

Elie Wiesel:

(applause) A judge in ancient Israel, a woman, a prophet who communicates God's will and words, a charismatic, religious, and undisputed political leader. A military advisor who is behind the general strategic plans against powerful enemies. Really, a woman? Yes. A great woman she was. One among the 18 judges that at that time ruled over Israel. Her name is Deborah, quote, the text explains the meaning of the name, [00:01:00] "she who would sit under the palm tree between Ramah and Bethel in the Mountains of Ephraim." Her dramatic life story is to be found in the Book of Judges, and it is being read on the Sabbath, when its *haftarah*, or prophetic portion, is devoted to her song. For she was also a talented and inspired poetess.

Her victory poem ranks among the most poignant in our sacred texts. It may also be read as a historical document about Israel's situation at that time. Who the enemy was, what his strength was, which tribe went to war to fight him, and which chose to stay behind, neutral. [00:02:00] Naturally, men also took part, and of course, a major part, in the fighting. But she, Deborah, and another woman of whom we shall speak about

later, played a crucial role in the outcome of the battle. In fact, some sources attributed to her Israel's stunning military triumph. Mind you, she's not the only great and renowned feminine figure in biblical and Talmudic history. Following the matriarchs were Moses' sister, Miriam, who galvanized and mobilized the women. In fact, she was the first woman, maybe, before Lysistrata, who actually organized women into an extraordinary [00:03:00] feminist movement.

But, Deborah alone was appointed by God to be His messenger, and spokesperson. She knew what to do, and when to do it, and with whom. Now, in truth, in truth the position of women in the Bible is not always very flattering. The fact is, the fact is that when God tells Eve that he, the husband, *yim-shol bach*, he shall rule over you -- my God, really. Why did He do that? So naturally, feminists among us could resent this first gender discrimination as old as the human species. [00:04:00] Still, I try to justify, but everything possible in biblical sources, so I may offer a different interpretation to this particular sentence. The verb *yim-shol*, which means "He will rule," is rooted, maybe, in the word *mashal*, which means, "parable." And so the verse could very well read, "And he, your husband, will serve you as a parable, a story." And why not? (laughter)

Much later -- and this is more difficult to explain -- much later, in *Bamidbar*, the desert, parsha Naso, the problem becomes more serious. There, Scripture deals with marital relations. What happens if and when a husband becomes jealous of his wife? [00:05:00] She's brought before the high priest, who imposes on her a series of humiliating procedures, including the forced drinking of what we call the bitter waters. If she fails, well, don't ask. But what if she doesn't? Of course she remains her husband's wife. But what about him? Doesn't he have, at least, to apologize to her? No. To push the case to its limits, the husband could easily repeat the scene once, twice, or five times, never risking any reproach from the high priest or anyone else. And furthermore, another question. Then what if the wife becomes jealous of the husband? Nothing happens.

[00:06:00] Well, I'm a husband. But nevertheless, I feel it's unfair. Now what about Deborah? Who was she? Where did she come from? Who were her parents and what was her childhood? We do not know. Who were her teachers, her mentors? We do not know. Did she have children? Was she married? How old was she when she acquired her talent and her divine powers? And then, when she led her people, our people, to war, when did she do so? We do not know. There are many things, vital elements about her biography, that remain hidden. All we know is what we learn

from the text. In the Book of Judges, she's called *Eshet Lapidot*, which could mean, "a woman of a place named Lapidot," [00:07:00] or the wife of a man bearing that name. *Lapid* in Hebrew means a torch. In other words, it suggests fire, and flame. Are we to imagine Deborah, a woman with a burning inner life? A strong character, an irresistible passion? Or someone who quietly, but with resolve, knows how to light a fire in man and lead them to action?

Yes, we do know little about her private life, but we know much more about her public activities. And to understand her better, it would be important to situate her in place and time. Joshua just died. He was 110 years old. His funeral was inexplicably, I would say, shamefully, [00:08:00] poorly attended. The Talmud says so. He was buried in the Mountains of Ephraim, on the north side of Mount *Gaash*. *Gaash* means trembling or even earthquake. "Was the mountain angry?" asks the Talmud. "Why was it angry?" And the Talmud says, "Because no one came to his funeral. No one came to pay a last homage to Moses' successor, the heroic conqueror who brought them in the land of Canaan." Strange. To accompany a person to his grave is one of the 10 most important humane commandments in our tradition. And yet, Joshua's contemporaries violated, or ignored, it -- why? And the Talmud says, [00:09:00] "People were too busy with their

daily occupations." No wonder that -- let's read from the book -- a new generation arose, quote, "which did not know the Lord, nor what He has done for Israel. Then the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord, and worshipped the idol of *Baal*. They forsook the Lord God of their fathers, provoking His anger."

