

HAFTARAH SELECTION for TORAH PORTION “Beshallach”

Rabbi Richard Hirsh

The Book of Judges is the second biblical book after the Torah [Five Books of Moses]. The best-known of the “judges” is Samson. The book follows this pattern: because Israel behaved immorally, a military threat arises against the Israelite tribes > the Israelites call out to God to save them > a “judge” [better: “chieftain”] arises and musters the troops to defeat the enemy > “the land had rest for forty years” > the Israelites again deteriorate morally > the cycle repeats, punctuated by the phrase “In those days there was no king in Israel, each person did what was right in their own eyes.” [AKA: “whatever they felt like!”] By the end of the book of Judges, there is complete anarchy. The final line states: “In those days there was no king in Israel. Each person did what was right in their own eyes” (21:25). This sets up, historically as well as in terms of the literature of the Bible, the drama of the next book/s of the Bible [I & II Samuel] where a king is finally appointed, not without debate and discord – first Saul, then David, then Solomon.

The Book of Judges 4:4-24 [narrative/prose version]

4 Deborah, wife of Lappidoth, was a prophetess; she led Israel at that time. 5 She used to sit under the Palm of Deborah, between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites would come to her for decisions. 6 She summoned Barak son of Abinoam, of Kedesh in Naphtali, and said to him, “The LORD, the God of Israel, has commanded: Go, march up to Mount Tabor, and take with you ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun. 7 And I will draw Sisera, Jabin’s army commander, with his chariots and his troops, toward you up to the Wadi Kishon; and I will deliver him into your hands.” 8 But Barak said to her, “If you will go with me, I will go; if not, I will not go.” 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 LORD will deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman.” So Deborah went with Barak to Kedesh. 10 Barak then mustered Zebulun and Naphtali at Kedesh; ten thousand men marched up after him; and Deborah also went up with him. 11 Now Heber the Kenite had separated from the other Kenites, descendants of Hobab, father-in-law of Moses, and had pitched his tent at *Elon-bezaananim*, which is near Kedesh. 12 Sisera

was informed that Barak son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor. 13 So Sisera ordered all his chariots—nine hundred iron chariots—and all the troops he had to move from *Harosheth-goim* to the Wadi Kishon. 14 Then Deborah said to Barak, “Up! This is the day on which the LORD will deliver Sisera into your hands: the LORD is marching before you.” Barak charged down Mount Tabor, followed by the ten thousand men,¹⁵ and the LORD threw Sisera and all his chariots and army into a panic before the onslaught of Barak. Sisera leaped from his chariot and fled on foot¹⁶ as Barak pursued the chariots and the soldiers as far as *Harosheth-goim*. All of Sisera’s soldiers fell by the sword; not a man was left. 17 Sisera, meanwhile, had fled on foot to the tent of Jael, wife of Heber the Kenite; for there was friendship between King Jabin of Hazor and the family of Heber the Kenite. 18 Jael came out to greet Sisera and said to him, “Come in, my lord, come in here, do not be afraid.” So he entered her tent, and she covered him with a blanket. 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. 20 He said to her, “Stand at the entrance of the tent. If anybody comes and asks you if there is anybody here, say ‘No.’” 21 Then Jael wife of Heber took a tent pin and grasped the mallet. When he was fast asleep from exhaustion, she approached him stealthily and drove the pin through his temple till it went down to the ground.

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Thus he died. 22 Now Barak appeared in pursuit of Sisera. Jael 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 Sisera was lying dead, with the pin in his temple. 23 On that day God subdued King Jabin of Canaan before the Israelites. 24 The hand of the Israelites bore harder and harder on King Jabin of Canaan, until they destroyed King Jabin of Canaan.

The Book of Judges 5:1-31 [poetry version]

On that day Deborah and Barak son of Abinoam sang:

2 When blocks go untrimmed in Israel,
When people dedicate themselves—

Bless the LORD!

