

HAFTORAH OF SIDRA : בשלח

***This week's Haftorah is taken from the Book of Shoftim,
Ashkenazzim read Chapters 4 and 5, Sefaradim read only Chapter 5***

1. This week's Sidra is famous for its *Shiras HaYom* ("the Song at the Sea") so much so that this Shabbos is called "*Shabbos Shiroh*." This song (which is the climax of the *Pesukei d'Zimra* of our Shacharis davvening) was composed with Divine Inspiration by Mosheh Rabbeinu immediately after HaShem saved us from the Egyptians at the Reed Sea. Mosheh led us in this song, in which he, together with the Jewish People, extols HaShem for the miracles that He wrought when He split the sea for us and saved us from the pursuing Egyptians. This week's Haftorah is likewise a song (that fact is about the only clear connexion of the Haftorah with the Sidra) and this song is similarly composed with Divine Inspiration, by Devorah the Prophetess. (Ashkenazzim include in the Haftorah the events which immediately led up to the song whereas Sefaradim read for the Haftorah only the song itself.)
2. Our Haftorah takes us back to the time not long after the conquest of Eretz Yisroel by Yehoshua bin Noon, Mosheh's successor. The Jewish people had at last taken possession of Eretz Yisroel and were now concerned with building their homesteads, planting their fields and cultivating their vineyards and olive groves. In Biblical times, there was little labour-saving machinery and life was hard. Producing sufficient food, building adequate shelter and ensuring physical safety were the priorities.
3. Everyday Jewish life was very different, too. Besides the *Chamishoh Chumshay Torah*, there was no written Torah. All Torah-learning was literally off-by-heart, *Torah She'be'al Peh*, and consisted in the main of studying the Halachic rulings that would later become the Mishnah. Although private Tefillah is of course a Mitzvah of the Torah and in fact is the proud hallmark of the Jewish People, nevertheless communal davvening as we know it today didn't exist. Other than the fact that we followed a tradition that we had way back from our Ovvos HaKedoshim and set time aside three times every day for davvening in the morning, for davvening in the middle of the day and for davvening at the end of the day, there was no real Seder HaTefillah as such, that is, there was no "Siddur." Generally, those people who had a profound knowledge of *Leshon HaKodesh* composed Tefillos according to established criteria and certain formulæ laid down by the Nation's Torah leaders and over time these Tefillos became universally accepted and became the basis of established Tefillah. In other areas of life, too, a great deal of general Jewish practice as we know it today, based as it is on more than three thousand years of Torah-life experience and the preventative measures and safeguards instituted by our Chachommim, of blessed memory, did not exist. Moreover, Jewish communal life as we know it didn't really exist either: there simply weren't any great centres of Jewish population — even Yerushalaim was not yet ours. (That particular area was inhabited at the time by the family of Yevus, descendants of the Philistines with whose king, Avimelech, Avrohom Ovinu had made a Treaty of Friendship and which we kept, even though the time limit of that Treaty had long expired. As long as they were friendly, we would not

HAFTORAH OF SIDRA : בשלח

take their land from them.) Therefore, although the people were truly devout in their adherence to HaShem and His Torah and Mitzvos, they were scattered throughout the country and lived in extended family groups or in very small communities. As such, they were vulnerable to outside influences, spiritual and physical. That is, they didn't have the safeguards that we have today to prevent incursions of ideas and practices of the idolatrous indigenous population whom they had not been able to expel and furthermore, they were under constant physical threat of attack from hostile inhabitants. It should come as no great surprise, therefore, that there were lapses in the Torah life of the Nation. This, of course, was followed by corrective punishment sent by HaShem to bring the people back into the fold.