Now remember, the land promised by God to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and Moses, to their descendants, was practically in their hands. But they had no leadership. Joshua left them without appointing a successor. Every tribe had a chieftain with an authority limited only to its allotted territory. [00:10:00] So God was neglected, history forgotten. The idols, *Baal* and *Ashtaroth*, became popular and attractive again. And so God became angry, and He delivered them into the hands of alien plunderers, says the text, who oppressed them in many ways. Some were sold as captives to their enemies, and the nation felt close to abyss. The Lord did raise up judges to rescue His people, but they wouldn't listen to them. History moves forward in circles, sin and punishment followed one another, to such a degree that God declared, and I quote Him, "I will no longer drive out any of the nations which Joshua left when he died." In other words, better do it yourself.

The Hebrews were forced to fight. Was it a punishment?

[00:11:00] The text says it was also a way of teaching future generations how to wage war. Who were the nations Israel had to confront? The Philistines, the Canaanites, the Sidonites, and the Hivites. The first judge was a man named Othniel, son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother. He fought and won. And there was peace in the land for 40 years. When he died, the children of Israel resumed their mischief, which strengthened the Moabites to persecute them.

The next judge was Ehud, son of Gera, of the tribe of Benjamin. A man of courage and skill. He came to visit King Eglon of Moab, allegedly to offer him a tribute. But he also hid a double-edged dagger in his clothes. With clever stratagems, [00:12:00] he managed to be alone with him, and kill him. A war erupted between Moab and Israel as a result. Ehud's army won. Ten thousand Moabites fell in battle. The land rested then 80 years.

Shamgar, son of Anath, succeeded Ehud. His troops killed 600 Philistines. You know, the Book of Judges has no poetry, but it has a lot of bloodshed. And, therefore, I am a little bit skeptical about the beauty in those pages. Shamgar, therefore, succeeded Ehud. Again, as they did before in periods of calm,

the children of Israel continued to transgress the law of God. We're taught then an old new lesson. Superficial joy brought danger, [00:13:00] and this time, by the Canaanite king Jabin, who ruled in Hazor.

Then arose the prophetess Deborah, as judge over her sinful people. At this point, as we begin yet another series of our annual encounters, perhaps we ought to follow our tradition, and open parentheses for some preliminary remarks. Remember, the objective of these learning sessions together remains the same: explore the extraordinary riches of ancient texts, and at times, analyze their impact on contemporary issues, experiences, and decision-makings. We have, throughout the years, explored that what excited and or intrigued sages and disciples in Palestinian academies [00:14:00] 2000 years ago -- at that time, the term Palestine had no political connotation -- remains of interest to their heirs, dispersed beyond various walls and mountains.

Each time a question is raised and an innovation made, it enhances the beauty of the theme before us. That was the case when we studied the tales of Abraham and Moses, Samson and Samuel, and that happens when we turn to Deborah, a great figure in Jewish history. A powerful, enigmatic woman, who, sitting under a tree, had to make mindful decisions regarding Jewish

destiny. But while she is doing her work over there far away, never being too early for concerned visitors, we should do our work, and open the doors [00:15:00] for eagerly awaited latecomers.

Back to the amazing book (laughs) before us. Read it carefully, and you will remember that the period of the judges was not the most luminous chapter of our people's turbulent, and yet, proud, history. No wonder its opening words is, "*Vayehi bi'yemei shefot ha'shoftim*", it happened at the time when the judges themselves had to be judged." But, as in the anecdote of the two brothers, the people were worse. They were Jewish, and faithful only when things were going badly. When facing an enemy who seemed [00:16:00] invincible, Jews were spiritually weak, forlorn, easily seduced, by whatever is alien, whatever is wrong. And only then, they returned to God, because they needed His divine intervention to keep them alive, to protect its existence.

But has it always been that way? Are we Jewish only when we suffer for being Jewish? When the outside pressures are gone, are Jewish identity and solidarity weakened by excessive integration? Or assimilation? Leading, sometimes, even to conversion, as was the case in some western European countries



in the early 1900s? Is the French proverb correct, that *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*, [00:17:00] the more things change, the more they stay the same? Doesn't history have some imagination?

