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New York School

Report on the Rabbinic Dissertation Submitted

by

Shirley Idelson

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Ordination

**Having Read the Book of Myths: Yael, Delilah and Feminist Poetics**

Ms. Idelson's thesis started out as an exploration of the figure of Yael in Biblical, Rabbinic and Modern Hebrew Literature. The initial target texts were rabbinic midrashim and the Haskalah epic poem "Yael ve-Siserah" by Michah Yosef Lebensohn. Shirley's apt translations and comments yielded some interesting enough data. The direction of the thesis shifted, however, with the incorporation of the feminist literary analyses of Mieke Bal, Nechama Ashkenazy and others. This stimulating new direction led Ms. Idelson to study not only the analogous Apocryphal story of Judith, but also the rather rich subject of Delilah. In moving to Delilah she also translated a goodly number of modern Hebrew works on Delilah or on Samson and Delilah. While all of her translations are excellent, Shirley was not always able to deal with the disparate literary themes branching out from all of her translations. The reason for this was that she became most interested in the trenchant remarks and the cultural revolution of the several literary critics whose works she began to assimilate with a passion. We thus deemed it wise to allow her to distill and to develop her thesis in the provocative directions she found most

intriguing. Her excellent knowledge of Hebrew, however, stood Shirley in good stead as she made astute comments of her own which more than occasionally helped her to pull together her midrashic translations and the broader theories.

For example, Shirley discusses the male bias in the stories of both Yael and Delilah which presents women only in terms of their sexuality and seductiveness -- essentially, only from the point of view of their sole access and importance to the male. In so doing Ms. Idelson adduced the interesting rabbinic etymology for the name Delilah. They connected to the verb dildelah, suggesting that Delilah wore out Samson sexually or even that she castrated him.

I was intrigued by Ms. Idelson's copious data dealing with the "censored out" story of Yael's alleged seduction of Siserah. The rabbinic material abundantly suggested this, and Shirley adduced abundant and far-reaching hypotheses from her secondary sources. Some of this material I had to take with more than a grain of salt, and I can not bring myself to summarize it all for this precis. The interested reader, however, can find much to mull over in Idelson's analysis.

I appreciated Shirley's endeavor to explore positive models of women linked to their sexuality, and I believe that, at the end, Ms. Idelson does not quite share the militant bias of her fascinating "feminist" authorities. The agenda of much of the secondary material Shirley used, it seems to me, is to expose or excoriate, and my impression is that she intends primarily to explore. This difference in tone creates a certain distance or disjunction between Idelson and her sources which I, for one,

respect, but which could leave the reader unsure of her purpose. Shirley is open and not doctrinaire. She is searching and assimilating material with her formidable linguistic and intellectual gifts, but she does not present a clearly focussed and original point of view of her own. This open and searching quality is both the thesis's (and Shirley's) weakness and its strength.

Respectfully submitted,

Dr. Stanley Nash



HAVING READ THE BOOK OF MYTHS:  
Yael, Delilah and Feminist Poetics

Shirley M. Idelson

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of  
Requirements for Ordination

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Love Letter<sup>1</sup>

Dear Samson,  
I put your hair  
in the jar  
by the pear tree  
near the well.  
I been thinkin'  
over what I done  
and I still don't think  
God gave you  
all that strength  
for you to kill  
my people.

Love--Delilah

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<sup>1</sup>The title of this thesis is excerpted from the first line of Adrienne Rich's "Diving into the Wreck," in Diving Into the Wreck, p.22. The poem above is included in Wendy Mulford, ed., Love Poems by Women, p.3. It is by Carole C. Gregory.

INTRODUCTION

"For feminist critics...not only is the personal the political; the aesthetic is the political, the literary is the political, the rhetorical is the political...for every text can be seen as in some sense a political gesture and more specifically as a gesture determined by a complex of assumptions about male-female relations, assumptions we might call sexual poetics."

"What Do Feminist Critics Want?"

Sandra Gilbert, 1985<sup>2</sup>

The myths of Yael and Delilah share a common "sexual poetic" which can be discerned through an analysis of the literature which has preserved their tales. Such a study requires a textual examination which is not limited to those passages found in the Book of Judges, where the canonized versions of these myths are recorded; it must also include a look at those pieces of subsequently-written literature which, inspired by the biblical tales, have served to both reveal and shape cultural mythological interpretation.

This work marks an attempt to approach the myths of Yael and Delilah from a point of view which is both feminist and critical. Presented from this perspective is an analysis of the episodes recorded in the fourth and the sixteenth chapters of the Book of Judges, much of the rabbinic midrashic material which relates to Yael and Delilah, and several pieces of modern Hebrew poetry written about these women. It is through this whole

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<sup>2</sup>Sandra M. Gilbert, "What Do Feminist Critics Want? A Postcard from the Volcano" in The New Feminist Criticism, ed. by Elaine Showalter, p.31.

body of literature that the myths have been preserved and promulgated.

### The Undertaking

To tell a myth is to proclaim what happened ab origine. Once told, that is, revealed, the myth becomes apodictic truth; it establishes a truth that is absolute...a sacred reality...The supreme function of the myth is to 'fix' the paradigmatic models for all rites and all significant human activities--eating, sexuality, work, education, and so on.

Mircea Eliade<sup>3</sup>

A literary text is not only speech quite literally embodied, but also power mysteriously made manifest, made flesh.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar<sup>4</sup>

The observations of Eliade, and Gilbert and Gubar point to the great difficulty of undertaking a critical approach to ancient cultural myths; they also reveal the extreme importance of such an endeavor. Having attained the status of sacred reality, the myth may seem to exist in a literary realm which is beyond the scope of contemporary critique; yet, the power held by the myth over human understanding and activity mandates an approach which questions its ancient assumptions and challenges its ongoing influence over human behavior. The feminist approach is especially compelling today, for it brings with it an awareness of misogynist notions which have long been perpetuated in culture through the

<sup>3</sup>Mircea Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane, p.95.

<sup>4</sup>Gilbert and Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic, p.6.

genre of myth. This awareness exists in large part thanks to the work of such ground-breaking authors as Simone De Beauvoir (The Second Sex) and Kate Millett (Sexual Politics).

In her essay "What Do Feminist Critics Want?" Sandra Gilbert explains the goals of feminist criticism: "At its most ambitious it wants to decode and demystify all the disguised questions and answers that have always shadowed the connections between textuality and sexuality, genre and gender, psychosexual identity and cultural authority."<sup>5</sup> Gilbert's agenda is expansive, and in relation to it, this work marks only a modest effort; it examines specifically the sexual components of two biblical stories which relate (implicitly in the first case, explicitly in the second) tales of seduction. The intent here is not to redeem the protagonists Yael and Delilah, each of whom is "guilty" of making vulnerable and then murdering an enemy warrior; to embrace these characters is to accept the patriarchal assumptions of their authors. The purpose is, rather, to expose those assumptions in all their misogyny. It is hoped that by revealing the effect these myths have on shaping our culture's negative view of women, that effect will be muted.

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<sup>5</sup>Gilbert, Op.Cit., p.36.



### The Women

The stories of Yael and Delilah share a great deal in common; they also differ in one highly significant aspect. Both Yael and Delilah are defined in terms of their relationship with a male enemy soldier. In each case, the warrior with whom the female protagonist becomes associated possesses great strength. Sisera has ravaged terrible destruction against the Israelites, allies of Yael; Samson has reeked havoc in the territory of Delilah's people, the Philistines. In both episodes, the action takes place in a tent, the private domain of the women involved. In the Judges 4 passage which describes Yael welcoming Sisera into her home, enough sexual imagery is presented in the text for the reader (both classical and modern) to assume that a seduction scene takes place before the murder; in the Judges 16 passage, as well, it is made abundantly clear that it is through Delilah's seductive powers that she is able to convince Samson to reveal the secret of his strength. Both Yael and Delilah are ultimately successful in bringing a powerful archenemy to demise.

The primary difference in the two stories has nothing to do with the actions of the women; their deeds are, for the most part, parallel. The contrast lies, rather, in their identity. Yael is a Kenite, and she acts on behalf of the Israelites. Delilah, on the other

hand, is a Philistine who smites an Israelite judge. On one level it is not surprising, then, that Yael is praised in much of Jewish literature, while Delilah is disdained. Nationalist concerns are overriding. Nevertheless, it is disturbing from a modern universalist perspective that ethical propriety seems to be determined not by an individual's actions, but solely on the basis of the side for whom the individual is fighting. While this point is worth exploring, it is not a central issue in this study. The primary concern here is with the traits that are shared mutually by Yael and Delilah. Each uses her sexuality in a seductive manner; each successfully strives to acquire the trust of a man of awesome strength; each betrays the man who offers his trust; finally, each--in the privacy of her own home--takes advantage of the vulnerability of sleep in order to bring to a bloody defeat the man dozing in her midst. Both Yael and Delilah are deceitful and violent. Their characters, despite their looks, are ugly and fearful. Indeed, it would not be hyperbolic to state that the characters of these women, as they are portrayed in the Book of Judges, resemble monsters.

#### Monstrous Women

Gilbert and Gubar discuss extensively the "eternal types" of women portrayed in male-authored literature. Specifically, they address the extreme images of woman

as angel or monster, "those masks male artists have fastened over her human face both to lessen their dread of her 'inconstancy' and...to possess her more thoroughly."<sup>6</sup>

The monster-woman, threatening to replace her angelic sister, embodies intransigent female autonomy and thus represents...the author's power to allay "his" anxieties by calling their source bad names (witch, bitch, fiend, monster)...For every glowing portrait of submissive women enshrined in domesticity, there exists an equally important negative image that embodies the sacrilegious fiendishness of what William Blake called the "Female Will..."

Assertiveness, aggressiveness--all characteristics of a male life of "significant action"--are "monstrous" in women precisely because "unfeminine"...The monster may not only be concealed behind the angel, she may actually turn out to reside within (or in the lower half of) the angel...Emblems of filthy materiality, committed only to their own private ends, these women are accidents of nature, deformities meant to repel, but in their very freakishness they possess unhealthy energies, powerful and dangerous arts...

They incarnate male dread of women and, specifically, male scorn of female creativity...Because these women can create false appearances to hide their vile natures, they are dangerous...Authors devised elaborate anti-romances to show that the female "angel" was really a female "fiend," the ladylike paragon really an unladylike monster...Thus all women were inexorably and inescapably monstrous, in the flesh as well as in the spirit.<sup>7</sup>

It is not difficult to identify aspects of the personalities of both Yael and Delilah in this description of the "monster-woman." Both are women who

<sup>6</sup>Gilbert and Gubar, Op.Cit., p.17.

