLUENCE IS TOTAL;
GOD'S PRESENCE IS EVERYWHERE.

Although the rabbis focused on Rahav and the intensity and act of her conversion, it is clear that they were not only addressing converts; they were speaking to their own people as well, Jews who were far removed by time from biblical events. By using these biblical times and personages, the rabbis of later centuries could speak to their own communities with important and sustaining messages. The knowledge and awareness of God may be most noticeable with a convert, since conversion is a clear and obvious sign of change, but that experience of God must be possible and present for everyone, if Judaism is to endure.

1. God is present in the world.

The rabbis of the midrashim understood that while an individual can have an experience and relationship with God, God is not limited to one-on-one communication. Whole peoples and communities can become aware of God's presence. Jews knew this through the Exodus and Sinaitic experiences. We have seen that the Canaanite peoples shared in this awareness of God,¹¹ even if they did not develop a relationship with, or faith in the Divine.

These awesome experiences of the Exodus and Sinai are matched in the midrash by another, more gentle, yet pervasive presence of God in the world. The Song of Songs is considered in the tradition to be a love poem between Israel and God. The verse, "My beloved has gone down to his gardens, to the beds of spices, to browse in the gardens and to pick lilies" (Songs 6:2), is read in the midrash as God descending into the world, to select the 'cream of the crop' of the nations of the world and add them to Israel.¹² God is an active force, present in the world and accessible to both Israel and others who are 'ripe' to be plucked to join Israel.

Not only is God present in the world to care for Israel and those who would join it, but God is also present to be the judge of all. The opening of a sermon found in Pesiqta Rabbati, which might have been given on Rosh Hashanah, is a

¹¹ See Josh 5:1.

¹² Song of Songs Rabbah 6:2:3.

comment on the verse "He will judge the world and acquit it; He will judge the peoples of the world according to the upright" (Ps 9:9).¹³ R. Alexandri understands the verse to mean that God will judge non-Israelites using as a standard the righteous among them. The prime examples give of such righteous people are Yitro, once a priest of an idolatrous religion, Rahav, a harlot, and Ruth, born of an accursed and condemned people. All these people were granted God's mercy and judged accordingly. Thus the themes of judgment and mercy are joined here in how God relates to all creation, both Israel and the nations of the world. The implication is that God is present among all people, and sees goodness wherever it is to be found. Thus, God is present in the world, not only in terrifying moments like Sinai, but in loving and merciful moments as well.

2. We are all part of God's plan, acting out God's purpose.

Whether God is terrifying or merciful at any moment is not a matter of whim. According to the rabbis, God is not arbitrary or capricious; God was purposeful, and all humanity has a part in that plan. When the midrash tells us that the Shechinah rested on Rahav, it was to communicate that God was the active, motivating force behind all.¹⁴ That was perfectly clear, even to Rahav, who calls the men she is about to

¹³ Pesiqta Rabbati 40:3-4.

¹⁴ Sifre to Deuteronomy, *pisqa* 22.

protect *sheluchim*, messengers, rather than *meraglim*, spies, as they are called in the biblical text. They may have been messengers of Joshua who sent them to spy, but she understood that they were messengers of God, here, like her, to do God's work.

A powerful example of the rabbinic understanding of the pervasive role of God in the lives of humans can be seen in a midrash in *Pesiqta d'Rav Kahana*.¹⁵ Despite God's order in Deuteronomy 20:17, that all the people of Canaan are to be killed in the Israelite conquest, Rahav and her family are spared. This is understood by the rabbis not as a challenge to God's authority, but as part of God's plan. First of all, Rahav serves for all time as a reprimand and reproach to Israel when its behavior is not as exemplary as hers. Second, it is her very grandson, Jeremiah, who comes to rebuke Israel about its behavior before the destruction of the Temple. Thus, Rahav needed to live to enable both of these to happen, and God's role in causing that to occur is evident.

Rahav is presented as a vehicle of God in a midrash on the opening verse of *parashat Shelach Lecha*: "Send men to scout the land of Canaan..." (Num 13:2).¹⁶ Rahav's part of the story in hiding the spies is inserted in a long discussion of the mission of the spies as an example of an occasion when one may break the prohibitions of Shabbat to fulfill a

¹⁵ *Pesiqta d'Rav Kahana*, 13:4. See also *Lamentations Zuta* 34.

