

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

Themes and Ideas in the Haftara
Yeshivat Har Etzion

**This haftara series is dedicated in memory
of our beloved Chaya Leah bat Efrayim Yitzchak
(Mrs. Claire Reinitz), zichronah livracha,
by her family.**

PARASHAT BESHALACH

THE BLESSED VOLUNTEERS

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THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE SONG OF THE SEA AND THE SONG OF DEVORA

The *haftara* of *Parashat Beshalach* (*Shoftim* 4:4-5-31) is comprised of two units:

- 1) the account of the war against Yavin, king of Canaan
- 2) the song that came in its aftermath

Truth be said, customs differ. According to the Ashkenazi rite, the *haftara* is comprised of the two chapters, which make it the longest *haftara* in the annual cycle of *haftarot*.^[1] Whereas according to the Sefardi rite, the *haftara* is confined to the Song of Devora itself, and the account of the war fought against Yavin, king of Cana'an, is omitted. The significance of the Sefardi custom lies in the fact that it focuses our attention on the song, that is to say, it emphasizes the obligation falling upon the individual and upon the nation as a whole to thank God for having saved them from their enemies. The Song of the Sea constitutes a clear example of the fulfillment of this duty, and the Song of Devora is another striking instance, and therefore the latter is read as the *haftara* on *Shabbat Shira*. In similar fashion, on the last day of the festival of *Pesach*, when once again we read the Song of the Sea as the day's Torah portion, the Song of David is read as the *haftara*. The guiding principle in choosing the Song of David as the *haftara* is the obligation to sing God's praises, as the Gemara explains in *Pesachim* 117a:

The prophets among Israel instituted that they should recite it [= *Hallel*] at every important epoch and in every trouble that may come upon them, when they are delivered they recite it over their deliverance.

The connection between the Song of the Sea and the Song of David does not lie in the event itself, but in the response to it. Thus, there is no need to seek common denominators between the two acts of deliverance, but rather to examine the manners of response. Indeed, it is difficult to find a common denominator between David's troubles and the parting of the sea, but, nevertheless, the song of the one serves as the *haftara* of the other. In our case as well, reading the song alone, as according to the Sefardi rite, comes to emphasize that it is *Shabbat Shira*, and to focus on that idea as the essence of the Torah reading and the entire day.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE WAR AGAINST CANA'AN AND THE REDEMPTION FROM EGYPT

The Ashkenazi rite enlarged the canvas and included also the war fought by Devora and Barak within the framework of the *haftara*. This can, perhaps, be seen as mere background and introduction to the song itself (following the manner of the Ashkenazi *haftarot* to be longer), but we must also consider the possibility that there

is a substantive connection between Israel's war against Canaan and their deliverance from Egypt, and that this is the reason that the *haftara* deals also with the war and not only with the song.

Were we to summarize what happens in the *haftara* in one sentence, we might say that it paints a picture of severe indifference and lack of initiative, and that the story of the war is the attempt to redeem a people that refuses to fight for itself.

The *haftara* opens with Devora, judge and leader of Israel. The people are faced with an exceedingly difficult situation. The verses immediately preceding the *haftara* say about Yavin: "And he strongly oppressed the children of Israel" (*Shoftim* 4:3), an expression that was not used earlier in the book. But apart from crying out to God, nobody lifts a finger to rise up against the oppression. Devora sits and judges, but there is no political authority ready to actively lead the people. Devora herself is described as "the wife of Lapidot," that is to say, she does not enjoy independent political status, but rather she is Lapidot's wife.

In this sense the situation resembles Israel's situation in Egypt. There too Israel is found in the chains of bondage, but the people do nothing to bring about their emancipation. Even Moshe Rabbenu went off to Midyan for a substantial period of time, and returned to Egypt only after God Himself persuaded him to do so. Despite Moshe's later efforts to mobilize the people to act against Pharaoh, he fails to knock down Israel's wall of despair and weariness, and he is forced to act as God's agent, without the people participating in the effort. The redemption is redemption from above ("*it'oreruta dile'eila*), with Moshe serving as God's prophet, and not as the head of a nation leading his people.[\[2\]](#)

CREATING LEADERSHIP AND MOBILIZING THE PEOPLE

Devora, like Moshe in his day, tries to mobilize the nation, and to further that end she sends for Barak. The first step does not involve mobilization of the people, but creating a leadership. Her hope is to initiate a process that will excite the people

and cause them to cast off their passivity in relation to their persecution and oppression. Barak, however, refuses to lead such a process by himself, and insists that Devora stand at the helm. In other words, Barak has the military qualifications and the operational capabilities to fight, but he lacks the leadership skills to initiate and lead. Devora must send for him in order for him to overcome his hesitation, and only afterwards is he ready to act. This is the first step in the *haftara's* drama, which sets man before the dilemma of having to choose between indifference and lack of initiative to change the situation, and readiness to sacrifice out of concern and in an active manner. Barak achieves partial success, when he is ready to act, but only under the aegis of Devora.

