

“The Ugliest Story in the Bible”: creating new commentaries from the silences in Judges 19-21 (sourcesheet 1 – Shoftim 19:1-10)

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1 And it was in those days, when there was no king in Israel, that there was a **Levite man** dwelling by the edge of the mountain of Ephraim, who took for himself a **pilegish/secondary wife** from Beit-Lechem in Judah.

אִישׁ אֶיְהוָה בְּיָמֵים הָהֵם וּמֶלֶךְ אֵין בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל וַיְהִי | אִישׁ
לְוִי גָר בְּיַרְכְּתֵי הַר־אֶפְרַיִם וַיִּקְחֶלּוּ אִשָּׁה פִּילְגֶשֶׁת
מִבֵּית לָחֶם יְהוּדָה:

2 And **she strayed away from him**, and went from him to her father's house, to Beit-Lechem in Judah. And she was there for a period (of) four months.

בֹּתְזָנָה עָלָיו פִּילְגֶשֶׁתוֹ וַתֵּלֶךְ מֵאִתּוֹ אֶל־בֵּית אָבִיהָ
אֶל־בֵּית לָחֶם יְהוּדָה וַתְּהִי־שָׁם יָמִים אַרְבָּעָה
חֳדָשִׁים:

3 And **her husband arose and went after her**, to persuade her [lit: speak to her heart] to return, and his servant was with him, and a team of donkeys. And she brought him into her father's house, and **the father of the girl saw him and he rejoiced** to know [lit: read] him.

גִּוְיָקָם אִישָׁהּ וַיֵּלֶךְ אַחֲרֶיהָ לְדַבֵּר עִלַּי
לְבַהּ לְהַשִּׁיבָהּ (כְּתִיב לְהַשִּׁיבּוֹ) וַיַּנְעִרוּ עִמּוֹ וְצֶמֶד
חֲמָרִים וַתְּבִיאֵהוּ בֵּית אָבִיהָ וַיִּרְאֶהוּ אָבִי הַנַּעֲרָה
וַיִּשְׂמַח לִקְרֹאתוֹ:

The father gave the husband generous hospitality, each time encouraging him to extend his stay another day. On the 5th day the Levite stayed until the afternoon, then the father offered him another night's lodging...

10 But the man did not want to lodge, and he arose and departed, [...] And with him was a **team of saddled donkeys, and his secondary wife** was with him. [...]

וְלֹא־אָבָה הָאִישׁ לָלוֹן וַיִּקָּם וַיֵּלֶךְ אֲנֻעְמוֹ צֶמֶד
חֲמָרִים חֲבוּשִׁים וּפִילְגֶשֶׁתוֹ עִמּוֹ:

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19:1 **Levites** were servants of God. In pre-Temple times they guarded and maintained the *Mishkan* (portable sanctuary), acted as teachers, maintained cities of refuge, and other holy tasks. A Levite had no land/territory, and was a *ger* ('stranger') everywhere; but he had high status.

Pilegish – this word is translated in various ways. For this session, think of our *pilegish* as a secondary wife, ie with some rights although not with same rights or status as a 'full' wife, and with a higher status than a concubine (whose father would not be considered as a 'father-in-law'). Note: she is not a 'second' wife – we are not told if the Levite has a 'first' wife.

Source 1 - Esther Bronzite, "Call Me By Your Name": [...] The Woman of Judges 19 (2022)
"To call her a *pilegish* is to define her through her specific relationship to a man."

- What else do we know about this woman? (where's she from? What are her family like? What in her background might have made her father content for his daughter to be a *pilegish* of a Levite rather than a full wife to a man from a tribe with land?)

19:2 **And the Levite's secondary wife strayed from him, and went from him to her father's house.** What exactly did the wife do? The word תִּזְנֶה ('tizneh') has been translated as: strayed from, played the harlot against, was unfaithful to, committed adultery against, sinned against. But did the Levite's secondary wife actually 'play the harlot'? The sources below share some other viewpoints.

Source 2 - Arthur Clarke (late 18th/early 19th century commentary)

"Neither the Vulgate, Septuagint, Targum, nor Josephus, understand this word as implying any act of conjugal infidelity on the woman's part. [...] If she had been a whore or adulteress, it is not very likely that her husband would have gone after her to persuade her – literally, to speak to her heart - and entreat her to return. The Vulgate simply states, *quae reliquit eum*, that she left him; the Septuagint, *ωργισθη αυτω*, that she was angry with him; the Targum, *ובסרת עלוהי/uv'serat alohi*, that she despised him; Josephus, *αλλοτοιως ειχε*, that she was alienated..."