¹⁶ *Tanhuma Buber, parashah Shelach Lecha* 1. See also *Numbers Rabbah* 16:1.

mission of God. She appears to be playing her part in the drama, as a minor character whose actions are predetermined, in this case, by God. She seems to have no will of her own; rather, she is doing the will of God to gain access for the Israelites to the Promised Land. In this version of the story, she is speechless, merely acting dutifully, whereas in the biblical text she is quite outspoken and appears assertively independent. The message here, as regards both the spies and Rahav, is that God's plan is the force that moves the world, and these three people are part of the whole.

Even the words of *Tanakh* exist as part of God's plan. All the parts must fit together in a seamless unity. To that end, R. Simon, in a midrash in *Ruth Rabbah*, states that the entire Book of Chronicles exists only to be interpreted; the genealogies listed there are not literal ones.¹⁷ For example, he says, the following verses exist only to show the connection between Rahav and Ruth:

"... and the families of the linen factory at Beth-ashbea; and Yokim, and the men of Cozeba and Yoash, and Saraf who married into Moab and Jashubi Lehem (the records are ancient). These were the potters who dwelt at Netaim and Gederah; they dwelt there in the king's service" (I Chron 4:21-23).

The midrash is rich in word play to prove the relationship between the two converts. While the plain sense of the verses details the lineage of the sons of Judah, into whose family

¹⁷ *Ruth Rabbah* 2:1.

Ruth marries, the midrashic treatment retells the story of Rahav. The word that is used here for linen, *bootz*, is different from that in Joshua 2, *pishtei ha-etz* which refers to flax, the raw material from which linen is made. R. Simon says that the verse in Chronicles must apply to Rahav, who hid them among the flax, since who else would have such large quantities of flax except those who were workers in linen. The place-name, Beit Ashbea (אֲשֵׁבָעַ) is a sound play on *tish'b'u*, (תִּשְׁבְּעוּ), because Rahav made the spies swear to save her. One might also see a visual play with *שָׁבַע*, satisfied, which is how Rahav would leave her customers, whether she were an innkeeper or a harlot. Further, the name, Yokim, (יֹקִים), means that the spies kept, *qaiyemu*, (קִיְּמוּ) their oath, *shavua*, (שָׁבוּעַ), to Rahav, a nice extension of the word play on Beit Ashbea. These are but a few of the many redefinitions of the words in the Chronicles verses.

One may wonder why such a long discussion existed to tie Ruth and Rahav together. On the surface, they appear to have much in common; both are proselytes, independent-thinking women who have a clear experience and understanding of God and who act on that faith. That surely would be sufficient to warrant tying them together. Yet there may be more. As we have seen,¹⁸ according to one extant midrash, Rahav, like Ruth, is shown to be part of the lineage of the messiah.¹⁹ This midrash in Ruth Rabbah seems to be an allusion to that

¹⁸ See the discussion above, p. 57.

¹⁹ Midrash HaGadol to Genesis 23:1.

connection. The clear objective here is to show that, as the words of *Tanakh* serve God's purpose, so did the converts about whom the words were written.

3. God has a special relationship to Israel.

Even though God is the God of all, the rabbis understood that God's plan had special meaning for Israel. After all, Israel had been chosen by God to receive Torah; therefore, Israel's special obligation and reward must be part of God's plan. Thus, the fact is that others joining Israel must be a sign of God's favor. In the Palestinian Talmud, Resh Lakish comments on a verse from the Song of Songs (6:2) that God chooses the 'cream of the crop' of other nations to join Israel, but only if Israel is righteous.²⁰ Converts are an indication that Israel is at one with God. Yitro, Balaam, and Rahav understood this special relationship, and sought to share it by joining Israel. The *Mechilta d'Rabbi Ishmael* describes their understanding of God and shows how their experience with the Israelites enabled them to know God.²¹

But what was the nature of the relationship when Israel was not 'at one' with God? Here, too, God paid Israel special attention. God's role was to chastise Israel and urge its repentance and return to the path of righteousness. The converse of the above midrash from Tractate *Berachot* in the

²⁰ P.T. *Berachot* 19b-20a. See also *Song of Songs Rabbah* 6:2:3.

