



PROPHET, JUDGE, AND ABOVE ALL, "MOTHER IN ISRAEL."

BY DINA COOPERSMITH



## Historical Context

*"This is how the Jewish people were in the days of the Judges: They would behave badly, God would give them into the hands of the [non-Jews], and when they repented, immediately God would redeem them." (Tanna D'vei Eliyahu 11)*

Joshua led the Jewish people into the Land of Israel, conquered it, and divided the land among the Twelve Tribes. As the nation settled into the land and became comfortable, the Canaanites still living there -- having not been completely eradicated -- influenced the Jews to worship idols and go against God. A cycle was established whereby the Jewish people would go off track, and God would send them a sign in the form of oppression from the surrounding nations. The Jews would then cry out to God, repent, and finally, a Judge/leader would arise to save them militarily and spiritually. This cycle repeated every one or two generations, which made it difficult for those living through the times to see the pattern too clearly. Until the next time...

*The Jewish people continued to do evil in the eyes of God... and God gave them into the hands of Yavin, the king of Canaan, who ruled in Chatzor. His army general was Sisera, and he sat in Charoshet Hagoyim. The Children of Israel cried out to God because [Sisera] had 900 chariots of steel. And he oppressed the Children of Israel exceedingly for 20 years. (Judges 4: 1-3)*

Previously there had been two oppressors -- Aram and Moav, and two Judges – Otniel Ben Kenaz, and Ehud Ben Gera. This is the third stage in the cycle of suffering/repentance/Judge -- at which point Devorah arises as the savior.

### **Female Judge?**

The position of Judge is very uncommon for a woman. In fact, in Jewish law, women normally do not serve as a courtroom judge. As those who are responsible for building the moral and spiritual fiber of the individuals within society, women are not encouraged to develop the kind of extreme emotional detachment necessary to be a judge in a court of law. Why, then, the exception in Devorah's case?

*What is so special about Devorah that she was chosen as Judge for Israel and prophet at that time? Especially since Pinchas Ben Elazar was around in those days?... It is because whether Jew or non-Jew, man or woman, slave or maidservant, the Divine Spirit rests upon people -- all according to their actions. (Eliyahu Rabba 89)*

According to the Midrash, whoever has fulfilled the criteria required for prophecy is able to receive the Divine Spirit. That person has to be tremendously wise, learned in Torah, have exemplary character, and be completely ruled by their spiritual nature and not by base urges. This was the level reached by Devorah, and in this case, she was best qualified for the job. However, this still doesn't answer how this allowed for the exception of her being a court Judge.

A number of possibilities present themselves: As a prophet, Devorah was allowed, in accordance with God's instructions to her through prophecy, to temporarily break Torah law for a set period of time in order to rectify the Jewish national situation.

Another possibility is that rather than being an official court Judge, Devorah would only teach the laws, and be an arbitrator of Jewish law when two people had a disagreement.

*Devorah judged, in accordance with God's words to her. Alternatively, she was not a judge but rather a teacher of the laws. (Tosfot, Nida 50a)*

The positions of teacher, scholar, and even arbitrator are completely available to a woman, if she is competent and up for the job.

The verse (Judges 4:5) says that Devorah would judge "under the palm tree" -- her court was out in the open, in the shade of a palm tree. Since most people coming to her were men, she wanted to be in the open so as not to transgress the prohibition of "yichud" (seclusion with a member of the opposite sex, which could lead to immorality).

*Another reason: the palm tree has only a little shade. So too, there were only a few scholars in that generation.*

*Also, there is only one heart in the trunk of the palm tree. So too, in [Devorah's] generation the Jewish people had only one heart for their Father in Heaven. (Talmud - Megillah 14a)*

Still, we must reach further to understand why Devorah was chosen. As the Midrash points out, Pinchas Ben Elazar was also a prophet at that time -- and yet he wasn't chosen as Judge. There must have been something else that Devorah brought to this position, which only a woman can provide, and which became necessary at this point in time. Let's explore.

