

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHETS

SEFER SHOFTIM

Sefer Shoftim – Chapter 5 Conclusion
The Victory Song of Deborah
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INTRODUCTION

With the completion of the fifth chapter of Sefer Shoftim, we now conclude the first division of the book. Let us briefly review some of the themes that we have explored thus far. Recall that unlike Sefer Yehoshua, our book presents a very unsympathetic portrayal of the people of Israel, for it charges them with repeated acts of treachery against God, and then starkly narrates the consequences of the Divine displeasure which inevitably follow. No doubt the circumstances were difficult. The relatively brief and bloody wars of conquest were long over while the great and extended task of settlement still loomed large before the people, challenging not only their physical fortitude but their moral and spiritual fiber as well. Slowly, they cleared the sparsely-settled hill country and established themselves in the more fertile and populated valleys, and everywhere they were continuously confronted with the ominous choice of either opposing their Canaanite nemeses with their polytheistic and relativistic ways or else accommodating or even embracing them. To choose the former invariably entailed armed conflict and physical danger while choosing the latter often provided social and commercial opportunity. Predictably but with ultimately tragic consequences, many of the tribes oftentimes chose the latter. By granting amnesty to the Canaanites and to their morally corrupt ways, in direct contravention to the Torah's shrilly repeated proscriptions, Israel courted disaster, defeat and downfall.

But though the people strayed from God and were punished accordingly, unflinching they soon cried out to Him for relief from their foes (itself a not-insignificant form of Teshuva) and He responded to their pained entreaties. A leader, often introduced abruptly with little textual elaboration on his or her obscure origins, would arise to save them from oppression. Suffused with Divine inspiration (that may or may not have also been expressed in the performance of a judicial role) and attendant military skill, the judge would counter attack, push

back the enemy, and secure a brief respite of peace. No longer threatened, Israel would once again stray, and a new cycle of oppression by foes, return to God and salvation by a judge would inevitably unfold.

THE FIRST FOUR JUDGES

We must note that the four judges introduced to us until this point have been, without exception, positively portrayed. Othniel son of Kenaz (3:9) the kinsman of Calev, Ehud son of Gera (3:15) of Binyamin, Shamgar son of 'Anat (3:31) the peasant warrior, and valiant Deborah the wife of Lapidot (4:4) all led the people faithfully, beat the oppressor admirably, and avoided controversy assiduously. There are no recorded instances in the text of any of them betraying a lack of trust before battle or else of succumbing to self-aggrandizement in the afterglow of their victories. They commit no missteps as they selflessly secure liberation for their people and when their era of leadership is over, they pass from the scene honorably. Though the Biblical text is often reticent concerning protagonists with respect to the details of their biography, it is never silent on matters of their morality (or lack thereof). The failure to mention any flaws concerning these four judges should therefore be taken as an endorsement and approval of their reign.

Perhaps the matter can be highlighted by briefly contrasting our quartet with the career of the last of the judges, the potent Shimshon from the tribe of Dan. Though Shimshon probably single-handedly slew more Philistine foes than any of these four others dispatched from among the ranks of their respective enemies, he is not remembered fondly by the book. Repeatedly, his unwillingness or inability to control his passions is recounted, and always by way of explanation for why he was ultimately ineffectual. If these four represent ideal administration and authority under the difficult national circumstances then prevailing, then other judges in the book present us with a different and less savory model of leadership, one that is often tainted with self-doubt, self-interest, and self-debasement.

THE VISUAL STRUCTURE OF THE TEXT

Chapter Five, then, the Victory Song of Deborah the Prophetess, provides us with an exceptionally appropriate conclusion to this first section of the book. Its soaring and lyrical verses are unusually vivid and together constitute one of the Hebrew Scriptures' greatest epic songs. Even before considering some of its motifs, we take note of its curious graphical appearance, for in the scroll (and in good editions of the Tanakh) it stands out from the rest of its context as something

that is visually unique. The Rabbis of the Talmud referred to this form in the following passage:

Rabbi Chanina bar Papa said: Rav Sheila of Kefar Timrata expounded that all of the passages of Biblical song are written as 'half bricks arranged upon whole bricks' and 'whole bricks arranged upon half bricks'. The exceptions to the rule are the list of the rogue Haman's ten sons (Esther 9:6-9) and the list of the kings of Canaan, for they are composed as half bricks arranged upon half bricks, and whole bricks upon whole bricks. What is the reason for the distinction? So that they should have no resurgence from their downfall (Talmud Bavli Megilla 16b).