²¹ *Mechilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, Massechta d'Amalek, parashah* 3. See also *Sifre to Numbers, pisqa* 78.

Palestinian Talmud follows immediately after it. It points out that God would punish Israel when necessary, by either not providing converts to enlarge it, or by causing the righteous among them to die before their time.²²

C. THE POSSIBILITY OF REPENTANCE COMES FROM ONE'S CONNECTION TO GOD AND HAS FAR-REACHING CONSEQUENCES.

It is evident that in the rabbinic mind, God and Israel were connected in both good times and bad. The covenant was permanent, not subject to repeal or revision. Given that understanding, it was necessary to find a way to repair the relationship when it had deteriorated. That way was repentance, *teshuvah*, returning to a proper relationship with God.

We have seen that Rahav came to know God's power and repented of her past life as a harlot. We shall now see the ways in which the rabbis used the story of Rahav to exemplify and model for Israel both the righteous life and the way back to God. Further, in Rahav's life, we can see intimations of the notion of future redemption which was so much a part of traditional rabbinic Judaism's world view.

Throughout this study, the theme of repentance has been focused on the proselyte, who arrives at an awareness of wrongdoing and has the desire to repent and come to God.

²² P.T. *Berachot* 19b-20a.

The midrash discussed above by Resh Lakish in the Palestinian Talmud is one such example.²³ The proselytes become the righteous of the nations and then are gathered to Israel through the will of God, thus benefitting both themselves and Israel. This midrash may also be interpreted in a different way. Since, if the proselytes repent, they are rewarded, and if Israel sins, its righteous are doomed to death, the conclusion of the syllogism must be that if Israel acts like the proselytes, it, too, will be rewarded. The message here is subtle but unavoidable.

In other midrashim, the lesson is more overt. In a sermon on the power of repentance, R. Eliezer states that repentance is greater than prayer or charity.²⁴ After all, Moses' prayer to be able to enter the Land of Israel was not granted, but Rahav's repentance for her life as a harlot was heard. The lesson to Israel is unmistakable. The greatest of the prophets is, in this regard, compared unfavorably to a Canaanite proselyte and former harlot. Israel, at least in this instance, should model itself after the harlot rather than the prophet.

What if Israel should be a harlot? The Book of Lamentations uses this imagery repeatedly to describe an Israel which has sinned and sullied itself by its actions. In

²³ P.T. *Berachot* 19b-20a.

²⁴ *Tanna debe Eliyahu, Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer*, chapter 4 and *Seder Eliyahu Zuta*, chapter 22.

Lamentations Rabbah, the rabbis develop this parallel.²⁵ In one way, Israel is equated with Rahav, and both are labeled *zonah*, harlot. In another, they are starkly contrasted. Rahav has repented, followed God, and saved others by bringing them into her house before the destruction of Jericho. Israel, however, shows no signs of repentance, has refused to follow God's commandments, and thus has caused death and the destruction of God's house in Jerusalem.

In an earlier, longer form of this midrash, Rahav's actions are paralleled to Israel, with the latter pale by comparison to the former.²⁶ Not only is Israel in terrible straits with the Temple being destroyed and the people sent into exile, but it has caused its own demise because it has played the harlot, what is more -- it has acted worse than one.

Within these sermons of chastisement lie the seed of redemption. If sinning leads to destruction, and exile from God, repentance leads to repair and union with the Divine. Rahav is the symbol of those removed from God, and of all proselytes who find connection with God and who serve as a model for the behavior that will lead all Israel and the nations of the world to that ultimate, permanent connection with God.

²⁵ Lamentations Rabbah 34.

²⁶ Pesiqta d'Rav Kahana 13:4.

D. THE ESSENTIAL ELEMENT OF THE COVENANT:
GOD'S REDEPTIVE POWER.

The story of Rahav models the entire frame of rabbinic theology: that redemption came first at the Sea, that redemption is possible for those alive now, and that redemption, in the person of the messiah, will come in the future. A variety of midrashim have understood Rahav to be connected with the redemptive power of God. We have seen her presented as an ideal convert, as a vehicle of God and as a model for Israel. Here we see her intrinsically connected to moments of Israel's redemption in the past, present, and future.