Isn't it conceivable that on a certain level, the Jewish people is still following Abraham to Mount Moriah, Joshua to the River Jordan, and Jeremiah to the ruins of and in Jerusalem? Will the history of Israel forever be threatened, if not by the same fiend, then at least by the same kind of enemy, using variety of methods? Where is the answer to its old and new existential questions to be found? What we know is that in the time of Deborah, these questions had acquired a sense of urgency.

[00:18:00] Well, who is she? What made her so courageous, so famous, so revered? And so worthy of God's attention? Granted, at that time, since the passing of the last titanic figure, Joshua, the people of Israel needed someone to respect and to follow. But why she? Because she was elected by God? Why was she elected?

Consider the situation, historically speaking. Israel had no kings yet. The enemies had. The latest enemy was King Jabin of Hazor. He and his top general Sisera were mighty, well-armed, and probably properly motivated, for patriotic reasons.

[00:19:00] The Canaanite armies, equipped with 900 chariots of iron, seemed invincible. Jabin's oppression of Israel, which lasted 20 years, did represent an existential threat to the land and to the descendants of Jacob. The thread was also moral and spiritual. The people of Israel must have learned from experience. Whenever the enemy was in power, it was because God, the God of their ancestors, had placed him there. The text says so specifically. It was God who made the enemy strong and victorious -- because of whom? Because -- not of the enemy, the enemy was not so good. But because the Hebrews, or the Jews, were so bad. And they disappointed Him. [00:20:00] And, well, never disappoint God. When you do, despair is not far away.

That's how we came to Deborah. But let's stop for a moment, and see again, almost, the role women played in biblical history. Were they all dominant figures? Some surely were. The most prominent one was, of course, our grandmother Eve. Adam was almost a tool in her hands. What she told him to do, he did. He wasn't hungry, so she made him eat from the forbidden fruit. When they had children, it was she who named them. If he had nothing to do, then actually, she had always something to do.

Among the four matriarchs, [00:21:00] Rebecca was the decision-maker in the family. Since Jacob was her favorite, she ruled

her husband, her blind husband, into giving him Esau's birthright. It was she who made Jacob go to her uncle and get married.

What about Rahab, the all-knowing woman in Jericho who by profession was known -- and the profession I don't dare reveal it to you, 'cause you know it already anyway. She imposes herself as a heroic figure, at the risk of her life. She sheltered Joshua's spies, and helped him conquer the land of Canaan. According to one legend, she became his wife.

What about Esther? How could we forget Mordecai's niece who, thanks to her stunning beauty [00:22:00] and devotion, saved the entire population of Persian king Ahasuerus' 127 provinces? Her lesson? There can be beauty in morality. And the other way around.

What about Ruth? How can we forget this gentle and timid young woman, who incarnates the very principle of loyalty? What she told her mother-in-law Naomi is still repeated by any woman who wishes to convert to Judaism: "Wherever you go, I shall go. Wherever you shall dwell, I shall dwell. Where you die and rest, I die and rest." The Messiah, the redeemer of Israel and the world, will be her distant offspring. Why do we know more

about her than about Deborah, the prophetess, [00:23:00] who during her life, saved her people from bondage, if not annihilation?

But let us beware of generalizations. Not all women in biblical history were God-fearing and good. King Ahab's wife, for instance, Queen Jezebel, prophet Elijah's hateful enemy, was evil personified. Many innocent lives were lost under her reign. Many abominations were committed simply for her pleasure.

So let us also mention that Deborah is not the only woman prophet in biblical literature. The number was 58. There was one before her, also a poetess but not a warrior. Her name, Moses' sister, remember? The children of Israel [00:24:00] crossed the Red Sea in total safety. Led by Moses, they sang a famous song of gratitude to God, and Miriam, together with all other women, followed with a very brief song of their own. The difference between the two musical hymns? Moses said, "*Ashira la-Adoshem*, I shall sing to God." Miriam and her women friends said, "*Shiru la-Adoshem*, you sing to God."

As for Deborah, her song, composed jointly with the Jewish commander-in-chief, is a song of praise devoted to Israel's

military victory, obtained by a courageous and imaginative woman named Yael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, who with supreme cunning and self-confidence, without anyone's orders, helped [00:25:00] General Barak, son of Abinoam, defeat the commander of the enemy army, Sisera. The entire story of that event is told in the Book of Judges, one in prose and the second in poetry.

