

# “The Ugliest Story in the Bible”: creating new commentaries from the silences in Shoftim/Judges 19-21 (sourcesheet 2, 19:23-29)

Sarah Bronzite, sarahbresearch@outlook.com, Limmud 2025

*The Levite and his entourage were enjoying hospitality from an old man living in Giv'ah, when local “men of wickedness” surrounded his house and insisted the male guest be given to them for sexual gratification.*

**23** And the man, the master of the house, went out to them and said to them, "No, my brothers, do not do so wickedly now. Since this man has come into my house, do not commit this disgraceful deed.

**כג** וַיֵּצֵא אֵלֵיהֶם הָאִישׁ בְּעַל הַבַּיִת וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם  
אֶל-אֶחָיו אֶל-תִּרְעוּ בְּאִחְרֵי אִשְׁרֵי-בָא הָאִישׁ הַזֶּה  
אֶל-בֵּיתִי אֶל-תַּעֲשׂוּ אֶת-הַנְּבִלָה הַזֹּאת:

**24** Here is my virgin daughter, and his secondary wife; I will bring them out to you, **and (you can) afflict them and do with them as you please**, but to this man do not do this disgraceful act."

**כד** הִנֵּה בְתוּלִי הַבַּתּוּלָה וּפִילְגֶשֶׁהּ אוֹצִיאהָ-נָּא  
אוֹתָם וְעַנּוּ אוֹתָם וַעֲשׂוּ לָהֶם הַטּוֹב בְּעֵינֵיכֶם  
וְלָאִישׁ הַזֶּה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ דְבַר הַנְּבִלָה הַזֹּאת:

**25** But the men did not want to listen to him, and then **the (Levite) man used force towards his secondary wife, and sent her out to those outside. And they raped [lit: knew] her, and abused her the entire night** until the morning, and they sent her away when the day began to dawn.

**כה** וְלֹא-אָבּוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים לִשְׁמַע לוֹ וַיַּחֲזֵק הָאִישׁ  
בְּפִילְגָשׁוֹ וַיֵּצֵא אֵלֵיהֶם הַחוּץ וַיִּדְעוּ אֹתָהּ  
וַיַּתְעַלְלוּ-בָּהּ כָּל-לַיְלִילָה עַד-הַבֹּקֶר  
וַיִּשְׁלַחֶיהָ כַּעֲלוֹת (כְּתִיב בַּעֲלוֹת) הַשָּׁחַר:

**26** And the woman came (back) as the morning began. And she fell down at the entrance of the man's house, where her master was, until it was light.

**כו** וַתָּבֹא הָאִשָּׁה לַפְּנוֹת הַבֹּקֶר וַתִּפֹּל פְּתַח בַּיִת-  
הָאִישׁ אִשְׁרֵי-אֲדוּנֶיהָ שָׁם עַד-הָאֹר:

**27** And her master rose in the morning, and opened the doors of the house, and went out to go his way. And behold, the woman, his *pilegash*, was lying after having fallen at the entrance of the house, with her hands on the threshold.

**כז** וַיָּקָם אֲדוּנֶיהָ בַּבֹּקֶר וַיִּפְתַּח דְּלֹתוֹת הַבַּיִת וַיֵּצֵא  
לִלְכֹת לְדַרְכּוֹ וְהִנֵּה הָאִשָּׁה פִּילְגֶשׁוֹ נֹפֶלֶת פְּתַח  
הַבַּיִת וַיִּדְיָה עַל-הַסָּף:

**28** And he said to her, "Get up, let's go", but there was no answer. And he took her upon the donkey, and the man got ready [lit: rose up] and went home [lit: to his place].

**כח** וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלֶיהָ קוּמִי וְנִלְכֶה וְאִין עֲנָה וַיִּקְחֶהָ  
עַל-הַחֲמֹר וַיָּקָם הָאִישׁ וַיֵּלֶךְ לְמִקְמוֹ:

**29** And he came to his house, and took the knife, and took hold of his secondary wife and cut her into limbs, into 12 pieces, and he sent her throughout all the borders of Israel.

**כט** וַיָּבֹא אֶל-בֵּיתוֹ וַיִּקַּח אֶת-הַמַּאֲכָלֶת וַיַּחֲזֵק  
בְּפִילְגָשׁוֹ וַיַּנְתְּחֶהָ לַעֲצָמֶיהָ לְשִׁנַּיִם עֶשֶׂר נִתְחָמִים  
וַיִּשְׁלַחֶהָ בְּכָל גְּבוּל יִשְׂרָאֵל:

**30** And so it was, that anyone that saw (it) would say, "There has not happened nor has there been seen (anything) like this."

