

Deborah

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

I have always been fascinated by the Biblical Deborah. Not the one in Genesis, but the most impressive one in the Book of Judges. The prophetess as well as a judge. A unique combination. She was the accepted authority of a majority of tribes in the Land of Israel some three thousand two hundred years ago. Amazingly she rose to the top in a male-dominated tribal society. She could not get everyone to join her. But this did not discourage her. She was a strong and popular woman. People streamed to her for justice and solace.

How did Deborah rise to the top? There are various theories. Her husband was called Lapidot. And he might have been a very powerful or rich or well-connected man who shunned the bright lights and pushed his capable wife to represent him. Perhaps he died leaving her holding the reins.

Lapidot might not have been a person at all. The word means lights or flames. Perhaps Deborah was dedicated to serving in or around the Tabernacle, tending the lights. She watched, she learnt from the priests. She, was in the public eye and was recognized as a very wise and capable person.

Perhaps she was born into a powerful family and made use of her position. She might have been captured by the Philistines or Canaanites, taken to serve or live in another culture. Like Joseph and Moses, she will have learned other ways of life and skills that gave her the edge when she returned to her people. We cynical moderns, used to Hollywood or seeing rich elderly men accompany their eye candy to the Metropolitan Opera house, might even assume she slept her way to the top. Me too#

She led the campaign to free her passive people from the oppressive Yabin the Canaanite King and his general Siserah. She showed wisdom and modesty in recruiting Barak ben Avinoam to take responsibility for military affairs without her. She wanted him to lead. Barak responded that he needed her moral authority. And he had no problem sharing the glory. This too was her strength, to choose the right person to work with. Regardless of his military prowess, he clearly had exceptional human qualities and did not feel threatened by her.

Another woman figured in the story, Yael. She was the wife of Hever the

Kenite. The Kenites were descendants of Jethro, Moses's father in law. The Torah was unclear as to whether they converted and tried to integrate into the Israelite tribes when they invaded Canaan or stayed apart. In the Book of Judges, they seem to have played a neutral role. The fleeing Sisera thought he would find refuge in Hever's tent. Yael might have been an Israelite or a Kenite woman. She welcomed him in and gave him to drink and offered a bed. But as he slept she smashed a tent pin into his skull. Was it personal? Had she been mistreated? Or was it just a passion for her nation? Deborah regarded her as a heroine and praised her above all women.

Following the campaign, Deborah sings a beautiful, evocative song, which is read in synagogues the same week as the song Moses and Miriam sang when they crossed the Red Sea. The poetry, the rhythm, the rhyme, and the imagery are powerful. The flooded rivers sweep down onto Sisera's formidable iron chariots, the men and their horses are carried away. She is derisive, poking fun at the elders of other tribes busy prevaricating. Particularly memorable is the irony in her imagining Sisera's mother waiting anxiously at the window for her son's return. Her "wise" maid, supportively tries to reassure her. Suggesting he was late because he was busy with the spoil, raping captured women. But we know of course that he was already dead. The poem ends with the iconic *Keyn Yovdu Oyvecha*, "Thus shall all your enemies perish."

Her mean-spirited critics focus on what they see as her backhanded compliment to Yael "Blessed amongst the women of the tents is Yael." they think she is implying that she was only a mere housewife. Not a career woman like Deborah. Or was Yael in fact the judge she refers to earlier in her song and Deborah is suggesting she relinquished her career and responsibility to stay at home? But that's too modern a perspective. In those days a woman who stayed at home in her tent was considered the ideal, not a cop-out.

The Midrash does say she was arrogant. And the Song of Deborah should have been the song of Deborah and Barak. Even so, credit to her, the Canaanite yoke was broken and there was peace under Deborah for forty years. That time span puts her squarely in the elite category of rulers, King David and King Solomon who reigned for forty years too.

Maimonides, probably influenced by thousands of years of male domination and both Christian and Muslim subordination of women, declared that only a man could be appointed to public positions of authority in Israel. A view held by many Haredi Jews to this day. I don't know how he explained away Deborah or the most successful Hasmonean Queen Salome (Shlomzion). In this era of increasing equality, in Orthodox Judaism, we need to correct the imbalance by empowering females. And Deborah stands as a powerful symbol of what women can achieve.

Our tradition validates birth and aristocracy through the priesthood. But it also validates merit. When it comes to appointments the men tend to hog them all for themselves, priests and kings. But when it comes to prophesy the Bible is concerned with human qualities regardless of sex and there were women prophets like Deborah. Where women have had the opportunity to show how good they are, they can often out achieve the men. They make up more university graduates than men nowadays in free societies. It seems utter madness to deny one half of our human pool of talent the opportunity to excel. We men will all be the real losers.