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INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHETS

SEFER SHOFTIM

Shiur #8: Chapter 4 – Continued

The Battle at River Kishon

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INTRODUCTION

Last time, we began to consider the events recorded in the fourth chapter of Sefer Shoftim. Recall that the Israelites, especially the northern tribes of Zevulun and Naftali, were then suffering the harsh oppression of Yavin, whose ancestral dynasty hailed from Chazor. For twenty years Yavin had imposed heavy tribute upon them and the Israelites called out to God for relief. That relief appeared in the guise of an inspired woman by the name of Devorah who in turn summoned Barak son of Avino'am of Naftali to raise an Israelite militia. The prophetess had instructed him and his force to ascend Mount Tavor, located at the northeastern entrance to the expansive and fertile Valley of Yizra'el, and to await further instructions. Yavin, moving to counter the threat to his harsh and tyrannical rule, immediately dispatched his able and obedient general Sisera, with nine hundred chariots of iron at his disposal, to overawe the irregular Israelite forces. Sisera and his charioteers, however, unable to ascend the steep slopes of Mount Tavor, waited instead in the valley along the banks of the wadi Kishon.

Although the text does not spell out explicitly the nature of Barak's attack, it would not be unreasonable to assume that his determined charge down the mountain, in accordance with Devorah's signal, coincided with a sudden cloudburst that turned the plain into a muddy torrent. Sisera's charioteers, who had been brimming with overconfidence by virtue of their superior weaponry, were suddenly stricken with fear as it became apparent that their vaunted iron chariots would offer them no advantage and had in fact become a grave liability. Barak and his ten thousand fighters engaged the enemy and overwhelmed them, and Sisera himself dismounted from his chariot and fled the battlefield on foot! During the course of this lesson, we will attempt to demonstrate, utilizing a number of lines of evidence, that the "cloudburst theory" provides the most reasonable explanation for the unexpected Israelite triumph.

IMPLICIT EVIDENCE FROM THE TEXT

Although the text of Chapter 4 makes no mention of any unusual precipitation, and is content to simply describe the victory as a generic intervention of God, a careful reading of the

passage would seem to provide almost undeniable evidence that the said intervention took the form of a sudden storm and a resultant flash flood of the valley floor. The text states:

They told Sisera that Barak son of Avino'am had ascended to Mount Tavor. Sisera sounded the alarm to gather all of his chariots – nine hundred chariots of iron – as well as all of the people that were with him, from Charoshet HaGoyim to the wadi of Kishon. Devorah said to Barak: "Arise, because this is the day that God will give Sisera into your hand, does not God go forth before you?" Barak descended from Mount Tavor followed by ten thousand men. God discomfited Sisera and all of the chariots and the encampment by the sword before Barak, and Sisera dismounted the chariot and fled on foot...(4:12-15).

Our first line of evidence relates to the location. Recall that last time we considered the stream of Kishon, a watercourse that begins its route near the feet of Mount Tavor and flows along the floor of the Yizrael Valley all the way to its exit at the base of the Carmel Range on the Mediterranean Sea. While the final western ten kilometers of the watercourse until its discharge on the coast are a perennial stream, the rest of the "river" is actually a wadi. This means that during the long summer months, its bed is dry and easily traversable, but during the rainy season it can suddenly and destructively fill with a torrent that may even overflow its banks and cause extensive flooding all along the valley floor. The fact that the passage refers more than once (4:7; 4:13) to this Kishon as the site of the victory may imply a connection to its occasional habit of suddenly filling with water and flooding the area.

#### AN UNUSUAL VERB FORM

A linguistic usage by Devorah herself, on the eve of the battle, reinforces the point. Summoning Barak, she instructs him to gather ten thousand men from the tribes of Zevulun and Naftali. This "gathering" of forces is termed "uMaShaChta," literally meaning "and you shall draw" (4:6) and may be understood as Devorah's oblique indication to Barak that he may very well have to employ a certain amount of arm-twisting in order to raise the necessary forces from the midst of tribes that had been for so long terrorized by Yavin and his tyranny. But significantly, his "drawing" is to be matched by a Divine response:

And I will draw ("umashachti") towards you, to the wadi of Kishon, Sisera the chief of staff of Yavin along with his chariots and multitude, and I will give him into your hand (4:7).

While Devorah's intent is clearly to inspire Barak by informing him that his own efforts to raise a force will be rewarded by God's intervention, in accordance with the recurring Scriptural motif that human initiative invites Divine assistance, the use of the verb form "MaShaCh" is of more than passing interest. Though it broadly signifies "to draw close" (see Shemot 12:21; Shir HaShirim 1:4), "to pull" (Bereishit 37:28; Yirmiyahu 38:13), or sometimes "to be lengthened" (Shemot 19:13; Yehoshua 6:5), in Rabbinic usage it is sometimes used in connection with water. Thus, for example, in the discussion of labor-intensive agricultural activities that are to be curtailed during the intermediate days of festivals (Chol HaMo'ed), Rabbi Eli'ezer rules that "one may draw ("moshchim") the water from tree to tree, as long as one does not irrigate the entire field" (Mishna Mo'ed Katan 1:3). In the discussion of watercourses that are fit for ritual

immersion, the Mishna in Tractate Mikvaot 5:3 states that "a spring whose water is drawn ("mashuch") into many small courses is still considered a spring if one added drawn water ("himshicho") to it in order to increase its volume."