4. In the time of our Haftorah, which takes place in the days of the "Shoftim," the Jewish Nation was governed by the righteous and learned prophetess Devorah. The word "Shoftim" which describes the Jewish leaders in the time immediately before the period of the kings, is usually translated as "Judges." But perhaps a better translation would be "Governors" as by no means were all of these Judges in fact all learned in Torah. Indeed, some of them would not have been qualified to judge at all nor to themselves render Torah decisions unless it was only to implement the ruling of a competent Torah scholar. But Devorah was indeed learned in Torah and, interestingly enough, she is the only one of the "Judges" who was endowed with prophecy.
5. At that time, Yavvin of Chatzor, one of the kings of Kenaan, was harassing the Jewish people through steady incursions into the Land of Israel. His brigands attacked travelling merchants as well as the Nation's itinerant Torah teachers and indeed anyone else who dared to travel along the country's roads until the roads were quite deserted and the whole country was in the grip of fear. In addition, Yavvin had amassed a great fighting force, including nine hundred iron chariots (the ancient world's equivalent of today's tanks) under the command of his general, Sisera, with the declared intention to do open battle with the Jewish people.
6. Seeing the dangerous situation of her people and guided by the spirit of prophecy bestowed upon her, Devorah told her husband Barak ben Avino'am, a good man but not particularly learned in Torah at this time, to gather a fighting force of ten thousand men from the Tribes of Naftoli and Zevulun. To muster the people to fight was a considerable imposition. In those days, there was no such thing as a standing army like today's professional armies. In those days, when the people were called upon to fight or to defend their borders, it meant that they had to down their tools and leave their fields and vineyards. The work of ploughing, harvesting, threshing or milling, of fencing and maintaining their fields and homesteads, was abandoned. Sometimes this could mean a year's crop was lost, resulting in hunger and deprivation for the man and his family. If the people were to answer the call of their leader, they could comply only if it was going to be a short campaign. A protracted campaign could be ruinous. (The invader, on the other hand, was able to gather an immense army of belligerent fighters, who often were in any case landless and rootless, who had nothing to lose and everything to gain from a battle, and it mattered not to them how long the campaign lasted.)
7. Barak does as Devorah says and ten thousand men gathered under his command. At the same time as Devorah and Barak mustered their men to come to the defence of the Nation, the Torah teachers exhorted the people to return to HaShem from their backsliding (the reason for their troubles at the hands of Yavvin). On condition that they all do Teshuvah,

HAFTORAH OF SIDRA : בשלח

Devorah tells Barak, HaShem will cause Sisera to come with his fighting men to attack but that He will deliver him quickly into their hands. Although he is told to muster his fighting men from the two Tribes, really it was expected that the others would also send men. In the event, they did not and later, in her famous song which thanks HaShem for the victory that He granted Barak, Devorah is sharply critical of the various Tribes. After all, Sisera and Yavvin were a threat to all of the Jewish People.

8. Sisera attacks and the unmatched battle is fought. Sisera has more than ten times the number of men than Barak. But, as prophesised by Devorah, the enemy is completely routed. HaShem enlists His world of nature in the defeat of Sisera. The usually dry *wadi* which is Barak's muster point and is attacked by Sisera, is suddenly flooded. In the resulting swamp, his iron chariots are rendered worse than useless and the Kenaanite army is destroyed. (Possibly another point of connexion with our Sidra, mirroring as it does the fate of the Egyptian cavalry.) HaShem's world of the supernatural also is utilized by HaShem in the defeat of the enemies of His People as the hosts of the heavens, too, smite Sisera and his hordes, with great boulders of ice falling like bombs upon the invaders (but miraculously not upon the Jewish defenders).
9. Sisera himself abandons his iron chariot and flees on foot, hoping to seek refuge with a tribe of people whom he thinks will protect him from the pursuing Barak. But Yael, the wife of Chever of the Kaynites, a people descended from Yisro the father-in-law of Moshéh, sees how this cruel man, even in his moment of desperation, is intent on evil and she bravely kills him. With the fearsome champion of the Kenaanites dead, this warlike people loses its appetite for war. Peace is established and the Land is quiet for the next forty years.
10. In the Song of Devorah, she portrays the sorry state of affairs that existed in Eretz Yisroel until she was moved to rise up and act. She acknowledges that the Jewish People sometimes slip and foolishly follow the ways of the pagans and idolworshippers whom they have not been able to expel from the Land, but she describes the event of the Giving of the Torah and how it was only the Jewish People who volunteered to accept the Torah and be the message-bearers of HaShem to the world. In this merit, she proclaims, HaShem does wonders for His People. About the present conflict, she chides the other Tribes for not sending men to help Barak, even when it became clear that the Kenaanites had been joined by allies who swelled their ranks. She pays tribute to the brave Yael for acting in the way she did, even putting herself in jeopardy. Conversely, she poetically portrays the mother of Sisera as waiting for her son to return from the battlefield, quite happily and confidently attributing his tardiness to his sharing out of the prisoners and rich spoils that he has taken in the battle. But she waits in vain, and sobs at her son's death. Devorah ends her song with the prayer that just as these enemies of the Jewish People met their doom, so should all the enemies of HaShem perish. But that those who give succour to the People of HaShem and are therefore considered as His friends shall be blessed with all good.