3 Hear, O kings! Give ear, O potentates!
I will sing, will sing to the LORD,
Will hymn the LORD, the God of Israel.

4 O LORD, when You came forth from Seir,
Advanced from the country of Edom,
The earth trembled;

The heavens dripped,
Yea, the clouds dripped water,

5 The mountains quaked
Before the LORD, Him of Sinai,
Before the LORD, God of Israel.

6 In the days of Shamgar son of Anath,
In the days of Jael, caravans ceased,
And wayfarers went
By roundabout paths.

7 Deliverance ceased,
Ceased in Israel,
Till you arose, O Deborah,

Arose, O mother, in Israel!

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!

9 My heart is with Israel’s leaders,
With the dedicated of the people—

Bless the LORD!

10 You riders on tawny she-asses,
You who sit on saddle rugs,

And you wayfarers, declare it!

11 Louder than the sound of archers,
There among the watering places
Let them chant the gracious acts of the LORD,
His gracious deliverance of Israel.

Then did the people of the LORD
March down to the gates!

12 Awake, awake, O Deborah!
Awake, awake, strike up the chant!

Arise, O Barak;

Take your captives, O son of Abinoam!

13 Then was the remnant made victor over the
mighty,
The LORD’s people won my victory over the
warriors.

14 From Ephraim came they whose roots are in
Amalek;

After you, your kin Benjamin;

From Machir came down leaders,
From Zebulun such as hold the marshal’s staff.

15 And Issachar’s chiefs were with Deborah;
As Barak, so was Issachar—
Rushing after him into the valley.

Among the clans of Reuben
Were great decisions of heart.

16 Why then did you stay among the sheepfolds
And listen as they pipe for the flocks?

Among the clans of Reuben
Were great searchings of heart!

17 Gilead tarried beyond the Jordan;
And Dan—why did he linger by the ships?

Asher remained at the seacoast
And tarried at his landings.

18 Zebulun is a people that mocked at death,
Naphtali—on the open heights.

19 Then the kings came, they fought:
The kings of Canaan fought

At Taanach, by Megiddo’s waters—
They got no spoil of silver.

20 The stars fought from heaven,
From their courses they fought against Sisera.

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21 The torrent Kishon swept them away,
The raging torrent, the torrent Kishon.

March on, my soul, with courage!

22 Then the horses’ hoofs pounded
As headlong galloped the steeds.

23 “Curse Meroz!” said the angel of the LORD.
“Bitterly curse its inhabitants,

Because they came not to the aid of the LORD,
To the aid of the LORD among the warriors.”

24 Most blessed of women be Jael,
Wife of Heber the Kenite,
Most blessed of women in tents.

25 He asked for water, she offered milk;
In a princely bowl she brought him curds.

26 Her [left] hand reached for the tent pin,
Her right for the workmen’s hammer.
She struck Sisera, crushed his head,
Smashed and pierced his temple.

27 At her feet he sank, lay outstretched,
At her feet he sank, lay still; Where he sank, there
he lay—destroyed.

28 Through the window peered Sisera’s mother,
Behind the lattice she lamented:

“Why is his chariot so long in coming?
Why so late the clatter of his wheels?”

29 The wisest of her ladies give answer;
She, too, replies to herself:

30 “They must be dividing the spoil they have
found:

A damsel or two for each man,
Spoil of dyed cloths for Sisera,
Spoil of embroidered cloths,
A couple of embroidered cloths
Round every neck as spoil.”

31 So may all Your enemies perish, O LORD!
But may His friends be as the sun rising in might!

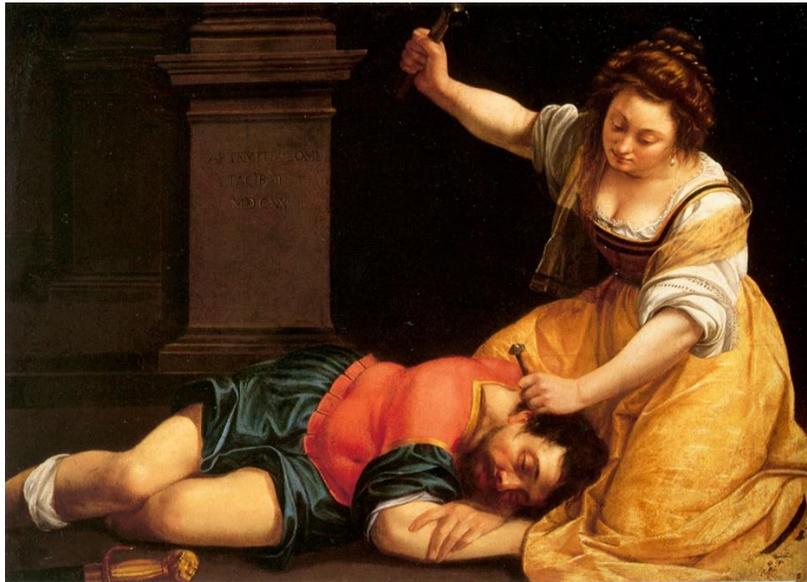
And the land was tranquil forty years.



