

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION  
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHETS

SEFER SHOFTIM

Shiur #09: Chapter 4 Conclusion  
Devorah and Ya'el

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This shiur is dedicated le-iluy nishmat Shmuel Ori ben Mordechai ve-Leviya Cohen z"l. May the Cohen-Rozen family be comforted among the mourners of Tzion ve-Yerushalayim.

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INTRODUCTION

Sefer Shoftim preserves the names of a total of thirteen figures who acted as "Judges," during the anxious and unstable period associated with Israel's conquest and settlement of the land of Canaan. As we have already seen, the challenges of the age were great while the spiritual stamina of the people was often lacking, so that no judge ever succeeded in restoring peace or securing serenity for very long. Nevertheless, some judges were more successful than others, and some of the narratives describing their exploits are correspondingly longer. Concerning some of these leaders, the text tells us almost nothing; concerning others, we can trace almost the entire trajectory of their lives. But of all of the judges whose lives and exploits are recorded in this short but remarkable book, only one has bequeathed to posterity a triumphal song of praise: Devorah.

Devorah is introduced to us rather abruptly. We are told nothing about her birth, upbringing or family, only that she was the wife of the otherwise unknown "Lapidot" (4:4). We know naught about her home or village, her children (?) or her friends, only that she was "a prophetess who judged Israel at that time." Under a sturdy date palm that had (uncharacteristically) taken root in the hill country of

Mount Efraim, she dispensed her instruction and inspiration, "between the Rama and Beit El."

## RABBINIC READINGS

Not surprisingly, the Rabbis (their opinions preserved in the Midrashic collection Yalkut Shim'oni) felt obliged to fill in some of the otherwise missing details. They tell us for instance, in comments echoed by Rashi (11<sup>th</sup> century, France), that "Lapidot" refers to "torches" ("lapid" in Hebrew). This is because Devorah would fashion wicks to kindle the lights of the Menora, and these in turn would be dutifully delivered by her husband to the Mishkan at Shilo. What is striking about such a statement is not that it tends to stress Devorah's spiritual disposition. What else to expect from a prophetess than for her to be busy fashioning wicks in her spare time, in order to spread the ethereal light emanating from the House of God! Rather, what is unusual about Rashi's formulation is that it has the pronounced effect of downplaying any independent role that Devorah's husband may have had, for his personal name and identity is entirely overridden by the nature of his enabling but subservient role.

Of course, according to other fanciful traditions (quoted by Rabbi David Kimchi, 13<sup>th</sup> century, Provençe) that identify Lapidot with Barak based on their related meanings (Barak means "brightness" or "lightening"), Devorah's central role in securing victory is highlighted even more. According to this reading (that is not attested to by any textual evidence), Barak, the Israelite general who led the troops to triumph, was also Devorah's husband. But in this phrase that introduces us to Devorah for the first time, Barak is memorialized in the text not as the military leader who prevailed against the chariots of Sisera, but rather as the dutiful husband who conveyed Devorah's handiwork to the holy precincts!

Whatever the real truth about Devorah's background and family, it is clear that the Rabbis extracted the cues that they did from the passage because they sought to emphasize Devorah's special and unusual role in the episode. In this, there can be no doubt that they were inspired by the Biblical text itself. After all, in his response to Devorah's summons to don the mantle of fighting general, Barak exclaims to her that he will only go to battle "if you go with me. But if you will not go with me, than I will not go" (4:8). Similarly, she informs him that God will bestow victory on the people of Israel "by the hand of a woman" (4:9).

Now it is the case that some of the traditions preserved in the Rabbinic writings concerning this matter betray a definite discomfort with a woman securing so prominent a leadership role. Rav Nachman of the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE, for instance, detected in Devorah's name (the Hebrew word for bee) intimations of her stinging arrogance (see Talmud Bavli Megillah 14b). Rabbi Berachya, also of the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE, saw intimations of ruin for a generation that could furnish no other competent leader besides a woman. But more representative is the following statement that, notwithstanding its surprise at a woman leading the people, nevertheless recasts that surprise into a powerful argument for respect for personal merit and ability, irrespective of creed, gender or economic status:

What was it about Devorah's character that allowed her to be a prophetess over Israel and to judge them? After all, wasn't Pinchas son of El'azar (the well-known activist priest and leader) functioning at the time? Calling heaven and earth as witness, I hereby testify that whether gentile or Jew, man or woman, slave or maidservant, the Holy Spirit rests upon a person only in accordance with their deeds! (Tanna Devei Eliyahu Rabbah Chapter 9).