The original story of Rahav in Joshua 2 connects her to the redemption of the Israelites at the Sea of Reeds. That knowledge of salvation by God is her stated reason for her understanding of God's power and her decision to save the spies. The earliest midrashim focus on this aspect of her life. In the Babylonian Talmud, the two events in the Torah of the splitting of water to allow the Israelites to pass are conflated into one.²⁷ Rahav is the connection to both, for her words in Joshua 2:10-11 describe her reaction upon hearing the news of the splitting of the Sea of Reeds, but are a foreshadowing of the splitting of the water at the Jordan.²⁸

²⁷ B.T. Sotah 34a. See also Mechilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, *Massechta d'Amalek*, parashah 3.

²⁸ "For we have heard how the Lord dried up the waters of the Sea of Reeds for you when you left Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two Amorite kings across the Jordan, whom you doomed. When we heard about it, we lost heart, and no man had any more spirit left because of you..."

In some sense, that first redemption at the Sea can be understood as Israel's alone, since it says in the Mechilta d'Rabbi Ishmael that Rahav was a harlot for the entire time that Israel was in the wilderness, after the crossing at the Sea.²⁹ Only when the second phase of that watery redemption, this time at the Jordan, was about to occur did Rahav repent of her sinful life and come to God. Now, since she has repented and been redeemed, she understands that both crossings, at the Sea and at the Jordan, are for her also. In this way, the rabbis use her as a model for all proselytes.

Rahav enables the redemption of others and in doing so, furthers her own redemption. Her saving the spies allows the Israelites to conquer Jericho and enter the Promised Land successfully, in what might be called their second redemption. Rahav, in turn, is saved by the spies when Jericho is conquered.³⁰ Rahav is clearly a vehicle of redemption, for her actions saved many lives: the two spies, herself, all her family, and by extension, all Israel.³¹ Not only does Rahav save Israel in her lifetime, her influence extends for generations. It is her grandsons, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, according to several midrashim, who preach a redemptive message to Israel before the destruction of Jerusalem in the sixth century B.C.E.³²

²⁹ Mechilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, *Massechta d'Amalek* 3.

³⁰ Joshua 6:22-25.

³¹ See Ecclesiastes Rabbah 5:6:1 for a midrash which demonstrates the rabbis' understanding of this concept.

³² See Ruth Rabbah 2:1. See also Pesiqta d'Rav Kahana 13:4, Lamentations Rabbah 34 in this regard.

We have seen that, even though it is Rahav who is the person taking these steps which lead to redemption, the rabbis understand that it is God who is the motivating force, and it is God's purposes in the world which are being acted out through Rahav.³³ It is significant and perhaps even surprising that God chooses Rahav to be the means of redemption for she is a Canaanite, a woman and a harlot. One lesson is the awareness that essential change is possible and always available for every individual; each person has that potential. Moreover, if such a person can be part of God's redemptive plan, God can truly be said to be the God of all.³⁴

The redemptive power of God was not just for the past, the rabbis believed, but gave hope to the present and was an indication of the future. This theme echoes through the midrashim about Rahav. In the *Mechilta d'Rabbi Ishmael*, Moses tells Yitro that Israel will receive six portions from God: the land of Israel, the world-to-come, a new world, the kingdom of David, and the positions of the priests and the Levites.³⁵ Of these, Rahav as a redemptive vehicle is connected with four. Her hiding the spies aids in the acquisition of the land of Israel. She is mother-in-law and grandmother of priests who serve as spurs of redemption for Israel. There is some evidence that she is also connected to

³³ Midrash to Proverbs, chapter 31.

³⁴ *Pesiqta Rabbati* 40:3, *Tanhuma Buber*, *parashah Shelach Lecha* 1, *Numbers Rabbah* 16:1.

