



OFF-RAMP TORAH

A JUDICIOUS DEPARTURE FROM
THIS WEEK'S TORAH PORTION

- January 27, 2023 -



פרוץ אפה יי, אלהינו מלך העולם,
אשר קדשנו במצותיו, וצונו לעסוק בדברי תורה:

TO START: *Parashat-haShavu'a Stats*

Weekly Portion: b'Shallach-Shirah Exodus 13:17-17:16

Sequence in Torah cycle: 16th of 54

Sequence in Exodus: 4th of 11

WHERE WE'RE GOING INSTEAD, and why

Judges 4:4-5:31

Context: the book of Judges is a checkered and variegated account of local affairs among the various Israelite Tribes during the two centuries between the conquest of the Promised Land of Canaan under Joshua and the establishment of a monarchy under Saul of Benjamin.

During this interim period, lacking any central authority, individual Tribes or even regions are vulnerable to periodic subjugation by neighboring nations. While that includes the aggressive Philistines on the southwest coast and our own cousins to the east and south (the Ishmaelites, Midianites, Ammonites, and Moabites), unconquered remnants of the Canaanites still pose an existential threat in the northern part of the land.

Content: The northernmost Tribes have been dominated for twenty years by the Canaanite king Yavin at Chatzor. At the behest of the prophetess D'vorah, ten thousand northerners rally in defiance of Yavin atop Mount Tabor. An unseasonal rainstorm bogs down Yavin's fearsome corps of armored chariots, robbing the Canaanites of their mobility and leaving them open to an overwhelming assault by the Israelites charging down from higher ground.

The inglorious defeat of Yavin's Canaanite force stuck in the mud in the Wadi Kishon echoes the destruction of Pharaoh's soldiers at the shores of the Sea in this week's Torah portion. More specifically, this passage is chosen because The Song of Triumph sung by D'vorah and Barak in chapter 5 mirrors the soaring Song of the Sea sung by the jubilant Israelites in Exodus 15— on account of which this week's portion "b'Shallach" constitutes this day, on which it is read, as שבת שירה Shabbat Shirah, "The Sabbath of Song."

4:4] - D'vorah, wife of Lapidot, was a prophet; it was she who led Israel at that time. [4:5] - She used to sit under the Palm Tree of D'vorah, **between Ramah and Beth-El** in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites would come to her for decisions.

4:6] - She summoned Barak son of Avino'am, of **Kedesh in Naphtali**, and said to him "The Eternal One, the God of Israel, has commanded: 'Go, march up to **Mount Tabor**, and take with you ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun. [4:7] - For I will be drawing Sis'ra, Yavin's army commander, with his chariots and his troops,



- more over

towards you up through the **Wadi Kishon**, where I will deliver him into your hands’.”

4:8] - Barak told her: “If you go with me, I will go; if not, I will not go.”

4:9] - “Very well, I will go with you,” she answered. “However, there will be no glory for you in the course you are taking, for then The Eternal One will deliver Sis’ra into the hands of a woman.” Whereupon D’vorah went with Barak to **Kedesh**.

4:10] - Barak then mustered Zebulun and Naphtali at **Kedesh**; ten thousand men marched up after him— and D’vorah also went up with him.

4:11] - Now Chever the Kenite had separated from the other Kenites (who are the descendants of Hovav, the Midianite father-in-law of Moses [Judges 1:16]), and had pitched his tent at the oak-grove of Za’ananim, which is nearby to **Kedesh**.



Hittite armored war chariot

before Barak’s onslaught. Sis’ra himself leapt from his chariot, and fled on foot, [4:16] - while Barak’s force pursued the chariots and soldiers all the way back to Charoshet-Goyim, so that all of Sis’ra’s troops fell by the sword; not one was left.

4:12] - Sis’ra had been informed that Barak son of Avi-No’am had gone up to **Mount Tabor**. [4:13] - So Sis’ra ordered all his chariots— nine hundred iron chariots— and all the troops he had to move from Charoshet-Goyim through the Wadi Kishon. [4:14] - Then D’vorah said to Barak, “Arise— this is the day on which The Eternal One will deliver Sis’ra into your hands. The Eternal One marches forth before you!” So Barak charged down **Mount Tabor**, followed by the ten thousand men.