The next step is Barak's call to the people to mobilize. Thus, the prophet turns from the leadership to the public at large and examines Israel's readiness to join the battle when their leader calls upon them to do so. In the story recounted in chapter 4, the verse speaks only of the sacrifices of the men of Naftali and Zevulun and their volunteering to come to the aid of their people. As will be clarified in Devora's song, not everybody is a hero. The nation is divided into two groups: they who offer themselves willingly among the people whom God should bless, and those who dodge, evade and shirk their duty and fail to come. As is evident from the song, there is great anger with those who did not come, and Devora goes through each tribe and makes a reckoning with each of them, comparing and contrasting between the tribes themselves and between them and the other nations.

LACK OF DESIRE AND INDIFFERENCE

The phenomenon of the tribes who did not come testifies to a two-fold problem. First of all, their lack of desire to fight stemmed from the desire to live an easy and comfortable life at the expense of national responsibility and historical effort. And second, the indifference to the fate of their brothers attests to tribalism that fails to develop into the feeling of a single unified nation. If we examine the matter, we see that most of the tribes that are mentioned as having failed to come were located on the geographical periphery, that is to say, they lived on the east bank of the Jordan or along the Mediterranean coast and therefore they did not feel part of the effort. Nevertheless, it seems that regarding the tribe of Reuven, Devora puts greater emphasis on the economic factor and on the comfort, and thus she confirms Moshe's

concerns about the tribes of Gad and Reuven. As for the tribes dwelling along the coast, Devora emphasizes the feeling of not being connected to the rest of the people.

It is important to emphasize that Devora's furor resulted not only from the failure to share the national burden, but also from the fact that their failure to arrive endangered the success of the war effort and necessitated a different kind of warfare on the part of God. Ten thousand is not an insignificant number of people, but it is also not sufficiently significant.^[3] In plain English, the people's mobilization was not particularly impressive. When Sisera gathers together "nine hundred chariots of iron and all the people were with him," Barak does not have a chance to overpower him using natural means.

SUPERNATURAL REDEMPTION

The redemption, therefore, must come by way of strong Divine intervention, as had happened in Egypt. Devora's words to Barak, "And Devora said to Barak, Up; for this is the day on which the Lord has delivered Sisera into your hand" (4:14), make this very clear, and Scripture intentionally creates parallels to the story of the exodus from Egypt: "And the Lord confounded Sisera, and all his chariots, and all his host with the edge of the sword before Barak" (ibid. v. 15). One need not be a Bible Contest champion to recognize that these words echo the verses in *Parashat Beshalach* that describe the war with Egypt. Indeed, *Chazal* in the Gemara in *Pesachim* (118b) deepened these parallels by creating a direct connection between the parting of the sea of Suf and the battle against Sisera, adding elements of a supernatural war:

Rava bar Mari expounded: What is meaning of the verse which states: "And they rebelled against You at the Sea, at the Sea of Suf" (*Tehilim* 106:7)? This teaches that Israel rebelled at that time, saying: Just as we emerge from one side, so too the Egyptians emerge from the other side. The Holy One, blessed be he, said to the angel of the sea: Spew them [= the Egyptians] out onto dry land. He said before Him: Master of the Universe, is there a servant whose master gives him a present, and then takes it back from him? He said to him: I will give you one and a half times of them. He said to Him: Master of the Universe, is there a servant

who sues his master [= who guarantees that You will keep Your promise]? He said to him: The Kishon stream will be My guarantor. Immediately it spewed them out onto the dry land, and Israel came, and saw them. As it is stated: "And Israel saw Egypt dead upon the sea shore" (*Shemot* 14:30).

What is "one and a half times of them"? Regarding Pharaoh it says: "six hundred chosen chariots" (*Shemot* 14:7), whereas regarding Sisera it says: "nine hundred chariots of iron" (*Shoftim* 4:13). When Sisera came, he came upon [Israel] with iron prongs. The Holy One, blessed be He, removed the stars from their courses for them. As it is stated: "They fought from heaven; the stars in their courses fought against Sisera" (*Shoftim* 5:20). When they landed upon them, the iron prongs became very hot, and they went down to cool themselves off in the Kishon stream. The Holy One, blessed be He, said to the Kishon stream: Go, and collect your guarantee. Immediately, the Kishon stream swept them away, and cast them into the sea. As it is stated: "The stream of Kishon swept them away, that ancient stream" (*ibid.* v. 21). What is that "ancient stream"? The stream that became a guarantor in days of old.

Bringing the heavenly stars into the battle against Sisera completes the picture, and provides the *haftara* with an element that parallels the pillars of fire and cloud that confounded the Egyptians, and the image of a stream sweeping the Canaanites away into the sea.

THE INDIVIDUAL WHO GIVES HIMSELF WILLINGLY

The story continues to develop, introducing a third model of the contrast between historical indifference and activity, namely, the actions of the individual. After dealing with the leadership and the community, the story of Yael comes to emphasize the importance of the individual who freely gives of himself.