<sup>7</sup>Gilbert and Gubar, Op.Cit., pp.28-31.

act autonomously and assertively in a Bible which portrays very few female characters as independent. The actions of both Yael and Delilah are "monstrous" and "unfeminine" in that they both commit murder (Yael in actuality, and Delilah through her betrayal). Although Yael does not display a "filthy materiality," Delilah certainly does as she accepts the bribe of the Philistine men, and agrees to deceive her lover Samson. Certainly both female characters create false angelic appearances in order to hide their "vile" intentions; finally, the myth of Yael and Sisera, as well that of Delilah and Samson can only be understood as anti-romantic, in that love and/or trust on the part of the male ultimately leads to his self-destruction. Indeed, Simone de Beauvoir identified the angel/monster component of the Delilah story when she wrote in The Second Sex in the chapter on myths:

"It is always difficult to describe a myth; it cannot be grasped or encompassed; it haunts the human consciousness without ever appearing before it in fixed form. The myth is so various, so contradictory, that at first its unity is not discerned: Delilah and Judith, Aspasia and Lucretia, Pandora and Athena--woman is at once Eve and the Virgin Mary. She is an idol, a servant, the source of life, a power of darkness; she is the elemental silence of truth, she is artifice, gossip, and falsehood; she is healing presence and sorceress; she is man's prey, his downfall, she is everything that he is not and that he longs for, his negation and his raison d'être."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex, p.133.

The myths discussed here serve as warnings to both men and women:

Be Thou Warned, Man

In the Middle Ages, according to historian Elizabeth Gould Davis, Delilah's betrayal of Samson was presented to husbands as a warning not to trust or confide in their wives.\* It is not difficult to imagine that both the Delilah and Samson myth, as well as the Yael and Sisera myth, long served to caution men regarding the dangers of women--especially of those women who are sexually seductive, but in the final analysis, of all women. In the Delilah tale, man is warned not to trust the sweet words of a woman in love, for in the end she will betray his deepest secrets and destroy his strength. In the Yael tale, man is cautioned against relying upon woman in times of duress, for she is likely to deceive him into a false sense of security, and then stab him to death while his back is turned. It is no coincidence that in both stories, the action takes place in a woman's tent; the message strongly sent is that the male who penetrates into the private domain of women finds himself in dangerous territory and had better be on guard at all times. The tent, like Pandora's box, is a symbol of female sexuality; like that mythic gift, and like, it is

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\*Elizabeth Gould Davis, The First Sex, p.159.

assumed, the uterus--the tent contains evil and chaos and death.

Not surprisingly, the male fear of female sexuality which lies at the root of this is expressed not only in hateful attitudes toward women, but also in disdainful views of romantic love. Millett writes: "Most patriarchies go to great length to exclude love as a basis of mate selection...Patriarchy has God on its side. One of its most effective agents of control is the powerfully expeditious character of its doctrines as to the nature and origin of the female and the attribution to Her alone of the dangers and evils it imputes to sexuality...Patriarchal religion and ethics tend to lump the female and sex together as if the whole burden of the onus and stigma it attaches to sex were the fault of the female alone. Thereby sex, which is known to be unclean, sinful, and debilitating, pertains to the female, and the male identity is preserved as a human, rather than sexual one."<sup>10</sup> While these observations of Millett's refer to the world of Ancient Greece, they are applicable to the biblical statements about love and sexuality which are found in the tales recounted in Judges 4 and 16. The message which is abundantly clear in each of these chapters is that falling into a state of romantic love is equivalent for

<sup>10</sup>Millett, Sexual Politics, pp.51-52.

the male to self-inflicted martyrdom. Men, the text warns, do not let your heterosexual passions sweep you to your death. Beware of the second sex.

#### Be Thou Warned, Woman

The myths serve also as a warning to women. They demonstrate the dangers of autonomy and self-assertion. Just as romantic love is portrayed as ultimately self-destructive for the male, so too is independent action self-destructive for the woman. Although neither Yael nor Delilah die in these myths, through their actions their own characters are destroyed. Acting independently and forthrightly turns them into lying, deceitful murderers; indeed, the message implicit but powerful is that to assert oneself is, for the female, to become a monster. No woman wants to be a monster. Thus, no woman should rebel against her lot, act with strength and courage, or strive to change the course of history. That Yael is praised for her actions does not challenge this thesis, for the fact remains that in the patriarchal text the only way for her to act at all is to murder. She leaves little hope to the Israelite woman who is herself seeking female role models. Murder is not the path to freedom. In the following passage, Gilbert and Gubar refer to the midrashic character Lilith who, like the women under study here, is a murderer; in this case, their observations are equally



applicable to both Yael and Delilah: "What her history suggests is that in patriarchal culture, female speech and female 'presumption'--that is, angry revolt against male domination--are inextricably linked and inevitably demonic...[She] represents the price women have been told they must pay for attempting to define themselves. And it is a terrible price..."<sup>11</sup>

#### Midrash and Poetry

Included in the following chapters are selections of midrash and poetry written about Yael and Delilah. The reader will note in much of the midrash the themes which are stated above and which lie beneath the surface of the myths as they are recounted in the biblical text. The rabbis who composed the midrashic material did not try to hide their views of women; for example, regarding Yael it is said that she was a woman of valor because she acted as a dutiful wife; and, of Delilah much is written about her evil approach to sexual relations with Samson. What is implicit in the Judges material is made explicit by the rabbis.

The poetry presented here does not, for the most part, challenge the roles attributed to Yael and Delilah in the biblical material. Instead, the verse tends to emphasize certain aspects that are already present in the myths. For example, one poem emphasizes Yael's

<sup>11</sup>Gilbert and Gubar, Op.Cit., p.36.



dilemma over whether or not to express her loyalty to the Israelite people by committing the sin of murdering Sisera; another stresses Samson's anger after he has revealed his secret and been betrayed by Delilah. While each poem presented here sheds new light on some aspect of the Yael and Delilah myths, none offers a revision of the tales to make them cohere with a feminist reading of the texts. They should not be expected to do so, as they do not emerge from a feminist milieu.

Such revision is necessary, however, as feminist criticism encourages a shattering of the "eternal types" which have for too long locked women into roles of passivity and submissiveness. The conclusion of this thesis will address the process of revision, with an eye toward creating modern midrash and poetry which actively subverts the misogynist underpinnings upon which stand the powerful myths of Yael and Delilah.

CHAPTER ONE: Yael AND SISERA

## INTRODUCTION

It may seem curious that this inter-disciplinary study of the portrayal of biblical women characters forced to use their sexual strength as a means to accomplishing their ends begins with an examination of the character of Yael. Indeed, not a single sexual act is described explicitly in either of the two accounts found in the biblical narrative portraying this Kenite woman's murder of Sisera, the Canaanite general. Yet biblical scholarship reveals that in the Yael passages recorded in the fourth and fifth chapters of the Book of Judges, the language is highly charged with erotic suggestion. It makes manifest a theme of sexual tension which lies just below the surface of the text. This has lead feminist literary critics such as Nehama Aschkenasy and Mieke Bal to ponder the possibility that explicitly sexual material was expunged, censored by the biblical redactor.

If this was in fact the case, and some ancient editor chose to erase the element of seduction from the scene which took place in Yael's tent in an effort to clean up the story, then the rabbinic authors of the Tannaitic and Amoraic periods willingly flew in the face of such an undertaking by addressing directly Yael's crafty use of sexual temptation in order to execute her

strategy of destroying the enemy military leader. They did this through midrash and Talmudic aggadah. Later rabbinic commentators such as Radaq and Rashi maintained this viewpoint in their elucidation of the Judges texts. Whether or not this rabbinic viewpoint was based on an intuitive knowledge that at some early date censorship was applied to the biblical narrative is debatable; what is clear is that, more often than not, both midrash and later rabbinic commentary portray Yael as a woman who acted as temptress, using her sexual (and only?) power in order to destroy Sisera. The rabbis warn that it is not the way of women to be heroic or militaristic. Yet Yael, portrayed as seductive killer, is nevertheless given the highest of accolades for her craftily-planned and brutally executed murder of the enemy general. Having committed two transgressions punishable by death--adultery and homicide--she is praised for the deliverance of Israel; she is declared a judge of her days; and, she is held as paradigmatic of the worthiest of women, those who perform the will of their husbands.

Unfortunately, there has not been a great deal of modern fiction written on Yael and Sisera. Among that which does exist is the epic poem "Yael and Sisera," composed by the nineteenth century Hebrew poet Micah Joseph Lebensohn, a gifted poet of the Haskalah movement of Vilna who unfortunately died at a young age. In

"Yael and Sisera," Lebensohn does not address the seduction theme discussed so extensively by the rabbis. To the contrary, Lebensohn omits all suggestive imagery and instead, he chooses to heighten the moral conflict faced by Yael as her compassion and moral sensibilities clash with her sense of patriotic duty. Lebensohn does set up an interesting contrast between two polar types of women, Deborah and Yael; in this juxtaposition of characters, the former acts as prominent and aggressive warrior, and the latter as tent-dwelling and deceptively gentle homebody. Each is, ultimately, a killer; Deborah slays enemy soldiers with glee, while Yael struggles desperately with the ethics of murder as she lifts her hand to strike a fatal blow to Sisera's head. As Deborah strives to reassure Yael that her action was in accord with God's will, one is left wondering how, in Lebensohn's view, the incident has impacted upon Yael's sense of moral responsibility.

The short story "Yael's Deed," by Yaakov Cohen, follows in the tradition of rabbinic midrash by allowing for the possibility that Yael did seduce Sisera in order to kill him. In contrast to Lebensohn, Cohen does not delve into the moral complexities of Yael's situation. Rather, in "Yael's Deed," the motivating force behind the murder is nationalism, and it seems that for Cohen, himself a revisionist Zionist, acting out of patriotic

loyalty is ample justification for Yael's crime.

Investigation reveals that there is a lack of contemporary fiction written about Yael. Among that which has been produced in the last two decades is a short play by Amy Blank entitled "The Wife of Heber the Kenite," and a modern midrash by Israeli feminist Naomi Graetz. Blank presents an imaginary dialogue between Yael and Deborah, in which Yael reveals not that she seduced Sisera, but the reverse: She intensely desired the Canaanite general, and killed him in a fit of rage when he did not return her lustful gaze. This dramatic work is interesting in its approach, for unlike any of the above-mentioned pieces of literature, it presents Yael's sexuality not as a source of power but of vulnerability. Not surprisingly, this play written from a woman's perspective does not present a duplication of the standard portrayal of Yael as crafty and seductive killer.

Graetz' midrash is unique too in its portrayal of Yael. Unlike Blank, Cohen, Lebensohn and virtually all of the rabbinic writers of midrash, Graetz does not praise Yael's valor. To the contrary, she presents Deborah as the true voice of feminist ideals (pacifism!), while portraying Yael as the woman who acts in accord with the worst of those values which promote and maintain patriarchy. Graetz through her midrash

presents a view which stands in direct opposition to that of Lebensohn's and Cohen's, for she states clearly that the values of compassion and preservation of human life far outweigh those of bravado and killing, even when one is prompted to murder by a deep sense of patriotic duty.