That is to say that each line of the song is divided into a stitch of text ('half brick') that is then separated by a blank space ('whole brick') from the concluding stitch of text, while the next line of song inverts the sequence, like this:

Devorah and Barak son of Avino'am sang on that day
saying: When there was great strife in Israel the
people offered themselves, praise God! Hear
kings, listen princes for I will, to God, I will sing,
making melody to God Lord of Israel...

The overall effect of the technique is to create an appearance of stacked elements, as each line of text sits solidly above a space and each space above a line. The commentaries regarded the visual impact of the form as suggesting unusual stability, like a section of wall that had been solidly constructed by alternating its successive layers of bricks. They interpreted the symbolism literally as an expression of the enduring permanence or truth of the song's message (see implication from commentary of Rashi ad loc). While the Song of Devorah is not the only example of this phenomenon in the Tanakh, there is only one other, and that of course is the Song sung by Moshe and the people of Israel after the great victory over the Egyptians at the Sea of Reeds, as recorded in Sefer Shemot (Chapter 15).

THE SONG AT THE SEA – COMPARISONS AND CONTRASTS

In past lessons, we have discussed some of the parallels between these two victories, and here a brief list must suffice: both episodes involve powerful and oppressive overlords armed with numerous chariots, both describe an Israelite people ill-equipped for battle and psychologically overawed, and in both situations miraculous and unexpected salvation is accomplished by torrents of water as the yoke of the tyrant is cast off forever. It would therefore have been

quite natural for Devorah to have seen God's exploits at the wadi of Kishon as mirroring Israel's experiences at the shores of Yam Suf, and for the text to have emphasized that link by employing a similar graphic convention.

At the same time, however, there are also numerous differences. Chief among them is that the song of Moshe and Israel, only about two-thirds the length of Devorah's epic, is a more narrowly focussed and repetitious composition. It describes God's might in effecting the immediate victory over Pharaoh and his host (Shemot 15:1-5), and then describes it again (Shemot 15:6-12). It goes on to intimate in the Egyptian defeat the future downfall of all of Israel's foes (Shemot 15:13-16), concluding with a prophetic and proleptic vision of Israel achieving stability and permanence in their land and building the Temple to glorify God (Shemot 15:17-19). Suffused with inspiration, the Song's final note is decidedly eschatological in tone, proudly proclaiming for all of the world to hear: "God will reign forever and forever!" (Shemot 15:18).

SIMPLICITY VERSUS COMPLEXITY

There is, in effect, only one single subject that is discussed in the Song at the Sea, and that is God's saving might, present and future: God overthrew the Egyptians, God foiled Pharaoh's nefarious plan, God will lead His people to Canaan and overwhelm the surrounding nations hostile to Israel's mission, and ultimately God will prevail. According to the Song's central theme, Israel's role in securing its salvation was and is correspondingly small.

Devorah's hymn, on the other hand, while certainly neither negating God's intervention nor downplaying it, nevertheless acknowledges the role of numerous human characters in the victory. While she gratefully and sincerely sings of God's involvement (Shoftim 5:1-5), she also notes her own (5:7), her fighters (5:5:9-11), and especially Yael's (5:24:27) selfless heroism. In one memorable couplet, Devorah even blurs the distinctions between them, crediting all of them with securing the triumph together: "Arise arise Devorah, arise arise and speak song, get up Barak and take your captives son of Avino'am. Then a remnant ruled over the mighty among the nations, God gave me dominion over the powerful!" (5:12-13).

