

Rabbi Gideon Shloush

Haftarat Beshalach: *Discerning the Hand of God*

Parashat Beshalach is by far one of the most exciting *parashiyot* in all of the Torah. It is here that we read of the Jewish people's dramatic crossing of the Red Sea, accompanied by the beautiful *Shirat Ha-Yam* (Song at the Sea). From the depths of their souls, the Jewish people poured forth a song of praise and thanksgiving for their miraculous salvation from the Egyptian army.

How fitting it is, therefore, that the *haftarah* perfectly parallels this *parashah*. For it is here that we read *Shirat Devorah* – the heartfelt song of Devorah. In her *shirah*, the prophetess leads the Jewish people in praising God for miraculously saving them from the advancing troops of Sisra, the commander of the mighty Canaanite enemy.

Who was Devorah? When did she live? What was her leadership style? Why was she an important figure in Jewish history?

The story of Devorah is recorded in the book of *Shoftim*. This was a glorious period, spanning four hundred years, from the days of Yehoshua up until the period of *Shmuel Ha-Navi*. Devorah, from the tribe of Naftali, was the fourth of the Judges. She led her people around the year 1106 bce. The Talmud records that Devorah was also one of seven prophetesses in *Tanakh*. That list includes Sarah, Miriam, Chanah, Avigayil, Chulda and Esther, in addition to Devorah.

God loved Devorah. In the *haftarah* she is referred to as “*Eishet Lapidot*” – “the woman of wicks.” The *Midrash* explains that she is so named because she took the time to lovingly prepare wicks for the Tabernacle. In appreciation, God said, “Devorah, you have increased My light, so I will increase your light. You will shine as a guiding light for the Jewish people.”

R. Shimshon Raphael Hirsch says that Devorah was a woman of fiery enthusiasm and inspiring speech. She judged the people and encouraged them towards a path of Torah observance. She was a wise, pious, and modest woman. The *haftarah* tells us “*ve-hi yoshevet tachat tomer*” – “she sat beneath the palm tree.” The Talmud (*Megillah* 14a) explains that she didn't meet with people in the house, but rather she sat outdoors when she judged, so as to avoid any issues of *yichud* (seclusion) with men.

During the time that she became a judge, trouble was brewing for the Jewish people. Up until this point, their oppressors had been foreign armies. Now, however, the budding Israelite nation was overcome by the Canaanites who lived directly in their midst. Sisra, general to Yavin, King of Chatzor, would continuously mock the Jewish People. He would say, “Where is your great God who saves you from suffering?” This aggression prompted the Jewish people to cry out to God for salvation.

What follows, as described in our *haftarah*, is that Devorah receives a prophetic message that Barak ben Avinoam should wage war against Sisra. (Many commentaries suggest that Barak was her husband.) Devorah instructs Barak to take ten thousand men to fight alongside him. Barak and his comrades would have to face an army that numbered in the hundreds of thousands. Devorah tells Barak, “Arise and confront Sisra. God has given him into your hands. God goes before you and fights for you.”

Barak follows her word and God takes charge of the battle. He sends confusion upon the armies of Sisra. As Devorah recounts in her song, when the stars appear at night, they radiate with such

intensity that the soldiers overheat in their armor. They immediately seek refuge along the banks of *Nachal Kishon*, where they hope to cool off. Miraculously, the shallow brook turns into raging waters and drowns the enemy army.

Seeing his army's demise, Sisra runs for his life (Radak explains that Sisra not only fled on foot but he purposely did not flee with any surviving soldiers so as not to be detected). As he runs for his life, he approaches a group of tents. There, a young woman, Yael, sees the panic-stricken general and invites him into her tent. Yael offers Sisra milk to drink and he becomes very drowsy. Then, "*va-tekhaseihu be-semikhah*" – she covers him with a blanket ("*semikhah*"). The commentaries explain that if you switch around the letters of "*semikhah*" you get the words "*ko shemi*" – "My Name is here." This *remez* (hint) indicates that Yael did not sin with Sisra, but rather, God was very much a part of this plan to get Sisra into Yael's tent. As he sleeps, Yael takes an iron pin from the edge of the tent and hammers it into his face.¹

Upon learning of the fall of Sisra, Devorah pours forth a most beautiful and poetic song of thanksgiving to God. This was a moment of great salvation for the Jewish people. The *Zohar* tells us that *Shirat Devorah* is filled with the secrets of Divine wisdom and is one of the ten great songs in (*Tanakh* and) Jewish history.

It is striking to see the parallels that exist between our *parashah* and the *haftarah*. In both stories:

The enemy leader denies the existence of God
God wages war on Israel's enemies from the heavens
God confuses the enemy camp
God drowns Israel's enemies in the water
God completely annihilates the enemy
The enemy leader survives (though only temporarily in the case of Sisra)
A woman leads a song of praise
The songs that follow the Israelite victories are works of poetry
The songs visually appear in the Torah in a magnificent "brick" form on the page

There are many lessons to be learned from this *haftarah* but the one that I find especially meaningful is the importance of giving *shirah* to God.

Our Sages tell us that we learn from both *Shirat Ha-Yam* and *Shirat Devorah* is how important it is never to delay in praising God and thanking Him for His kindness.

Shirah is unique for it emanates from the depths of our souls. It allows our inner most feelings to burst forth. It is a demonstration of our longing to be closer to God. "*Kol ha-neshamah tehaleil Kah, halelukah*" – "My entire soul sings praise to You, oh Lord."

How blessed we are to live in a time where we have so much to be thankful for, and to praise God for. Especially noteworthy is that although surrounded by enemies, our people continue to thrive in our historic homeland. Isn't it remarkable to see the magnitude of construction taking place all across the Land of Israel? Entire neighborhoods and cities have sprung up in the most barren of places. There are new roads and buildings at every turn. Cranes are everywhere. We are no doubt living in the days of *Kibbutz Galuyot* (the Ingathering of the Exiles), as God prepares for the arrival of the *Mashiach*, *Techiyat Ha-Meitim* (the Resurrection), and the building of the Third Temple.

¹. It is interesting to note that when Sisra flees, he ends up in the house of Chever Ha-Keini (Yael's husband). Chever Ha-Keini was a descendant of Yitro. The *Midrash (Esther Rabbah)* teaches us that when one takes upon oneself a *mitzvah*, the *mitzvah* does not cease from recurring again in that person's household. Centuries earlier, Yitro had generously accepted a refugee (Moshe) into his household, and therefore, in that merit, Yitro's descendants now accepted the enemy (Sisra) into their house, and were thereby able to vanquish this enemy of Israel.

Let us not take this for granted. We must give *shirah* each day for what are privileged to witness God's active fulfillment of His promise to return His people to their national homeland, after a significant absence of nearly two thousand years.

It is now that we await the opportunity to hear the *final* song, which will be sung by the Jewish people at the time of the final redemption (*Yeshayahu* 42:10 and *Tehillim* 149:1). May we merit witnessing this climactic moment.