4:15] - The Eternal One threw Sis’ra and all his chariots and army



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4:17] - Sis'ra, meanwhile, had fled on foot to the tent of Ya'eil, wife of Chever the Kenite; for there was a compact of friendship between King Yavin of Chatzor and the family of Chever the Kenite. [4:18] - Ya'eil came out to greet Sis'ra and said to him, "Come in, my lord, come



Ya'eil and Sis'ra (detail)
by Artemisia Gentileschi, 1620

in here, do not be afraid." So he entered her tent, and she covered him with a blanket. [4:19] - He said to her, "Please let me have some water; I am thirsty." She opened a skin of milk and gave him some to drink; and she covered him again. [4:20] - He said to her, "Stand at the entrance of the tent; should anybody come and ask you if someone is here, say: 'No one'."

4:21] - Then Ya'eil wife of Chever took a tent peg and grasped the mallet. When he was fast asleep from exhaustion, she approached him stealthily and drove the peg through his temple right down into the ground; that is how he died. [4:22] - So when Barak approached, in pursuit of Sis'ra, Ya'eil went out to greet him and said: "Come, I will show you the man you are looking for." He went inside with her— and there lay Sis'ra, dead, with the peg in his temple.

[4:23] - On that day God subdued King Yavin of Canaan before the Israelites. [4:24] - The Israelites thereafter exerted greater and greater pressure upon King Yavin of Canaan, until at last they had destroyed King Yavin of Canaan.

5:1] - On that day **D'vorah and Barak son of Abinoam sang:**

Exodus 14:31-15:1a

Now when Israel beheld the wondrous power which The Eternal One had wielded against the Egyptians, the people were in awe of The Eternal One; they had faith in The Eternal One, and in God's servant Moses. At which **Moses and the Israelites sang this song** to The Eternal One....

5:2] - When **locks go untrimmed** in Israel,
when people **dedicate themselves**,
Bless The Eternal One!

Numbers 6:5

All the days **of their dedication**,
no razor shall pass over their head

5:3] - Hear, O kings; give ear, O potentates,
and **I will sing—**
Will sing to The Eternal One;
sing praise to The Eternal One,
the God of Israel.

Exodus 15:1b

I will sing to The Eternal One,
Who has triumphed gloriously;
Horse and driver He has hurled
into the sea.

5:4] - O Eternal One, when You came forth from Sei'ir,
advanced from the country of Edom,
The earth trembled; the heavens dripped—
indeed, the clouds dripped water!

- more over

- 4:5] - **The mountains quaked** because of The Eternal One—
even distant Sinai, because of The Eternal One, God of Israel!

Flavius Josephus (37?-100?), *Antiquities of the Jews* 5:5:5 -

When the Israelites closed with them to engage in battle, **there came down from heaven a great storm, with a vast quantity of rain and hail**. The wind blew the rain in the face of the Canaanites, blinding them so their arrows and slings were useless to them, nor would the coldness of the air allow the soldiers to handle their swords— at the same time that this storm did not inconvenience the Israelites, because it came at their backs. They also took such encouragement, upon the apprehension that God was assisting them, that they fell upon the main body of their enemies, and slew a vast number of them.

- 5:6] - In the days of **Shamgar son of 'Anat**, in the days of Ya'eil,
caravans ceased; wayfarers took roundabout paths.

- 5:7] - Deliverance ceased, ceased in Israel;
'til you arose, O D'vorah—
'til you arose, a mother in Israel!

- 5:8] - **When they chose new gods**, was there a fighter then in the gates?
No shield or spear was seen among forty thousand in Israel!

Judges 3:31

Shamgar son of 'Anat
struck down six hundred Philistines

Judges 2:10-13

Another generation arose after them, which had not experienced the deliverance of The Eternal One. They forsook The Eternal One, the God of their ancestors, Who had brought them out of the land of Egypt, and **they followed other gods, from among the gods of the peoples around them**. They forsook The Eternal One, and instead worshiped Baal and the Ashtarot.

I Samuel 13:19-20, 13:22

No smith was to be found in all the land of Israel, for the Philistines were afraid that the Hebrews would make swords or spears. So all the Israelites had to go down to the Philistines to have their plowshares, their mattocks, their axes, and their ox-goads sharpened. . . . Thus it was that, on the day of the battle [at Michmas], **no sword or spear was to be found in the possession of any of the troops**.

- 5:9] - My heart is with Israel's leaders,
with the dedicated of the people—
bless The Eternal One !