## BIBLICAL MATERIAL

The following discussion of the portrayal of Yael in rabbinic literature and modern fiction is based only upon those passages in the biblical text which include direct references to the character of Yael. These are found in the fourth and fifth chapters of the Book of Judges. The passages are brief, describing the incident in which Yael commits a murder for the sake of Israelite military victory. In the murder scene, there is no explicit portrayal of seduction. However, the text is to be read here with the perspective of Nehama Aschkenasy, author of Eve's Journey: Feminine Images in Hebraic Literary Tradition. "A new reading of the story that focuses on the woman's strategy inevitably points to a submerged sexual tension that pervades the tale."<sup>1</sup> A number of critics suggest that this tension is submerged as a result of biblical redaction which censored out of both passages explicitly sexual material. For example, Yair Zakovitch states, "Both descriptions represent two different stages of the attempt to conceal this primitive [original] tradition, according to which Sisera finds his death in sleep, that

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<sup>1</sup>Nehama Aschkenasy, Eve's Journey: Feminine Images in Hebraic Literary Tradition, p.170.



is, after the sexual act with Jael, in her bed."<sup>2</sup>

The fourth chapter presents narrative which describes Yael's murder of Sisera. The incident occurs after Sisera's entire army is destroyed in battle against Deborah and Barak. Only Sisera remains alive, as an escaped refugee, still fleeing the Israelite army. He sees in the distance the tent of Yael, wife of Heber the Kenite. In the following scene, since the Kenites are ostensibly his allies, Sisera seeks safety in the tent of Yael; there he is welcomed and graciously served, unbeknownst to him, as a victim about to meet his death. Does Yael tempt him with her sexual strength in order to gain power over him so she can kill him? This is not stated in the text; however, feminist biblical scholarship suggests that some of the imagery presented in the following passage is indisputably sexual. The narrative follows:

Sisera, meanwhile, had fled on foot to the tent of Jael, wife of Heber the Kenite; for there was friendship between King Jabin of Hazor and the family of Heber the Kenite. Jael 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. 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. He said to her, "Stand at the entrance of the tent. If anybody comes and asks you if there is anybody

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<sup>2</sup>Yair Zakovitch, "Sisseras Tod" in Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 93, 3, p.365, quoted and translated in Murder and Difference by Mieke Bal, p.101.

here, say 'No.'" Then Jael 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.

Now Barak appeared in pursuit of Sisera. Jael 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.

Judges 4:17-22<sup>a</sup>

In this narrative, Yael welcomes an exhausted Sisera into her tent, assuring him that her domain is safe. Sisera enters, and knowing that she is a Kenite, he assumes that she is trustworthy. He requests water to drink; Yael offers him milk, a more nutritious and soothing alternative. She thereby allays his fear, and puts him to sleep. Thus far, all seems quite innocuous. Yet, as Aschkenasy points out, "This short exchange between the man and the woman is rife with sexual tension once we realize that, as Wolfgang Lederer tells us, in the mythological apperception of early man, woman, water, and milk are tied together, and that, in Egyptian hieroglyphics, the water jar is a symbol of femininity. Thus when Sisera asks Jael for water, he implies that he wants more than just a drink; and when Jael responds by giving him milk, she more than hints at her readiness to satisfy him with the totality of her

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<sup>a</sup>Jewish Publication Society, Tanakh-The Holy Scriptures, p.383. Unless otherwise noted, all biblical translation in this text is cited from the JPS Bible.

femininity."<sup>4</sup>

Aschkenasy sees the language of address in the dialogue between Yael and Sisera as reflective of underlying sexual tension between the two. Yael initially addresses Sisera as "my lord," and he politely asks for water using the word na. However, after he has been served milk and covered with a blanket, Sisera abandons language of respect for words which are more familiar and demanding: "Stand in the door of the tent." According to Aschkenasy, "The sexual act, implied in the symbols of water, milk, and blanket, is interpreted by the man as a sign of his domination over the woman, and results in a new relationship, one in which the woman is seen as slave and the man as master. Ironically, the man is wrong; the sexual intimacy only gives him the illusion of power, while, in reality, it places him at the mercy of the woman."<sup>5</sup>

Mieke Bal, in her discussion of the story of Yael and Sisera Murder and Difference, echoes the argument that certain images in the narrative add support for the assumption that a sexual theme is present in the text; the images she discusses are Yael offering Sisera milk, and her covering him with a blanket. Regarding the milk, Bal offers two possible arguments for such a

<sup>4</sup>Aschkenasy, Op.Cit., p.171.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p.171.

thematic association. The first is that the milk was used to narcotize Sisera, and that Yael sought to make him drunk before having the sexual intercourse which ultimately would make Sisera a vulnerable, easy victim. The second argument is that the milk came from Yael's own breast. Regarding Yael's covering Sisera with a blanket, Bal claims that because "in the parallel story of Judith, the bed is carefully prepared, and the same verb appears," no "innocent" conclusion may be drawn.<sup>6</sup>

The fifth chapter of the Book of Judges consists of the Song of Deborah. In poetic verse, Deborah sings praises for Yael whom she portrays as a heroine of the people. The language here is significantly different from that of Chapter Four; one difference, scholars suggest, is that the imagery in Chapter Five is almost explicitly sexual. Thus this passage, even more than the preceding one, illustrates the possibility that the biblical author intended for the reader to assume that Sisera was, in fact, seduced in Yael's tent:

"Curse Meroz!" said the angel of the Lord.  
 "Bitterly curse its inhabitants,  
 Because they came not to the aid of the Lord,  
 To the aid of the Lord among the warriors."

Most blessed of women be Yael,  
 Wife of Heber the Kenite,  
 Most blessed of women in tents.  
 He asked for water, she offered milk;  
 In a princely bowl she brought him curds.  
 Her [left] hand reached for the tent pin,

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<sup>6</sup>Mieke Bal, Murder and Difference, pp.105-106.

Her right for the workmen's hammer.  
 She struck Sisera, crushed his head,  
 Smashed and pierced his temple.  
 At her feet he sank, lay outstretched,  
 At her feet he sank, lay still;  
 Where he sank, there he lay--destroyed.

Judges 5:24-27

The incident described here is a second version of that which is narrated in Chapter Four. Here the prophet Deborah exalts Yael by placing her brutal murder of Sisera into the context of divine justice. According to Deborah, a courageous Yael rejected her Kenite tribe's neutrality, and independently chose to act in accord with her loyalty to the Israelites with the end result of having performed God's will.

Just as the earlier passage is rife with sexual tension, so too is this one. According to Aschkenasy, "Deborah's ode introduces an erotic strain in verse 27, which is usually translated as 'at her feet, he fell he lay down:/ at her feet he fell'; the Hebrew, however, is more daring, since it reads 'between her feet,' or, 'between her legs.' If we remember that the noun regel, 'leg,' carries sexual connotations in Hebrew, it is no wonder that an ancient midrash concluded that Sisera had intercourse with Jael."<sup>7</sup>

Bal also comments on the sexual connotations of this verse, making an argument similar to the one stated

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<sup>7</sup>Aschkenasy, Op.Cit., p.170.

above.<sup>2</sup> In addition, Bal sees the three verbs kara', nafal, and shakhav as part of a progression which parallels male sexual response. "The three verbs, 'collapsed,' 'fell,' 'lay down,' form a chronological series, representing the successive phases of orgasm: the first signifies the orgasm itself, while the moment immediately afterwards is expressed by 'to fall'; the third verb, 'to lie down,' would then express the post-orgasmic rest here equivalent to death. Those who translate synonymically, on the other hand, represent three times a slackening, thus censoring, along with the lyric procedure, the dynamic perspective, the detailed description of the event--a narrative mechanism--and its possible sexual connotations."<sup>3</sup>

Both Bal and Aschkenasy reach the conclusion that a seduction scene between Yael and Sisera once existed, which at some point was censored from the text by a biblical redactor. According to Bal, the two Judges passages vary significantly, and thus each must have been censored differently: "In the narrative, the solicitous woman nourishes the man with her milk before covering him a second time. There is nothing of this in the song, which, on the contrary, offers a violent description, where agony, orgasm, and birth are coexten-

<sup>2</sup>Mieke Bal, Op.Cit., pp.105-106.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p.103.



sive. If both texts imply sexual relations between the two characters even while they censor them, the form this description adopts and the possible censorship implied is very different in each case."<sup>10</sup>

Aschkenasy puts it differently: "Jael's sexual tactic of luring the man is expunged from the story's outer layer, but is still woven into the symbolic fabric of this small drama. The result is a cleaned up version that is nevertheless vitalized by a darker side which ties Jael to all those women who throughout history were forced to use their sexuality to gain their ends. Significantly, the woman's sexual strength is always seen as a means by which the treacherous woman overpowers the trusting man. The sexual act is never graphically depicted in the ancient document, but the act of killing is presented in gory detail, and functions as an 'objective correlative,' to use T.S.Eliot's phrase, of the sexual encounter."<sup>11</sup>

Ultimately, the issue of whether or not the text was at any point censored is not central to this study; what is important is the understanding that even if neither the narrative of Chapter Four nor the poetic verse of Chapter Five explicitly describe a seduction scene taking place in Yael's tent, nevertheless, the

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p.107.

<sup>11</sup>Aschkenasy, Op.Cit., p.171.

reader understands it to have occurred. Thus a "darker side" of Yael is revealed, and she is placed into a category of women who make use of their sexual power by acting as temptresses in order to overpower the men these women seek to destroy.



## MIDRASH, TALMUDIC AGGADAH, AND RABBINIC COMMENTARY

Midrash, Talmudic aggadah, and rabbinic commentary almost uniformly praise Yael's valor in murdering Sisera. Clearly, the overriding principle guiding this praise is the supreme importance of acting out of loyalty to Israel. Yael is held high as a paradigm of the devoted Jewish woman willing to sacrifice a sacred element of her personal ethic for the good of the nation. Yet the reader will see that while the rabbinic material overtly acclaims Yael's boldness, simultaneously much of it also transmits a strong message which is none too flattering about women who act with such independence. The message which these texts state clearly is that women must not be allowed to act in the strong and forthright manner demonstrated by Yael.

Much but not all of the rabbinic material addresses directly the sexual component of the story. Of this, the amount of material which suggests that Yael seduced Sisera into having intercourse with her outweighs that which offers a denial of this claim. There is one midrash which refutes altogether the sexual component that is stated repeatedly in a number of other sources. Interestingly, all talmudic aggadot mentioning Yael portray her as erotic temptress. The rabbinic commentators of the medieval period and later bring forth much

of this Tannaitic and Amoraic material as they add their own perspective.

# 1. Midrash

## A. Numbers Rabbah X.2

"If anyone, man or woman, explicitly utters a nazirite's vow, to set himself apart for the Lord, he shall abstain from wine and any other intoxicant..."  
(Numbers 6:2)

"Or as he that lieth upon the top of a mast" (Proverbs 23:34); that alludes to Sisera. What is written of him? "And twenty years he mightily oppressed the children of Israel" (Judges 4:3). What was his end? Because he abused and reviled while also oppressing them he died an ignominious death, for He delivered him into the hand of a woman; as you read, "For the Lord will give Sisera over into the hand of a woman" (Judges 4:9); for this reason it says, "As he that lieth," which alludes to Sisera, of whom it is written, "At her feet he sunk, he fell, he lay" (Judges 5:27). "Upon the top of a mast" (hebel), for Jael "wounded" [hiblatu from haball] him in the head with the pin that was in the tent; hence it is written, "Her hand she put to the tent-pin, and her right hand..." (Judges 5:26); measure for measure.<sup>12</sup>

## B. Leviticus Rabbah XXIII.9-10

"You shall not copy the practices of the land of Egypt where you dwelt, or of the land of Canaan to which I am taking you; nor shall you follow their law. My rules alone shall you observe, and faithfully follow My laws: I the Lord am your God. You shall keep My laws and My rules, by the pursuit of which man shall live: I am the Lord." (Leviticus 18:3-5)

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<sup>12</sup>H. Freedman and Maurice Simon, eds., Numbers Rabbah, trans. Judah Slotki, pp.342-343. Unless otherwise noted, all translations of Midrash Rabbah appearing in this text are cited from the Freedman and Simon edition of that midrashic compilation.