And what follows is an amazing dialogue between a powerful soldier and an unarmed woman. The opening is abrupt. Without any political or strategic preparation, Deborah sent for Barak, son of Abinoam, from Kedesh in the tribe of Naphtali, and said to him, "Has not the Lord God of Israel commanded you to go and deploy troops at Mount Tabor, and take with you 10,000 men of the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun?" Actually, there is no [00:26:00] previous trace of such order in the text. Does it mean that the general has not obeyed God's commandment? And God has therefore felt it necessary to alert his prophetic female messenger to repeat it to the general, which continues. And Deborah went on, "Hasn't God told you that against you I will send Sisera, the chief of Jabin's army, with his chariots and his forces, at the River Kishon, and that I will deliver him in your hands?" And finally the general Barak answers, "If you go

with me, I will go with you. But if you will not go with me, I will not go either."

What? Barak, son of Abinoam, [00:27:00] the commander-in-chief, the supreme general, a weakling? A coward afraid of the challenges and perils of battlefields? Possible. In fact, he is ready to withdraw into himself and abandon Israel's history to the enemy. Why, then, is he ready to yield to God's design for him and his people in spite of everything? Only because Deborah will be with him? Wasn't he embarrassed to hear his own words? Is it that he admired her position of authority? Was he taken by her social status? Was he, perhaps, taken by her femininity? One source identifies him as her husband. And then, when her husband says, "I want to go with you only," I understand. Or not. (laughter)

[00:28:00] But that he believes in her is clear, since he joins his destiny to hers. But didn't he hope to obtain some kind of glory in their common victory? And she immediately negated all such illusions. And Deborah said, "I certainly will go with you," she says to him. "Nevertheless, you do not expect any glory from our journey, for the Lord will give Sisera in the hand of a woman, not in your hands." Perhaps he thought that

she referred to herself, and he accepted. And the two of them rose and went to a place called Kedesh, to war.

The great Louis Ginsberg quotes the following Midrash: "When the [00:29:00] people of Israel fell off from God and His laws, God sent an angel to them with the following message. 'Out of all the nations on earth, I chose a people for myself, and I thought, so long as the world stands, my glory will rest upon them. I sent to them Moses, my servant, to teach them goodness and righteousness. But they strayed from my ways. And now I will arouse their enemies against them, to rule over them, and they will then cry out, "Because we forsook the ways of our fathers, the misfortune came over us." And then, I will send a woman unto them, and she will shine for them, as a light for 40 years.'" [00:30:00] And so, Deborah's first political and military move was wise and useful. Though she belonged to the tribe of Ephraim, she called upon a warrior from the Naphtali tribe, Barak, son of Abinoam, and appointed him commander-in-chief. Her goal was to unite the people. To rise above tribal loyalties and sensitivities.

Well, what then can we say about Deborah? She had a good common sense. She had a good political notion of how to unite people. She had a quality of leadership in three public areas. In

religious terms, she was a prophetess; in the social sphere, she served as judge; [00:31:00] in security matters, she had a commanding position in the battlefield. Now again, about her private life, we presume that she was married, therefore, to a man called Lapidot. But we don't know anything about him, or about their married life. Who was in charge of the household? Who took care of the children, if they had any? What was the husband doing while she was away doing communal work? What was his trade, his livelihood? What were his moods, his ambitions, his hobbies? How did he feel being married to a public personality whom everybody looks up to?

And she, was she attractive? Seductive? Feminine? We are told of her that she actually was a mother. You will hear it from the poem, later on. [00:32:00] "I," she said, "rose a mother in Israel." That's how she begins her song. But we don't know of how many children, or maybe when she said "a mother," she meant simply, poetically. Many references to Deborah in the Midrash are praiseworthy. In one place, some sages believe that Deborah's husband, believe it or not, Lapidot, was actually an ignoramus. An ignoramus. He knew nothing about anything, and one day, she told him, "Let us go together to the holy temple in Jerusalem. I shall make candles with thick wicks to bring light to good and pious people in darkness. And so you, too, shall



earn a place in the world to come." Said God, "Since you sincerely brought light in this world, [00:33:00] I shall increase your light, which will have the intensity of that of all the tribes of Israel."