Salomon de Bray 1597 – 1664; “Jael, Deborah and Barak” (1635)

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Artemisia Gentileschi 1593 – 1656 “Jael and Sisera,” 1620

Contemporaries of Artemisia Gentileschi often showed Jael as a treacherous temptress. They didn't really know what to think of this woman who acted without the knowledge and consent of her husband. The Bible does not pass a clear judgement either. But Gentileschi shows her as a predecessor of **Judith**, the undisputed heroine who also killed an enemy warlord to save her people. <https://www.artbible.info/art/large/727.html>

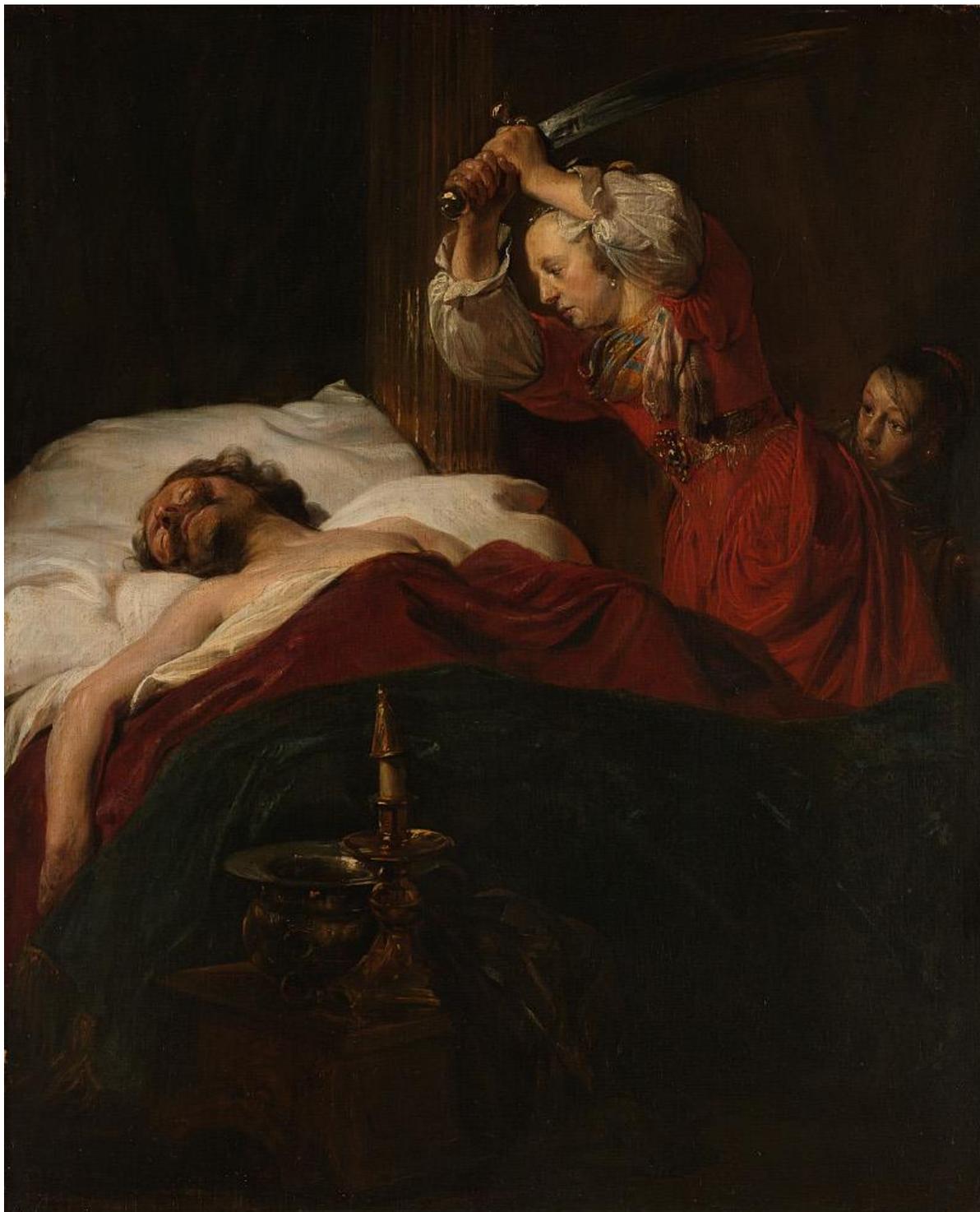
The Book of Judith (NOT in the Jewish Bible, but preserved in the Catholic Bible in the “Apocrypha” section – those Jewish books of approximately 2 BCE-2 CE that “did not make it” into the Jewish Bible but the Catholic Church considered “sacred” and thus preserved. “Apocrypha” means “hidden things” in Greek. See <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/apocrypha-and-pseudepigrapha/>)