³⁵ *Mechilta d'Rabbi Ishmael*, *Nassechta d'Amalek*, *parashah* 3.

the *olam haba*, the world-to-come, and the kingdom of David, thus associating her with the coming of the messiah, the ultimate redemptive vehicle.³⁶

Perhaps the authors of the *Mechilta d'Rabbi Ishmael* were in some conflict about how closely to draw the connection between Rahav and the coming of the messiah. This passage numbering the rewards of God to Israel is part of a discussion about Yitro, not Rahav. Yet, this discussion immediately precedes one about Rahav, so the connection could be made if one wished, yet it could be denied if desired. Why all the subterfuge? Perhaps the authors wanted to distance themselves from the theology of their Christian neighbors. For the Gospel According to Matthew opens with a genealogy of Jesus, in which Rahav is named as the mother of Boaz, husband of Ruth and great-grandfather of David.³⁷ Since all the other names in the genealogy are taken from the *Tanakh*, one might assume that the connection between Rahav and Boaz also came from some Jewish tradition. Yet we have seen that the only overt connection to the names on this list in Matthew is found in *Midrash HaGadol*.³⁸ It may be that the authors of *Midrash HaGadol* saw no difficulty in preserving this tradition. They were living, after all, in a later Moslem Yemenite culture and saw no threat from a connection between

³⁶ See Part II, p. 39 for a discussion of the midrash in *Midrash HaGadol* to Genesis 23:1 which names the two spies as Peretz and Zerach, thus linking Rahav to the Messiah.

³⁷ Matthew 1:5.

³⁸ *Midrash HaGadol* to Genesis 23:1.

Rahav, David and Jesus. The authors of the Mechilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, on the other hand, were surrounded by a growing Christian religion whose leaders, as is evidenced by the opening verses in Matthew, sought to give Jesus authenticity of lineage through interpretation of the biblical text. The rabbis would want to do everything possible to disprove the connection. If they knew this tradition, they may have felt that they could not put it explicitly in the text of the midrash, but they could place the discussion so that it was preserved in the mind of those who already knew it, without being overt about it. Of course, this is a most speculative theory, but not without its possibility. Given all the evidence that we have seen of the way the rabbis saw Rahav as a redemptive vehicle, this connection is at least plausible.

CONCLUSION

THE END

The scriptures show that the Gospel is to be preached to all, even idolaters, magicians, and sinners. The sinfulness of one's past is not a bar to conversion; rather such a sinner shows true penitence and faith by coming to God. Further, converts have a

In considering the story of Rahav, the midrashim are virtually unanimous in seeing her in a favorable light. The fact that she is a harlot is almost irrelevant, except when it is used as a contrast to her present righteous life. Her conversion is accepted; her motives, never questioned. Nor is her character impugned. She is presented as an assertive woman, in control of her house, a known presence and influence in the community. Her joining the people of Israel is a benefit to all.

In analyzing the midrashim of the rabbis, we have seen how the rabbis have taken the biblical story of Rahav the harlot and expanded, interpreted and enlarged it. Rahav has become for them a vehicle to address their own communities. Through her words and actions, they discuss the nature of conversion, the relationship of the convert to the people of Israel, the role of the convert as a model and lesson for Jews, and the centrality of repentance in coming to know God.

The midrashim show that the rabbis understand conversion to be open to all, even idolators, enemies of Israel, and sinners. The sinfulness of one's past is not a deterrent to conversion; rather such a sinner shows true penitence and faith by coming to God. Further, converts have a true

understanding of God which leads them to exemplary action. Here is one person whose conversion had enormous and unimagined consequences. The potential for each individual to come to know God was a powerful and palpable understanding of the rabbis. This was a direct inheritance from early pharisaic thought: one's birth as priest or Levite or Israel or gentile was irrelevant in determining one's relationship with God.

The rabbis saw converts as enhancing the people of Israel. The fact of their conversion is a sign of the health of Israel with God. Moreover, certain converts, such as Rahav, are equated with the best of Israel, both for their relationship with God and the lives they lead.

The convert as a model of behavior was a profound lesson of hope for Jews of every age. For those rabbis in the centuries after the destruction of the Temple who saw themselves as responsible for Israel's plight, and for those Jews living in subjugation in foreign lands, the availability of God's mercy was a powerful reality. It enabled them to believe that penitence and faith will eventually bring them close to God, as it did to Rahav. Because converts act on the basis of their faith, the rabbis saw that they served as a model for Israel. Rahav's repentance should be noted and emulated, for the rewards for coming to God and living rightly are great.