## THE ROLE OF YA'EL

The decisive role played by women in the episode is not confined to Devorah. Though she is the driving force behind Barak's success in rallying the Israelite irregulars and then leading them into battle at her signal, the victory is not complete until Sisera the tyrant foe is captured and killed. And this final act, it will be recalled, is performed by a certain Ya'el "the wife of the Kenite" who woos the fleeing Sisera with reassurances of protection, afterwards plies him with sleep-inducing goat's milk, and then finally kills him instantly by driving the tent peg through his head (4:17-21). Thus, there is a direct textual parallel drawn between Devorah and Yavin the King of Chazor on the one hand, and Ya'el and Sisera on the other. Just as the menacing King of Chazor dispatches his loyal underling Sisera but does not himself participate in the battle, so too does Devorah inspire and then send Barak to engage the foe while she remains uninvolved in the actual fighting.

But now, the unexpected happens. For while infamous and proud Sisera enters the fray as a seasoned warrior aching for the kill, he is ably met, disarmed and then defeated not by his natural nemesis Barak, but rather by the noble but otherwise obscure Ya'el. It is clear that Barak himself is actually the anomaly in the episode, a fact that is reinforced by his utter failure to capture and kill Sisera. Pursuing the runaway Canaanite, complete victory almost within his grasp, he is unexpectedly

met by Ya'el who emerges from her tent and pronounces matter-of-factly: "go and I will show you the man whom you seek." She then proceeds to invite him into her dwelling where he finds Sisera lying down dead with the tent peg still lodged in his temple! Sisera has been defeated far from the battlefield, and by a woman!

## WOMEN SECURING THE VICTORY

What might be the significance of the fact that victory is here secured by women? On the simplest level, the Divine intent may be to emphasize the extent of the achievement. Women were not typically expected to participate in warfare, and few and far between are the reports in Tanakh (or other contemporary sources) of women taking any active role in physically engaging enemies in battle. In fact, the occurrence was so unusual that to be dispatched in battle by a woman was regarded as a particularly ignominious end. Take, for example, the incident of the rapacious and unsuited Avimelech son of Gid'on, who succeeded his father as judge by viciously killing any and all rivals including his own brothers, as reported in Chapter 9 of our book. Avimelech established his rule over the people of Shechem and its region for a period of three years, but then a falling-out occurred between himself and the town's inhabitants and nobles. He quickly massed his troops and moved against the opposition, first besieging and then reducing the town of Shechem and then attacking the adjacent town of Tevetz. But before he was able to proclaim victory, the people of Tevetz including men, women and the town rulers, fled to the citadel and bolted the entrance. Avimelech approached the tower in order to set it aflame, but was suddenly felled by millstone dropped by a woman on the roof. His skull fractured, he quickly called his armor bearer and implored him to finish him off, "lest they say about me that 'a woman killed him!'" (9:54). His loyal armor bearer fulfilled his last wish and ran him through.

Returning to our context, the implication would thus be to highlight the miraculous nature of the triumph. Not only was powerful Yavin and his threatening deputy Sisera – who had 900 chariots of iron at his disposal – defeated by the poorly-armed and untrained Israelites, but the victory was secured from beginning to end by female (the proverbial "weaker sex") non-combatants who had no battle experience whatsoever!

## A MOTHER AND A WIFE

But there is more. In one particularly telling reference, Devorah refers to herself as "a mother in Israel." The people trembled before the Canaanite threat in the years leading up to the confrontation, and even the well-traveled routes were abandoned by wayfarers who feared being attacked:

In the days of Shamgar son of 'Anat and in the days of Ya'el they ceased using the roads, and those that went on the way chose roundabout routes. Unwalled towns ceased in Israel, they ceased, until I, Devorah, arose, I arose like a mother in Israel..." (5:6-7).

What did Devorah mean by declaring herself to be a mother in Israel? It could only have meant that she was intensely concerned for the people, pained by their anguish, and absolutely determined to change the dismal situation. Like a mother who cares for her children, Devorah the consummate leader cared for her "offspring," namely the nation of Israel, and this led her to do everything within her power to improve their lot. And in this endeavor she was not alone. Ya'el, introduced as the "wife of Chever the Kenite," unexpectedly appeared on the scene, just as menacing Sisera was fleeing the battlefield. But she could not oppose him with weapons, these being entirely beyond her skill. Instead, Ya'el invited the weary general with soft offers of protection, gave him satisfying sustenance, cradled him in her inviting arms and covered him with warm blankets, and then summarily executed him as he slept, her steady hands never becoming sullied with the handling of male weapons of war. The tent peg, a potent symbol of domesticity, was her weapon of choice and was found to be especially effective in her small and delicate hands.

