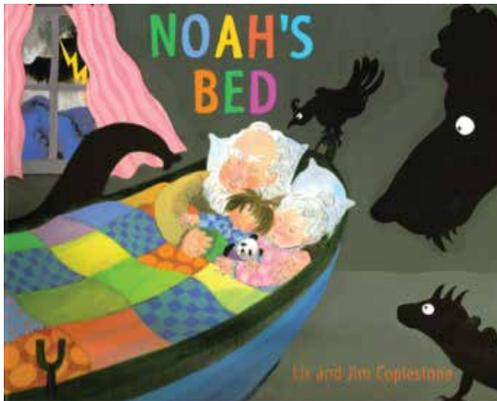




Global Day of Jewish Learning

Curriculum: Heroes and Villains, Saints and Fools



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Introduction (5 minutes)

► Share this summary of the story of Deborah (Judges 4–5).

The story of the biblical prophetess Deborah appears in Judges Chapters 4 and 5. The account of a victory by a coalition of northern Israelite tribes over a Canaanite army is recorded in narrative (4:1–24) and poetic forms (5:1–31). This victory ended the wars of conquest that were begun in the time of Joshua. In both the narrative and poetic versions, special attention is given to the prowess of two women: Deborah, a prophetess and judge in the region of Ephraim; and Yael, a non-Israelite tent dweller of the Kenite tribe. Deborah calls the Israelite commander Barak to war and helps him recruit the Israelite tribes to battle; Yael, by ruse, kills the Canaanite commander, Sisera, when he flees the battlefield in defeat.

► Introduce the session.

In today's session, we will explore the character of Deborah and her significance as a leader, through the lens of biblical, rabbinic and more contemporary Jewish texts.

Part One: Deborah—Her Character and Career (10 minutes)

We meet Deborah in Judges 4:4–5.

► Read Text #1 aloud in the full group.

Text #1: Judges 4:4–5. English translation adapted from *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh*.

שופטים ד, ד-ה

ד ודבורה אשה נביאה אישת לפידות היא שפטה את ישראל בעת ההיא:
ה והיא יושבת תחת תמר דבורה בין הרמה ובין בית אל בחר אפרים ויעלו אליה בני ישראל למשפט:

4 Deborah, wife of Lappidoth, was a prophetess; she judged 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 judgments.

► Ask:

1. How is Deborah described? What aspects of Deborah are highlighted? Do you sense any tensions in these descriptions?
2. Why do you think we only meet Deborah in the middle of her life and career? She is an Israelite woman, judge and prophetess. Is there anything unusual about this?

Part Two: Gender in Battle (18 minutes)

Deborah is the only female judge in the Bible. It is unusual for a woman to summon a man in biblical times. When Deborah summons Barak to lead the Israelite forces against the Canaanite troops led by Sisera, Barak's consent is conditional.

- Ask your participants to form groups of two or three for the *chevruta* style of learning. *Chevruta*, or partnered learning, has the added benefit of two people sharing ideas and insights as they learn together.
- Ask your *chevruta* pairs to read Texts #2 and #3 together and discuss the questions which follow.

Text #2: Judges 4:6–9

שופטים ד, ו-ט

(ו) ותשלח ותקרא לברק בן אבינעם מקדש נפתלי ותאמר אליו הלא צנה ה' א-לוקי ישראל לך ומשכת ביהר תבור ולקחת עמך עשרת אלפים איש מבני נפתלי ומבני זבלון:
(ז) ומשכתי אליך אל נחל קישון את סיסרא שר צבא יבין ואת רכבו ואת המונו ונתתיהו בידך:
(ח) ויאמר אליה ברק אם תלכי עמי והלכתי ואם לא תלכי עמי לא אלה:
(ט) ותאמר הלא עמך אפס כי לא תהנה תפארתך על הדרך אשר אתה הולך כי ביד אשה ימכר ה' את סיסרא ותקם דבורה ותלך עם ברק קדשה:

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.

➤ Ask:

1. Why does Barak refuse to lead the Israelite army unless Deborah joins him?
2. Why do you think Deborah feels the need to point out her gender?
3. Do you think Barak's reply makes him a stronger or weaker leader? Why?

