

Parashat Beshalach 5783, 2023:

*Lev Echad—One Heart*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon HaKohane, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechieel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Gittel Malka bat Moshe, Alexander Leib ben Benyamin Yosef, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The protagonist of this week's *haftorah* is the prophetess and judge Devorah: "Now Devorah was a woman prophetess, the wife of Lappidot; she judged Israel at that time." (*Sefer Shoftim* 4:4, this and all Tanach and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) Chazal teach us in *Talmud Bavli, Megillah* 14a, that Devorah was one of the seven prophetesses: "Who were the seven prophetesses? Sarah, Miriam, Devorah, Chana, Avigail, Chulda, and Esther." It appears, as well, that she had the additional distinction of being one of the Judges (*Shoftim*) of the Jewish people—if we take the phrase, "she judged Israel at that time" ("*hi shoftah et Yisrael ba' eit hahi*") at face value.

It seems that the phrase, "she judged Israel at that time," should be understood in its literal sense, as the next *pasuk* states: "And she sat under the palm tree of Devorah, between Ramah and Beth-El, in the mountain of Ephraim; and the children of Israel came up to her for judgment." (*Sefer Shoftim* 4:5) There is a fundamental halachic problem with this interpretation, however, since the fourth century *Talmud Yerushalmi, Yoma* 6:1 (32a) states: "... a woman may not judge" ("*ain haisha danah*"). Although the Rambam (1135-1204) does not explicitly include this ruling in his *Mishneh Torah*, it is found nearly verbatim in the *Arba'ah Turim* of Rabbi Yaakov ben Asher (1270-1340), and in Rabbi Yosef Karo's (1488-1575) *Shulchan Aruch, Choshen Mishpat, Hilchot*

*Dayanim* 7:4: “A woman is disqualified from judging” (“*ishah pasulah l’don*”). Given this clear-cut ruling, we must ask the simple and straightforward question: “Was Devorah really a judge?” The answer, as in many areas of *halacha* and *hashkafah*, is a resounding, “It depends on who you ask.”

Tosafot discuss Devorah’s status in a number of different tractates of the Talmud. One such source is *Talmud Bavli Gittin* 88b s.v. *v’lo lifnei hedyotot*. Initially, Tosafot opines that the phrase from *Sefer Shoftim* “she judged Israel at that time,” should not be taken literally, since it may very well mean “... perhaps she never rendered judgment at all, and [instead] she instructed [the judges] as to what the legal decisions ought to be.” (This, and the following Tosafot translation of this source, my own) According to this view, although Devorah was a legal scholar who discussed cases with members of various *batai din* (Jewish courts), she was not an actual judge. It should be noted that this approach is followed by Rabbi Yaakov ben Asher in the above-cited section of the *Arba’ah Turim*. In contrast, Tosafot’s second approach suggests that Devorah was a practicing judge, and her mandate to adjudicate cases came directly from the Almighty: “Alternately, perhaps they [the Jewish people] had accepted her judicial authority upon themselves because of [a Divine pronouncement] from the *Schechinah* (Hashem’s immanent presence).”

Devorah as a judge in practice—based upon Divine mandate—finds further support in *Talmud Bavli, Megillah* 14a, in one of the explanations of the phrase, “And she sat under the palm tree of Devorah.” “Just as this palm tree has but one heart [Rashi: “a central growing point”], so, too, did the Jewish people of that generation have but one heart (*lev echad*) directed to their Father in Heaven.” This explanation is particularly fascinating in that Devorah’s universal acceptance as a

judge for *klal Yisrael* (the Jewish people) took place precisely because the heart of the Jewish people was unanimously directed to *avinu she'b'shamayim* (our Father in Heaven).

*Chazal's* use of the term, *lev echad*, is reminiscent of Rashi's gloss in Parashat Yitro on a celebrated phrase that precedes *Kabbalat HaTorah* (the Receiving of the Torah). Therein the Torah states: "and the Jewish people encamped (*va'yichan Yisrael*) there opposite the mountain." (19:2) Rashi focuses on the word, "*va'yichan*," and notes that it is in the singular, rather than the plural, even though it refers to the entire Jewish nation. Consequently, he suggests this term connotes: "*K'ish echad b'lev echad*—like one man with one heart—but [that is, even though,] every other encampment was marred by complaints and arguments."

In sum, our ancestors were united, and stood shoulder to shoulder in anticipation of receiving the Torah in order to serve *avinu she'b'shamayim*, just as they would in the time of *Devorah HaNaviah*. The message is clear: When we have *achdut* (unity) and a desire to draw closer to the Holy One blessed be He, then there is nothing that we cannot accomplish as a people.

Shabbat Shalom

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\*\*\* I have posted 164 of Rabbi Soloveitchik's English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link: [The Rav](#)