

“The Ugliest Story in the Bible”: creating new commentaries from the silences in Shoftim/Judges 19-21 (sourcesheet 3, 21:6-14)

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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 run to Rimmon, and other tribes vow never to marry their daughters to a Benjaminite.

6 And the children of Israel felt compassion for Benjamin their brother, and said, "Today, one tribe has been cut off from Israel.

וַיִּגְחַמוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל-בְּנֵימִן אָחִיו וַיֹּאמְרוּ נִגְדַע הַיּוֹם שִׁבְט אֶחָד מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל:

7 What shall we do for them that remain, for wives, since we have sworn by the Lord not to give them of our daughters for wives?"

זְמַח-נַעֲשֶׂה לָהֶם לְנוֹתְרִים לְנָשִׁים וְאֶלְחָנוּ נִשְׁבַּענוּ בַיהוָה לְבַלְתִּי תִתֶּן-לָהֶם מִבְּנוֹתֵינוּ לְנָשִׁים:

8 And they said, "Which one of the tribes of Israel did not go up to the Lord at Mitzpah?" [ie: had not made the oath] and behold, no one had come to the camp from Yavesh-Gil'ad to (attend) the assembly. [..]

תַּיִאמְרוּ מִי אֶחָד מִשְׁבְּטֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר לֹא-עָלָה אֶל-יְהוָה הַמִּצְפָּה וְהִנֵּה לֹא בָא-אִישׁ אֶל-הַמַּחֲנֶה מִיַּבֵּשׁ גִּלְעָד אֶל-הַקָּהָל:

10 And the congregation sent there **twelve thousand of the valiant men**, and commanded them, saying, "Go and strike the inhabitants of Javesh-Gil'ad with the edge of the sword, including the women and the children.

וַיִּשְׁלְחוּ-שָׁם הָעֵדָה **שְׁנָיִם-עָשָׂר אֶלֶף אִישׁ מִבְּנֵי הַחַיִל** וַיִּצְווּ אוֹתָם לֵאמֹר לְכוּ וְהִכִּיתֶם אֶת-יֹשְׁבֵי יַבֵּשׁ גִּלְעָד לְפִי-חֶרֶב וְהַנָּשִׁים וְהַטָּף:

11 And this is the thing that you shall do; every male, and every woman that had relations with man you shall destroy."

וְזֶה הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר תַּעֲשׂוּ כָל-זָכָר וְכָל-אִשָּׁה יִדְעַת מִשְׁכַּב-זָכָר תַּחְרִימוּ:

12 And they found among the inhabitants of Yavesh-Gil'ad **four hundred virgin girls that had not had relations with any man; and they brought them to the camp**, to Shiloh which is in the land of Cana'an.

וַבְּנִימְצָאוּ מִיּוֹשְׁבֵי יַבֵּשׁ גִּלְעָד אַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת נַעֲרָה בְּתוּלָה אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יָדְעָה אִישׁ לְמִשְׁכַּב זָכָר וַיָּבִיאוּ אוֹתָם אֶל-הַמַּחֲנֶה שִׁלֹּה אֲשֶׁר בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן:

13 And the whole congregation sent and spoke to the children of Benjamin that were in the rock of Rimmon, and they proclaimed to them (words of) peace.

וַבְּיִשְׁלַחוֹ כָל-הָעֵדָה וַיְדַבְּרוּ אֶל-בְּנֵי בְנֵימִן אֲשֶׁר בְּסֵלַע רִמּוֹן וַיִּקְרְאוּ לָהֶם שְׁלוֹם:

14 And (the men of) Benjamin returned at that time, and they [ie the community] gave them the (four hundred) women who were still alive out of the women of Yavesh-Gil'ad.

וַיָּשֻׁב בְּנֵימִן בְּעֵת הַהִיא וַיָּתְנוּ לָהֶם הַנָּשִׁים אֲשֶׁר חִיּוּ מִנְּשֵׂי יַבֵּשׁ גִּלְעָד:

21:7 What shall we do for the (Benjaminites) that remain, for wives?

Source 1 - Ralbag

“They were overcome by an incredible remorse for all the evil they had done to Benjamin.”

Source 2 - Malbim

“They swore that none of them would give their daughter to Benjamin [..]; (but) if one tribe were missing, it would be a great defect for the entire nation which could not be repaired.”

Source 3 - Alice Bach, Rereading the body politic: women, violence and Judges 21 (1999)

“Getting wives for Benjamin is a victory for Israel: not against a foreign enemy, but a triumph that reunites the tribes.”

21:12 And they found among the inhabitants of Yavesh-Gil'ad four hundred virgin girls

Source 4 – BT, Yevamot, 60b

“From where did they know that they were virgins? Rav Kahana said: ‘They sat them on the opening of a barrel of wine. If she was a non-virgin, her breath would smell like wine; if she was a virgin, her breath did not smell like wine.’”

(Note: Rashi and a number of other rabbis include something similar in their commentaries.)

21:12-14 ...and they brought them [ie the girls] to the camp [..] and (the men of) Benjamin returned at that time, and the community gave them the (four hundred) women.

Source 5 – Devarim/Deuteronomy chapter 21:10-14

“If you go out to war against your enemies, and the Lord, your God, will deliver him into your hands, and you take his captives, and you see among the captives a beautiful woman and you desire her, you may take [her] for yourself as a wife. You shall bring her into your home, and she shall shave her head and let her nails grow; and she shall remove the garment of her captivity from upon herself, and stay in your house, and weep for her father and her mother for a full month. After that, you may be intimate with her and possess her, and she will be a wife for you.”

Source 6 - Alice Bach, Rereading the body politic: women, violence and Judges 21 (1999)

“Unless the reader listens for the woman’s story muffled in the gaps and silences of the male narrative, the reader becomes a voyeur, complicit with the orderly retelling of the story.”

Sarah’s reflection: I have included no rabbinic sources that comment on the women themselves (other than those linked to Rav Kahana’s pronouncement above) because there are none. Instead, commentators are keen to tell readers exactly where the camp in Shiloh is located, and/or how wonderful it is that the congregation has been able to reassure the 600 Benjaminites that they should reconcile with the rest of the tribes and travel with them to back Shiloh in order to marry and rebuild.