R. Hiyya taught: Why is "I am the Lord" written twice? It implies: I am He who inflicted punishment upon the Generation of the Flood, upon Sodom, and upon Egypt, and I am the same who will inflict punishment upon any one who will act in accordance with their practice...I am He who requited Joseph, Jael, and Palti the son of Laish, and I will in the future pay reward to any one who acts in accordance with their deeds...There were three who fled from transgression and with whom the Holy One, blessed be He, united His name. They are: Joseph, Jael, and Palti. How do we know it of Joseph? Because it says, "He appointed it in Joseph for a testimony" (Psalms 81:6). What is the implication of the expression Yehosef? God (yah) testifies in regard to him that he did not touch Potiphar's wife. Whence of Jael? From the fact that it says, "And Jael went out to meet Sisera...and she covered him with a semikah" (Judge 4:18). What is the meaning of "with a semikah?" Our Rabbis here [Palestine] say it means with a sudra, while our Rabbis there [Babylon] say it means with a cloak. Resh Lakish remarked: We have searched the whole of the Scripture and have not found any article the name of which is semikah. What then is a semikah? It denotes: shemi koh (My name is here); My name testifies in regard to her that this wicked fellow had no contact with her. Whence of Palti? One verse says, "Now Saul had given Michal his daughter, David's wife, to Palti the son of Laish" (I Samuel 25:44), and another verse says, "Paltiel" (II Samuel 3:15), thus calling him Palti, as well as Paltiel. Who took away the name Palti and who gave him the name Paltiel? The fact is that the additional el (God) indicates: I [says God] testify, in regard to him that he had no contact with David's wife.

This midrash states emphatically and unambiguously that when Sisera was in Yael's tent, he "had no contact with her." No argument can be posited that this text suggests anything other than a flat denial that in the interaction between Yael and Sisera there was anything

resembling a seduction; nevertheless, it is not difficult to ascertain the claim to which the author of this text may have been responding. As the following aggadot demonstrate, there were certainly those who read seduction into the biblical text. One almost detects a sense of appall on the part of the composer of this midrash at the notion that Yael, the national heroine, may have engaged in sexual intercourse in a strategy aimed at preparing her prey for the kill. In an effort to redeem her reputation, the author makes a case for God's presence dwelling in the tent, nay, in the essence of the very blanket with which Yael covered Sisera as he lay in bed before her.

It is worth noting a contrast between the portrayal of Yael in the above midrash, and that of Yehosef and Paltiel. Whereas the latter two are praised for not touching the tempting women in their midst, Yael is praised not because she did not tempt Sisera, but because Sisera did not initiate any physical contact with her. This language reflects an attitude that commonly declares women to be the passive recipients of sexual advances from their male neighbors. According to this view, the most assertive action a woman can take sexually is to make herself as tempting and irresistible as possible. Here Yael is praised for not having done this. In the following aggadot, she is praised for just

the reverse.

## 2. Talmudic Aggadah

### A. Megilla 15a

The Rabbis taught: There have been four women of surpassing beauty in the world--Sarah, Rahab, Abigail and Esther. According to the one who says that Esther was fallow, Vashti should be inserted in place of Esther. Our Rabbis taught: Rahab inspired lust by her name; Jael by her voice; Abigail by her memory; Michal daughter of Saul by her appearance. R. Isaac said: Whoever says, "Rahab, Rahab", at once has an issue. Said R. Nahman to him: I say Rahab, Rahab, and nothing happens to me! He replied: I was speaking of one who knows her and is intimate with her.<sup>12</sup>

### B. Nazir 23b

R. Nahman b. Isaac said: A transgression performed with good intention is better than a precept performed with evil intention. But has not Rab Judah, citing Rab, said: A man should always occupy himself with the Torah and [its] precepts, even though it be for some ulterior motive, for the result will be that he will eventually do them without ulterior motive?--Read then: [A transgression performed with good intention is] as good as a precept performed for an ulterior motive, as it is written, "Blessed above women shall Jael be, the wife of Heber the Kenite. Above women in the tent shall she be blessed" and by "women in the tent", Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah are meant.

R. Johanan said: That wicked wretch [Sisera] had sevenfold intercourse [with Jael] at that time, as it says, "At her feet he sunk, he fell, he lay"; etc. But she derived pleasure from his intercourse?--R. Johanan said: All the favors of the wicked are evil to the righteous, for it says, "Take heed to thyself that thou speak not to Jacob either good or

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<sup>12</sup>I. Epstein, ed., The Babylonian Talmud: Megilla, 15a. Unless otherwise stated, all translations from the Babylonian Talmud are cited from the Epstein edition.

bad." (Genesis 31:24) Now [that he was not to speak] bad we can understand, but why was he not to speak good? Thus it may properly be inferred that the good of such a one is an evil.

C. Yebamoth 103a-103b

R. Johanan said: That profligate had seven sexual connections on that day; for it is said, "Between her feet he sunk, he fell, he lay; at her feet he sunk, he fell; where he sunk, there he fell down dead." But, surely, she derived gratification from the transgression!--R. Johanan replied in the name of R. Simeon b. Yohai: All the favors of the wicked are evil for the righteous. For it is said, "Take heed to thyself that thou speak not to Jacob either good or evil." (Genesis 31:24) Now, as regards evil, one can perfectly well understand [the meaning], but why not good? From here then it may be inferred that the favor of the wicked is evil for the righteous.

There, one can well see the reason, since he might possibly mention to him the name of his idol; what evil, however, could be involved here?--That of infusing her with sensual lust. For R. Johanan stated: When the serpent copulated with Eve, he infused her with lust. The lust of the Israelites who stood at Mount Sinai, came to an end, the lust of the idolaters who did not stand at Mount Sinai did not come to an end.

D. Niddah 55b

Come and hear: There are nine fluids of a zab...[including] the milk of a woman, since it is written, "And she opened a bottle of milk, and gave him drink." (Judges 4:19)

### 3. Rabbinic Commentary

#### A. Rashi:

A skin of milk (Judges 4:19): She gave him milk because it slackens the body and causes drowsiness.<sup>14</sup>

#### B. Radak:

Blessed (Judges 5:24): Meroz shall be cursed, but Yael shall be blessed, for she hastened to come to God's aid right in the place where she was, in her tent; and she shall be more greatly blessed than the other women who dwell in tents.

He asked for water, she gave him milk (Judges 5:25): In order to make him drowsy; so that he would fall asleep quickly, given his exhaustion combined with the milk which he drank--so that he would not feel her smiting him.

At her feet he sank, lay still (Judges 5:27): It is customary that biblical language doubles words in order to strengthen their meaning. And the meaning of "he fell a fall" is that he had no resistance and no recovery; that is what is meant by "Where he sank, there he lay--destroyed." And there is a distant midrash which claims that because his death is described with seven expressions for falling, sinking, laying down--thus that evil one must have had sexual intercourse with Yael seven times that day. But that which they wrote above about the word semikah refutes this midrash.<sup>15</sup>

#### C. Eliyyahu Rabbah

For what reason was Jael, Heber's wife (Judges 4:11-17), accorded a distinction not accorded to any other woman in that deliverance came to Israel through her? Because she was a woman of worth who did her husband's will. Indeed

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<sup>14</sup>A.J. Rosenberg, ed., Judges: A New English Translation, trans. Avrohom Fishelis and Shmuel Fiselis, p.33.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p.46.



it is well said that no woman is to be regarded as worthy unless she does her husband's will.<sup>16</sup>

[Judgment decreed that] as a reward for Jael, wife of Heber the Kenite, who did the will of her husband, there came a great deliverance [for Israel] through her.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Gerald Friedlander, ed., Eliyyahu Rabbah, p.157.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p.173.



## MODERN FICTION

Included in this section is the poem "Yael and Sisera" by Micah Joseph Lebensohn, and the short story "Yael's Deed" by Yaakov Cohen. The contemporary material discussed in the introduction to this chapter-- "The Wife of Heber the Kenite" by Amy Blank, and the modern midrashic piece by Naomi Graetz--appear in full in Appendix A.

Lebensohn's poem is a wonderful depiction of events and the thought process which occupied Yael moments just before and after her murder of Sisera. The poem is full of contrast, as it portrays Yael as a woman torn by conflict. Initially the scene is set with a description of brave Deborah fighting in battle while Yael quietly worries about the fate of the nation in the privacy of her own tent. Sisera appears at her tent, and begs to be considered as a mere suffering mortal, not as a vicious enemy warrior. As he sleeps, Yael is faced with the option of acting either as the Angel of Mercy or as the Angel of Death. Inside her, the voice of universal ethics wages a battle against the voice of the nation, and ultimately the patriotic impulses prove stronger. Yael kills Sisera, though not without much angst. In conclusion, the people led by Deborah sing a song of victory and praise for Yael, and she realizes that her

murderous sin has been exonerated.

Cohen's short story involves the Kenite women, most of whom react hostilely to Yael when they discover what she has done. The women condemn her for performing the unwomanly act of murder; for violating the laws of hospitality; for offering to Sisera deceptively warm words of welcome; and for seducing him sexually. An old woman overhears the gossipers, and puts them to shame. She chides them by praising Yael for sacrificing her "final offering, her woman's honor" for the sake of the nation, and instructs them to keep quiet.

Both Lebensohn and Cohen, through the fiction presented here, suggest that in a time of national crisis, committing a transgression for the sake of patriotic duty may be the most noble and ethical conduct an individual can perform.

Yael and Sisera

By Micah Joseph Lebensohn

"A powerful one did not fall at the hand of the mighty  
Through the hand of a woman God's enemy was shattered."

Judith 16

From the heights of Mount Tabor to the field of battle  
A young woman's voice shall thunder, and it shall sunder  
the earth

She went out to battle to greet one who tramples her  
land

Shouting thunderbolts--she came in fire,  
It is Deborah! She who judges in Jeshurun,  
Lapidoth's wife/'spitfire' in battle she is a blazing  
flame,

There in Canaan where her people were oppressed she  
shall fight

And vengeance now burst from her right hand  
The people came sparsely; but with the warring God/Lord  
of Hosts,

In God's name and with God's strength there she shall do  
wonder;

Against nine hundred chariots of soldiers, Sisera too  
A young woman stand firm, fearlessly bold,  
Against terrors of death, against military bowmen,  
She draws near with only a sword in her right hand  
And like a sickle to ears of corn she shall reap enemy  
soldiers,

Like a lioness she wades to her neck in blood.  
When their arrows hit her they only disintegrate  
And by her sword all fell like straw

Amidst myriads of corpses fallen soldiers of war  
Stood the prophet, like God she is vengeant  
Love of her homeland strong as death

Daring in the valley of the shadow of death  
Risking her life she went out to greet destruction,  
From the hand of the violent oppressor to redeem the  
land

She trampled like an insect the one who trampled her  
land

And Deborah proclaimed the name Yinnon with the rising  
sun.

