

“The Ugliest Story in the Bible”: creating new commentaries from the silences in Shoftim/Judges 19-21 (sourcesheet 4, 21:16-24)

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Translation mostly from Chabad, triangulated using a number of Sefaria translations

The Levite cuts up his dead wife and sends out the pieces as a call to arms against the tribe of Benjamin, whom he holds responsible for the fact he was threatened and his wife violently assaulted. Civil war ensues, and all but 600 Benjaminites are killed. The 600 hide in Rimmon, and the other tribes vow never to give their daughters in marriage to a Benjaminite. Later, they regret that vow and work to find 600 wives for the Benjaminites in a way that does not break the 'letter of the law'. They find a way to take 400 wives from Yavesh Gil'ad; now, just 200 more are needed.

16 And the elders of the congregation said, "What shall we do for the remaining (men) for wives, since the women of Benjamin have been destroyed?" [..]

טז וַיֹּאמְרוּ זִקְנֵי הָעֵדָה מֵהַנְּעֻשָׁה לְנוֹתָרִים
לְנָשִׁים כִּי־נִשְׁמְדָה מִבְּנֵימִן אִשָּׁה:

19 And they said, "There's a feast-day for G-d taking place in Shiloh, which is to the north of Beth-El [..]."

יט וַיֹּאמְרוּ הִנֵּה חַג־יְהוָה בְּשִׁלּוֹ מִיָּמִים |
יְמִימָה אִשָּׁר מִצְפּוֹנָה לְבֵית־אֵל:

20 And they instructed the men of Benjamin, saying as follows: "**Go and lie in wait in the vineyards,**

כ וַיִּצְוּ (כְּתִיב וַיִּצְוּ) אֶת־בְּנֵי בְנֵימִן לֵאמֹר לְכוּ
וְאַרְבַּתֶּם בְּכַרְמֵי:

21 watch, and as soon as the daughters of Shiloh come out to dance in the dances, come out of the vineyards and kidnap for yourselves each man his wife from the daughters of Shiloh; and then go to the land of Benjamin.

כא וְרֵאיתֶם וְהִנֵּה אִם־יֵצְאוּ בָנוֹת־שִׁילּוֹ לְחַוֵּל
בְּמַחְלוֹת וַיִּצְאֲתֶם מִן־הַכַּרְמִים וְחִטַּפְתֶּם לָכֶם
אִישׁ אִשְׁתּוֹ מִבָּנוֹת שִׁילּוֹ וְהִלַּכְתֶּם אַרְץ בְּנֵימִן:

22 And if their fathers or their brothers come to quarrel with us, then we will say to them, 'We were merciful to them, because we did not start a war in order to take a wife for each man. And, since you did not give them to the men (of your own volition, you do not need to worry) that you are guilty [ie, of breaking the oath].' "

כב וְהָיָה כִּי־יָבֹאוּ אֲבוֹתֶם אֹלֹ אַחֵיהֶם לְרִיב
| (כְּתִיב לְרֹב |) אֵלֵינוּ וְאָמְרוּ אֵלֵיהֶם חֲנוּנוֹ
אוֹתָם כִּי לֹא לָקַחְנוּ אִישׁ אִשְׁתּוֹ בְּמִלְחָמָה כִּי
לֹא אַתֶּם נִתַּתֶּם לָהֶם כְּעֵת תְּאֻשְׁמוּ:

23 And the children of Benjamin did so, and they carried off wives whom they had abducted from among the girls who had danced, according to the numbers (needed). And they departed and returned to their territory [lit: inheritance], and built cities and lived in them.

כג וַיַּעֲשׂוּ־כֵן בְּנֵי בְנֵימִן וַיִּשְׂאוּ נָשִׁים לְמִסְפָּרָם
מִן־הַמְּחַלְלוֹת אִשָּׁר גָּזְלוּ וַיָּלְכוּ וַיִּשׁוּבוּ אֶל־
נַחֲלָתָם וַיִּבְנוּ אֶת־הָעָרִים וַיִּשְׁבוּ בָּהֶם:

24 And the children of Israel departed from there at that time, every man to his tribe and family, and they departed from there every man to his territory [lit: inheritance].

כד וַיִּתְּהַלְכוּ מִשָּׁם בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּעֵת הַהִיא אִישׁ
לְשִׁבְטוֹ וּלְמִשְׁפַּחְתּוֹ וַיִּצְאוּ מִשָּׁם אִישׁ לְנַחֲלָתוֹ:

21:20 Go and lie in wait in the vineyards

Source 1 – Metzudat David

“They did not tell everyone the location of the vineyards (they were thinking of), lest the men of Shiloh should find out and guard against (the attack). But they told the men of Benjamin the way.”

21:21 Kidnap for yourselves each man his wife

Source 2 – Metzudat David

“According to the numbers (needed), one for each man.”

Source 3 - Malbim

“They made a pact that each and every one of them would not kidnap just one woman.”

21:23 And they carried off the wives whom they had abducted

Source 4 – Metzudat David

Whom they had abducted – “they took them with force.”

Source 5: Devarim/Deuteronomy chapter 22: 28-29

“If a man comes upon a virgin who is not engaged, and he seizes her and lies with her, and they are discovered, the man who lay with her shall pay the girl’s father fifty [shekels of] silver, and she shall be his wife.” (This text teaches that the wronged party is the father - who has lost the value of his ‘property’ - and not the woman.)

Source 6 – Athalya Brenner, Judges: a feminist companion to the Bible (1999)

“The young women of Shiloh are kidnapped, taken, carried off, abducted. Readers do not usually comment that they are also raped. [...] The biblical text silences them, mutes them, absolutely.”

Source 7 – Alice Bach, Rereading the body politic: women, violence and Judges 21 (1999)

“The carrying off of the women in Shiloh has been met with near silence. The representation of violence and pain of rape have been lost in a welter of interpretations that talk about reuniting the tribes of Israel, fighting a holy war in God’s name, assuring the continuation of the tribe of Benjamin. The text does not even name the action as rape. It is figured as a political necessity, not as a sexual crime. [...] Much like violence portrayed in cartoons, the carrying off of the dancing maidens is accomplished without pain, without struggle, without resistance. If (only) the narrative were focalised even for a moment through the eyes of the victims. [...] But the women remain as passive signifiers; the biblical storyteller is not interested in representing their experience. Thus, the reader must inhabit the gap, the silence, and - through the power of imagination - break the silence of the women of Shiloh.”

21:24 Every man to his tribe and family

Source 8 – ‘Hoil Moshe’, R Moisé Tedeschi

“And afterwards they (all) went to the city where the tribal chief resided, and there they divided into families, and each family went to the place where the head of the family resided, and once there perhaps they did a headcount to see how many (men) had died [lit: fallen], in order to find out how many widows [lit: wives] they needed to find a marriage for..”

Source 9 – Malbim

“After that, everyone went to their place and things remained as before.”