In essence, then, just as Devorah acts as a "mother" to save Israel, Ya'el employs a dramatic inversion of her wifeness, using its trademarks of loving concern and loyal empathy, to ensnare the general. How else to understand the charged sexual metaphors that Devorah utilizes in her song to describe Ya'el's exploit (see 5:27 – "Between her legs he bowed, fell and lied down..."), if not as expressions of admiration for the simple shepherdess's resourcefulness in utilizing her womanly skills? Thus, the episode furnishes us with a mother and a wife securing victory for a rag-tag army of irregulars in order to indicate that war is ignoble, killing is tragic, but freedom from enemy domination must be nevertheless be achieved. "We did not ask to become warriors," the women in the episode seem to be saying, "nor are we enamored with the male cult of killing. The glory of the battlefield does not impress us. But we will nevertheless fight and prevail, precisely because our way of life is at stake. The enemy is not inspired with our dreams for a

secure and peaceful future for our children; his only desire is for domination and tribute. But we will not be bowed!"

## THE MOTHER OF SISERA

This reading, that sees in the Israelite women's role a positive statement of their core values and not simply a detached expression of surprising triumph, is reinforced by Devorah herself, in her unsympathetic portrayal of another mother, namely that of Sisera. Towards the end of her song, she paints a poignant image of Sisera's old mother who expectantly awaits his return, but in vain:

By the window Sisera's mother peers out, and she wails by the casement (saying): "why does his chariot tarry in coming, why is the sound of the hoof beats delayed?" Her wise attendants answer her, as she too tells herself: "Surely they have found much spoils and they divide them, a captive girl or two for each fighter, a spoil of colored cloths for Sisera, a spoil of embroidered colors, double embroidered colors for the necks of the spoil!" (5:28-30).

While our initial tendency is to pity Sisera's mother, for we can only too well understand her pain as her beloved son fails to return from battle, Devorah quickly deflates our sympathies. For while she, as a "mother in Israel," and Ya'el, as a wife among the allied Kenites, decry bloodshed and take up the fight because they must, Sisera's mother is cut from a different cloth. In her veins, Canaanite blood flows, and she cannot for a moment perceive the pain of Israelite mothers who also wait anxiously for the return of their own beloved sons from the battlefield. The worldview of Sisera and his mother is conditioned by Canaanite values, and her greatest comfort is therefore to imagine her son engaged in the aftermath of bloody victory, taking for his captives fearful and defenseless Israelite girls bedecked with spoils.

Thus, while the women of Israel proclaim life's inherent sanctity and celebrate its inviolate worth, leaving their proverbial tents to counter the threat but never reveling in the enemies' demise, Sisera's mother dreams of more bloodshed. How striking that Devorah's triumphal song, though (as we shall see next time) commemorating God's triumph and Sisera's downfall in superlative terms, never once gloats over the enemies' defeat! Absent from its verses are any of the typical proclamations of victory songs ancient and modern that belittle the foe, demonize him and unabashedly rejoice over his gory end. The real struggle, then, is not

between Sisera and Barak but rather between the mother of Sisera and Devorah, between Ya'el and the obsequious attendants, between the amorality of the Canaanites and their culture of death and the ethical morality of the Torah.

In general as author, I intentionally steer clear of making facile comparisons between Biblical events and our modern predicament, preferring to let the insightful reader discover the connections on his/her own. But here the matter is too blatant and the collective pain too unbearable to overlook. As we speak, the State of Israel is engaged in an epic struggle for its existence, battling not only an implacable foe but a hostile world as well. Everywhere, Israel is delegitimized, its basic life-affirming values criticized, its right to safety and security derided.

While the mothers of Israel (and its fathers) cry for their every loss, pathetically sifting the bloody sands for remnants of their sons and daughters, the foe celebrates, reveling in every murderous act with unabashed pride. The mothers of the foe gleefully dispatch their own sons, tender in years and inflated with false dreams of the carnal pleasures that await them in Paradise, to blow themselves to bits, their explosive belts packed with nails, screws and frightful shards of metal. Their intent is to kill and to maim men, women and children, and for every one of their "heroic" successes there is a local celebration, complete with wanton weapon use, wildly chanting youth whose faces are twisted by hatred and not by pain, and home-baked sweets (!) proffered to the seething masses by the beaming parents of the latest "shahid." Is there anything more grotesque than their merriment and mirth that invariably marks the murdering of the innocent? We would do well indeed to recognize the mother of Sisera peering out from behind the shadows, a threatening sneer on her lips as she contemplates her son's delay. For her, bloodshed is honorable and killing glorious. "Just so shall all of your enemies perish, Oh God, and may those that love Him be as (strong as) the rising sun in its power" (5:31).