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the Harlot, and the Israelite spies
(The book of Joshua, chapter two)

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The Negotiations between Rahab the Harlot, and the Israelite spies

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Abstract

This paper addresses the following issues: negotiations under pressure, asymmetric negotiations, the use of emotions in negotiations, the use of knowledge and reciprocity in negotiations. The examination of the mentioned issues is framed through the biblical story of Rahab the Harlot, (the Book of Joshua, chapter 2), and the clever negotiation management between Rahab and the spies. The analysis of this story is very interesting and teaches many basic negotiation principles still in use in modern times. The reader may discover the power of finding a clear mutual interest for both sides, and using its positive influence on negotiations. The paper raises the question of what the basic negotiation principles used by Rahab and the two spies were. The second question is what we can learn from this in a practical way. The questions will be answered by the following methodology: a deep analysis of the relevant biblical verses in the book of Joshua, discussion, and conclusions. The paper suggests, as a general conclusion, that words wrapped with emotions, hope, confidence building measures, reciprocity and mutual interests are very powerful and are a useful tool in negotiations, and effectively increase the chances of success for both sides in negotiations. It is interesting to hear a story of negotiations between one woman and two men (spies) some 35 centuries ago and be able to analyze interactions and the negotiation abilities of the two sides according to the teachings of the Bible. Another interesting point is that for over three millennia, human nature regarding negotiations is still very similar. We can learn from the past and contribute to the future.

Introduction

The story of Rahab¹, the Harlot, and the Israelite spies, along with the story of the fall of Jericho, are probably the most popular stories in the biblical Book of Joshua. The account of Rahab and the Spies

¹Rahab is a word in Hebrew meaning "**wide**". Rahab was a harlot and probably combined the trade of lodging – keeper for wayfaring men.

is a story of extremely high-stakes negotiations: the lives of Rahab and her entire family on one side, and the lives of the spies on the other side (along, presumably, with the Israelite's chance to occupy the land of Canaan).

Rahab is an interesting character and well respected in both Judaism and Christianity. Along with the Jewish Bible, Rahab's name appears three times in the New Testament. In Matthew 1:5, Rahab is one of only four women listed in the genealogy of Jesus. In Hebrews 11:31, she is one of the examples of faith lifted up for Christians to emulate; and in James 2:25, she is praised as one who was justified by works, not just by faith. It seems to be the case, then, that the story of Rahab enjoyed some prominence in the early Christian community, as an example both of great faith and good acts.

In Judaism, Rahab is mentioned for her great speech about God's power.² The Jewish sages gave her a respected place in the Holy Books and mentioned Rahab as one of the four most beautiful women on earth³. According to the Jewish sages, Rahab converted to Judaism, married Joshua and together they had eight children - all Kohanim (priests) and prophets.⁴

In the context of the Book of Joshua, a work that confirms and continues the story about the Israelites purity, faith, and devotion to God⁵, the story of Rahab is remarkable. She is a foreigner and a prostitute, presumably a potential "snare" for the Israelite spies, someone who might entice them to behave in an immoral manner and worship other gods.⁶ Yet, it is Rahab, not the spies, who confesses faith in the Lord, the God of Israel. It is Rahab who saves them through her wisdom, and her negotiation abilities; it is Rahab who tells them that God has given them the land of Canaan, a fact they later report to Joshua, using Rahab's own words.⁷

² Josh 2:9-11.

³ Talmud Bavli, Tractate Megillah, 15:71.

⁴ Talmud Bavli, Tractate Megillah, 14:72.

⁵ Joshua 2:7-13.

⁶ Joshua 23:12-13.

⁷ Joshua 9:24.

Existing Narrative and Analysis

After the death of Moses (who died without ever entering the land of Israel), Joshua, the son of Nun, became the leader of the Israelites. One of his first acts as the new leader was to get prepared for the occupation of Canaan by sending out two Israelite spies to enter the city of Jericho and stay with Rahab. She hides them from the King of Jericho in return for their promise of protection for her and her family during the Israelite invasion. The encounter led to negotiations between Rahab herself and the two spies. This unique encounter and negotiations will be analyzed in this chapter:

*“We were told that the spies came to the house of a harlot named Rahab and lodged there.”*⁸ The King of Jericho was told about their presence: *“Some men have come here tonight, Israelites, to spy out the country.”*⁹ The King of Jericho, thereupon, sent emissaries to Rahab: *“Produce the men who came to you and entered your house, for they have come to spy out the whole country.”*¹⁰

