

# Deborah, a Woman's Leadership: When Is It Desirable?

*Rabbi Nancy Myers*

The nephew of Caleb, Othniel; the left handed cunning hero, Ehud; a warrior chosen by an angel, Gideon; a bastard who sacrifices his daughter, Jephthah; and the one who fought with the strength of a demi-god, Samson—these are some of the male leaders listed in the Book of Judges in the Bible. Among the twelve judges recorded, though, is one woman called by the name Deborah. Stunningly, she is not only listed by name but there are two whole chapters that describe her acts and struggle against the Canaanites.

Judges, chapter 4, describes Deborah as the wife of Lapidoth and a prophetess who led Israel as she sat under the palm of Deborah, between Ramah and Bethel. The people would come to her with inquiries. Deborah not only dispensed advice, but she had the authority to summon Barak and order him, on behalf of God, to gather his men and battle Sisera, Jabin's commander. Surprisingly, Barak refuses to go without Deborah by his side—even as she warns him that Sisera will be disposed of by another woman. When the victory is complete, chapter five presents us with an ancient hymn of victory praising Deborah's rise to leadership as a "mother in Israel." In a time where men were heads of households, inheritors of wealth, priests overseeing sacrifice, leaders of Israelites, and soon to rule as kings, how did a woman get to lead—and even get to be recorded in our ancient scriptures?

To understand Deborah's role at this time, we need to delve into some history. According to Lawrence E. Stager, shortly after 1200 BCE in the ancient Near East, major world powers collapsed.<sup>1</sup> The

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RABBI NANCY MYERS (NY 97) has been the rabbi of Temple Beth David in Westminster for twenty years. She is the author of the historical fictional novel *Awake, Deborah!* and co-author with Rabbi Wendy Pein of the upcoming, *Awake, Deborah! A Study Guide*.

Hittite empire, primarily in modern-day Turkey, and the Mycenaean empire in Greece crumbled. Egypt lost its hegemony over the land of Israel. International trade routes broke down. There was drought and subsequent famine, causing many to go hungry. It was a dark age in a time where barely any history was recorded. People were on the move throughout the Mediterranean region, westward from the Jordan, and up from the coastal plains to the hill-country of Israel. These voyagers and soldiers were in search of food, water, security, land, and life for their children and livestock.

It was during this time of tumult and challenge that the ancient Israelites came into history. Merneptah, an Egyptian Pharaoh, mentions that Israel was “laid to waste and his seed not” in his stele of 1209 BCE.<sup>2</sup> This is the first time the people of Israel are mentioned in any extra-biblical source. While Merneptah boasts of defeating the Israelites, their seed nevertheless took root in the hill-country, west of the Jordan River, and grew like weeds. According to Elizabeth Bloch-Smith and Beth Alpert Nakhai, hundreds of small new agricultural villages and hamlets were founded in the hill-country of biblical Ephraim, Manasseh, Benjamin, and Judah at that time.<sup>3</sup>

As the Israelites struggled for survival they had to contend with differing groups of Canaanites, as well as the Sea Peoples from Greece who invaded the coast. According to Jo Ann Hackett, there was a lack of centralization in society and no permanent administration, not even a standing army. And so, we have an opening for unlikely leaders such as outcast men and even a woman to rise to power.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps it is because of this time of upheaval that the Israelites of the early Iron Age were willing to allow a woman to lead them and help them survive. Everything was in tumult. Commerce broke down, and people were relocating en masse. Things were so chaotic that there was an openness to different kinds of leaders. And for our biblical Israelites of the early Iron Age, they were fortunate to have such a respected leader such as Deborah.

As the centuries went by, the legends and stories of Deborah must have been so pervasive that they could not be omitted. Let’s just take a moment to reflect on this. The period of the judges was in the early Iron Age, approximately 1100 BCE. Following that was the period of our kings, and the division of our nation into the northern kingdom of Israel and southern kingdom of Judea. The Assyrians wiped out Israel and ten tribes of our people were lost

in 722 BCE. And then the Babylonians destroyed our Temple in 587 BCE, exiling our people. Some of our people returned to Israel under Persian rule, and then we lived under the Greeks. During all this time, the stories of Deborah weren't forgotten. They must have been passed on through word of mouth, and were so memorable that the authors or redactors of our Bible had to include her.