- 5:10] - You **riders on tawny jennies**,
you who sit on saddle rugs,
and all other wayfarers— declare it!

- 5:11] - Louder than the sound of archers,
there among the watering places,
Let them chant the gracious acts of The Eternal One,
the gracious deliverance of Israel.

**Then did the people of The Eternal One
march down to the gates!**

- 5:12] - Awake, awake, O D'vorah! Awake, awake, strike up the chant!
Arise, O Barak; go take your captives, O son of Avino'am!



Philistine iron sword

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5:13] - **Then was the remnant made victor over the mighty;
the people of The Eternal One won My victory over the warriors!**

5:14] - From Ephraim [son of Joseph] came those whose roots are in Amalek;
after you, your kin [of Joseph's little brother] Benjamin.
From Machir [son of Joseph's son Manasseh] came down leaders;
from Zebulun such as hold the marshal's staff.

5:15] - While Issachar's chiefs were with D'vorah
(For all Issachar was as Barak,
charging after him into the valley!),

**among the clans of Reuben
there was craftiness of heart.**

5:16] - Why else did you stay among the sheepfolds,
and listen as they pipe for the flocks?
Among the clans of Reuben was great **crafti-
ness of heart!**

RaSHI (Shlomo Yitzchaqi,
1040-1105)

"Craftiness of heart" –
signifies **cunning**. Reuben
straddled the battle lines to
learn who would be victor, so
that he could align with them.

5:17] - Gil'ad [= Reuben and Gad] tarried beyond the Jordan [to the east];
and Dan [to the southwest]— why did he linger by the ships?
Asher [in the northwest] remained at the seacoast
and tarried at his landings.

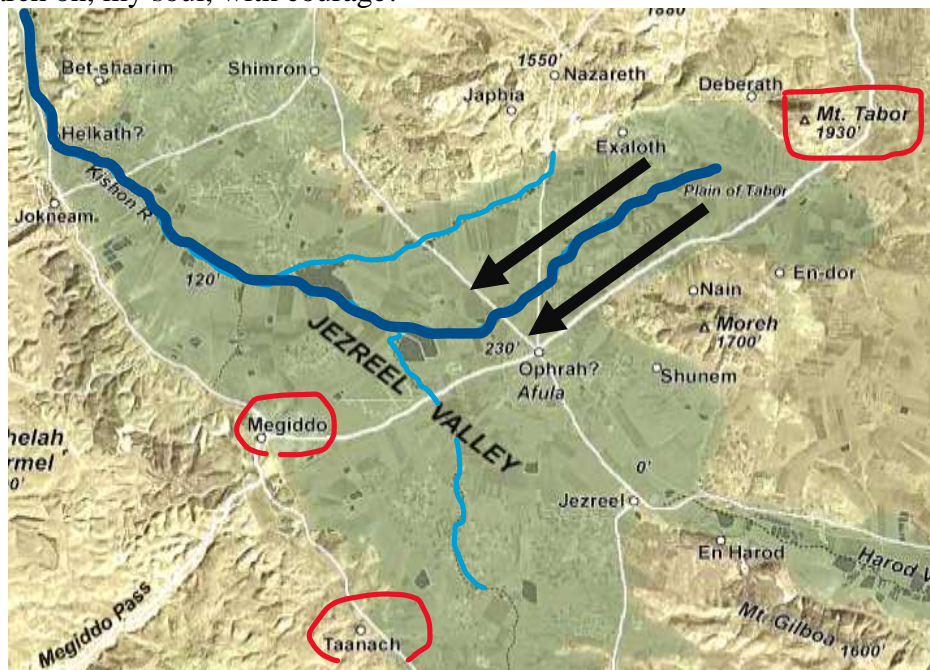
5:18] - Zebulun is a people that mocked at death;
Naphtali, [did likewise] on the open heights!

5:19] - So the kings came and fought; the kings of Canaan fought
at **Ta'anach** by **Megiddo's** waters— but got no spoils.

5:20] - The stars fought from the heaven;
from their courses On High they fought against Sis'ra.

5:21] - **The torrent Kishon swept them away,
the raging torrent, the torrent Kishon.**

March on, my soul, with courage!