So, we do learn more about her extraordinary spiritual role in defeating Sisera's mighty armies. Not only did she transmit God's orders to Barak to go to war, she also accepted to join him at the front, something she did without asking for heavenly consent. And furthermore, she went as far as to tell Barak when to launch the first attack. Which, by the way, throws a strange light on the young commanding officer. In his relationship with Deborah, he does not fare too well. Too hesitant, too recalcitrant. [00:34:00] Can we imagine today a general who refuses to go to the front unless in the company of a woman? (laughter)

Now, who was Barak, the general? In some Midrashic sources, he figures among the judges, alongside with Deborah, with equal rights and functions. Like her, he was a legal authority, perhaps even a good one. But he was not a prophet. Prophecy belonged to her. Just as military strategy and bravery were supposed to belong to him. In his hesitation, due to the fact that he received the direct battle orders from her and not from

God, it's a question that one, of course, must explore. But on the other hand, we may phrase this question differently.

[00:35:00] Didn't God use Deborah simply because of Barak's hesitations? Had Barak accepted right away, he didn't need Deborah. But is this why he was punished? His punishment being that victory was going, was going to be obtained not by him, but by a woman.

Actually, one Midrashic source is critical of Deborah. First because she summoned Barak to come to see her, instead of going to see him. After all, he was the commander-in-chief. And so, precious time was wasted. When there is a crisis, every minute counts. Another hidden reproach: she sounds vain when she claims that things were going badly in the land until she, [00:36:00] Deborah, a mother in Israel, rose to save her people. And therefore, we are told in the Midrash, actually, she was punished. Her prophetic powers were taken away from her, though temporarily. But that's the singular virtue of our sacred texts. No one is totally pure, nor absolutely innocent. Even the greatest—Abraham, Moses, David—have their shortcomings, their faults.

Sages also wonder, why was she chosen to deliver God's message to Barak, since Pinchas, son of Eleazar, the grandson of Aaron

the high priest, was still alive. Why didn't God use him as His messenger? Both had prophetic powers. [00:37:00] Still, says the Midrash, there was a difference between them. Pinchas' powers were hereditary. All priests -- their power is hereditary. Whereas Deborah's were her own, meaning they were given to her thanks to her own virtues, commented the Midrash Tanna Devei Eliyahu: God said, "Heaven and earth are my witnesses. Whether Gentile or Jew, man or woman, slave or servant, the holy spirit rests on him or her according only to their good deeds."

So now, let's turn our attention to another important protagonist in the story, the principal enemy, Sisera. Who is he? In the biblical text, [00:38:00] he is a famous Canaanite warrior, whose 900 iron chariots and numerous soldiers drew fear and terror into the hearts of adversaries. As usual, the Midrash, with its occasional taste for exaggeration, goes much farther, using imagination and color to depict Sisera's appearance and behavior. Listen to the portrait of the Canaanite Superman, as it is to be found in the Midrash of Abba Gurion and *Yalkut Shimoni*. Quote, "There was no hero like him. He had 40,000 army chiefs under his command, and each of them had 100,000 men at his disposal. He was 30 when he conquered the entire world with his physical strength. (laughter) With

him around, no city was safe. His voice alone [00:39:00] made its walls collapse. It paralyzed beasts in the field. When he went to war, he rode in a wagon drawn by 900 horses. He cut his ironclad enemies into pieces like wool."

More? Listen. "The proportions of his body were vast beyond description. If he took a bath in the river, and dived beneath the surface, enough fish were caught in his beard to feed a multitude of people. (laughter) Furthermore, during the 20 years of his brutal domination over Israel, he was not satisfied with physical oppression alone. He ridiculed and humiliated the people, inflicted on them ever more mental and psychological sufferings," says the Midrash. It is because of this [00:40:00] added cruelty that he was punished. His punishment? Quote, the text says, "He was punished that in the end he perished in the hand of a woman."

The disturbing impression one gets from these words is that they imply a distinct measure of disdain toward Sisera. Not was he to be slain, but in addition to his tragic fate, he will be killed by a woman. In other words, to suffer defeat is bad. To suffer defeat by a woman is much worse. Several Midrashic texts use this tale. Do not be shocked. To stress -- why not say it -- in those times -- to stress a woman's inferiority, [00:41:00]

in certain areas. Rabbi Berechiah uttered four sentences, three about men and one about women. "Woe to the living man who needs a debt for help. Woe to the strong who need the weak. Woe to the clever person who needs a blind man. And woe to a generation whose leader is a woman." Wow.