\* \* \* \*

Before a tent opening Yael stood  
 Her spirit depressed, lamenting  
 Grieving for her people, her land,  
 She knew that today the prophet fought,  
 Therefore she shivers and shakes, expressing her terror:  
 Perhaps Sisera has begun to oppress her people even  
 more.

She was still afraid, disheartened,  
 When suddenly a man fleeing from battle came before her,  
 Weary, wounded, with nothing left of him but a breath,  
 Dripping blood and covered with dirt,  
 His eye the shadow of death, his face parched,  
 And his wound not bandaged, gaping.  
 "Have pity upon me," he calls. "Save one on the verge  
 of collapse,

I am Sisera! Do not be afraid, do not tremble,  
 Your eyes do not see the officer of an enemy army;  
 Rather, behold, one who flees from battle, from  
 slaughter has come to you!

Alas, there the young woman crushes me,  
 And pursues me with her sword in her right hand  
 Woe, all my armies fell in the war,  
 And she still thirsts for my blood, eager for revenge,  
 Save me from dying in a vengeant murder,  
 Behold I might see your benevolence appear on your brow,  
 And give me a resting place in this peaceful abode,  
 There where it is peaceful I shall die or regain my  
 strength."

\* \* \* \*

And the cheeks of Yael, why have they paled?  
 Why does her face here suddenly darken,  
 Like a fiery hell, how her eyes do burn,  
 Why is she afraid; her knees trembling?  
 Woe, a terrible thought comes to her mind,  
 Ghastly as death, like Sheol pure terror,  
 And her spine chilled, her face blanched,  
 And with this thought her blood froze in her.

\* \* \* \*

Then she quickly lead him to the room of her tent,  
 There he collapsed, she covered him with a blanket.  
 "Alas, Yael, you have saved my life from destruction.  
 But a feverish thirst burns like fire within me,  
 A little cold water put out a strange fire  
 Be so kind, bring me drink, revive me,  
 Perhaps the life you have given me you may extend."  
 And she brought him milk in a mighty mug  
 And he drank, and his thirst was quenched--and he was  
 revived.

"How good you are, young woman, more precious than fortunes of gold!"

Sisera called and he cried:--

"Your eyes have pitied an enemy of your people,  
So too the Merciful God shall also reward you."

\* \* \* \*

And why does she lower her eyes to the ground,  
And why does she turn her face from him,  
Why can she not look into his crying eyes,  
Why do his words like swords cut her heart?  
He falls asleep and his slumber is sweet,  
And slowly Yael slips out of the room.

\* \* \* \*

Alas, she cried, my pain is mortal and enduring,  
Woe, if my heart even entertains the idea of murder,  
My hair stands on end from fear,  
If it depresses me, the spirit in me is sorrowful,  
And what if I do execute my strategy?  
A sword can be grounded through one lying down,  
If I use my sword against one lying serenely  
Upon an exhausted one dozing calmly,  
Innocently not knowing that a murderer lurks  
How sweet is his sleep, resting tranquil  
Perhaps even in his dream appears my mercy.  
How terrible it would be should he awaken, before his  
eyes

Yael with a murderous weapon unstable as water,  
This is treacherous Yael, she shall do him in.  
She who saved him in order to kill him,  
She whom he blessed: "As your eyes have pitied  
So too the Merciful God shall reward you"--  
Thus he blessed me and now he sleeps restfully,  
And now he shall bless me perhaps in his sleep,  
And I--while he sleeps--shall take his life,  
I shall murder a man who came in good faith,  
While he trusted he disarmed himself  
While tears of thanks have not yet dried on his face,  
I shall complement these tears with blood,  
And shall I break this peace with the blood of war?  
I shall not! I shall not change light to dark,  
I shall yet retain my integrity--and I shall not spill  
the blood of Sisera!--

But I hear another voice speaking, responding,  
The voice of a people already despoiled twenty years,  
It is the voice of my people bombarding my ears  
mightily,  
And filling my heart with heat to kill, to murder,



There sleeps restfully the oppressor and plunderer of  
the land,

He devastated totally thousands of my people,  
He did not heed the lament of a mother whose child he  
ravaged

And why should not his mother too become childless,  
Why should a man who has no compassion sleep and live,  
Did he not rob sleep from all eyes?

If he awakens, will he not be even stronger and more  
violent,

And with his iron heart he shall continue to crush my  
people,

And the blood of my people, alas, cries to me from the  
soil:

"Empower yourself, Yael, take revenge!"

My people and he--how can they balance equally on my  
scales?

Be silent, my pounding heart! Turn away from me, fear,  
Come murder and rise from the depths of the grave,  
Banish pity from my heart, all mercy and complacency,  
Fill my innocent heart with the rage of a viper,  
Cover me with your cloak, with your cloak of blood, and  
replace the flesh of my heart with stone,  
So that it shall not hear the voice of woe nor under-  
stand mercy,

Place darkness over my eyes so they shall not see  
The deed which my hands shall commit in the room,  
And may your viper's venom hiss from terror!  
And in a moment lick the blood of this slain one.

\* \* \* \*

Then she grasped a stake and mallet,  
Nearing the room she stood on the threshold,  
And to land a mighty blow she raised her arm,  
Suddenly she stood trembling, afraid,  
And extended like an upright nail she stood,  
Her ear harkened to a voice of fear and terror,  
The voice of Sisera speaking with all his heart,  
From the depths of sleep, from sleep on his eyes:

"Woe, young woman! Woe, dreadful one!

Like Deborah she stings, inflicts turmoil,  
She thunders at Barak, they shall destroy slain ones,  
And they swallow blood of the slain like rivers,  
And to devour all my soldiers, woe, to her teeth,  
Alas, she is not yet sated from devouring and her eyes  
are still looking ravenously,

Woe, from a distance she saw me as well,  
And she sharpened her eye and like an eagle she swooped  
down

And already she gnashed her teeth to swallow me, too  
And she brandished her sword to split open my skull,

Then an angel of God descended and the heavens reached  
down to me,

And anointed me, secretly covered me with his wings,  
To rescue me from Deborah, this plague and destruction  
He grasped my right hand with mercy and gentleness,  
Surely He will lead me to that tent over there,  
And he will slake my thirst, selah."

"You are Yael..." (And at this voice she comes to the  
threshold

Like a burst of mountain thunder she trembled abashed  
and beads of sweat spread over her face).

Yael, it is you!--You are a ray from the heavens!--  
Why do you wail, my mother! Why do you look out the  
window

Here, over here, cast your gaze  
And see an angel from on high sheltering your son,  
And bless this young woman, bless God."

\* \* \* \*

She was still standing at the threshold to hearken and  
to lie in wait

And each word crushed her heart like a sword,  
And in her hand the tent-pin and mallet stirred,  
Thinking whether she should enter or leave the room,  
Thus he stood almost trembling, terrified,  
And quickly exploded a love of homeland,  
And with a daring spirit she lifted it,  
And on its wings she came into the room.

\* \* \* \*

Now there is not a sound, just silence selah,  
A terrible silence surrounding her tent--  
Suddenly the groaning of one slain thunders  
Above the sound of blows the sound of a pounding blow  
(This sound still horrifies all who guard a friend,  
it melts all hearts, agitates all who hear it)  
Followed by a mortally wounded voice, the voice of a  
dying man,  
His utterance is barely audible but it can be heard:  
"Yael, you are my angel--the angel of death!"  
And silence, the silence of the shadow of death,  
returns.

\* \* \* \*

Heber's wife rushed out of the room,  
Her face white as the dead,  
Her eyes like lightening rolling in her,  
Blood flowing from her palms,  
Between her eyes was marked the sign of murder,

The glory of her brow stained with spilled blood,  
 She stood like a marble pillar, standing silently,  
 Trembling for some minutes from foot to head,  
 As if she had stepped into the hole of a viper:  
 As her lips moved her voice could not be heard,  
 Intermittently she gazed at the room,  
 And instantly her face turned away,  
 Then her heart heaved a sigh of her horror,  
 For her eyes saw a terrible sight there  
 Thus without a word she was alone, shocked  
 For this evil murder she could not be solaced.

\* \* \* \*

Suddenly there was heard too the sound of her people  
 rejoicing,  
 The sound of a people returning victorious from the  
 battlefield.

"Ah!"--cried Yael--"This joy is not my joy.  
 I did not murder my armed warriors, only one who sought  
 refuge in my shade."

She was still speaking when to her ear rang  
 voices of myriad of the nation like the roaring sea  
 exulting.

"Let us praise Yael"--the multitude shouted for joy--

"Her hands dispatched our foe to Sheol."

And Deborah before them in reddened garments,

And Barak with his army rushed in front,

And Deborah sang boldly a song of praise to God

And "Blessed among women is Yael," she said.

"Among women is Yael blessed," the whole people  
 responded.

And Yael's spirit revived as she listened and answered:  
 I have been living with this people and in their land I  
 seek refuge,

And for its welfare and peace how could I not yearn  
 It is the voice of this people! And it calms the  
 agitation of my heart,

It exonerates my sin, cleanses the blood of my palm,

And the voice of the prophet comes from on high

This is a sign to me that God has approved of my deeds.



# מיכה יוסף לבנון: יעל וסיסרא

לא נסל אור ביד כמיר, ביד אשה רפז קמיו (יחזקאל 11)

ממרומי הר תבור לשדה סלחמה  
 ירשם קול עלמה ויבקע אדמה  
 לקראת רומס ארצה לקרב יצאה  
 וברקים מפיה - כאש היא באה,  
 ודבורה היא היא בישרון שופטת,  
 אשת לסידות בקרב אש לזהטת,  
 כנענן שם הלחם עמה לחצו  
 ונקמות עתה משינה פוצו,  
 כמעט עם באה אך עם אל הצבאות,  
 בשמו ובעזו שם תעשה נוראות:  
 בתשע מאות רכב חיל סיסרא יחד  
 תחצב עלמה, תעז מבלי פחד,  
 אל בלהות סות, אל חיל רומי קשת,  
 אך חרב בימיה והיא נגשת  
 וימגל שבלים תקצר חיל קמים,  
 כלביאה תחצה עד צואר בדרמים  
 עליה חצימו אך יתמוללו  
 ולסי חרבה כקש כלם נסלו  
 בין רבבות סגר חללי חיל סלחמה  
 נצבה הנביאה, כאל היא נקמת,  
 אהבת מולדתה העזה כמות  
 היא לבנה הרהיבה בסדה צלמות  
 לשום נפש בכף צאת לקראת קרץ,  
 מיד חומץ ומז חלץ הארץ,  
 את רומס על ארצה לרמס כרמס  
 ודבורה קראה שם יזון עם שמש.