Deborah: Victory in the Hands of a Woman

Consider the suggestion of the 14th century Portuguese philosopher and scholar, Don Isaac Abravanel.

Text #3: Abravanel. Commentary on Judges 4:8.

אברבנאל על שופטים ד, ח:

...ולכן אמר לדבורה שתלך עמו, כדי לחזק לבב ישראל בראותם הנביאה עמו שצותה בזה, ולשיאימינו כי דבר ה' הוא ובו היה עושה הדבר הזה כי לא מלבו...

And this is the reason that he said to Deborah that she should go with him, in order to strengthen Israel's heart when they see the prophetess who commanded it together with him, that they should thereby believe that it was the word of God that causes them to act thus and it is not something he made up.

➤ Ask:

1. According to Abravanel, what is the value in Deborah heading out to battle with Barak? Who will benefit from it?
2. Given Abravanel's explanation, do you agree or disagree with Barak's strategy?

With Barak and Deborah on the battlefield, both the martial and religious elements of the Israelites' conquering forces are represented. Abravanel suggests that together Barak and Deborah present a formidable team.

Consider the comments of Radak - Rabbi David Kimhi, a 12th century scholar from Provence, France.

➤ Read Text #4 aloud to the full group.

Text #4: Radak. Commentary on Judges 4:9.

רד"ק על שופטים ד, ט:

כי ביד אשה - י"מ יעל שנמכר סיסרא בידה ועל פי הנבואה אמרה זה ואיננו נכון לענין הפסוק שאמר אפס כי לא תהיה תפארתך אלא פירושו כך אם אלך לא תהיה תפארתך כי על ידי תהיה התשועה ויאמרו כי ביד דבורה ימכור ה' את סיסרא...

Into the hands of a woman—there are those who understand this as a reference to Yael, into whose hands Sisera was delivered and that this statement was made through prophecy. This does not, however, fit the context of the verse which states “however, it will not be *your* glory.” Rather, this is the explanation: If I go with you, it will not be your glory, for the salvation shall come through me, and they will say that in the hands of Deborah, God will deliver Sisera...

➤ Ask:

1. According to Radak, who is the woman being referred to in Deborah's statement to Barak?
2. What might be Deborah's motivation in pointing out that, if she were to go with him, the glory of victory will not be his, but hers? Does her response offer any insight into her personality and character? Would you come to a different conclusion about Deborah's character if she were referring to Yael?

Part 3: Yael—Woman of the Tent (10 minutes)

In an ironic twist, given that the prophetess Deborah is on the battlefield, Israel's ultimate military victory is achieved not on the battlefield but through the encounter between Yael and Sisera in a tent. Yael is introduced as “wife of Heber, the Kenite” (Judges 4:17). Heber was an ally of the king Sisera served. This explains why Sisera would think Heber's tent was a good place to hide.

➤ **Read Text #5 aloud.**

Text #5: Judges 4:17-22

שופטים ד, יז-כב

יז) וְסִסְרָא נָס בְּרִגְלָיו אֶל אֵהָל יַעֲלֵ אִשֶׁת חֶבֶר הַקֵּינִי כִּי שָׁלוֹם בֵּין יָבִין מֶלֶךְ חֲצוֹר וּבֵין בֵּית חֶבֶר הַקֵּינִי:
יח) וַתֵּצֵא יַעֲלֵ לְקִרְאֵת סִסְרָא וַתֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו סוּרָה אֲדֹנָי סוּרָה אֵלַי אֵל תִּירָא וַיִּסַּר אֵלָיָהּ הָאֵהָלָה וַתִּכְסְהוּ בַּשֹּׁמֵיכָה:
יט) וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיָהּ הַשְׁקִינִי נָא מְעַט מַיִם כִּי צָמָאֲתִי וַתִּפְתַּח אֵת נְאוֹד הַחֶלֶב וַתִּשְׁקֶהוּ וַתִּכְסְהוּ:
כ) וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיָהּ עֲמֵד פֶּתַח הָאֵהָל וְהָיָה אִם אִישׁ יָבוֹא וּשְׂאֵלָךְ וְאָמַר הֲיֵשׁ פֹּה אִישׁ וְאָמַרְתְּ אֵין:
כא) וַתִּקַּח יַעֲלֵ אִשֶׁת חֶבֶר אֵת יַתֵּד הָאֵהָל וַתִּשָּׂם אֵת הַמַּקְבֵּת בְּיָדָהּ וַתְּבֹא אֵלָיו בְּלֹאט וַתִּתְקַע אֵת הַיַּתֵּד בְּרִקְתּוֹ וַתִּצְנַח בְּאֶרֶץ וְהוּא נֹרֵדִם וַיַּעַף וַיָּמַת:
כב) וְהָיָה בָּרֶק רֹדֵף אֵת סִסְרָא וַתֵּצֵא יַעֲלֵ לְקִרְאָתוֹ וַתֹּאמֶר לוֹ לָךְ וְאַרְאֶנְךָ אֵת הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה מְבַקֵּשׁ וַיָּבֵא אֵלָיָהּ וְהָיָה סִסְרָא נָפֵל מֵת וְהַיַּתֵּד בְּרִקְתּוֹ:

