

Parashat Beshalach, 5781, 2021:

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Devorah and Her Generation

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The protagonist of this week's *haftorah* is the prophetess and judge Devorah: "Now Deborah was a woman prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth; she judged Israel at that time." (*Sefer Shoftim* 4:4, this and all Tanach and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) Our Sages note in *Talmud Bavli, Megillah* 14a, that Devorah was one of the seven prophetesses: "Who were the seven prophetesses? Sarah, Miriam, Devorah, Chana, Avigail, Chulda, and Esther." It appears, as well, that she had the additional distinction of being one of the Judges (*shoftim*) of the Jewish people — if we take the phrase, "she judged Israel at that time" ("*hi shoftah et Yisrael ba' eit hah*") at face value.

It seems that we should interpret, "she judged Israel at that time," quite literally, as the very next *pasuk* states: "And she sat under the palm tree of Deborah, between Ramah and Beth-el, in the mountain of Ephraim; and the children of Israel came up to her for judgment." (*Sefer Shoftim* 4:5) There is a fundamental halachic problem with this interpretation, however, since the fourth century *Talmud Yerushalmi, Yoma* 6:1 (32a) states: "... a woman may not judge" ("*ain haisha danah*"). Although the Rambam (1135-1204) does not explicitly include this ruling in his *Mishneh Torah*, it is found nearly

verbatim in the *Arba'ah Turim* of Rabbi Yaakov ben Asher (1270-1340), and in Rabbi Yosef Karo's (1488-1575) *Shulchan Aruch, Choshen Mishpat, Hilchot Dayanim 7:4*: "A woman is disqualified from judging" ("*ishah pasulah l'don*"). Given this clear-cut ruling, we must ask the simple and straightforward question: "Was Devorah really a judge?" The answer, as in many areas of *halacha* and *hashkafa*, is a resounding, "It depends who you ask."

Tosafot, an illustrious group of Rashi's (1040-1105) students and disciples, discuss Devorah's status in a number of different tractates of the Talmud. One such source is *Talmud Bavli Gittin 88b s.v. v'lo lifnei hedyotot*. Initially, Tosafot opines that the phrase from *Sefer Shoftim* "she judged Israel at that time," should not be taken literally, since it may very well mean "... perhaps she never rendered judgment at all, and [instead] she instructed [the judges] as to what the legal decisions ought to be." (This, and the following Tosafot translation of this source, my own) According to this view, although Devorah was a legal scholar who discussed cases with members of various *batai din* (Jewish courts), she was not an actual judge. It should be noted that this approach is followed by Rabbi Yaakov ben Asher in the above-cited section of the *Arba'ah Turim*. In contrast, Tosafot's second approach suggests that Devorah was a practicing judge, and her mandate to judge had come directly from the Almighty: "Alternately, perhaps they [the Jewish people] had accepted her juridical authority upon themselves because of [a Divine pronouncement] from the *Schechinah* (Hashem's immanent presence)."

Devorah as a judge in practice — based upon Divine mandate — finds further support in a previously cited Gemara, *Talmud Bavli, Megillah 14a*, in one of the explanations of the

phrase, “And she sat under the palm tree of Deborah...” Therein our Sages teach us: “Just as this palm tree has but one heart [Rashi: a central growing point], so, too, did the Jewish people of that generation have but one heart (*lev echad*) directed to their Father in Heaven.” This explanation is particularly fascinating in that Devorah’s universal acceptance as a judge for *klal yisrael* (the Jewish people) took place precisely because the heart of the Jewish people was unanimously directed to *avinu she’b’shamayim* (our Father in Heaven).

Sadly, unlike the spiritually united Jews of Devorah’s generation, we live in an age of profound *pirood* (separation). Each one of us, even if we do not label ourselves, is labeled and defined by others as to what kind of Jew we are and where we stand on the religious/non-religious/not-yet-religious spectrum. The result of this kind of thinking is alienation and disaffection from our fellow Jews. Instead of banding together in love and tolerance, we are split apart by groundless hatred (*sinat chinam*) and distrust of one another. In stark contrast, the Jews of Devorah’s time clearly teach us what ultimately should bind us together, namely, singular dedication to *avinu she’b’shamayim*. If we can achieve this, we will be well on our way to replacing *sinat chinam* with *ahavat yisrael* (unconditional love for the Jewish people).

Rabbi Yitzhak Avraham Kook (1865-1935), the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Palestine under the British Mandate, was one of the greatest exponents of *ahavat yisrael* in the modern age. He conceptualized this idea in the following poetic manner:

Listen to me, my people! I speak to you from my soul, from within my innermost soul. I call out to you from the living connection by which I am bound to all of you, and by

which all of you are bound to me. I feel this more deeply than any other feeling: that only you —all of you, all of your souls, throughout all of your generations — you alone are the meaning of my life. In you I live. In the aggregation of all of you, my life has that content that is called “life.” Without you, I have nothing. All hopes, all aspirations, all purpose in life, all that I find inside myself — these are only when I am with you. I need to connect with all of your souls. I must love you with a boundless love.... Each one of you, each individual soul from the aggregation of all of you, is a great spark, part of the torch of the Light of the universe which enlightens my life. You give meaning to life and work, to Torah and prayer, to song and hope. It is through the conduit of your being that I sense everything and love everything. (*Shemonah Kevatzim* 1:163, translation, Chanan Morrison)

May the time come soon and in our days when we, as individuals and as a nation, will realize the truth inherent in Rav Kook’s stirring words and treat every one of our brothers and sisters with the *ahavat yisrael* they deserve. *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom, and may Hashem in His infinite mercy remove the pandemic from *klal Yisrael* and from all the nations of the world.

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>
They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org> using the search criteria Etengoff and the *parasha*’s name.

The email list, *b’chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at:
<http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik’s](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.