לפני פתח אהל יעל נצבת  
 רוחה חבלה בה, חיתה דואבת  
 על עמה על ארצה נפשה ענמה,  
 ידעה כי היום הנביאה ולחמה,  
 לכן יחרד לבנה, יהנה אימתה  
 אולי יד סיסרא על עמה קשתה.  
 עוד לבנה בה יעל, ירשו ידיה,  
 סתאם איש נס מקרב בא עדיה,  
 ענף, סצוץ, אין בו אך הנשמה  
 גם יזוב דמו וישוקק אדמה,  
 עיניו צלמות, סניו חמרמרה,  
 וסעציו לא חבשו סיהם יסערה,  
 "חומי נא - יקרא - קס למות הצילי,  
 סיסרא אנכי אל תיראי תחילי,  
 לא השר בצבא צר יחזו עיניך,  
 נס מקרב, מקטל הן בא אליך!  
 אויה, שם העלמה נפשי שאאמת,  
 ובחרבה בימיה אחרי רודפת  
 הוי, כל צבאותי נפלו במלחמה,  
 ולדמי עוד תצמא, תשאף בנקמה,  
 הציליני נא ממות בנקם רצח,  
 הן אראה טוב לבך יושע על מצח,  
 ותני בנה שלוש לי אך מנח,  
 שם שאנן לי אגעז או אחליף כח.

ולחמי זו יעל מה זה חורו,  
 מה זה כה פתאם פניה קדרו,  
 כמורדת פתחה מה דלקו עיניה,  
 מדוע זה חרדה, סקו ברכיה!  
 הוי, הניח נורא על לבנה עלה,  
 אים כמות, כשאלו אך בהלה,  
 ובשרה סמר, הלבנו סניה,  
 ולהציון זה בה קסאי דמיה.

אז לחרד אלה מהר הוליכתהו,  
 שם כרע שוכב, כשמיכה כסתהו,  
 "הוי, הצלת נפשי, את יעל, משחת,  
 אך חמת צמאה כאש כי קודחת,  
 מעש מים קרים כבזות אש ורה  
 הואילי, תשקני, נפשי השבי,  
 אולי חיים נתת לי עוד תרחיבי,  
 ובספל אדירים תלב יתבה,  
 "ישת חרות - גם רחמי לו שבה  
 "מה רב טובך, עלמה מהו יקרה!  
 קרא סיסרא וכת עינו נגרות -  
 "על צורך בת עמך חסו עיניך,  
 כן גם אל תנון כן יגמל עליך.

ומה זה ארצה תוריד העינים,  
 ומה זה סמנו מסב אפים,  
 מה מליו כתרבות לבנה נורו  
 הוא נרדם יישן ושנתו מתקת,  
 ולאט מן החרד יעל חמקת.

אוי קראת, סכאובי אנוש ונצח.  
אוי, אם יתר לבי אף ר' ע' ו' רצח.  
עד סערת ראשי מסתד סטרה.  
אם הוא יציק לבי, רוחי בי צרה.  
ומה אם זכותי גם עוד אפיקה.  
על שוכב כסח כי חרב אריקה.  
על גם נע ובסוכה ובנחת  
הם לא ידע כי לא תצפן רוצחת  
ושנתי מה קרבה שלו גרדיע.  
אולי גם בחלום לו חסדי יופיע.  
כה נזרא כי יקצ' ולעניני יחו  
יעל בכלי רצח כמים פחו.  
זו יעל מעלה, תגור חיהה.  
זו הצילתהו אף בעבור הקנהה.  
זו אשר ברכה: "הן חסו עניך  
כן גם אל תנון ימל עליך" -  
כת הוא ברכני וישיח לנח.  
ויברכני עתה אולי ברות.  
ואני - כשננו - את נפשו אקהה.  
איש בא בכריתי בשלומי ארצחה.  
עת כי כסח מנשק נער כפיו.  
עוד דמעות תודה לא יבשו על אפיו.  
דמעות אלה כדמים אשלימה.  
ודמי מלחמה בשלום אשימהו  
לא אעש! - אור לחשך לא אהסכה.  
סוד איתם! - ודמי סיסרא לא אשפכה!...

אך קול אחר דובר אשטע כי ענה.  
קול עם משה מרט זה עשרים שנה.  
קול עמי הוא ירעיש אונני בכח.  
וימלא לבי חם לקטל, לרצח.

שם יישן ינוח מן שודד ארץ.  
את אלפי עמי הקריע לקרץ.  
משד אל שודד כן לא שמע נהי  
ושכלה גם אמו למה לא תהי  
מה יישן יחי איש חמלה לו און.  
ההוא לא נול שנה מכל עון!  
הלא כי יקצ' יוסיף עו חרוע.  
ובלב כחול לו אף עמי ירע.  
ודמי עמי, ה, צופקים לי מאדמה:  
"מלאי בך, יעל, מלאי בנקמה!"  
עמי והוא - הבמאני יסאו יחדו!  
דם לבי יכני! סו מן פחד.  
בוא רצח ועלה מעמקי השחת.  
גרש חוס מלכי, כל חן ונחת.  
מלא בנמט פתן לבי התמים.  
במעילך כסני, במעיל הדמים.  
ובשר לבי הסר ותנה בו אבן.  
כל ידסע קול הי ותנינח לא יבן.  
על עיני שים קדרות לכלי החזינה  
את מפעל ידי בחדר תעשינה.  
וסתני ראשך נא יהמו ישרקו!  
ודמי חלל זה עוד רנע ילקו.

אז שלחה יד ליתד ומקבת.  
תקרב לחדר על ספו נצבת.  
ולהלמות צמלים תניף הורוע.  
סתע מרעיד עמדה, לבה יוע.  
ותטעה מסמטר קמה נצבה.  
קול תת וסחדים הן אונה קשבה.  
קול סיסרא דובר ממלא לבתו.  
מעמקי טמא, משנת על עיניהו:

"אוי, העלמה! - אויה איה!  
כדבורה גם חשך הצמיד המהומה,  
תרעם על ברק, נסילו חללים.  
ודמי הרונים הם עלעו כנחלים,  
ולברות כל חילי-ה, אל שניה  
אוי, עוד לא רותה ונטויות עיניה.  
אוי! גם אותי מרחוק ראתה,  
ותלטש עיניה ובגשר דאחה.  
וכבר חרקה גם שן אותי לכלע.  
ותצופף חרבה קדקדי לבצע.  
אז ירד מלאך אל ג'ס שמים.  
ובאברתו סף לי, לט בכנסים.  
סלט מדבורה זו דבר ושתת  
יחזיק בימיני בחנינה ונחת.  
עוד כסח יחתי שמה אהלה.  
ולצחה צמאני יסק חלב סלה.  
יעל את... ולקול זה היא בסף באה  
כנסך רעם הרים חתה נדכאה  
ורסיסי ידע מרצו על אפס!  
יעל, את היא את! - מלאך השמים!  
מה-לך יבב, אמיו מה זה תשקסי  
הנה הלום נא עיניך העיסי  
וראי לבנך מצל מלאך גבוה.  
וכרכי עלמה זו ברכי לאלה!"

היא עודה בסף לאזין ולמו ארב  
ותמליל כל מלה לבה כחרב.  
ויבדה רמו יתד ומקבת.  
אם חדרה תבוא או תצא חושבת.  
כה עמדה כמעט נדהמת רועדת.  
ותסרז חיש אהבת ארץ מולדת.

וּבְרוּחָהּ כִּי עֲזָה אוֹתָהּ נִשְׁאַה.  
וּבְכִנּוּסֶיהָ הַחֲדָרָה הִיא בָּאָה.

עֲתָה אֵין קֶשֶׁב. אֵךְ דּוֹמִיָּה סֵלָה.  
דּוֹמִיָּה נוֹרָאָה סָבִיב אֶהְלָה -

פֶּתַע קוֹל נֹאקֶת חֲלָל יִרְעֵם רַעִם  
מֵעַל קוֹל מַהֲלָמוֹת קוֹל הוֹלֵם פֶּעַם  
(קוֹל זֶה עוֹד יִתְרִיד כָּל אִישׁ רוֹעֶה רַע.

הוּא יִמְסֶה כָּל לֵב. יִרְנִיז כָּל שׁוֹמֵעַ)  
אֲתָרִיו קוֹל אָנוּשׁ. קוֹל נֶפֶשׁ נִצֵּעַת.

תִּשָּׁח אֶמְרָתָהּ אֵךְ אֵין שׁוֹמֵעַת:

יִעֲלֶה. אֵת הִיא מִלֵּאכִי - מִלֵּאךְ מוֹתוֹ -  
וּדְמָמָה שָׂבָה דּוֹמִית צִלְמוֹת.

צֵאת מִן הַחֲדָר פֶּרֶצָה אֶשֶׁת חֶבֶר.

וּלְכֹן-פִּנְיָה כִסְפִי שׁוֹכְנִי קָבֶר.

עֵינֶיהָ כְּבָרְקִים בָּהּ יִתְגַּלְגֵּלוּ.

מִכֶּסֶף דָּמִים נִסְסוּ נִזְלוּ.

בֵּין עֵינֶיהָ הִתְהַה מוֹ אוֹת הֶרְצָח.

וּבִכְדָם שִׁסְכָה נִכְתָּם הוֹד הַמִּצָּח.

כְּנָצִיב שִׁישׁ נִצְבָּה. דּוֹמָם עֲמָדָה.

מִרְגֵּל עַד רֹאשׁ לִרְנָעִים רַעְדָּה.

וּכְמוֹ חֵר צִסֶּע רִגְלֶיהָ נָנְעוּ:

קוֹלָהּ לֹא נִשְׁמַע וּשְׁפָתֶיהָ נִעַו.

לִרְנָעִים הַחֲדָרָה תַעֲיִף עֵינֶיהָ.

וּכְרִנֵּע חִישׁ תִּסְכַּב מִשֶּׁם פִּנְיָה.

אִז יִתֵּן לִבָּהּ קוֹל אֲנֻחַת אֵימָתָה.

כִּי מִתְּחִלָּה נוֹרָא שֶׁם עֵינֶיהָ רָאָתָה.

כֹּה מִבְּלִי דְבַר שׁוֹמְמָה נִשְׁעָמָה

עַל רִצָּח עוֹלָלָה נִפְשָׁה לֹא נִחְמָה.

פֶּתָאִם נִם נִשְׁמַע קוֹל עֲמָה סִמְחָ.

קוֹל עִם מִשְׁדָּה לֶחֶם שָׁב כְּמִנְצָח.

יֵאָהָה! - קָרָאָה יַעֲלֶה - יִיל זֶה לֹא גִילִי.

לֹא לוֹחֲמִי רִצָּחֲתִי רַק חוֹסֶה צִלִּי.

עוֹד הִיא דּוֹבְרָת וּלְאִזְנָה צִלְלוּ

קוֹלוֹת רִבְבוֹת עִם כְּהִמּוֹת יָם יִצְהָלוּ.

כִּרְכִּבוֹ אֵת יַעֲלֶה - בְּהִמּוֹן יִרְיֵעוּ -

יִצְרְנוּ לְשִׁאוֹל יְדִיָּה הַכְרִיעוּ.

וּדְבוּרָה לִפְנֵיהֶם תִּמְצָח בְּנֹד.

וּבְרִק אֵת חִילוֹ יִרְדֵּן מִנְגֵד.

וּדְבוּרָה שִׁיר עִז וְזִמְרָת יָהּ הִיא שָׁרָה

וּיִתְבָּרֵךְ מְנָשִׁים יַעֲלֶה - אֶמְרָה.