## **Verbal Taunts**

*What is the meaning of "exceedingly" (exceedingly harsh oppression with which the Canaanites oppressed the Jews)? Rabbi Yitzchak said: With humiliating curses and taunting, as it says (Malachi 3:13), "Your words are harsh upon me." Who was fitting to deal with this problem? Devorah." (Midrash - Tanchuma, Behar 3)*

The harsh torment with which the Canaanites oppressed Israel was spiritual in nature, a humiliation of taunting and cursing. This was God's way of creating a

spiritual and psychological exile for the Jewish people in their land, which caused them to cry out to God to save them.

Devorah must have had a special ability to lead her people out of that particular exile. She was uniquely qualified to restore their sense of identity through her nurturing and elevating skills, which we will explore further in this essay.

Also, there might be an element of "measure for measure" dealt to Yavin and Sisera, the Canaanite leaders, in the fact that Devorah was the woman in charge of their defeat and that Yael, another woman, killed General Sisera. In those days, being conquered at the hands of women was considered humiliating (see Judges, 9:53, 54). Their degrading insults designed to humiliate the Jews, resulted in equal mortification regarding the "feminine" nature of their downfall.

Devorah comes from the root *daled, bet, reish*, which is the letters of *dibur* -- speech. Devorah must have been an excellent orator. Devorah also means "bee," as in the stinging kind. Perhaps a person, able to use speech properly, along with a stinging element, was necessary to combat the stinging insults of Yavin and Sisera.

*Dabar* also means a leader or ruler. Devorah's leadership qualities -- and oratory skills -- were perfect traits for a prophet, national leader, Judge and even military expert.

### **Wise Wife**

Another trait of Devorah can be seen in the Midrash about her husband, Lapidot:

*Devorah's husband was unlearned (am ha'aretz). She said to him, "Let me make you wicks and you'll take them to the Tabernacle in Shilo; your portion will be among righteous people there and you'll merit the World to Come. He made thick wicks to increase their light, and that's why his name was Lapidot ("torches"). And God said to Devorah, "You both intended to light up the Tabernacle; I, too, will make your light shine in Israel and Judah, and among all the 12 tribes." (Eliyahu Rabba, Chapter 9)*

Apparently, Lapidot was a physically-oriented man-of-the-land (*am ha'aretz*) without much intellectual or spiritual prowess. We can imagine this situation must not have been easy for Devorah, a highly accomplished scholar, teacher,

leader and prophet. And yet, we don't see any bitterness, complaints or a condescending word.

Instead, Devorah focuses on her husband's strength and suggests that he bring the wicks she made to the Tabernacle, hoping he'll find uplifting company there, which will inspire him toward spiritually-oriented deeds. It seems this method worked, since he took over the wick-making, and even improved them by adding thickness to increase their light, to the point where this became his expertise and identity. Hence the name by which he is known, Lapidot.

It is interesting that Devorah doesn't encourage Lapidot to take a class, study more, or become more intellectual. She knows this is not his personality and she cannot make him into something he's not. Instead, she recognizes his capability as a doer, one who is good in the realm of action. So she becomes the enabler, wisely directing him to become righteous within his potential.

Indeed, this is Devorah's general method of leading -- in a feminine, subtle way, perceiving people's needs. For the nation as a whole, she recognizes their spiritual lacks, and encourages them to become elevated by working with their strengths.

### **Military Prowess?**

The Sages identify Lapidot ("torches") with the army general Barak ("lightning"), due to the similar meaning of their names.

*[Devorah] sent for Barak... and said to him, "Go and pull out at Mount Tavor and take with you 10,000 people from the tribes of Naftali and Zevulun. I will direct Sisera, Yavin's general, and his chariots and masses of soldiers toward you to the Kishon river, and I will give them into your hands."*

*Barak said to her, "If you come with me, I will go, but if you don't come with me, I won't go."*

*She said to him, "I will go with you, but you will have no glory on this path, rather God will give Sisera into the hands of a woman..." (Judges 4:4-9)*

Devorah gives her husband, Barak, another task he is suited for: taking responsibility for the battle with the Canaanites. He seems to initially decline by begging for her presence at his side. Devorah tries to dissuade him, asserting that he should take all the credit by leading the troops into battle. She says there is no glory on this path, were she to join.