In other words, the root "MShCh" may sometimes be used in connection with water, presumably because it tends to flow downhill and thus can be directed or "drawn," and by extension can also "draw" other objects along with it. In our context of Sefer Shoftim, the use of the term in Devorah's directive may therefore be a veiled and proleptic reference to the nature of the Divine involvement that will transpire, stated (as prophecies typically are) in language whose full import can only be appreciated after the fact. The assumption of this analysis, of course, is that Rabbinic Hebrew (meaning the Hebrew employed at the time of the Mishna, c. 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE until 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE) can shed light on Biblical usages, an axiom that is well-known to any serious student of the Bible (for a striking illustration of this fact as well as of the unfamiliarity of even some of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century scholars with unusual Biblical terms, see Talmud Bavli Rosh Hashanah 26b).

#### EVIDENCE FROM THE TRIUMPHAL SONG OF DEVORAH

While the evidence adduced so far is predicated upon implication and is therefore somewhat indirect, much stronger support may be brought from the verses themselves. While we have so far only considered the narrative description of the fourth chapter, we must bear in mind that the account of Devorah and Barak continues into the fifth chapter as well, namely the renowned Song of Triumph composed by the Prophetess in commemoration of the victory. Composed as lyrical poetry, Devorah's inspired words are counted among the most celebrated in the Hebrew Bible. While we will have occasion to consider the Song at length later on, for our present purposes let us quote the relevant passage that relates to the actual moment of engagement followed by victory:

Zevulun endangered itself unto death, and Naftali ascended upon the heights. The kings came to do battle, then the kings of Canaan battled at Ta'anach upon the waters of Megiddo, and they took no payment of money. From the heavens they fought, the stars in their courses fought against Sisera. The wadi of Kishon swept them away, the ancient wadi the wadi of Kishon, my soul treads with strength! Then the hooves of the horses galloped, the prancing, the prancing of the stallions...(5:18:22).

Here, the poem describes the heroic courage of ill-equipped Zevulun and Naftali who trusted in God, answered Barak's call and prepared to do battle with their powerful overlord. It then describes the opposing force, a coalition of Canaanite kings eager to reassert their hegemony over the Israelite tribes, even prepared to forego the enticing promises of compensation from the spoils that were customarily extended by overlords in an attempt to enlist local support for a punitive campaign.

But now the poem apparently turns to the supernatural, for it claims that the stars themselves left their heavenly courses to do battle with Sisera! Could the reference be, perhaps, to a downpour so severe that it seemed as if the very heavens had become undone? Might it be

suggesting a spate of hailstones (quite common in the region during the course of heavy precipitation) that fell upon the discomfited foe, further adding to his despair (compare to Yehoshua 10:11 – "While they were fleeing the people of Israel, at the descent of Beit Choron, God cast upon them great stones from heaven all the way until 'Azeka. More died from the hailstones than had been dispatched by the people of Israel by the sword")? Or is it a reference to the popular pagan belief that one's fate was determined by the stars, and in this case, they themselves had dictated that Sisera would perish?

## THE MOST PLAUSIBLE THEORY

While we cannot determine the meaning of the phrase with absolute confidence, adopting the imagery of thunderheads, lightening and severe precipitation certainly furnishes a plausible reading and strikes this author as the most prudent, especially in light of the subsequent description of the wadi Kishon. Upon its banks, the poem suggests, the charioteers lost their sure footing and were "swept away" by the torrent, in contrast to the soul of the Israelite forces that "tread with strength" and did not slide. The poem completes the picture of an utter rout by mentioning the remaining enemy forces that beat a hasty retreat upon their horses, thus leaving Sisera alone to face the aftermath of the Israelite onslaught. Of course, the initial reference to the "waters of Megiddo," describing the course of the Kishon as it winds its way through the Valley of Yizra'el and makes its way to the Mediterranean Sea, would also tend to reinforce the "flash flood" theory. So too Devorah's poetic prologue in 5:4 that describes God's victorious march from "Se'ir and the fields of Edom" that caused the "earth to quake and the heavens to rain, the heavy clouds to drip with water." While it is not impossible to relate to the language of all of these lyrical verses as nothing more than bold metaphors, thereby minimizing their value as sources of empirical data, there is no pressing need to do so. We may read them as emphatic descriptions, couched in vivid poetic terms, of events that actually took place.

Perhaps the matter can be settled by historical evidence that the flooded wadi Kishon was instrumental in deciding battles during other periods as well. In the spring of 1799, the armies of Napoleon swept through Egypt and the land of Israel, at time encountering stiff resistance from the Ottoman Turks and their local allies. In a pitched battle that took place in the strategic Valley of Yizra'el, always a sight of conflict and struggle, the wadi Kishon suddenly overflowed its banks. Many retreating Arab irregulars were swept away by the deluge that descended from Mount Tavor and that filled the usually-dry tributaries of the Kishon with raging torrents.

Of course, there is an additional thematic advantage in reading the victory over Sisera and his numerous chariots of iron as being brought about by cascading waters. While we will further explore the literary parallel in our study of Chapter 5, suffice it to say that there are definite echoes of another miraculous triumph over tyranny preserved in our account: the drowning of Pharaoh's cavalry and men, his "six hundred choicest chariots" (Shemot 14:7) at the Sea of Reeds, in the aftermath of the Israelites' exodus from Egypt. The link between the two events is of course greatly enhanced when similar circumstances can be adduced to describe the nature of God's intervention.

Next time, we will complete our study of Chapter 4 by considering the respective roles of Devorah and Ya'el, two headstrong and courageous women who are the real protagonists of the narrative, in bringing victory to the Israelites.

Shabbat Shalom and Chag Kasher ve-Sameach.