Once we come to the Rabbinic period, male leadership had crystallized. Only males could be rabbis and they were the ones to interpret and write down our oral tradition. From their words, we find different perspectives about Deborah. On the one hand, some laud her as a prophet along with Sarah, Miriam, Hannah, Abigail, Hulda, and Esther. The Babylonian Talmud states: "*Deborah was a woman of prophecy, the wife of Lapidoth.* What is meant by 'a wife of Lapidoth' (literally, 'a woman of flames')? Because she would make wicks for the sanctuary. *And she would sit under a palm tree.* Why under a palm tree? Rabbi Simeon ben Abishalom said, 'Because of being alone.' Another explanation is: just as a palm tree has only one heart, so Israel in that generation had only one heart, directed to their Father in heaven."<sup>5</sup> The Rabbis in this text praise Deborah and are able to acknowledge her leadership (as well as that of other Biblical women). They are comfortable with her being a prophetess and the only concern is her being alone with other men. Otherwise, her role is accepted.

On the other hand, we have texts that express discomfort regarding Deborah. The Babylonian Talmud also contains this passage: "Rav Nachman said, 'Haughtiness does not befit women.' There were two haughty women, and their names are loathsome, one being called a hornet [referring to Deborah] and the other a weasel [referring to Hulda]. Of the hornet it is written, *And she sent and called Barak*, instead of going to him. Of the weasel it is written, *Say to the man*, instead of *Say to the king*."<sup>6</sup> Here, the Rabbis don't like that Deborah is able to summon a man. They see her as boastful and unwomanly, and clearly feel threatened by her authority. Conversely, one never sees a male being criticized for being assertive. These two texts from the Talmud demonstrate the range of comfort and discomfort the Rabbis had with a strong Biblical leader such as Deborah.

In my novel *Awake, Awake Deborah!*,<sup>7</sup> I also imagine the people of the time wrestling with her role. Deborah has to overcome limitations placed on women such as learning to read and pressure

to marry, and her voice is not taken seriously—at least initially—by others. She has to deal with doubts because she is female and with societal expectations thrust on to her. What makes this a great story to tell is that the needs of the time and her own abilities enable her to rise up to become the judge that our people need at such a perilous time.

A woman in a strong position of leadership was not just a contentious issue in antiquity, but is so today as well. When we take a step back, it's hard not to appreciate that women were only allowed to vote in our country in 1920. Before that time, women didn't have a say in choosing political leaders nor its processes. And even after women were able to vote, they still lacked equal representation at the highest levels of government. In 2023, even though women make up about 50 percent of the population, they are only 25 to 28 percent of our senators and representatives.<sup>8</sup> There continue to be more male congressman and senators than females. And to this day, there has not yet been a female president of the United States.

Furthermore, women in Fortune 500 companies are equally under-represented, comprising a mere 10 percent of CEOs from 1995 to 2023.<sup>9</sup> Often women in such leadership positions are scrutinized in ways that men are not. The color of their outfits and the length of their hemlines are examined. Questions arise about how they can or will balance child rearing with work responsibilities. People readily doubt if woman can be decisive and lead a team. And when they are assertive, they are viewed as unwomanly and imbued with other negative attributes.

It is not only at the higher levels of our society that women are struggling to get ahead. Many women in the United States, depending on what state they live in, lack of reproductive rights. They aren't able to choose whether to continue a pregnancy or to take measures to protect their health and well-being, and even access to contraception is no longer a given. This can be seen as an attempt to keep women out of the public sphere of leadership, and is a throwback to male patriarchy.