Rahav knew the awesome might of God, experienced the desire of God to forgive the repentant sinner, and witnessed the redemptive power of God. She represented those who are vehicles of God in that they aid in the fulfilling of God's purposes on earth, particularly in relation to Israel and the covenant. Rahav not only saves the spies, thus allowing the conquest of the land and the redemption of God's pledge, but she is connected to the messianic redemption of the future. Thus the basic elements of the story of Rahav are tied together: knowledge of God leads to actions which fulfill God's redemptive plan.

Are there changes in the rabbinic perceptions of Rahav? That is, can one see a chronological pattern or trend in the way Rahav is seen?

The talmuds present a contrasting view of Rahav. The Palestinian Talmud describes her as a convert, whose righteous behavior enhances Israel and all the nations of the world. Possibly the authors were drawing on earlier, pre-Constantine traditions which saw conversion as desirable; thus, to present a convert in positive terms was natural. On the other hand, it is quite clear that the Babylonian Talmud views Rahav negatively, as an immoral woman who is representative of the temptress. Every good action of hers is tempered by her being a harlot; the later rabbinic understanding that she is a true convert is barely mentioned,

and when noted, it is countered with a negative characterization. Perhaps the *amoraim* in Babylonia saw the dangers of proselytizing; thus, praising, or even acknowledging converts might have been threatening to the Jewish community. Further, the text's emphasis on women as a negative influence in the society might also be reflective of a particular cultural pattern of the area.

The exegetic midrashim of Sifre to Numbers and to Deuteronomy, and the Mechilta of Rabbi Ishmael and of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai focus on Rahav as a spiritual person, serving as a model of conversion, connected to God and rewarded by God for her actions and faith. These are Palestinian compilations, which draw on traditions in the first centuries of the Common Era, a time of religious ferment and competition for adherents, especially between Jews and Christians. In that pre-Constantine era, no authority had yet imposed an official religion on the Roman world. Jews, Jewish-Christians, gentiles all competed for followers. Thus, the midrash authors called on the traditions of that time which cited Rahav as one of the standards by which others should measure their religious understanding. Here is a Canaanite woman who knows the true God and true way; all the more so should those searching for faith look to her.

In later midrashim, while Rahav's conversion is not ignored, the growing emphasis appears to be on her

repentance, which purifies her, and on her serving as a vehicle of God, which both benefits her in this life and in the next. Both of these messages are ones which the rabbis of the small, fragmented, threatened Jewish communities of the Diaspora wanted to preach. They stress that the mending of one's wanton ways and adhering to God's path will lead to redemption, if not in this life, then in the world-to-come. Rarely, however, is there any overt connection between Rahav and the messiah; that might have supported the validity of the Christian connection to Rahav. Nevertheless, her role in the past salvation of Israel led to intimations about the future redemption. Only in a midrashic collection in the non-Christian world, Midrash HaGadol, could Rahav be overtly linked with the messianic future.

While this study focuses on Rahav as a redemptive vehicle and model for Israel, questions about her and her story remain unanswered and might be subjects for further investigation. How does this rabbinic vision of Rahav as convert fit with other discussions of the larger topic of *gerut*, conversion? Rahav as *zonah*, harlot, is barely mentioned in the midrashim. How is she seen in the wider context of *z'nut*, prostitution? Is there a difference in the rabbinic perspective when writing midrashim or when debating halachah? What were the Jewish sources of the Christian assertion that Rahav is in the lineage of the messiah? When and why did that

tradition fall out of Judaism? Finally, to what extent are other biblical female personages, Israelite or not, considered in rabbinic literature? These and other questions which this study raises are left to others' investigations.

This investigation of the story of Rahav in rabbinic literature has revealed old truths about midrash and new truths about its subject. While the authors bring themselves to the text to uncover hidden meaning therein, we come to their discoveries with ourselves, finding new meaning both in their understanding and in the text itself. Franz Rosenzweig wrote, "...the days of [a person's] own life illumine the Scriptures, and in their quality of humanness permit [one] to recognize what is more than human."¹ What the authors of midrash and we, too, do in our investigations and analyses is bring ourselves to the text to discover new aspects of its eternal meaning. Thus, this research is an intermediate point on a path of ever more understandings of the Jewish tradition and the people who live and shape it.

¹ Nahum Glatzer, *Franz Rosenzweig: His Life and Thought*, (New York: Schocken, 1953), p. 258 in Michael Fishbane, *The Garments of Torah*, (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1989), p. 108.

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