

Bringing the Prophets to Life

Weekly insights into the Haftara by Rabbi Nachman (Neil) Winkler

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EIN B'REIRA

B'SHALACH (SHIRA) - 52 p'sukim

- Sho-f'tim 4:4-5:31

The Torah's story of Kri'at Yam Suf and Sefer Shof'tim's saga of Israel's battle against Yavin, the Canaanite King, share numerous details - which explains why Chazal chose the latter story from to be read as the haftara for Parashat B'Shalach - Shabbat Shira. We have discussed these similarities (many of which are found in Masechet P'sachim 118b), in past articles, but I take this opportunity to review some of them.

Consider:

- Both encounters took place at a body of water (Yam Suf; Nachal Kishon)
- Both clashes pitted a weakened Israel forced to face a far stronger military
- Both enemies boasted in their massive chariot forces (600; 900)
- Both fell in war when their chariot "brigades" were made ineffective, having being trapped in the marsh and mud of the sea/river.

- Both victories were celebrated by songs of praise to Hashem
- Both praises were led by prophetesses (Miriam, [who led the women]; Devora)

Despite the numerous similarities of the two events there is, I believe, an essential distinction between the two experiences. The distinction, however, cannot be appreciated without first studying the history of Israel's relationship with their neighbors - a history recorded in the earlier p'rakim and elucidated by Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch.

Rav Hirsch reviews the earlier years and points to the p'sukim in the third perek [5-7] that relate how B'nei Yisra'el had been ignoring the Torah's decree not to assimilate with the idolatrous nations around them. Yet, the text describes how Israel intermingled with the surrounding nations, intermarried with them, and, as the Torah predicted, abandoned their commitment to the One G-d. Hashem punished their unfaithful behavior by letting them fall into the hands of these neighboring nations, with the hope that such subjugation would awaken Israel to return. But it did not. Nonetheless, despite their wayward ways, Hashem responded to His nation's cries and saved Israel from each enemy. But their regret after the years of misery was but

fleeting for, despite the reprieve offered to them by G-d, they continued in their sinful ways.

But the arrival of the Northern Canaanite tribe under the harsh reign of Yavin, brought twenty years of suffering for Israel who, once again, cried out to G-d. This time, Hashem responded through His prophetess, Devora. And so, begins our haftara.

Past history makes it clear that Israel's past pleas for relief did not lead the nation to genuine repentance. But under the leadership and inspiration of Devora, there was a change. The suffering under Yavin and Sisera (his general), was far more difficult than those of the past. Pointing to Devora's words in her SHIRA (5:8), Rav Hirsch reminds us that, throughout the 20 years of Canaanite control, all of Israel's weaponry was confiscated, leaving Israel with "neither spear or shield". The situation was beyond difficult. It was, seemingly, impossible. In effect, Israel faced the decision of EIN B'REIRA, they had no choice - much as the Israelites felt at Yam Suf.

But there was a difference.

The Israelites escaping the Egyptian army had no choice but to rely on the G-d they hardly knew. They saw their "savior" - primarily - as being Moshe. The miracle at the Red Sea was wrought so that the nation would discover G-d.

At Nachal Kishon, the nation of Israel knew well who Hashem was and what He could do. But they also recognized that they had turned away from G-d far too often in the past. Their pleas and prayers then, were not meant to discover a G-d they did not know... but to return to THE ONE, the ONLY ONE, who could help them.

When we are faced with a situation that gives us no choice, EIN B'REIRA, [chas v'shalom] our tefillot must direct us to remember, repent and return to the ONLY ONE, who can - and who will - help us! *