The word for "glory" is *tifferet*, meaning harmony, which is also one of the "traits" of God. *Tifferet* is the beauty which comes from joining disparate aspects to create a harmonious whole. If a woman goes to war, says Devorah, this is not harmonious. A woman's nature is to nurture life, which does not match the army's role of bringing about death. However, Barak insists that her presence will provide the moral and spiritual support necessary to gather Jewish soldiers to war and lead them to victory.

*Since Barak trusted God and believed in Devorah's prophecy, as it says, "If you come with me I will go, but if you don't come with me I will not go," he therefore shared in the song with her, as it says, "And Devorah and Barak sang..." (Tanna D'vei Eliyahu 9)*

Barak knew that the war would be won regardless of the small Jewish regiments and the strength of the enemy. He was completely certain that this war would bring glory and honor to the Jewish people. However, he wanted to ensure that the nation would realize the credit due to Devorah, and not to his or their own strength and skill. Barak has instilled within himself such a high level of trust in Devorah's prophecy, coupled with his own humility, that he was willing to forego his own honor as a military victor. As a result, he becomes a partner with Devorah in her spiritual song of thanksgiving as well.

If this is in fact Devorah's husband "the ignoramus," he has truly come into his own, having graduated from the need to be guided by his wife to engage in "good deeds," to the point where he is now guided by his own internal set of values and priorities. Barak, through his wife's careful encouragement, has developed his character and achieved spiritual greatness.

### **Devorah's Role in the War**

Initially, Devorah is the military strategist, telling Barak what to do. He is told to gather 10,000 people from the tribes of Naftali and Zevulun, and he goes with them, and with Devorah, to Mount Tavor.

Sisera, Yavin's general, goes with his army to the valley of Kishon. Normally, if an army has the advantage of height over the enemy, they wouldn't leave the mountain to fight in the valley below. However, here Devorah brings God's word to the army, as she rides with them:

*"Get up, because on the day God has given Sisera into your hands. God has gone before you..." (Judges 4:14)*

Devorah informed Barak that this war would not be fought by natural means. The war had already been won miraculously, in fact, by God's thundering noise, sounding like horses and chariots, causing the Canaanite army to retreat. Barak had only to chase after them at this point and finish the job.

It was clear that this was a completely "spiritual" victory, led by God and His prophet/messenger, Devorah. Barak, with a mere 10,000 soldiers, overcame an enemy of which the Midrash -- in an exaggerated style -- describes as numbering 4 billion:

*Sisera came to fight them with 40,000 officers, who each led 100,000 soldiers. There was no city that didn't collapse from the force of his battle cry, and even an animal in the field could be immobilized by his voice. (Midrash - Yalkut Shimoni, Judges 43)*

In a secondary account, we hear about Sisera fleeing by foot and being called in by Yael, the wife of Chever (from the descendants of Yitro, who joined the Jewish people a century or so earlier). Yael encourages Sisera to drink, eat and sleep -- and then uses a tent-peg to crush his skull. In Jewish history, this is one of the great stories of female bravery, where the fortitude and courage of a woman, along with her feminine wiles, were used for the sake of Heaven to bring about victory and redemption.

### **Song of Devorah**

After the victory at Mount Tavor, Devorah joins Barak and sings a song which she composed through Divine inspiration. It became -- for this generation and for generations to come -- a testimony to the spiritual elevation of the nation, which led to the miraculous victory.

*When attacks came upon Israel and then the nation repented voluntarily, may God's Name be blessed. (Judges 5:2)*



In this opening line, Devorah sets the stage for understanding Jewish destiny. When the Jewish people stray from God and Torah, they are given into the hands of their enemies. Once they voluntarily repent, God brings about salvation. And for that He is praised.

Devorah proceeds to describe the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai, and Rashi interprets:

*"God, as You left Seir" -- this is the Giving of the Torah... What is this [story] doing here? Devorah said, "Torah is difficult to stray away from and good to attach oneself to... This why the Jewish people are given to their enemies when they leave it, and are saved as soon as they choose to immerse in it again." (Rashi, Judges 5:3)*

Before Devorah could even attempt the challenge of confronting the enemy, she had to inspire the Jewish nation to return to God. Once that spiritual change occurred, the physical victory would then reaffirm the nation's conviction that their loyalty to Torah was generating a positive response from God. In this way, the spiritual return would be profound, deep-rooted, and far more lasting.