**ל**וְהִיָּה כָל-הָרְאָה וְאָמַר לֹא-נִהְיֶתָה וְלֹא-נִרְאָתָה  
כְּזֹאת:

19:23-29 – Rashi

Sarah's reflection: I find it noteworthy that, apart from saying that he believes the *pilegesh* was dead by the time her husband woke up, Rashi is completely silent about this section of the narrative.

19:24...**and (you can) afflict them and do with them as you please...**

Source 1 - Abarbanel

"We can deduce that they didn't really want sex with a man, because if that were the case (when they were refused the Levite) they would have asked for the manservant who came with the Levite, and they would not have 'settled for' a woman. But they also did not want to cause any disgrace to the old man, since he was one of the inhabitants of the city and a respected member of the tribe, so they decided not to abuse his daughter. Therefore, they ignored him when he talked about [offering them] his daughter, and instead satisfied themselves with the visitor's *pilegesh*. And another way to see this is: they saw how beautiful she was and desired her, and they only demanded the male visitor so that he would choose to give her to them."

19:25 **The (Levite) man used force [..], and sent her out to those outside.**

Source 2 - Metzudat David

"And the man used force" – because she did not want to go out, so the husband held her by force to save himself thinking that, when they saw her, because she was beautiful that they would be satisfied with her."

Source 3 – Angelina Duell, The Levite's concubine: constructing a hermeneutics of meaning (2023)

"The Levite strong-armed his concubine and forced her outside the relative safety of the home. I imagine that a struggle took place, that the concubine did not go quietly into the night."

Source 4 – RiD

"He used force, and sent her out - and then hid himself from the men."

Source 5 – Peggy Kamuf, Author of a crime (1993)

"The concubine's delivery into the hands of the Benjaminites saves [...] the host's daughter."

19:25 **They raped her, and abused her, the entire night...**

Source 6 – Malbim

"They raped her" – this means, vaginal penetration; "and abused her" – this means, anal penetration.

19:28 **And he said to her, "get up, let's go..."**

The only classic commentary on this text comes from the Metzudat David, which states: the reason the Levite speaks to her is because he is not sure if she is dead. Sarah's reflection: I can think of many things a man might want to say to his wife when she returns home at dawn, clearly traumatised, after he has pushed her outside the night before towards a gang of men who have been offered her to "do with as you please" ... but 'get up, let's go' isn't one of them. What might have been better?

19:28 **There was no answer.**

Sarah's reflection: I am curious as to why none of our *mefarshim* (classic commentators) have picked up on the grammar of this phrase. The text does not say 'she did not answer', but rather that there was no answer – from anyone. No one else spoke up for her; no one pointed out to the husband his heartlessness; no one asked him to reflect on his choice of words and on the absence of any caring action he could have taken. Another interpretation might be that there was no answer because, after the way he treated her, she had nothing left to say to him, and others in the old man's household had also seen the Levite's true colours and felt the same way.

19:28 **And he took her upon the donkey, and the man got ready and went home.**

Source 6 – Rashi

"She was dead."

Source 7 – Rachel Levy, Judges 19: Reading in Context and Intertextuality (2005)

"Verse 28 brings us to another gap in the narrative: was the woman dead or alive? Rashi helps the reader to understand clearly who is responsible for the death of the *pilegesh* and who is not. From the fact that she does not answer the Levite [in v27], he concludes she is already dead. *While the text does not disclose anything in this respect\**, Rashi clearly aims to stress the woman's death was the exclusive responsibility of the men of Giv'ah, and not something the Levite had any control over or involvement in." (\* *my emphasis – Sarah*)

Source 8 – Athalya Brenner, A feminist companion to Judges (1993)

"As her death begins at her exposure and ends with her dismemberment, we cannot know when exactly she dies. [...] Moreover, the agents of the woman's death are an unclear as is its moment: the act keeps being displaced from one man to the next."

Source 8 - Abarbanel

"And she died from [...] the extreme cold that set in, because she was [...] outside without a blanket."

19:29 **And he [...] took hold of his secondary wife and cut her [...] into twelve pieces**

Source 9 – JH Coetzee, The 'outcry' of the dissected woman in Judges 19-21 (2002)

"The Levite who, as a man of God, was supposed to care for people, showed himself to be an egocentric, self-protecting [...] person misusing his position as a Levite. He not only sacrificed his wife by pushing her violently out to be abused by brutal men, but also dissected her body by means of a sacrificial knife."

Source 10 – Devarim/Deuteronomy 21:23

"(If a person is hanged) you shall not leave his body on the pole overnight. Rather, you shall bury him – **כי־קבור תקברנו** *ki kavor tikberenu* - on that [same] day."

Source 11 – BT Sanhedrin 46b

"The verse states, '*kavor tikberenu*' (Devarim 21:23) - doubling the verb for emphasis. From this it is derived that one who leaves his deceased relative overnight without burying him transgresses a prohibition."