Story: Judith capitalized on her beauty: arriving at the enemy camp, she lured Holofernes into his tent, made him thirsty by plying him with salty cheese, then got him drunk. When he fell asleep or passed out, Judith murdered him with his own sword, then snuck back home, bringing along his severed head, scattering the enemy.

Judith 13:1-4: Now when the evening was come, his servants made haste to depart, and...the tent was shut from without, and the waiters dismissed from the presence of their lord; and they went to their beds: for they were all weary, because the feast had been long. And Judith was left alone in the tent, and Holofernes lying along upon his bed: for he was filled with wine. Judith had commanded her maid to stand without her bedchamber, and to wait for her....So all went forth and none was left in the bedchamber, neither little nor great. Then Judith, standing by his bed, said in her heart, ‘O Lord God of all power, look at this present upon the works of mine hands for the exaltation of Jerusalem. For now is the time to help your people and to execute your salvation to the destruction of the enemies which are risen against us.’ Then she came to the pillar of the bed, which was at Holofernes' head...And approached to his bed, and took hold of the hair of his head, and said, ‘Strengthen me, O Lord God of Israel, this day.’ And she smote twice upon his neck with all her might, and she beheaded him.

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Jan de Bray 1627 – 1697 (1659) <https://www.artbible.info/art/large/936.html>

Judith raises the sword to kill the enemy war lord Holofernes. Next to her is her maid.

HIS MOTHER by Haim Gouri (1960)

It was years ago, at the end of Deborah's Song,
I heard the silence of Sisera's chariot so long in coming,
I watch Sisera's mother captured in the window,
a woman with a silver streak in her hair.

A spoil of multi-hued embroideries,
two for the throat of each despoiler.
This is what the maidens saw.
That very hour he lay in the tent as one asleep.
His hands quite empty.
On his chin traces of milk, butter, blood.
The silence was not broken by the horses and chariots.
The maidens, too, fell silent one by one.
My silence reached out to theirs.
After a while – sunset.
After a while – the afterglow is gone.

Forty years the land knew peace. Forty years
no horses galloped, no dead horsemen stared glassily.
But her death came soon after her son's.

HIS MOTHER

לפני שנים, בסוף שירת דבורה,
שמעתי את הדימה רכב סיסרא אשר בושש לבוא,
מביט באמו של סיסרא הנשקמת בחלון,
אשה שפס כסף בשערה.

שלל צבעים רקמה,
צבע רקמתים לצוארי שלל, ראו הנערות.
אותה שעה שכב באהל כנרדם.
ידי ריקות מאד.
על סנטרו עקבות חלב חמאה נדם.