- more over

- 5:22] - Then the horses' hooves pounded,
as headlong galloped the steeds!
- 5:23] - “**Curse Meroz!**” said the angel of The
Eternal One;
“Bitterly curse its inhabitants,
“**Because they came not to the aid of
The Eternal One,**
“to the aid of The Eternal One
among the [other] warriors.”
- 5:24] - Most blessed of women be Ya'eil,
wife of Chever the Kenite;
most blessed of women in tents!
- 5:25] - He asked for water; she offered milk—
in a princely bowl she brought
him curds.
- 5:26] - Her hand reached for the tent peg;
her right, for the workmen's hammer.
She struck Sis'ra, crushing his head;
smashed and pierced his temple.
- 5:27] - At her feet he sank, lay outstretched;
at her feet he sank, lay still.
Where he sank, there he lay— destroyed.
- 5:28] - Through the window peered Sis'ra's mother,
behind the lattice she whined:
“Why is his chariot so long in coming?
“why so belated the clatter of his
wheels?”
- 5:29] - The wisest of her ladies give answer,
And she, herself, reassures herself:
- 5:30] - “They must be dividing the spoils:
“A woman or two for each man;
“Spoils of dyed cloths for Sis'ra,
spoils of embroidered cloths—
“A couple of embroidered cloths ‘round
his neck as spoils.”
- 5:31a] - So may all Your enemies perish,
O Eternal One—
but may Your friends be
as the sun, emerging in all of its strength!

Nathaniel Whitaker, “An Antidote to
Toryism— or, The Curse of **Meroz**” (1777)

Had the foe been weak and contemptible,
there had been less need of their help.
But when a powerful tyrant oppressed
them, and when **they were called upon
to unite with their suffering brethren**
in shaking off his yoke, and all their
strength little enough to oppose him, then
to excuse themselves was highly criminal,
and in effect to join with the tyrant to
rivet slavery and misery on the whole
nation.

ivory furniture inlay,
“Woman at the Window” motif



Kalhu / Kalah / Nimrud, Iraq
8th century BCE



- 5:31b] - After that, the land knew peace for forty years.

The Song of D'vorah
by Gustave Doré, c. 1863

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TORAH: Moses's Song of the Sea	HAFTARAH: D'vorah's song,
The Eternal One “threw the Egyptian army into a panic” [Exodus 14:27].	“The Eternal One threw Sis'ra and all his chariots and army into a panic” [Judges 4:15].
Incident takes place at the beginning of national liberation to go the Promised Land.	Incident makes possible the final settlement of the Promised Land.
Song concludes with the climactic hope in God's enduring kingdom.	Song concludes with a celebration of God's enduring kingdom.

A) George Foot Moore (1851–1931), *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Judges* - **The Song of D'vorah** holds a high place among Triumphal Odes in the literature of the world. It is a **work of that highest art** which shows a development and command of the resources of the language for ends of poetical expression, which prove that poetry had long been cultivated among the Hebrews.

B) Joseph Herman Hertz (1879–1946), *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs* – [The Book of Judges describes how] an overwhelming national calamity, or foreign oppression, would bring forth a Champion. . . , and **the most remarkable of all was D'vorah**. From this narrative we can reconstruct **the mortal danger from which her victory saved Israel**. It was one of the “decisive battles” of the world, which settled the destiny of Palestine— and a great many other things— for all time.

Moreover, **under the inspiration of D'vorah's lofty patriotism, most of the tribes for the first time combined** in face of a common danger. Those wild years forged the bonds of a nationality that has survived unprecedented shocks throughout the ages.

C) Abraham Cohen (1887-1957), *Soncino Books of the Bible: Judges* – Verse 4 introduces Deborah as “a prophetess”— literally, נְבִיאָה אִשָּׁה “**a woman, a prophet.**” The latter title, signifying that her activities were Divinely inspired, is applied also to Miriam [Exodus 15:20] and Huldah [II Kings 22:14]. **This full description, however, is not used of any other judge.**

D) Miki Raver, *Listen to Her Voice: Women of the Hebrew Bible* – The rabbinic interpreters of Torah could not handle the magnitude of D'vorah's power. The Talmudic sages labeled D'vorah arrogant, haughty, and boastful. In modern times, D'vorah would be called controlling, a know-it-all.

And indeed, she was. A general's job is to be controlling. A prophetess is a know-it-all. D'vorah was like “the sun, emerging in all of its strength” [Judges 5:31]. Her mighty spirit invites the warrior woman within us to show herself.

D'vorah was more than mortal, she was mythic.

D'vorah instructs Barak
by Balage Balogh, 2003