17 Sisera, meanwhile, had fled on foot to the tent of Yael, wife of Heber the Kenite; for there was friendship between King Jabin of Hazor and the family of Heber the Kenite. **18** Yael 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 Yael 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. Thus he died. **22** Now Barak appeared in pursuit of Sisera. Yael 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.

➤ **Ask:**

1. How would you describe Yael's treatment of Sisera in verses 18–21? How does it meet and/or defy gender expectations?
2. Compare the encounter of Yael and Barak in verse 22 to that of Deborah and Barak (in Text #2). In each case, who is strong and who is weak?
3. Is the Bible making a social comment on the role of gender in ancient cultures? If so, what is the comment?

Part Four: Image of Motherhood in the Song of Deborah (12 minutes)

The Song of Deborah (Judges 5) is a poetic recounting of the story. The preface to the poem names Deborah and Barak as the singers of the song. Within the poem, two women are referred to as “mother”. One is the prophetess herself and the other is the mother of the Canaanite commander, Sisera.

➤ Read Texts #6 and #7 aloud.

Text #6: Judges 5:7

שופטים ה, ז

קָדְלוֹ כְּרִזּוֹן בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל חָדְלוֹ עַד שֶׁקָּמְתִי דְבוֹרָה שֶׁקָּמְתִי אִם בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל:

Deliverance ceased,
Ceased in Israel,
Till you arose, O Deborah,
Arose, O mother, in Israel!

Text #7: Judges 5:28-30

שופטים ה, כח-ל

כח) בְּעַד הַחֲלוֹן נִשְׁקָפָה וַתִּיבַב אִם סִיסְרָא בְּעַד הָאֲשָׁנָב מְדוּעַ בָּשֵׁשׁ רָכְבוֹ לְבוֹא מְדוּעַ אֶתְרוּ פַעְמֵי מְרַקְבוֹתָיו:
כט) חֲכָמוֹת שְׂרוּתֶיהָ תַעֲנִינָהּ אִף הִיא תִשֵּׁב אֶמְרֶיהָ לָהּ:
ל) הֲלֹא יִמְצְאוּ יַחֲלָקוּ שְׁלָל רַחֵם רַחֲמֶתִים לְרֹאשׁ גָּבֵר שְׁלָל צְבָעִים לְסִיסְרָא שְׁלָל צְבָעִים רַקְמָה צְבָע רַקְמָתִים לְצִוְאָרֵי שְׁלָל:

28 Through the window peered Sisera's mother,
Behind the lattice she whined:
“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.”

Deborah: Victory in the Hands of a Woman

► Ask:

1. Does Deborah's role fit the typical image of a biblical mother? Why or why not? In what ways is she a mother?
2. While the Bible calls Deborah a mother, it does not share with us if Deborah has any children. Do you think that detail is significant? Why or why not?
3. Why do you think the Song of Deborah concludes with a description of the mother of Sisera waiting in vain for his return?

Let's consider what Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz says:

► Ask a participant to read Text #8 aloud.

Text #8: Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. *Biblical Images.*

Another markedly feminine aspect of the song is seen in its conclusion. There is no description of the fallen, of bodies torn or mangled by war, but it is psychologically extremely cruel...This is explicitly the reckoning of one woman with another...Deborah graphically depicted the expectation of Sisera's mother and her waiting, watching, and preparing for his victorious coming, not yet knowing of his death and downfall. Irony and harsh mockery are often to be found in prophecy but usually in a straightforward and explicit way. Here we have not the bluntness of an ax but the fineness of a needle.