הדימה לא נשברה אל הסוסים ואל המרכבות,
גם הנערות שתקו אחת אחר אחת.
שתיקתי ננעה בשתיקתן.
אחר זמן-מה שקעה השמש.
אחר זמן-מה קבו הדמדומים.

ארבעים שנה שקטה הארץ. ארבעים שנה
לא דהרו סוסים ופרשים מתים לא נצצו עיני
זכיות.
אבל היא מתה, זמן קצר אחר מות בנה.

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Albert Joseph Moore, 1861 - “The Mother of Sisera Looked Out of a Window”

On ‘His Mother’ by Dan Pagis

https://www.poetryinternational.org/pi/cou_article/3112/On-His-Mother/nl/tile

Characters mentioned only in passing in the Bible have often been a source of inspiration for later Hebrew literature. From ancient Jewish legends to recent poetry and prose, such minor figures have been elaborated upon and sometimes used as a means for expressing present-day attitudes. Gouri’s poem, for example, centers on the character of **Sisera’s mother**, who is mentioned only briefly, if perhaps strikingly, in the famous ‘Song of Deborah’ (Judges 5: 28-30), with which every Israeli school[child] is familiar.

Sisera, the leader of a Canaanite army, fought against Israel and was defeated by Barak and by the prophetess Deborah. After deserting the battlefield, he was lured into the tent of Jael, a chieftainess, who offered him milk and butter. He quenched his thirst and fell into a deep sleep; then Jael drove a wooden peg through his head and killed

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him. The ‘Song of Deborah’ triumphantly celebrates these deeds and goes on to describe the dead enemy’s mother as she awaited her son in vain:

The mother of Sisera looked out at a window, And cried through the lattice: “Why is his chariot so long in coming? Why tarry the wheels of his chariots? Her wise ladies answered her, yea, she returned answer to herself: Have they not sped? have they not divided prey; to every man a damsel or two; to Sisera a prey of diverse colors, A prey of diverse colors of needlework, Of diverse colors of needlework on both sides, meet for the necks of them that take the spoil?”

Gouri’s poem follows the biblical text in its general argument and in some details, but it reverses the point of view. The poet takes the part of the defeated leader and of his bereaved mother.

The variation on the biblical passage has a distinctly subjective tone, for the poet speaks for himself in the first stanza and in his identification with the maidens’ silence. But his departure from Scripture is even more pronounced in the imaginatively descriptive passages. The image of the mother’s “silver-streaked hair” creates the emotional tone for what follows: the enemy’s mother, an aging woman, is waiting, like every mother, for the safe return of her son; but all she hears is the silence of his absence. While the maidens in her entourage (the biblical “wise ladies”) see in their imagination Sisera’s booty, the son himself lies dead. And since the enemy conceives Sisera not as an enemy but as a lamented son, it suggests that Jael behaved treacherously, violating the elementary code of hospitality.

The biblical hymn does not describe the moment when the mother learns of her son’s death, and neither does the poem. The poet passes from the mournful scene of silence and of slowly fading light to the conclusion, carefully admitting all reference to the triumphant cry of the ‘Song of Deborah’ – “So let all thine enemies perish, O Lord”, etc. The poem reproduces only the last few words of the chapter that tells, in the dry tone of the chronicle, that after the victory there came forty years of peace and security.

Note that the poet minimizes the outcome of that war. On the contrary, by changing the word order of the quotation, “And the land had rest forty years”, (Judges 5:31), and by repeating the time phrase in the same line, he stresses “forty years” – a long period of peace in a war-ridden country – and continues to praise the peace in affirming the absence of horrors. But these positive results seem to be diminished as they lie enclosed in the mood of tragedy and human loss suffered by the aging woman who herself died soon after her son’s death.

Although the poem is close to the Bible in vocabulary, the syntax and poetic forms are modern. The subdued tone avoids both sentimentality and rhetoric. It is almost an improvisation on a familiar theme, with utterly changed emphasis, in lines of varying length, which seem to be independent rhythmic segments.

From *The Modern Hebrew Poem Itself: a New and Updated Edition*. Edited by Stanley Burnshaw, T. Carmi, Susan Glassman, Ariel Hirschfeld and Ezra Spicehandler. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003, 164-165