

## Haftarat Beshalach בשלח

**Torah: Exodus 13:17–17:16**

**Haftarah: Judges 4:4–5:31**

### **To God Alone Belongs All the Glory**

#### **General Overview**

Haftarat Beshalach is perhaps one of the most unusual passages in the entire Tanakh. It is the true story of a woman who led Israel. Not only was she Israel's Judge, but she also directed her people into battle and afterward composed a victory song which became part of Scripture. Thus, we have a woman who not only ruled Israel, but also who wrote a portion of the Word of God. This is the only incidence of both occurrences found in the Scriptures.

The haftarah records how a powerful Canaanite in the north severely oppressed Israel for 20 years when D'vorah judged Israel. But, because she was a prophetess, as well as a judge, she heard from the Lord that it was time Israel was delivered from such oppression. Central to Israel's deliverance was a soldier named Barak. D'vorah called him to lead Israel's army and challenge Sisera, the Canaanite general in battle.

The story records how Barak came down from Mount Tavor and routed the Canaanites. Following this victory, the remaining Canaanites fled. Among the fleeing soldiers was the general, Sisera. He eventually sought rest and protection in the tent of Yael, the wife of a Kenite. She deceptively showed hospitality to him until the opportune time arrived for her to drive a tent peg into his head!

The defeat of the army and the death of its general made it possible for the Israelites to deal the death blow to the Canaanite king of Hazor, Jabin. Israel was then able to be relieved of this latest bout of enemy oppression and enjoyed peace under the rule of D'vorah for forty years. The haftarah concludes with the victory song written by D'vorah commemorating this deliverance wrought by the Lord for His people.

#### **Connection to the Parasha**

There is both a literary and a thematic connection between the Torah portion and this haftarah. Thematically, we have accounts of a great victory accomplished by God over Israel's enemies. In the parasha, there is God's victory over the Egyptians and in the haftarah, we see the Holy One's defeat of the Canaanites. Both resulted in great deliverances for Israel.

We find the literary connection in that both deliverances resulted in praise from the victors. After the Israelites finished crossing the sea, they broke forth into song of praise to their Deliverer. Likewise, D'vorah also composed a great victory song commemorating God's victory over the Canaanites.

## Exposition

Haftarat Beshalach falls neatly into two main sections with subdivisions. The first part is the narrative version of the victory over the Canaanites. The second section is the poetic rendition of that same event. We do not know who wrote the prose version, but D'vorah is clearly the author of the song often referred to as the "Song of D'vorah." Based on these divisions, here is our study outline:

- I. The Story (4:4–24)
  - A. The Situation (4:1–4)
  - B. The Summons (4:5–11)
  - C. The Slaughter (4:12–24)
- II. The Song (Judges 5:1-39)
  - A. Comparisons Between Victory Songs
  - B. Characteristics of D'vorah's Song
  - C. Contents of D'vorah's Song

In this excerpt from the haftarah, we will focus on the characteristics of D'vorah's song.

### II. The Song (5:1–39)

#### *B. Characteristics of D'vorah's Song*

The Song of D'vorah is, without a doubt, a great piece of ancient Hebrew poetry. Rabbi Hertz withholds no praise of this Song when he says,

This Song of D'vorah holds a high place among the Triumphal Odes in the literature of the world. It is a work of that highest art which is not studied and artificial, but spontaneous and inevitable. It 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 (Moore).<sup>1</sup>

Of course, we cannot truly appreciate what Rabbi Hertz is saying unless we read the Song in the original Hebrew. Cundall is indeed correct when he observes that although there are some textual difficulties, the Hebrew still retains a vividness, an almost staccato effect of action and a spirit of sheer exultation that indicates a participant, or at least an eyewitness.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, it is only in the Hebrew where we are able to truly appreciate the special nuances of Semitic poetry that make it a particularly beautiful mode in which to sing or even just to read. For example, this Song contains its share of Hebrew parallelism, so characteristic of ancient Semitic poetry. The most frequent types of such parallelism are the synonymous and the climatic parallelisms. In the former, the thought of the first line is repeated in the second. In the latter, part of the first line is repeated in the second, and then a fresh detail is added. Another example of Semitic poetry is the rhythm and beat, expressed in, sometimes, single words.

Another characteristic of the Song of D'vorah is its emphasis on God. God is depicted as the One who accomplished the victory on the battlefield. As

far as D'vorah is concerned, God is to be praised (5:3), blessed (5:9), and loved (5:31) because it was He whose presence won the victory (5:4-5), performed righteous deeds (5:11), and fought against the warriors (5:23).

Finally, note the frequent use of the covenant-keeping name of God, The "Lord," יהוה, in verses 3, 5, 9, 11, 13, 23, and 31. This represents a keen awareness on D'vorah's part of the covenant relationship that existed between Israel and God. He acted on Israel's behalf because of that covenant. In return, Israel was to act for His causes for the same reason.

That is why D'vorah has such a rebuke for those of Israel who did not, "come to the help of the Lord" (5:23). It was not that the Lord needed their help. It was merely because of the mutual relationship that existed between them because of the covenant established which bound them together.

Dr. Cundall aptly summarizes the significance of the revelation of God in D'vorah's song when he observes:

There are many illustrations of apostasy and moral laxity in Judges, but the evidence of a strong faith in God, a realization of His almighty power, His involvement in Israel's situation and the existence of the covenant-bond, all of which may be seen in the Song of D'vorah, do something to redress the situation.<sup>3</sup>

This is also an appropriate way to conclude this week's commentary. We have studied a passage that is full of historical information about the battle between Israel and the Canaanites during the time of the judge D'vorah. We come away from it with the distinct impression that, although Israel, during the period of the judges, was in a sorry spiritual state, nonetheless, there were also periods of time when God worked miracles of grace for them. One such incidence was this story found in Judges chapters four and five.

We always desire to know more about the details of every historical record. But we must never forget the very reasons why the ancient Israelites recorded their history — to give honour and glory to God for His works of grace and mercy among them. This haftarah was one of those moments when God intervened on behalf of those who did not deserve His intervention and, in the process; He brought His people back to Himself. To Him alone belongs all the glory.

---

<sup>1</sup>J.H. Hertz, *Pentateuch and Haftarahs*, p. 283.

<sup>2</sup>Arthur E. Cundall and Leon Morris, *Judges and Ruth* (TOTC), 90.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 93.