But Rahab has no intention of accommodating the King’s emissaries. She seems to have completely different plans. So, instead of handing over the spies, she admitted to the King’s emissaries to seeing the two men, but added that they had already left; she claimed not to know where they had gone but urged that they be pursued.¹¹

The emissaries could never have been successful in their chase of the two spies because Rahab had in fact hidden the spies in her attic at her home.¹² The reason Rahab lied to the King’s emissaries was based on her fear from the power of the Israelites and their God together, and most probably because she wanted to preserve their lives to conduct what must be literally termed ‘the negotiations of her life’.¹³

So Rahab opens with an ode to the Israelites’ God, the ultimate confidence-building gambit: *“I know that God has given this land to you because of the fear we feel and the anxiety that all the inhabitants feel from the stories of your mighty power and abilities upon us, we have heard how God made the miracles of dividing the waters in the red*

⁸ Joshua 2:1.

⁹ Joshua 2:2.

¹⁰ Joshua 2:3.

¹¹ Joshua 2:5.

¹² Joshua 2:6.

¹³ Joshua 2:9.

sea, and the way you won Sihon and Og, (the two Amorite kings) across the Jordan.”¹⁴ She adds, “When we heard about it, your great victories, we felt the holiness of one God, your God that is on earth and in heaven above.”¹⁵

As a harlot (essentially, a businesswoman), Rahab was well aware of the ways and means required to drive a good negotiation session, and she was well aware of the fact that there is much she can gain from this particular session.

At this point in the negotiations, the spies know nothing about Rahab's motives. But Rahab knows that she saved the lives of the two spies and that fact made her realize she had a chance to get something very important in return: a life for a life. So, Rahab told the spies wisely, *“now after saving your lives while risking mine and my family, swear to me by your God and tell me that you will save from death all my family, my parents, my sisters, and brothers and whatever belongs to them.”¹⁶*

The spies realized they had a chance to strike a good deal, and they also recognized the real need of Rahab to save her family.¹⁷ The spies accepted the offer from Rahab, but not without conditions. They had told her that the Israelites will do their best to save her family's lives, but on one condition, *“do not tell anyone about our visit and escape from Jericho, and we shall prove you that God gave this land to us.”¹⁸*

To help the spies escape from her home, Rahab lowered a rope from her roof.¹⁹ However, her assistance did not end there; she also gave the escaping spies tactical advice²⁰, *“And she said unto them, get you to the mountain, lest the pursuers meet you; and hide yourselves there three days, until the pursuers are returned: and afterward may ye go your way.”²¹* But the negotiations continued; the spies told Rahab that the deal is valid only if she does exactly as they tell her. *“When we, the Israelites invade the country, you have to tie a crimson cord on the window*

¹⁴ Joshua 2:9-10.

¹⁵ Joshua 2:11.

¹⁶ Joshua 2:12.

¹⁷ Joshua 2:13.

¹⁸ Joshua 2:14.

¹⁹ Joshua 2:15.

²⁰ Joshua 2:16.

²¹ Joshua 2:16.

through which we have escaped'.²² "Then bring your father, your mother, your brothers, and all your family together and keep them safe in your house".²³

Rahab did exactly what the spies had told her and followed their instructions, and the spies took Rahab's advice. After walking to the hills and hiding for three days, the spies managed to escape detection.²⁴ Rahab's advice worked perfectly, and they returned safely to the Israelites' camp. The spies reported to Joshua all the information they had gathered. They provided a clear account of what had transpired and what they had observed.²⁵

Indeed, the book tells us that, with God's help, Jericho was captured after the sound of rams' horns and the shouts of the Israelite army brought its walls crashing down. "Man and woman, young and old, ox and sheep and ass, were exterminated with the sword."²⁶

Before destroying the city of Jericho by fire, the two spies, as they said during the negotiations, led Rahab and her family to safety.²⁷ The spies and Joshua did it in return for Rahab's action of "hiding the angels" in her home.²⁸

Joshua, the spies, and Rahab honored their spoken agreement, upholding the loyalty and trust made between them, another feature of the time.

Discussion

The following subsections explore in detail some of the specific negotiation tools evident in this negotiation case study.

²² Joshua 2:18.