In another source, the phrase "*Vehi shofta Yisrael ba-eit ha-hi*", "And she judged Israel at that time" means in reality, that the times were almost unworthy of male leadership. So some of you, I'm sure, surely many of you here may feel hurt or insulted by this seemingly Talmudic anti-feminine insensitivity, which may be termed as gender discrimination. Those of you familiar [00:42:00] with Jewish prayers must have wondered whether we men are not really kind and fair to women when we say every morning, "*Baruch shelo asani isha*", "Blessed be Thou for not having made me a woman."

One explanation I received from a Jerusalem rabbi, a friend, of this strange prayer, sounded reasonable to me. He said it has to do with childbirth. We men thank God that we do not have the pain women have when they give birth to children. Makes sense. One day, I hope, we may devote our entire session to the place of women in Judaism. For the moment, let me just say that it is more respectful than it may seem at first sight. And let me

give you an example. Why is the Jewishness of the Jew determined by his or her mother-in-law? [00:43:00] It's not from the Bible, it's only from the Talmud's time, because in those times of anguish and persecution, under the Roman occupation of Judaea, some women, probably more than some, were raped by Roman soldiers, and became pregnant. So our sages decided, why inflict upon them an additional plight and shame of thinking, of knowing, they were carrying an enemy child in their womb? That the child be Jewish, for her sake. Admit it, such sensitivity is gratifying.

And now, let's return to the story of Deborah and Sisera. The Canaanite lost; the Jews won. But whose victory was it? Deborah's? No. Barak's? [00:44:00] No. It was due to another woman whom Deborah made famous. Who is that strange and, until then, unknown, woman? Was she a soldier? No. She was just a simple housewife. How did she win the war? Wait. Be patient. Actually, she entered the stage after the battle was already over. Who is to be thanked for Israel's victory? Barak and his troops? Did they fight valiantly, with renewed vigor? Let us read a biblical narrative.

And I quote, "Sisera the general mobilized all his people, from Harosheth Haggoyim to the River Kishon. Then Deborah said to

Barak, 'Get up. This is the day in which God had delivered Sisera into your hand. [00:45:00] Has not gone out before you?' So Barak went down from Mount Tabor with 10,000 men following him. And God routed Sisera, and all his chariots, and all his troops, with the edge of the sword. Not a man was left." What? Not Barak, son of Abinoam? That God himself inflicted bloody defeat onto the enemy forces?

It was God's intervention and not Jewish heroism that brought fear and death among Sisera's troops? It came only when the entire people joined in a public seven-day fast and repentance. That's when victory came. God forgave and acted. Is it that in the life of the individuals as well as in the history of people -- God's will is manifested through human endeavor, which may be one of frailty? [00:46:00] Suddenly, the plot changes direction and characters. Let us return to the text. The text says, "But at the end, Sisera had fled the battlefield on foot, and reached the tent of Yael, the wife of Heber the Kenite."

Hey, hey. Where are we now? The war is over. Gone, the Canaanites. Israel can breathe easier. God made peace with His people. Deborah is happy, as Barak must be, proud. Sisera is not among the casualties -- so what? Alone and solitary, he's no threat to anyone. So the story could end right here. But it

doesn't. It continues in two places: in prose and in Deborah's poem. And it reads like a classical movie, with at the center, not James Bond, [00:47:00] but, listen: I read from the quote.

"And Yael went out to meet Sisera and said to him, 'Turn aside, my lord. Turn aside to me, do not fear.' And when he turned aside into her tent, she covered him with a blanket. Then, he said to her, 'Please give me a little water to drink. I am thirsty.'" Of course, a question. She went out to meet him. Has he met her before? Has she known him? Who told her to go out and meet him? Was it part of Deborah's or Barak's strategic plan? One Midrashic source says that she was unusually beautiful, whose voice, quote, "was the most seductive a woman ever possessed." Quote, "She, Yael, opened a jug of milk -- not water, but milk -- gave him to drink, and covered him. And he said to her, [00:48:00] 'Stand at the door of the tent, and if any man comes and inquires of and asks, "Is there a man here?" you shall say no.'"