These two very different understandings derive from a small switch from a 'hey' to a 'chet':

- The verb form *zanah/זָנַח* describes a woman in a sexual relationship with a man prohibited to her. This might be sex work, but could also mean straying/being unfaithful
- The verb form *zanach/זָנַח* describes a person who abandoned, rejected, deserted, despised or spurned another person

Source 3 - Rashi

"**She strayed away from him** – meaning, to the outside. The word זָנַח, 'promiscuity', always denotes departure. 'One who departs to the outside' - who leaves her husband to love another."

- Note: "Interestingly, Rashi refrains from establishing whether she actually had sexual relations with others; he merely notes she went out to seek them. In doing so, he [...] mitigates the meaning of the word '*va-tizneh*' by interpreting the word as an action of desire, as opposed to an action of consummated sexual relations." (Rachel Levy, *Judges 19: Reading in Context and Intertextuality*, 2005)

Source 4 – Malbim

"**She strayed away from him** – a teaching according to the opinion of Chazal (Gittin 6:2) is that she did not commit adultery, but rather only did something against him that was not his will: she went away from him."

Source 5 - Isla Mullner, Lethal differences: SV as violence against others in Judges 19 (1999)

"The narrative [...] draws attention to her unusual ability to act on her own: the Levite's wife leaves her husband and goes back to her father's house. [...] The current view is that '*zonah*' had connotations of sexual misconduct. However, it should not be taken to mean a transgression that is separate from the wife's act of abandoning her husband. [...] The Levite's wife's behaviour falls into the category of 'sexual misconduct' (ie socially inappropriate) because she has left him. As Cheryl Exum writes in her book *Fragmented Women*: "A woman who asserts her sexual autonomy by leaving her husband [...] is guilty of sexual misconduct."

Source 6 – BT, tractate Gittin 6b

"With regard to the episode involving the *pilegesh* in Giv'ah where it says 'And his secondary wife deserted him', the Sages discussed what occurred that caused her husband to become so angry with her that she left him. **(Cont'd overleaf)**

- Rabbi Evyatar says, 'He found her responsible for a fly in the food that she prepared for him'; while Rabbi Yonatan says, 'He found her responsible for a hair'. [...]

- Rav Chisda says: ‘A person should never impose excessive fear upon the members of his household, as the husband of the *pilegish* of Giv’ah imposed excessive fear upon her.’”

Source 7 - Rabbi Ian P Bailey, ‘The Seven Ways’ podcast (2021)

“This man is a Levi – he supposed to guard Israel, to protect Israel. [...] But this man used Judaism for aggression, to be a bad husband. Our Sages understand that what is going on here is more of a domestic violence scenario. [...] This is excessive fear. It is beyond obedience – this is abuse. So she leaves him; she goes to her (father’s) house to feel safe.”

Source 8 - Elizabeth A Goodine, Going postal in Judges 19 (2009)

“Pamela Tamarkin Reis [...] posits that the *pilegish* did not play the harlot against her husband but rather that she played the harlot for her husband or on account of her husband. As Reis notes, the preposition *al* can carry either meaning. In this case, to read the preposition as ‘for’ clarifies the concubine’s reason for leaving: her husband has become her pimp. [...] This makes understandable the fact that her father accepts her return.”

19:3 **And her husband arose and went after her**, to persuade her [lit: **speak to her heart**] to return.

Source 9 - Rachel Levy, Judges 19: Reading in Context and Intertextuality (2005)

“Rashi’s silence (here) is [...] telling because the Torah strongly condemns extra-marital relations. Rashi’s lack of comment on verse 3 perhaps explains why he mitigates the meaning of the word ‘*va-tizneh*’ in the preceding verse. After all, what man – particularly in Biblical times – runs after a concubine who sleeps around and still expects the story to end well?”

Source 10 - Malbim

“**And her husband arose** - this also indicates that she did not commit adultery, because he is called ‘her husband’ - if she committed adultery it would have been forbidden for him to be in a sexual relationship with her. So, the text is saying that she still had *kiddushin* (marriage status).”

19:3 And **she brought him** into her father's house, and **the father of the girl saw him and he rejoiced**.

Source 11 - Abarbanel

“**She brought him into her father's house** – Radak (R David Kimchi, France, 12-13th century) wrote that the man's *pilegish* found him outside and brought him to her father's house. This is not mentioned in the text, but [...] he said, "And she brought him..." means, because she was so eager that he came to her father's house.”

Source 12 - Rabbi Ian P Bailey, ‘The Seven Ways’ podcast, 2021

R Bailey asks: when the Levite turns up, does the father chastise him? No – he celebrates. He becomes an enabler of the bad treatment meted out to his daughter. He placates him. He doesn’t protect his daughter. “No-one is there to say, ‘knock it off, cut it out’”.