²³ Joshua 2:18.

²⁴ Joshua 2:22.

²⁵ Joshua 2:23.

²⁶ Joshua 6:21.

²⁷ Joshua 6:23.

²⁸ Joshua 6:25.

Asymmetric Negotiations²⁹

As we can see, the two spies have entered Jericho with the mission to check the strong and weak points of the enemy, to estimate their power and abilities, and to report the intelligence to Joshua. The main advantage of the spies was their superb improvisation abilities. This means that they used no material stimuli. The spies entered Jericho and went straight to Rahab the Harlot and slept with her.³⁰ This was a wise step for strangers who are looking for a place that most likely will "hug" them. Secondly, we may assume that the fact that the spies slept with Rahab the Harlot has given both sides a kind of intimacy and a chance to establish "rapport".

It could be that the negotiations between Rahab and the two spies alternated between symmetric and asymmetric. We saw in this case study that the power of controlling the negotiations may move from one side to the other. In the beginning, Rahab held the power, and then after the spies realized and understood the interest of Rahab to save her family, the symmetry changed.

This is a very interesting case of alternating symmetry. During the negotiations, there was no tangible outcome, like selling merchandise or any worldly asset or real estate. Based on mutual interests, there were moral and survival implications, reciprocity, trust, and beliefs. Both sides presented their needs gradually and clearly, then reached a win-win settlement.

Confidence Building Measures (CBM): The Act of Sleeping with Rahab

Strangely, it seems that the first confidence-building measure was the fact that upon the spies' arrival in Jericho, they went to Rahab the Harlot and slept with her. As cynical as it may seem, such an act may be considered a genuine confidence-building measure. That act of sleeping with Rahab contributed to their open relations and broke many social and emotional barriers such as shame, embarrassment, and uncertainty. Simply an act of compassion, even if it is with a professional harlot, may have helped break through those obstacles and harmonize the relations between Rahab and the spies. The two sides certainly

²⁹Asymmetric negotiation is an influence that occurs between counterparts of significantly different sizes as measured by the parties' relative resources and clout in a particular context. The context for these negotiations or conflicts can range from mergers and acquisitions and international trade deals, to hostage-takings and initiating change at a local school board.

³⁰Joshua 2:1.

felt comfortable enough with each other to speak rather freely on subjects that carried potential existential uncertainty for all concerned.

Concrete Confidence Building Measure: The Act of Hiding the Spies in the Attic

Rahab knew that keeping the spies at her home had exposed her to mortal danger, but still she hid them in her attic and denied the King's emissaries the chance of finding them. Besides the fact that it was courageous on the part of Rahab, this was quite simply one daring, top-class act of confidence-building. By allowing the spies to stay in her home, she gained their trust and was able to establish a relationship with them and build reciprocity. She was able to increase her value in their eyes, as someone who had a positive will towards them. The time the spies stayed in her home allowed them the opportunity to learn about each other's interests and purposes, providing both parties the information needed to guide a successful negotiation.

Poetic License – Extreme Reframing: The Act of Lying to the King's Soldiers

Rahab, whether she expected a visit by the King's emissaries or not, fully prepared herself for such an encounter. Rahab was smart enough to speak confidently and tell the King's emissaries that she, indeed, met the spies, but that they had already left. Furthermore, Rahab had sent the soldiers in the wrong direction and encouraged them to move fast to increase their chances of catching the spies. This act of mixing facts with false accounts, while certainly exposing Rahab and her family to real danger, added another layer of confidence-building to the relations between Rahab and the spies.

Creating a Common Ground - Professing to a belief in the same God

The text tells us that, before the spies descended to the street, Rahab came up to them on the roof, and said to the men: *“I know that the LORD has given you the land, that the terror of you has fallen on us, and that all the inhabitants of the land are fainthearted because of you. I beg you, swear to me by the LORD, since I have shown you kindness, that you also will show kindness to my father’s house (reciprocity), and give me a true token, and spare my father, my mother, my brothers, my sisters, and all that they have, and deliver our lives from death.”* So, the men answered her, *“our lives for yours?”*, if none of them share their business with others. *“And it shall be when the LORD has given us the land that we will deal kindly and truly with you.”*

This belief in a common God provides a useful platform for establishing a sense of comradery and shared destiny between Rahab and the spies. She acts to effectively include herself (and by association, her family) within the spies' "in-group", almost compelling them to treat her as a friend, not a foe.