Rashi, the great commentator, wonders, "Why did she give him milk?" And answers, "Because milk has a soporific effect on the body. It helps put him to sleep." Quote, "Then Yael, Heber's wife, took a peg and took a hammer in her hand" -- it's hard to read, because it's so cruel -- "and came softly near him, and



drove the peg into his temple, and it went down into the ground. For he was fast asleep, and tired. So he died. And then," says the text, "as Barak pursued Sisera, Yael [00:49:00] came out to greet him and said to him, 'Come, I will show you the man you seek.' And when he went inside the tent, there lay Sisera, dead, with the peg in his temple. Thus on that day, God subdued Jabin, King of Canaan, in the presence of the children of Israel."

Now, what does it all mean? Yael was the heroine. Yael was the victor. Yael was the repository of feminine glory, but also, why not say, of duplicity? This chapter in the book contains surprising elements. Canaan was no longer a real threat to Israel, since an entire army was annihilated. Why did his chief warrior have to die? He was not as Agag will be under King Saul [00:50:00] of the Amalekite tribe. Why couldn't he be spared, even in prison, or exiled? Furthermore, who was Yael? All of a sudden, she appears in the text. Who was her commanding officer? Who trained her? Who gave her orders?

Concerning the war itself, the text attributes its outcome to divine intervention, actually. It is God who helped Barak and his forces to defeat the Canaanites. It was God who subdued King Jabin of Canaan. But was God also in Yael's tent? Helping

her murder so cruelly, brutally, inhumanly, Sisera? Is God, the eternal matchmaker, the one who arranged their encounter? I admit that this part of the tale perturbs me. Of all places to hide, why did Sisera come [00:51:00] particularly to Yael's tent? Actually, the biblical text offers an immediate explanation. For there was a peace treaty between the Canaanite King Jabin and the house of Heber the Kenite. Really? Is that a valid explanation? Wait a second. Does it mean that Heber the Kenite was not Jewish? Was Yael the Righteous, so celebrated by Deborah, as we shall see later, married to a pagan?

Naturally, it was also possible that Heber was Jewish. Husband, too. But then how could he and his family live in peace with the Canaanite occupation regime? I admit, again, I am puzzled by this episode. Luckily, I am not the only one. Midrashic commentators and heirs seem to have shared my puzzlement. The great Don Yitzhak Abarbanel, one of my [00:52:00] favorite medieval philosophers and commentators, asks himself about the real nature of the relationship between the king of Hazor and the Kenite family. It must have been close, otherwise Sisera would not have turned to it for shelter. But if that was the case, if Sisera came to the Kenite tent because he trusted the

family of Heber, is it humanly conceivable that Yael violated that trust, and killed him?

One theory, indicated Abarbanel, based on a Midrashic hypothesis, is that the covenant between the two communities, signed by men, applied to men only. In other words, Yael did not feel obligated to fully respect its terms. Another theory identifies her with Jethro, [00:53:00] Moses' father-in-law. He, too, was a Kenite who joined the people of Israel. Just as Jethro was known for the warm hospitality he showed Moses, the fugitive from Pharaoh, she, Yael, welcomed Sisera, the fugitive from Barak. In other words, according to the Midrash, a divine commandment is hereditary, and Yael inherited the virtue of hospitality from Jethro. Now, is that possible? Is it possible that the story had such erotic connotations, perhaps?

Believe it or not, as always in the Talmud, on this question, there is no unanimity. Some sages stress the seductive aspect of the scene. Rabbi Yohanan interprets the words "He fell between her legs" as an affirmation. [00:54:00] "On that day," says he, "Sisera committed seven sexual violations or acts of rape." One source believes that the milk she gave him to drink was a woman's. Others negate such possibilities, referring to Yael's covering Sisera with the blanket, says Reish Lakish, "We

studied the entire scripture, and did not find a single object called '*smicha*' which means blanket." What is *smicha*? A composition of two syllables. *Smi-cha*, my name is testimony. The dead wicked man did not even touch her.

From the human, purely, viewpoint, Yael does not come off nobly in this episode. A defenseless fugitive arrives seeking shelter, compassion, and pity, [00:55:00] from someone who was supposed to be friendly, and what does he get? False charity and real brutality. Yet, most sages follow Deborah's position, and see in Yael a heroic figure whose sole purpose was to save her people. But why? The people were saved. Our sages go as far as ranking Yael alongside the four matriarchs: Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah, who, like her, were pious and pure in all their behavior.

