

# Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Beshalach

- Gidon Rothstein

Haftarah No. 4: Parshat Beshalach-- Judges 4:4-5:31

## Why is This the Haftarah for Parshat Beshalah?

The tempting answer to this question is that it contains a song of praise to God, like in the Torah reading itself. Indeed, Sefardi custom limits the *haftarah* to the *Shirah*, the Song. Ashkenazic custom, which reads the story leading up to the Song, seems to add another element; along these lines the Mechilta says that the salvation of Devorah's time, not just the Song, is parallel to that of the Splitting of the Sea.

We can see how Devorah's events somewhat replay those at *Yam Suf* by focusing on three aspects of the *haftarah*—the scorn Devorah displays for Barak when he insists on her coming with him, the interest in Yael and her killing of Sisera (as shown by her figuring prominently in the Song as well as in the story), and the Song's negative reaction to those who neglected to join the battle against Sisera. (Devorah herself, both in her functioning as a judge and involvement with the wicks of the menorah, points in the same direction, but clarifying those points would take too much space).

## The Call to War

After introducing Devorah, the prophet tells us that she sent a message to Barak ordering him to take ten thousand men from Naftali and Zevulun to Mount Tabor, where God would cause Sisera—whom we were earlier told was the general for Yavin, the king of Canaan who had been troubling the Jews—to come fight.

Barak agrees to go only on condition that Devorah come with him. While she accepts, she makes her displeasure clear by noting that his unwillingness to act on his own means he will not get any glory for the victory he is about to produce. Barak's hesitation about listening to Devorah, apparently, is both bothersome to her and worth our while to know.

## Yael's Prominence

Telling the story of the victory takes ten verses; seven of them are devoted to Yael's interactions with Sisera, ending with her showing his corpse to the Jews who had been chasing him. Four verses of Devorah's Song praise Yael's role in his death. Despite recognizing how impressive it is that a woman took upon herself to lure an Assyrian general to sleep and then killed him with a tent-peg and a hammer, I still also suspect the prophet is celebrating more than just the fact of her killing Sisera.

## Denigrating Those Who Failed to Join

The key to understanding our focus on those two parts of the incident lies in the *Shirah*'s also taking time to curse those who did not come to help Barak fight against Sisera. In today's world, that kind of behavior would be criticized as unseemly; once a battle or effort is won, the winner

is supposed to thank those who helped, not speak against those who did not. Everyone is entitled to an opinion, contemporary society holds, and respect involves not looking down on them for holding to their views.

Regardless of whether that is true in ordinary human interactions, it is decidedly not true when a prophetess of God issues a declaration. At that point, it becomes incumbent upon all—Jew or non-Jew-- to contribute to the success of the prophet's endeavor. The tribes that failed to heed her call—and, in the Talmud's reading, the celestial stars that did the same—deserve blame for failing to further God's cause.

Phrasing it that way also explains Barak and Yael's role. Barak should have taken Devorah's directions, since she speaks in God's Name. Had he done so, he'd have been the vehicle of God's saving the Jewish people and celebrated as such; that he needs continuing support from the prophet is itself a mark against his character.

Yael, on the other hand, had no obvious obligation to join in the defeat of Sisera, so her decision to intervene, in ways not at all characteristic of women of her time, was all the more impressive. It was not so much that we needed Sisera dead, since he'd been defeated already, as that we revel in someone else's recognizing the truth of our God and our prophets.

Taking all three of these together, we see the subtext of the haftarah is the question of joining, of when and how people in the world, Jew or non-Jew, are willing to cast their lot with God, Creator of Heaven and Earth; at the Sea (in the Torah reading), no one had a choice because of how clear the Hand was. In the rest of human history, the challenge is more complicated, and thus what Devorah sings about in her Song.

### **The Return of Famous Verses**

1) Pesachim 66b uses Devorah's call to herself (verse 12: "*uri uri Devorah*, awake, awake, Devorah") to prove that if a prophet acts arrogantly, his/her prophecy will be removed. Devorah had previously (verse 7) said that Jews were afraid to live in border cities, until she came and made it safe. That arrogance deprived her momentarily of prophecy, so she had to revive it by saying "awake, awake."

2) Verse 23 starts with the words "*aru Meroz*, curse Meroz," (Rashi says it's either a star or an important person), from which the Talmud derives the right to excommunicate a person who refuses a summons from a religious court, a *Beit Din*. Devorah's call to war, in other words, was binding on all Jews; refusing it lay one open to communal sanctions. That verse ends by saying that they did not come to the aid of God, from which the Sifrei understands that helping the Jewish people is the same as helping God.

3) The Sages understand Yael to have helped Sisera fall asleep by more than just giving him milk rather than water. Based on verse 24, the Talmud famously declares an *aveirah l'shmah*, a sin undertaken with perfectly pure purposes" greater than a "*mitzvah shelo lishma*, a mitzvah performed with lesser motivations than just serving God."

4) Sisera's mother's cries teach the Talmud, Rosh haShanah 33b, that the blasts of the shofar on

Rosh haShanah should sound like crying, since Onkelos translates *yom teruah*, a day of blowing as “*yom yevavah*, day of crying,” the same verb as describes Sisera’s mother crying for her son.

5) The last verse in the *haftarah* serves as the crux of a famous Talmudic declaration (e.g. at Yoma 23a), that those who “are insulted and do not insult, hear themselves reviled without replying, act out of love and are pleased with the travails [God sends them]” are the definition of the lovers of God whom our verse describes as “the going out of the sun at its full strength.”

Shabbat Shalom