יִמְנָשִׁים הִיא תִּכְרֹךְ - כָּל הָעָם יַעֲנֵן.

וְחֲחִי רִיחַ יַעֲלֶה שְׁמֵעָה וְחֵעֵן:

עִם עִם זוֹ אֶעֱד וּבְאֶרְצוֹ אֶחְסֶיהָ.

וּלְטוֹבוֹ וּשְׁלֹמוֹ אֵיךְ לֹא אֶהְמָהּ

קוֹל עִם זֶה הוּא! וְשִׁאוֹן לְבִי יִשְׁבִּיחַ.

יִלְבִּין חֲסִאֲתִי. דָּם כִּסִּי יִדִּיחַ.

וּדְבַר הַנִּבְיָאָה הֵן בָּא מִנְבוּחָהּ.

זֶה אוֹת לִי כִי מַעֲשֵׂי רַצָּה אֱלֹהִים.

### Yael's Deed

By Yaakov Cohen

And word of Yael's deed also reached the tribe of the Kenites settled in the Negev, from whom Heber the Kenite separated when he went after his wife Yael from the Tribe of Naftali and he pitched his tent at the oak with the nomads who were at Kadesh.

And there was peace between Yavin king of Canaan and the Kenite tribe, and they were afraid lest the king of Canaan punish them for the transgression of the wife of their brother, and they restrained themselves from fully expressing praise for the soldier's wife, and there were those too who shook their head in worry and said nothing.

The women saw that the faces of the men were enraged, and they gathered their courage to speak evil of Yael, in their jealousy of her. At evening time, while she was lying down, the women neighbors gathered before their tents to chat about the big news and for each to sharpen her tongue.

And one woman said, "Have you heard of such a thing, that a woman should take an iron tent-pin and a mallet and drive the tent-pin into a man's head, striking and crushing his temple, while he sleeps a secure sleep?"

And the second said, "And has such a thing been heard--that a woman would violate thus the laws of hospitality, which have been sacred forever, and in the secrecy of her tent, when he came to request refuge with her, that she should rise and kill him silently?"

And the third answered them, "And not just this, but she went out to meet him and she drew him with her words saying: Turn, my Lord, turn to me, do not be afraid! And she stole his heart to trust her and her words."

And the fourth added, "He asked for water, she gave him milk!"

And the fifth said, "Who knows, if that is all she gave him?"

And the first laughed loudly. "The innocent one!..." And all the women answered her with laughter and nodded their head.

And there with them was an old woman, and she was weak and sitting at the tent entrance and listening from nearby to the conversation of the women. And when she heard the last words she got up and came near on her staff and she said, "You had better shut up, fools! If you are quiet it will be thought honorable!"

"For consider how hard it was for her that she was forced to make her heart stone, the heart of a wife and a mother, and to pierce with her soft hand the head of

her people's enemy.

"And is not her deed seven times greater since she was forced to break the sacred laws of hospitality, to flatter the hated stranger and to defile herself with deceit?

"And why this idiotic laughter? May the mouths of gossipers be gagged! And perhaps, if this too should be true and she was forced to sacrifice this final offering, her woman's honor for the sake of redeeming her people from the oppressor's hand--then is not her deed precious and lofty 77 times greater? We all must bow down silently, in awe and sacred wonder before this beautiful and heroic woman."

## יעקב כהן: מעשה יעל

ודבר מעשה יעל הניע גם אל בני הקיני היושבים בגג, מהם נפרד חבר הקיני בלכתו אחרי אשתו יעל משבט נפתלי ויט אהלו עד אלוץ בצענונים אשר את-קדש.

ושלום בין יבין מלך כנען ובין שבט הקיני ניראו האנשים, פן יפקד עליהם מלך כנען את עון אשת אחיהם, ויתאפקו מהביע בפה מלא את-תהלת אשת החיל, ויש גם אשר הגיעו ראשם בדאגה ולא אמרו דבר.

ראו הנשים את פני האנשים והם כזועפים ותוספנה אמן לדבר טרה ביעל בקנאותן בה. לעת הערב, בטרם תשכבנה, נאספו השכנות לפני אהליהן לשוחח בתרשה הנדולה ולשנן אחת אחת את לשונה.

ותאמר האחת: הנשמעה כזאת, כי תקח אשה יתד-ברזל ומקבת ותתקע את-היתד באיש בראשו, הלם תהלם ותמחץ רקתו, והוא ישן שנתו לבטח?

ותאמר השנית: ואם נשמעה כזאת, כי תסר אשה ככה את משפט האורת, אשר נקדש מימי עולם, ובסתר אהלה, בבואו לבקש מחסה אמה, תקום ותצנחנו חרש?

ותשלישית ענתה לעמתן: ולא רק זאת, כי יצא יצאה לקראתו ותמשכנו בחלקת לשונה לאמר: סורה, אדוני, סורה אלי, אל תירא! ותעב את-לבו להאמין בה ובדבריה.

והרביעית הוסיפה: מים שאל, חלב נתנה!

והחמישית: מי יודע, אם רק זה לבד נתנה לזו -

ותצחק הראשונה קול גדול: התמימה! וכל הנשים ענו אחריה בצחוק ותנענה ראשן.

ושם אתן אשה זקנה אחת, והיא רפת-כח ויושבת פתח האהל ומקשיבה מקרוב, לשיח הנשים, והי כשמעה את הדברים האחרונים ותקם ותקרב על משענתה ותאמר: דמנה, פתיות, ולכבוד יחשב לכן!

כי שמנה אל לב, מה-קשה עליה המעשה, אם נאלצה לעשות לבה כזאת, לב אשה ואם, ולמחוק בידה הרכה את ראש צורר עמה.

והאם לא שבעתיים גדל מעשה, אם נאלצה עס-זה להפר את משפט האורת הנקדש, להחניף לזר השנוא ולנעל נמשה בשקר?

ומה היה זה הצחוק הנבער לכן? יסכר פי הולכי רכילו! ואולם, לו גם אמת היה הדבר והיא נאלצה להקריב גם את הקרבן האחרון הזה, את כבוד האשה

למען פדות עמה מיד המציק - הלא אז יקר ונעלה מעשה שבעים ושבעה ועל כלנו לכרע דומם, במורא ובתמהון: קדש לכרע לפני האשה הנעוה הזאת וגבורת נפשה.

CHAPTER TWO: DELILAH AND SAMSON



## INTRODUCTION

In literature concerning the story of Yael and Sisera, the issue of whether or not a seduction scene took place remains debatable. Regarding the story of Delilah and Samson, in contrast, virtually all of that which has been written assumes without question that Delilah did use sexual seduction as a means to achieving her goals. Mieke Bal writes: "Both Yael and Delilah destroy the men who choose to come too close to them by tricking them into uttering fatal words. They are generally considered seductresses, using, that is, the other 'mouth' at their disposal. The mouth of the sword and the mouth of the female body come to resemble each other, in strategy and in effect."<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, the Samson and Delilah myth is exemplary in the body of literature devoted to demonstrating the dangers which threaten men who surrender to the love of a foreign woman. According to Bal, "In our culture, the story of Samson and Delilah is the paradigmatic case of woman's wickedness. The combination of seduction, unfaithfulness, and treason is an unavoidable and fatal one. However strong a man is, and Samson was strong, he will always be helpless against woman's strategies of

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<sup>1</sup>Mieke Bal, Death and Dissymmetry, p.65.

enchantment. Once seduced, he will be betrayed."<sup>2</sup>

Although the language in Chapter 16 of the Book of Judges is no more sexually explicit than that used to describe Yael's encounter with Sisera in her tent, it is considered to be more clearly highly suggestive. The essential difference in the stories is that, whereas Yael and Sisera were still almost complete strangers at the time of the murder, Samson and Delilah were involved in a relationship based on Samson's love for this Philistine woman. Again, Bal's perspective: "The story of Samson and Delilah is explicitly a love story. It is a story of love and betrayal that has become, in modern culture, the story of love as betrayal."<sup>2</sup>

Feminist criticism of the biblical tale of Samson and Delilah does not attempt to vindicate Delilah from the treachery associated with her. Clearly, she was a paid informant for the Philistine army, and she took advantage of her intimate relationship with Samson in order ultimately to obtain the information necessary to cause his demise. The issues at stake in the feminist critique are the means that Delilah actually employed to accomplish this, and the role that Samson played in his fateful proceedings with Delilah. It is suggested that far more dishonesty and deceitfulness are read into the

<sup>2</sup>Mieke Bal, Lethal Love, p.38.

<sup>2</sup>Mieke Bal, Death and Dissymmetry, p.224.

Delilah character than she actually displays in Judges 16. In addition, it is noted that a close reading of Samson's behavior might reveal that it was not really his naivete that allowed for Delilah's victory (a common understanding of his character), but his subconscious willingness or desire to succumb. Samson, it is suggested, had more responsibility in bringing about his own defeat than readers usually attribute to him.

There is not a great deal of midrash or rabbinic commentary written on the story of Samson and Delilah, and virtually all of it is rooted in the talmudic aggadah found in Sotah 9b and 10a. This material clearly presents Delilah as the prototypical seductress who uses her sexual appeal to destroy Samson, the prototypical male victim. In their commentary on the story, the rabbis expound upon their understanding of female sexuality (which they regard to be non-existent) and in so doing reveal the fears they held about the power of women in their midst. It seems likely that to some extent it was these fears which undergirded many of their misogynist claims. It is interesting though not altogether surprising to note that the rabbinic view of Delilah is, at least on the surface level, very different from the rabbinic view of Yael. The stories of these two women are quite parallel--each acts independently on behalf of a military effort to destroy the

enemy. Yet, as has been demonstrated here, Yael is acclaimed as a hero; in contrast, Delilah is portrayed as a despicable traitor. Clearly the most significant difference which dictates these opposing interpretations of the women's actions is the side each was defending. Yael was fighting for the Israelites, and Delilah was fighting for their opposition. It is natural to hail one's own soldiers. Yet in a body of literature concerned with the morality of human behavior it is interesting to note that the ethical merit of a violent action committed during wartime may depend solely upon the patriotic loyalty of the individual who does it.

The modern fiction presented here includes excerpts from the dramatic work of the Haskalah writer Moshe Chaim Luzzato and the Israeli poet Leah Goldberg. Luzzato's works are "Delilah and Samson," "Delilah," and "The Philistines and Delilah." Goldberg's poem is called "Delilah."

In "Delilah and Samson," the portrayal of these two protagonists hardly differs from the biblical story line. Their dialogue is expanded upon, but very little is really added. In this piece, the major departure from the story's original text occurs when Samson realizes that his strength has left him. Luzzato has Samson respond by taking responsibility for his demise through confessing his own guilt and acknowledging God's

justice.

This is the case in "Delilah" as well; here, the reader is privy to Samson's inner thoughts regarding Delilah after he has been defeated. While much blame is placed on the deceitful Philistine woman, ultimately the real castigation is directed at Samson himself for his own savagery and for the weakness he demonstrated when he allowed himself to surrender to his beloved.