Women also struggle in leadership roles within the Jewish community. It was only in 1972 that the Reform Movement started ordaining women (with the Reconstructionist Movement following suit in 1974, and the Conservative Movement in 1985). It hasn't been easy. As Pamela Nadell writes: "Congregations refused to interview them for jobs. Community boards of rabbis opposed

their participation . . . . At the same time, the new rabbis found themselves struggling to overcome the conviction that this was one job women could not possibly do. Congregants worried that women rabbis could not carry heavy *Torah* scrolls. They feared that the women would be too soft-spoken for the job, or alternatively that they would always preach on feminism. Unaccustomed to seeing women in the male ritual garb of *kippa* (skullcap) and *tallit*, congregants displayed their sense that women rabbis disturbed the traditions they knew."<sup>10</sup>

I was ordained in 1997 and as I reflect on my rabbinate, I know that I am lucky enough to have women ordained decades before me, but there have still been many challenges. In every position that I have held, I was always the first female rabbi to occupy it. I have heard many times that people weren't sure they were ready for a 'female rabbi.' And I was told behind-the-scenes that I was not hired for several solo pulpits to which I had applied because of my gender. My first High Holy Day services at my current congregation were memorable because during my first sermon, about prisoner abuse in Iraq, an older male literally disrupted my talk. As he walked down the aisle, he shouted, "You have no right to be here talking about politics on the pulpit!" His words were seen by other community members not as a concern for politics per se, but through the lens of gender: many believed that had I been a male, he would not have disrupted the service.

And so we can see that, from the years since Deborah ruled as judge, that women's roles in society have at times been accepted but also challenged. The time of the early Iron Age was a period of the decline of empires, famine, and mass relocation of people. In this chaotic time, Deborah was able to lead. Today, on the other hand, while there are major societal challenges, we are living a period of relative security. Fortunately, the collapse of civilization is no longer required to have women in positions of leadership. In the second half of the twentieth century and into the present, women have been serving as doctors, lawyers, university presidents, congresswomen, senators, and rabbis.

In every generation, though, women have needed to work harder to move forward, to be taken seriously, and to effect positive changes in our society. Deborah in antiquity was a successful leader because she was, first of all, willing to be a judge. She sat at the palm tree and counseled her people until she had to exert

a different type of leadership. Without equivocating, she declared to Barak the day to fight, and with her by his side, victory was achieved. King Jabin's army of chariots was decimated and Sisera was killed by the brave Yael. Deborah was wise, decisive, and willing to do what had to be done.

And today, what makes a women's leadership successful or desirable? I find that it is a willingness to take on responsibility, to stand against the winds of doubt, to be able to take some arrows of disparagement, and to be a good leader. And what qualities do good leaders have? They include intelligence, integrity, honesty, resiliency, determination, care, an ability to work with and for others, and willingness to act for the greater good. These traits are not necessarily bound by one's gender. Males or females can possess them, and there are examples of good leaders in the past as well in the present.

Women have always belonged in all areas of society, whether they are caring for children at home or leading our people. Not to utilize their strengths would deprive our society of good governance and care. And so I can say that a woman's leadership is desirable—in every time and in every place.

### Notes

1. Lawrence E. Stager, "Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel," in *The Oxford History of the Biblical World*, ed. Michael D. Coogan (Oxford University Press, 2001), 90.
2. Stager, "Forging an Identity," 91.
3. Elizabeth Bloch-Smith and Beth Alpert Nakhai, "A Landscape comes to Life" in *Near Eastern Archaeology* 62:2 (1999): 70.
4. JoAnn Hackett, "There Was No King in Israel," in *The Oxford History of the Biblical World*, 134.
5. *Megillah* 14a.
6. *Megillah* 14b.
7. Nancy Myers, *Awake, Awake, Deborah!* (Lulu.com, 2022).
8. See <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/fact-sheet/the-data-on-women-leaders/>.
9. See study cited in note 8 above.
10. Pamela S. Nadell, "Rabbis in the United States," in *The Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women* (Jewish Womens Archives), <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/rabbis-in-united-states>.