The biblical narrative ends with what is called the Song of Deborah, although in the text we include the name of Barak as co-author. The Talmud compares it in its grandeur and magnitude to the song of Moses at the crossing of the Red Sea. In both cases, the faith of Israel weakened, [00:56:00] causing us miraculous intervention. What? Israel's faith weakened? When did it weaken? Hasn't it defeated a powerful enemy? Answers the Talmud, "It weakened before the battle even began. Sisera's

army, with his iron chariots, must have seemed invincible to the Jews, who, for the last 20 years, had endured pain, fear, and discouraging pessimism. To pull them out of the state of depression, God performed miracles by fighting with them, for them, just as He had done at the Red Sea."

Says Rav Huna, "It is written, *'min shamayim nilkhamu hakokhavim*, the stars in heaven joined the battle.' It means, Sisera planned his battle, his battle plans, studying the stars. So God moved them around, and confused his calculations."

[00:57:00] Also, as Sisera advanced his troops to cross the River Kishon, God ordered it to become a trap, and they drowned. And Sisera fled before the victorious, repenting children of Israel. Deborah's accomplishment was thus, not military, but religious. She made them aware of their sins, and their implacable punishment, and then, they won. They won only when they repented.

We are close to the conclusion of the story, so listen to Deborah's victory song. "When leaders lead in Israel, when the people willingly offer themselves, bless the Lord. Hear, oh kings. Give ear, oh princes. I, even I, [00:58:00] will sing to the Lord. When you went out of Seir, when you marched from fields of *Edom*, the earth trembled. And the heavens poured, the

clouds also poured, water. And the mountains gushed before the Lord of Israel." Following the description of miracles, she turns to reality. "When the highways were deserted, and the wanderers walked along sideways, village life ceased, it ceased in Israel, until I arose, I, a mother in Israel."

Is she in ecstasy? Listen. "Awake, awake, Deborah. Awake, sing a song. Barak, lead your captives away, oh son of Abinoam. Then, [00:59:00] the survivors came down. The people against the dignitaries. And the Lord came down for me, against the mighty." She describes the tribes that joined forces against the enemy and those that didn't. And then, comes the magnificent, pathetic, and surprisingly vengeful denouement. She describes Sisera's downfall. Listen. "At her feet he sank. He fell. He lay still. At her feet, he sank, he fell. Where he sank, there he felt death." And suddenly, she changes the optical attention from Sisera to his mother. "The mother of Sisera looked through the window, and cried out through the lattice, 'Why is his chariot so long in coming? Why tatters the [01:00:00] clatter of his chariots?' Her wisest ladies answered her, or maybe she answered herself. 'Are they not finding and dividing the spoil? To every man a girl, or two. For Sisera, plunder of dyed garments. Plunder of garments, embroidered and dyed, two pieces of dyed embroidery for the neck of the looter.

Thus, let all your enemies perish, oh Lord. But let those who love him be like the sun when it comes out in full strength.'"

So the land had rest for 40 years. Her last words in the Midrash is an exultation to the people, not to rely on the dead, only the living. Pray, prayer alone can change events. End of the chapter.

I cannot erase the [01:01:00] image of Sisera's mother standing at the window, waiting for her dead son. Every year, when I chant the *haftarah*, the portion of the Prophets which contains this episode, it is always *Parshat Beshalach*, I chant it because it's a *Yahrzeit* for my father, Shlomo ben Eliezer Halevi. It falls the following week, on the 18th day of *Shevat*. Yes, each time, I chant the Song of Deborah, and when I reach its climax, with Sisera's mother's anguish, my voice is penetrated suddenly by melancholy. Why was she made to suffer? What had she done to deserve such punishment? If the son was a looter, was it her fault? And why did Deborah feel it necessary, or even meaningful, to tell her story, the story of a mother whose tears were [01:02:00] waiting to be shed? Wasn't she herself a mother? Is the story, on one mysterious level, nothing but what, in a time of warfare and bloodshed, invisibly and

imperceptibly, always links one mother to another, one human being to all others?

Was Deborah so insensitive to the suffering of a woman who was not Jewish, be she the mother of a cruel, implacable dead enemy? And what about us, fellow learners and friends? Whom do we follow? What is our mission? If we, here and elsewhere, are to draw a lesson from such biblical memories, of lofty dreams and fearful nightmares, tell me: what is the lesson? Thank you.

[01:03:00] (applause)

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