Yael belongs to the family of Chever the Kenite. This family represents indifference to history in full glory. The entire region is fighting a fierce war of survival. Israel is oppressed by the Canaanites, whereas the Canaanites feel threatened by a nation that appeared out of nowhere and threatens to drive them out of the land. The political-security situation engages the entire land and reaches the

boiling point of war, and the Kenites do not take a side. The ability to manage with either side, when each one feels that the other is committing a historical travesty against him, testifies to escapism and seclusion from the real world. If we consider neutral Switzerland when all of Europe was up in flames, and we reflect upon the meaning of such neutrality from the perspective of accepting an oppressive regime, we might be better able to understand the background against which Yael developed.[\[4\]](#)

The story of Yael is the story of an individual who freely gives of himself and listens to the inner voice that calls upon him to break out of the indifference that surrounds him and the lack of initiative implanted in man by his very nature, and take action. Sisera arrives at her tent on the clear assumption that it would serve as a safe haven, and this too teaches the extent to which Yael veered from the expected in the direction of personal daring. In this she serves as positive example of voluntarism and sacrifice and turns into the heroine of the story. Devora's words to Barak at the beginning of the *haftara*, "the Lord shall yield Sisera into the hand of a woman" (ibid. v. 9), are fulfilled, but through Yael and not her. As opposed to Barak who hesitated and refused to act on his own, Yael acted contrary to her surroundings with resolve and determination, and therefore she is credited with the death of Sisera.

THE SONG OF DEVORA

Now, we can move on to the Song of Devora and see that she too focuses on the issue of voluntarism. The opening verse of the song emphasizes this idea, designating the period as one of strife and voluntarism: "In time of tumultuous strife in Israel, when the people willingly offered themselves" (5:2). The song is structured the same way as the previous chapter, opening with the leadership, out of Devora's feeling that she too woke up from indifference to arouse the nation, and emphasizing the role of the lawmakers and dignitaries. She then moves on to discuss the people and the functioning of the various tribes. And at the end of the song, a special section is devoted to Yael.

This order corresponds to the development of the story, but it comes not only to describe the stages of the war, but also to glorify personal voluntarism during

difficult times. Yael's praises are sung at the end of the song not only because that reflects the chronology of the war, but also because of her unique importance in the entire story. It might be added that the lofty introduction that describes the giving of the Torah and the ancient times during which the *Shekhina* moved through the land comes not only as a festive introduction aimed at fitting the isolated incident into a cosmic framework, but also to contrast the two periods. In the world described by Devora when God went out from Seir and marched out from the field of Edom, the entire world of nature and history faded away before Him, and there was no need for human initiative and voluntarism. However, with the transition to natural governance and the difference that went into effect with Israel's entry into the Promised Land and their sins during the period of the Judges, it was no longer possible to rely on Divine miracles and human initiative was required. The song revolves around the diverse responses on the part of the major protagonists, Devora exalting the blessed volunteers and condemning those who avoided assuming responsibility.

On this point the Song of Devora constitutes a step forward in comparison to the Song of the Sea, for the Song of the Sea came in response to an event in which the individual and the nation took no part whatsoever, for it was God who fought for them in Egypt,^[5] whereas Devora presents a world in which parts of the nation offer themselves willingly, and they assist in the victory over Yavin king of Canaan and his allies.

(Translated by David Strauss)

[1] The *haftara* for the seventh day of *Pesach* is one verse shorter.

[2] I expanded on these ideas in my book *Tzir ve-Tzon* (Alon Shevut, 2002).

[3] The number 10,000 is familiar to us from another story in the book of Judges, close to our chapters, namely, the story of Gid'on. As may be remembered, Gid'on mobilizes thirty-two thousand men for his war against Midyan, and when he is told that they are too many, he sends twenty-two thousand of them home, and he is left with 10,000. God, however, tells him once again that he has far too many soldiers, and

after another sifting of the ranks, he is left with only three hundred men. It would seem from here that 10,000 men are considered a large number of troops, and therefore God sends them home as well. On closer examination, however, it seems that Gid'on thought they were a small number, and therefore when he was told that the original group was too large, he cut it down to 10,000 men, and not 300. Indeed, for a natural war they are a small number, as Gid'on thought. God was not content with that reduction because He wanted to conduct a supernatural war, Gid'on having complained that providence had left and abandoned Israel. There were many who freely offered themselves, but their recognition of God was weak. It was therefore important that the victory not be regarded as a human victory. In our chapter, on the other hand, the current problem was not providence, but the people's spirit of voluntarism, and in this context 10,000 volunteers should be seen as a small force when fighting a natural war.

[4] In this regard, the Kenites are following in the footsteps of their patriarch/founder, Yitro. He too was indifferent to the historical reality around him, as is evident from the stories about him in the books of *Shemot* and *Bamidbar*. See my book, *Tzir ve-Tzon*, where I expanded on this idea as well. This provides yet another interesting parallel between the *haftara* and the book of *Shemot*, but this is not the forum to discuss the matter at greater length.

[5] Attention should be paid to the transition from the beginning of *Parashat Beshalach*, where there is no human component whatsoever, to the end of the *parasha*, where Moshe and Yehoshua play active roles in the war against Amalek as prophet and general. Moshe prays and waves his hands and in this way he directs the war on the level of Divine providence, and not in the framework of natural military tactics, whereas Yehoshua acts on Moshe's command with human initiative and fights Amalek in a natural manner.