► Ask:

1. Based on your reading of Text #7, do you agree or disagree with this description of Deborah's leadership?
2. What interests *you* about the connection between Deborah ("Mother, in Israel") and Sisera's mother?

Conclusion (5 minutes)

Deborah's epic role in Israelite history is highlighted by the fact that her story is recorded in the Bible in poetry and prose. Like Moses in the era of the exodus, Deborah is a prophetess, judge and national leader in the era of the settlement of Canaan. The story of Deborah, both in narrative and song, pays special attention to the role of women in ancient Israel. Deborah correctly predicts that victory will be attributed to a woman—whether herself or Yael—if she joins the war effort.

The story of Deborah challenges us to appreciate that human history can be moved forward through various players both women and men, both judges and women of the tent, both in the public sphere of the battlefield and the private sphere of the tent.

► Ask:

1. What are some views in your community about appropriate leadership behavior?
2. Are these influenced by gender roles? How?

Part One: Deborah—Her Character and Career

Text #1: Judges 4:4-5. English translation adapted from *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh*.

שופטים ד, ד-ה

ד) ודבורה אשה נביאה אשת לפידות היא שפטה את ישראל בעת ההיא:
ה) והיא יושבת תחת תמר דבורה בין הרמה ובין בית אל בהר אפרים ויעלו אליה בני ישראל למשפט:

4 Deborah, wife of Lappidoth, was a prophetess; she judged 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 judgments.

Part Two: Gender in Battle

Text #2: Judges 4:6-9

שופטים ד, ו-ט

ו) ותשלח ותקרא לברק בן אבינעם מקדש נפתלי ותאמר אליו הלא צוה ה' א-לוקי ישראל לך ומשכת בהר תבור ולקחת עמה עשרת אלפים איש מבני נפתלי ומבני זבולון:
ז) ומשכתי אליך אל נחל קישון את סיסרא שר צבא יבין ואת רכבו ואת המונו ונתתיהו בידך:
ח) ויאמר אליה ברק אם תלכי עמי והלקתי ואם לא תלכי עמי לא אלך:
ט) ותאמר הלה אלך עמה אפס כי לא תהנה תפארתה על הדרך אשר אתה הולך כי ביד אשה ימכר ה' את סיסרא ותקם דבורה ותלך עם ברק קדשה:

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.

Text #3: Abravanel. Commentary on Judges 4:8.

אברבנאל על שופטים ד, ח:

...ולכן אמר לדבורה שתלך עמו, כדי לחזק לבב ישראל בראותם הנביאה עמו שצותה בזה, ולשיאימינו כי דבר ה' הוא ובו היה עושה הדבר הזה כי לא מלבו...

And this is the reason that he said to Deborah that she should go with him, in order to strengthen Israel's heart when they see the prophetess who commanded it together with him, that they should thereby believe that it was the word of God that causes them to act thus and it is not something he made up.

Text #4: Radak. Commentary on Judges 4:9.

רד"ק על שופטים ד, ט:

כי ביד אשה - י"מ יעל שנמכר סיסרא בידה ועל פי הנבואה אמרה זה ואיננו נכון לענין הפסוק שאמר אפס כי לא תהיה תפארתך אלא פירושו כך אם אלך לא תהיה תפארתך כי על ידי תהיה התשועה ויאמרו כי ביד דבורה ימכור ה' את סיסרא ...

Into the hands of a woman—there are those who understand this as a reference to Yael, into whose hands Sisera was delivered and that this statement was made through prophecy. This does not, however, fit the context of the verse which states “however, it will not be *your* glory.” Rather, this is the explanation: If I go with you, it will not be your glory, for the salvation shall come through me, and they will say that in the hands of Deborah, God will deliver Sisera...