At the same time, Devorah discusses the complex and divisive dynamic that was at work among the tribes of Israel, as some of them selflessly volunteered for what must have seemed a lost cause, while others, who were geographically beyond the direct threat of Yavin and Sisera's tyranny, remained aloof and seemingly unconcerned:

...why did you, (Reuven), sit among the sheepfolds to hear the bleating of the flocks? For the divisions of Reuven there was much soul searching! Gil'ad dwelt on the other side of the Yarden, and Dan, why did he dwell with his ships? Asher sat on the shores of the sea and dwelt securely in his harbors. But Zevulun was a people that delivered its life to die, as did Naftali, upon the heights of the field...(5:16-18).

Paralleling the tribal divisions were communal and personal ones, for Devorah indicates that not everyone took part in the battle or in the routing of the foe that followed:

Cursed be (the people of) Meroz, says the messenger of God, may her inhabitants be utterly cursed, for they did not come to the assistance of God, to the assistance of God against the mighty. But among the women may Ya'el the wife of Chever the Kenite be blessed, among the women in the tents may she be blessed...(5:23-24).

THE SPIRIT OF THE AGE

In a nutshell, Devorah's song succeeds admirably in expressing the spirit of the age, the powerful political and religious undercurrents that characterized the anxious and turbulent period of these early judges. God had brought Israel to the gates of Canaan, had initially subdued their Canaanite foes, but had also delegated responsibility to them, making them the masters of their own fate. Israel had been promised His assistance but had also been impressed with His demands. Triumph would not be unconditionally guaranteed, but would instead be a direct function of the moral choices that the people made.

At the same time, the tribes of Israel, just recently and uneasily fused as a loose coalition, would have to desire unity in order to achieve it. Tribal divisions, narrow sectarian interests, partisan politics and local and regional concerns would have to be overcome so that the nation as a whole might prosper and their mandate might succeed. But as Devorah poignantly describes it, these twin objectives of embracing responsibility while fostering a sense of peoplehood and national mission, were, for now, beyond Israel's reach. Israel faltered and suffered setback and everywhere disunity reigned. Judges such as herself could step in to temporarily fill the breach, but more time and effort would be needed to effect meaningful and lasting change.

THE TENSION OF THE HUMAN CONDITION

That the Song at the Sea, in contrast, sounds so optimal and straightforward should not surprise us. Precisely because Israel had scarcely left Egypt when the triumph at Yam Suf unfolded, the reality of the situation was so much more stark and correspondingly one-dimensional. At the Sea of Reeds, with their cruel overlords speedily bearing down upon them, thoughts of bloody vengeance on their minds, the former slaves were psychologically paralyzed. Armed resistance was unthinkable, Pharaonic acceptance of their mass surrender implausible, flight impossible. There was nothing at all for the people of Israel to do save to entreat Moshe for Divine intervention. And while Israel did obey God's directive to enter the sea, the choices before them were, to say the least, limited. Even their inherent disunity could not serve as a detriment to their deliverance, for what other possible venues for preservation were available to them? Thus it was that the people of Israel, artificially united by the overwhelming circumstances, did little to secure their own salvation while God did all. How else to sing His praises, as the dead Egyptian host washed up upon the azure shores, then to ascribe the triumph exclusively to Him! How else to view that triumph, reflected as it was through an imposed prism of Divinely orchestrated parameters, as anything but apocalyptic!

Perhaps the events at wadi Kishon, celebrated in Devorah's epic poem, may be regarded as a more realistic appraisal of the human (and the Israelite) condition. God grants us the cosmic gift of choice, we freely exercise that capacity in accordance with our will, and then we live by the consequences. God is never absent, His concern never distant, His involvement never lacking, but He has given us a role to play in the unfolding of our destiny. Rarely do we stand at the shores of the sea confronted by utter and complete powerlessness to affect or to change our lives. At such a moment, indeed, there is nothing to be done except to plunge into the frigid waters and to hope for a miracle. But more often than not, there are real choices to be made, concrete initiatives to be seized, and opportunities to be realized. God was present at wadi Kishon and Devorah never begrudges Him (as we often do!) the verity of His involvement. But human beings such as Barak, Ya'el, the selfless tribes of Zevulun and Naftali, and Devorah herself, heeded the call and were counted, thus securing for themselves a real role in the triumph. How would we have responded to His overtures for action?

Shabbat Shalom