

Torah Table Talk

Deborah as Wife, Judge, and General: Anatomy of Leadership

Parshat Bishalah

Exodus 13:17 – 17:16/ Judges 4:4 – 5:31



*Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt
in memory of their grandson, Oren Jacob Brandt-Rauf.
"He was the perfect child."*

Do you have thoughts, comments or questions on Table Torah Talk?

Please share them with me at Haravmark@Optonline.net

The story of Deborah is filled with irony and ambivalence both in the Bible and in later Jewish literature. While Deborah is described as the first woman rabbi, this story is not without its doubts. Deborah is not only the great leader of her generation but the greatest of all the judges mentioned in the Bible. When Deborah summons Barak to her presence to order him gather an army to defend the nation, he refuses to lead the army without the prophetess at his side. Despite this unquestioning confidence in her ability, Deborah criticizes Barak: "Very well I will go with you," she says, "However, there will be no glory for you in the course you are taking for the Lord will deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman." This comment and criticism turns out to have a double meaning. The defeat of Sisera and his army's is attributed to Deborah and it is Yael rather than Barak who kills the Canaanite general. Later rabbinic tradition was at best ambivalent about a woman in a position of great leadership.

Along with Moses song at the sea, Deborah's song is a celebration of divine salvation in history. These two biblical passages give this Shabbat its special name, *Shabbat Shirah*, the Sabbath of Song. Parallel to Deborah's role in the battle of the Canaanites is Miriam who also leads the women in song celebrating Israel's redemption at the sea. These two women are among seven women who are described in the Jewish traditions as prophetesses. They are Sarah, Miriam, Hannah, Deborah, Abigail, Hulda, and Esther.

Judges 4:4 – 5 Deborah, the wife of Lapidot, was a prophetess; she led Israel at that time. She used to sit under the Palm of Deborah, between Ramah and Beth El in the hill country of Ephraim and the Israelites would come to her for decisions

Tanna D'bei Eliyahu, Yalkut 42

"Now Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lapidot, she judged Israel at that time" (Judges 4:4). What was the special character of Deborah that qualified her to prophesy about Israel and to judge them? Was not Pinhas son of Eleazar still alive at that time? (They said:) "I call heaven and earth to witness that whether it be a heathen or a Jew, a man or a woman, a manservant or a maidservant, the holy spirit will suffuse any one of them in keeping with the deeds he or she performs." It is said that Deborah's husband was unlettered [in Torah]. So his wife told him; "Come, I will make wicks for you; take them to the Holy Place in Shiloh. Your portion will then be with men of worth in Israel [who will be studying by the light of your wicks], and you will be worthy of life in the world-to-come." She took care to make the wicks thick, so that their light would be ample. He brought these wicks to the Holy Place [in Shiloh]. The Holy One, who examines the hearts and reins of mankind, said to her: Deborah, since you took care to make the light for the study of My Torah ample, I will make the light of your prophecy ample in the presence of Israel's twelve tribes.

Rabbi David Kimhi

Lapidot: The sages tell us that Lapidot was Barak ben Avinoam, since Barak (torch) and Lapidot (wicks) have a similar meaning, according to the Midrash she was called the wife of Lapidot because she made wicks for use in the Temple.

Tanna D'bei Eliyahu, Yalkut 42

The point of the words "She sat under the palm tree of Deborah" (Judges 4:5) is taken to be that, since it is improper for a woman to be alone in a house with a man, Deborah went outside and sat down under a palm tree where she instructed multitudes in Torah.

Midrash Tehillim 22:20

"Deborah, a prophetess...judged Israel" (Judges 4:4). With regard to this verse, R. Berechiah had four sayings: Woe unto the living who need help from the dead; woe unto the strong who need help from the weak; woe unto the seeing who need help from the blind; woe unto the generation that has to be led by a woman.

Genesis Rabba 18:1

R. Nahman said: Haughtiness does not become women. There were two haughty women, and their names were appropriately odious, one being called Hornet (Deborah), and the other Weasel (Huldah). Of the one called the Hornet, Scripture says, "And she sent and called Barak" (Judges 4:6)--she would not deign to go to him.

Michael Fishbane: The JPS Bible Commentary: Haftarot

Victory is thus achieved by a woman, as Deborah had said to Barak, and in a twofold manner; at first through the agency of Deborah herself, and then through the acts of Jael. By contrast the men are portrayed as hesitant, fearful, and easily beguiled, and their actions parody the conventions of heroic manliness.

Robert Alter The Art of Biblical Narrative (Page 146)

On the one hand the (*biblical*) writer is a member of a patriarchal society in which women have more limited legal privileges and institutional functions than do men, and where social conventions clearly invite one to see women as subsidiary to man, her proper place....On the other hand, our writer – one does not readily think of him as a bachelor – surely had a fund of personal observation to draw on which could lead him to conclude that a woman, contrary to institutional definitions, could be a daunting adversary or worthy partner, quite man's equal in a moral or psychological perspective, capable of exerting just as much power as he through her intelligent resourcefulness...

Around the Table

1. The Bible describes Deborah as a prophetess and a judge as well as the "wife of Lapidot." Why does it make a point of telling us to whom she is married? What does this add to our picture of Deborah?
2. Not all of the sages looked on the fact that this generation had a woman leader in a positive light. Why? How are we to respond to such comments today? Do you consider such comments as misogynistic? Is it fair to dismiss such comments as out-dated or are there other ways to wrestle with such troubling comments?
3. What do Fishbane and Alter add to our understanding of women in leadership in the time of the Bible? Are their comments apologetic or do you feel that they have a valid perspective on biblical women?
4. When Rabbi Nahman speaks about haughtiness, do you think he is using it in the context of feminine stereotypical characteristics, or is he making a more general comment about certain personal characteristics? On what basis does he make this comment about Deborah? Do you feel that Deborah is a positive feminine role model for Jewish women today? Is she a positive feminist role model? Why or why not?

Torah Table Talk is a weekly e-publication of Rabbi Mark B Greenspan sponsored by the Oceanside Jewish Center on Long Island, New York. If you would like to subscribe to Torah Table Talk please send an e-mail to Tabletalk@oceansidejc.org. To remove your address from this list, send a blank email to tabletalk-unsubscribe@oceansidejc.org. To see an archive of Rabbi Greenspan's sermons and TTT go to <http://www.oceansidejc.org/rebmark/RabbiGreenspan.html>.

"All it takes to study Torah is an open heart, a curious mind and a desire to grow a Jewish soul."