## **Security Plan**

Prior to Devorah's reign, the security situation in Israel was at one of its lowest levels:

*In the days of Shamgar Ben Anat, in the days of Yael, the roads were empty; travelers went in circuitous routes; there were no open cities in Israel... until I arose, Devorah, I arose as a mother in Israel. (Judges 5:6-7)*

In the days of the previous judge, Shamgar, the Israelites had to pave roads which would circumvent hostile Canaanite villages (sound familiar?) and would stay off the main roads, afraid of their non-Jewish neighbors. Convoys of businessmen stopped coming through the towns to buy and sell for fear of the enemy. The Promised Land was no longer providing a secure, safe home for the Jews.

Devorah understood that the cause of this physical weakness was the abandonment of Torah values, and that the solution to the desolate roads would only come about through repairing the spiritual paths:

*"The riders of white donkeys, sitting in judgment, and walking in the path, conversing" (Judges 5:10). "The riders of donkeys" -- these are the scholars, who would go from city to city and from state to state to teach Torah. "White donkeys" -- they would make the Torah clear as day. "Sitting in judgment" -- judging truth. "Walking" -- scholars of the written text. "On the path" -- scholars of the Oral Law. "Conversing" -- scholars of Talmud, whose conversations are all Torah. (Talmud - Eruvin 54b)*

As the leader, Devorah did everything in her power to strengthen the spiritual underpinnings of the nation, to restore Torah learning to the people in the cities and villages. And then she orchestrated a miraculous military victory to cement their faith and observance.

### **Mother in Israel**

Devorah chooses a strange way to express her leadership of the Jewish nation: "I arose, Devorah, I arose as a mother in Israel."

Of all the adjectives one might use to describe Devorah -- general, leader, judge, arbitrator, prophet -- the word "mother" would not present itself automatically. And yet, this is how Devorah perceives herself.

One might assume that, just as the talk show host Dr. Laura introduces herself first and foremost as "my kid's mom," here too, Devorah is saying that the most profound and unique way that a woman can actualize herself is as a "mother."

However, having studied Devorah in the various texts, this speculation seems narrow. Nowhere do the sources mention anything about Devorah's children, or if in fact she even had any. And aside from the Midrash describing the wicks which she encouraged her husband to bring to the Temple, we don't see Devorah in a typical role as wife, either.

Perhaps Devorah's self-description is an expanded definition of the word "mother." A woman can be a mother, even if she doesn't have children of her own. Sarah was barren for most of her married life, yet she was called a "matriarch," a title that refers to her entire life and not only to her last 37 years.

So too, Devorah -- within her various roles of leadership -- was exemplifying traits of motherhood:

- As a prophet, using her innate ability to connect to God, she brought the word of God to a people who had endured degradation and humiliation, thus elevating them spiritually and emotionally.
- As a Judge/arbitrator, she nurtured the Jewish people back to their former stature of being an upright society, a light unto the nations.
- As a leader, she encouraged the scholars and teachers to travel from town to town, re-educating the masses and transforming their ignorance and distance from God into enlightenment and repentance.
- Even as a military general, she acted as a mother, leading the nation into battle, not because she preferred a state of war, but because she knew it would provide them with the necessary security to function and fulfill their potential -- as well as an enormous boost in self-esteem to see the miraculous victory and to realize the benefits of their close relationship to God.

Devorah was leader of the Jewish people for 40 years, during which time the country was at peace, free of disturbance by surrounding nations. It was an atypical achievement in Jewish history, and it was accomplished with her unique feminine powers.

This is Devorah's message to all Jewish women: Besides having children and taking care of them physically, "mothering" is a necessary component in any field. No matter what the task, we must always aspire to nurture, help people with our unique insight to achieve physical, emotional and psychological health, affect people on a spiritual level, impact and influence in a small, profound way, or on a general, national scale.

All this is learned from Devorah. All this falls under the rubric of what it means to be a "mother in Israel."