Part 3: Yael—Woman of the Tent

Text #5: Judges 4:17–22

שופטים ד, יז-כב

(יז) וסיסרא נס ברגליו אל אהל יעל אשת חֲבֵר הקיני כי שלום בין יבין מלך חֲצוֹר ובין בית חֲבֵר הקיני:
 (יח) ותצא יעל לקראת סיסרא ותאמר אליו סוּרָה אֲדֹנָי סוּרָה אֵלַי אֵל תִּירָא ויִסַר אֵלֶיהָ הַאֲהֶלָה וַתִּכְסְהוּ בַשְּׂמִיכָה:
 (יט) ויאמר אליה השקיני נָא מַעַט מִיָּם כִּי צָמְאֹתִי וַתִּפְתַּח אֵת נְאוֹד הַקֶּלֶב וַתִּשְׁקְהוּ וַתִּכְסְהוּ:
 (כ) ויאמר אליה עֲמֵד פְּתַח הַאֲהֶל וְהָיָה אִם אִישׁ יָבֹא וְשָׂאֲלֶךָ וְאָמַר הֲיֵשׁ פֹּה אִישׁ וְאָמַרְתְּ אֵין:
 (כא) וַתִּקַּח יעל אֵשֶׁת חֲבֵר אֵת יַתֵּד הַאֲהֶל וַתִּשֶׂם אֵת הַמַּקְבָּת בַּיָּדָה וַתְּבֹא אֵלָיו בְּלֹאט וַתִּתְקַע אֵת הַיַּתֵּד בְּרַקְתּוֹ וַתִּצְנַח בְּאֶרֶץ וְהוּא נֹרֵדִם וַיִּעַף וַיָּמָת:
 (כב) וְהָיָה בְּרַק רֹדֵף אֵת סִיסְרָא וַתִּצָּא יעל לקראתו וַתֹּאמֶר לוֹ לֵךְ וְאַרְאֶנְךָ אֵת הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר אָמַרְתָּ מִבְּקֶשׁ וַיָּבֵא אֵלֶיהָ וְהָיָה סִיסְרָא נָפֵל מֵת וְהַיַּתֵּד בְּרַקְתּוֹ:

17 Sisera, meanwhile, had fled on foot to the tent of Yael, wife of Heber the Kenite; for there was friendship between King Jabin of Hazor and the family of Heber the Kenite. **18** Yael 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 Yael 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. Thus he died. **22** Now Barak appeared in pursuit of Sisera. Yael 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.

Part Four: Image of Motherhood in the Song of Deborah

Text #6: Judges 5:7

שופטים ה, ז

קָדְלוֹ כְּרִזּוֹן בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל קָדְלוֹ עַד שְׁקִמְתִי דְבוֹרָה שְׁקִמְתִי אִם בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל:

Deliverance ceased,
Ceased in Israel,
Till you arose, O Deborah,
Arose, O mother, in Israel!

Text #7: Judges 5:28–30

שופטים ה, כח-ל

כח) בָּעַד הַחֲלוֹן נִשְׁקָפָה וַתִּיבַב אִם סִסְרָא בְּעַד הָאֲשָׁנָב מְדוּעַ בִּשְׁשׁ רֶכְבּוֹ לְבוֹא מְדוּעַ אֶחָרוּ פְּעָמֵי מְרַכְבוֹתָיו:
 כט) חֲכָמוֹת שְׂרוּתֶיהָ תַעֲנִינָה אִף הִיא תִשֵּׁב אֲמָרֶיהָ לָהּ:
 ל) הֲלֹא יִמָּצְאוּ יַחְלְקוּ שְׁלָל רַחֵם רַחֵם רַחֵם לְרֹאשׁ גְּבַר שְׁלָל צְבָעִים לְסִסְרָא שְׁלָל צְבָעִים רַקְמָה צְבָע רַקְמָתִים לְצִוְאָרִי שְׁלָל:



Deborah: Victory in the Hands of a Woman

28 Through the window peered Sisera's mother,
Behind the lattice she whined:
"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."

Text #8: Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. *Biblical Images.*

Another markedly feminine aspect of the song is seen in its conclusion. There is no description of the fallen, of bodies torn or mangled by war, but it is psychologically extremely cruel...This is explicitly the reckoning of one woman with another...Deborah graphically depicted the expectation of Sisera's mother and her waiting, watching, and preparing for his victorious coming, not yet knowing of his death and downfall. Irony and harsh mockery are often to be found in prophecy but usually in a straightforward and explicit way. Here we have not the bluntness of an ax but the fineness of a needle.



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