Providing Useful Advice: The Act of Giving the Spies Tactical Advice

Rahab was in total control of her actions. She received the King's soldiers; she had the two spies hidden in her attic. To increase her credibility, Rahab now tells the spies: "*Go to the hills so the pursuers will not find you. Hide yourselves there three days until they return and then go on your way.*"³¹ Rahab adds action to words by using a rope from her house to let the spies descend from her house at a location that was more obscured: "*so she let them down by a rope through the window for the house she lived in was part of the city wall.*"³²

Leveraging Reciprocity

The meeting of Rahab and the spies at her house created a few opportunities to exercise reciprocity in order to establish credibility and achieve gains. Rahab slept with the spies and by that act, both sides may have gained the trust of the other side. Throughout the negotiations, both sides have the opportunity to make requests, present conditions and at the same time, make concessions and agree to the other side's requests. Rahab asked the spies for help regarding the life of her family and the spies responded in kindness, but with a proviso that Rahab must fulfill. We can see another good example of reciprocity in action, when the spies respond to Rahab after she asked them to keep her family alive, saying: "*Our lives for your lives.*"

Using General Knowledge

Rahab was well informed about many details regarding the Israelites; indeed, her position and profession required her to know and understand the social and political climate she existed in, as well as to gather as much intelligence about the people (mostly men) she admitted under her roof. She knew what happened when the Jewish people crossed the Red Sea. She knew what happened to King Sihon and King Og; they were both defeated by the Israelites.³³

³¹ Joshua 2:16.

³² Joshua 2:15.

³³ Joshua 2:10.

Rahab used this information while she negotiated with the spies. Her knowledge helped her to create trust, to become valuable, and to impress the spies, especially with the knowledge that was valuable and new to them.

Naturally, Rahab was well informed about the internal politics within her city, Jericho. That is also an existential tool in the hands of a person in her position, as well as her profession and affiliation.

Using the Right Language

It appears that the tone of speech used by Rahab and the spies was familiar to both sides. The essence of Rahab's delivery was religious and moral. For example, when she says: "*now then, please swear to me by the LORD that you will show kindness to my family, I have shown kindness to you. Give me a sure sign.*"³⁴

It looks as if the rapport that was established between Rahab and the spies was good, honored and respectful.

We can also see that the language used by Rahab was emotional and spiritual. Altogether, Rahab's narratives reflect her acumen, her ability to see beyond the immediate situation (think strategically, which is a huge negotiation advantage in every situation and to help predict what will happen). Rahab mentions God many times during her negotiations to support her statements and to provide a holy character to her speech.

Conclusions

The negotiation between Rahab and the spies shows some of the hallmarks of the negotiation strategies known at the time, including attempts at shifting symmetries through the presentation of conditions, searching for reciprocity, and the robust practice of confidence-building tactics. Rahab had two options: to hide the spies or to hand them over. The spies also had several options: they could offer to save Rahab and her family, or they could have refused to save the family after Jericho was conquered (assuming that it happened as expected). We are bearing witness to a deal that was made only through an oral agreement: no witnesses, no written contract, no mediators. This is a demonstration of the fact that it is possible to build up trust simply by exercising the art of speaking wisely and listening carefully. The moves to gain confidence and create an atmosphere that will allow an oral agreement, without any witnesses, were

³⁴ Joshua 2:12.

followed one by one. The motivation of both sides was very strong. The spies needed to survive; Rahab needed to both survive and save her family. Such strong motivations led both sides to be willing to act boldly. Rahab's deception in lying to the King's soldiers and the use of the attic in her house to hide the spies, all demonstrated courage, calmness, and ability to think under pressure. Conversely, the spies' understanding that Rahab had a profound interest in saving her family's life encouraged them to negotiate in earnest.

The act that sealed the confidence-building ritual of this negotiation session was when Rahab advises the spies to hide in the woods and remain hidden for three days before attempting to return to Joshua. We can observe how the trust was built progressively and was strengthened with each reciprocal move. Another interesting point here is that Rahab's confidence is based partially on the perception of her new encounter with God and his power, on the rapport that was established between herself and the spies, and, of course, on the opportunity to save her family, as a miraculous chance given from God. Therefore, she was ready to risk her life, betray her King, and demonstrate ultimate loyalty and trust to the spies.