"The Philistines and Delilah" is markedly different. Here, Luzzato actually seems to portray Delilah as a woman with conscience. In contrast to the usual casting of her as a treacherous woman eager to betray her lover Samson, the portrayal here is one of a reluctant Delilah who argues against those Philistine men seeking to destroy Samson. She is so opposed to obeying their request that she suggests that her own life too would have to end if Samson were to be killed. There is a possibility that in this work Luzzato is only exaggerating Delilah's deceitfulness, by suggesting that she lied to her own countrymen in order to increase the sum price of her cooperation. On the other hand, it is also conceivable that Luzzato wanted to redeem her reputation slightly.

## BIBLICAL MATERIAL

The myth of Samson as it is written in Judges 13-16 portrays the life story of one of Israel's less admirable judges, a man who possessed great strength of body but demonstrated as well a weakness in the area of self-restraint which ultimately proved to be fateful. The story revolves around three encounters Samson had with different foreign (Philistine) women--one with whom he was engaged but never married, another who was a prostitute, and finally Delilah, his lover who in the end successfully sought to defeat him. The text is full of riddles; indeed, Edward Greenstein suggests that it is itself a riddle. "The Samson story should be read as a riddle...The reader of the Samson story meets riddles at every turn and in every domain of the literary work. One comes to realize that the riddle formula pervades the entire narrative of Samson."<sup>4</sup> This study will be limited to an analysis of the riddles which appear in the interaction between Samson and Delilah, although these cannot be considered without reference to the literary context of the story as a whole.

Issues of concern here are twofold: First of all, to identify the elements of seduction which permeate the

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<sup>4</sup>Edward L. Greenstein, "The Riddle of Samson" in Prooftexts September 1981, Vol. 1, No. 3, p.243.



story; secondly, to examine closely the actions taken by Samson and Delilah without using the lens of culture which has so strongly influenced modern readings of the story. In other words, it is desirable here to read the episode in Judges by looking as objectively as possible at what is said and done in an effort to divorce the characters from the reputations they bear in a culture that has been influenced by the biblical myth. "Critiquing the myth necessitates undoing the popular reading of those judgments and attempting to replace the seemingly self-evident motivations with others."<sup>5</sup> Perhaps a new understanding of Samson and Delilah may be reached. Even the possibility that a valid understanding might be reached which alters significantly from the standard one will facilitate a recognition of some of the assumptions upon which later literary interpretations, such as the talmudic aggadah and the modern fiction which appear later in this chapter, are based.

Again it will be necessary to draw heavily from the work of Mieke Bal, who has employed a feminist perspective in composing an extensive analysis of virtually the entire Book of Judges. Particularly helpful in examining the biblical story of Samson and Delilah is the chapter entitled "Delilah Decomposed" in her collection of feminist literary readings of biblical love stories

<sup>5</sup>Mieke Bal, Lethal Love, p.39.

Lethal Love. In this chapter she addresses both the elements of seduction which are apparent in Chapter 16, and the actual roles played by Samson and Delilah. The following analysis is based primarily on this chapter, with reference to other works by Bal as well.

Bal addresses the sexual undertones of much of the imagery which is so powerful in the Samson story; not all of it relates directly to the interaction between Samson and Delilah, but for the interested reader it is fascinating material. Relevant to this particular study, however, is only that which does relate directly to Samson and Delilah. The significant images Bal explores include the language Delilah uses to express helplessness, the cutting of hair, Samson's resting between Delilah's knees, and the gouging out of the defeated Samson's eyes. The conclusions she reaches may seem quite provocative, but it is Bal's claim that these emerge in the context of a story which is fundamentally about sexuality and strength. "The relation between strength and sexuality is obvious. It is the ground (in the common and the semiotic sense) of the event between Samson and Delilah. It is the form 'love' takes in this story."<sup>6</sup>

The language that Delilah uses in addressing Samson has the unquestionable tenor of seductiveness, for she

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p.40.



uses his love for her as a weapon to make him divulge his secret. But Bal points to a specific utterance which bolsters her case that Samson is presented in the story as passive and surrendering; indeed, she claims, he is portrayed symbolically as a victim of rape. In Judges 16:3, Delilah asks Samson for the first time: "Tell me, what makes you so strong? And how could you be tied up and made helpless?" The Hebrew verb used in the passage to mean "make helpless" is a verb that is also used to mean "rape." According to Bal, "He knows perfectly well that she is talking not about some love game but about his being mastered by the other, the enemy."<sup>7</sup> This motif is repeated later, with regard to the image of Samson's eyes being gouged out.

Regarding the cutting of hair and Samson's resting between Delilah's knees, Bal states her case emphatically. "Haircutting, especially in this context, can hardly be denied some affinity with castration. The moment of the haircutting follows that of a sexual encounter--sleeping on his lover's knees cannot be seen otherwise--and it seems plausible to associate the relaxation after sex to the annihilation of the hero's strength. Thus, the underlying ideologeme has it that sexual discharge is damaging to physical strength. The haircutting becomes a way to make the temporary weaken-

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p.52.

ing after sex into a permanent one."<sup>9</sup> In Lethal Love, Bal posits her case a bit differently. Samson "falls quietly asleep, 'on her knees,' an expression in Hebrew that also allows the translation 'between her knees.' This attitude on Delilah's lap shows that he has completely surrendered to her indeed. The attitude suggests...rest after lovemaking...Love makes one powerless, very literally so. Full surrender sets the castrating razor in motion..."<sup>9</sup>

As mentioned above, it is suggested that there is a motif in the Samson story which reflects a Samson who is passive and surrendering, having the semblance of a victim of rape. In this regard, Bal addresses the gouging out of Samson's eyes. "There is again, in the blinding, the penetration of the hero's soft flesh with a hard object. And this is where this episode shows relations with Yael's act. The sexual context, so much more obvious in the present case than in Yael's, makes a more direct allusion to rape unnecessary."<sup>10</sup>

Mieke Bal's analysis of ostensibly sexual imagery in the Samson myth extends far beyond the content of the references cited above. Yet in this effort to explore the element of seduction in the story of Samson and

<sup>9</sup>Mieke Bal, Death and Dissymmetry, p.226.

<sup>9</sup>Mieke Bal, Lethal Love, p.58.

<sup>10</sup>Mieke Bal, Death and Dissymmetry, p.226.

Delilah, further elaboration on this theme hardly seems necessary. The text states explicitly: "He fell in love with a woman in the Wadi Sorek, named Delilah. The lords of the Philistine went up to her and said, 'Coax him and find out what makes him so strong...'" (Judges 16:4-5) It does not take much depth of analysis to understand that Delilah used Samson's love for her--and his attraction to her, one might assume without taking too great a leap--in order to manipulate him into divulging the secret of his strength. If, even after verse five, this still seems at all dubious, it becomes manifestly apparent in verse fifteen, when Delilah, exasperated, finally says, "How can you say you love me, when you don't confide in me?"

If it can be conclusively determined that Delilah seduced Samson, then one might embrace as accurate a depiction of their conflict as one in which the deceptive and traitorous woman is pitted against the loyal but naive man. Indeed, such is the depiction portrayed in many artistic interpretations of this myth, including literary and artistic works produced through the ages. Aschkenasy writes in reference to these: "In the context of sexual symbolism...both the victimized Samson and the treacherous Delilah...are seen as reenacting an arche-

typal male-female situation."<sup>11</sup> A few of these--pieces of talmudic aggadah and modern fiction--shall be examined later in this chapter. However, before accepting this depiction as entirely valid, it may prove worthwhile to take a closer look at the characters of Delilah and Samson as they are actually portrayed in the Judges passage. Perhaps one might not conclude so hastily that Delilah is deceptive and traitorous, or that Samson is naive and loyal. Perhaps one might discover that the riddle of their relationship is more complicated than it seems.

**se-duce**, v.t. 1. to lead astray, as from duty, rectitude, or the like; corrupt. 2. to persuade or induce to have sexual intercourse. 3. to lead or draw away, as from principles, faith, or allegiance. 4. to win over; attract; entice.<sup>12</sup>

According to none of the above definitions is it stated that the act of seduction must necessarily be accomplished through means which are either deceptive or traitorous. Thus, it is possible that Delilah did seduce Samson without displaying these negative traits which are so often attributed to her character. Examination of the dialogue she initiates in Chapter 16

<sup>11</sup>Nehama Aschkenasy, Eve's Journey: Feminine Images in Hebraic Literary Tradition, p.60.

<sup>12</sup>This definition appears in The Random House College Dictionary, p.1191.

reveals that, in fact, Delilah is in her speech not the least bit deceptive. Is she traitorous? She certainly does not act out of a sense of loyalty to Samson; yet, in the sense of patriotic identification, Delilah demonstrates a commitment to her people which is paralleled to a remarkable extent by that of Yael, a woman who also betrayed an enemy soldier resting peaceably in her tent for the sake of the national welfare. Yael, of course, was praised for this.

Delilah says in 16:8: "Tell me, what makes you so strong? And how could you be tied up and made helpless?" Her question is straightforward; indeed, it is Samson who, in his answer, is understandably deceptive. Delilah then tests Samson's answer by crying, "Samson, the Philistines are upon you!" While this is clearly a lie, it is at the same time acknowledgment to Samson that Delilah is trying to determine how he would respond should the Philistines actually try to attack him. As much as it is a lie, it is also a warning.

Samson wrenches himself free from the fresh tendons used to tie him, and Delilah tries again. "Oh, you deceived me; you lied to me! Do tell me now how you could be tied up," (16:10) she says. Again Samson only tells a half-truth, Delilah cries wolf, and he wrenches himself free. This time, Delilah says, "How can you say you love me, when you don't confide in me? This makes

three times that you've deceived me and haven't told me what makes you so strong." (16:15) Neither of the above two statements quoted are at all untrue; each is, in fact, quite direct and to the point. Again, this is not an effort to prove that Delilah did not seduce Samson, nor is it an attempt to deny her status as a paid informant for the Philistine lords. It is simply to suggest that the characterization of Delilah as deceitful is simply not consistent with the biblical record.

Surely, the reader might suggest, if Delilah is not deceitful, at least she must be seen as traitorous in her betrayal of Samson. While this is accurate, it does not acknowledge the reality that Delilah was a Philistine woman acting on behalf of her own people's national interests. She is no martyr, for she is motivated by her own selfish desire for money; at the same time, she is also not a traitor, turning her back on her family for the sake of a foreign man--Samson--who loves her. As was demonstrated in the preceding chapter on Yael, in the biblical context this national devotion was praised when it was performed on behalf of the Israelite people.

A discussion of the issue of loyalty brings to mind the question of Samson's supposed loyalty. It is not difficult to place this in question, for the so-called judge of the people of Israel three times over chose foreign women as his bed-partners. In the biblical



context, an Israelite man who opts for Philistine women can hardly be considered as anything other than disloyal to the people.

Perhaps, one might argue, it was Samson's naivete which prompted him always to follow his heart, particularly in the case of his relationship with and ultimate confession to Delilah. Samson's naivete, like his supposed loyalty, is not at all evident. Instead, it seems more likely that Samson actually knew on some level exactly what he was doing. It seems at least possible that Samson was neither loyal nor naive; rather, through his relations with foreign women he sought to rebel against his parents and to proceed violently down a path of self-destruction. What else can explain his refusal to censure Delilah when she so obviously tries to put him at risk? As Bal puts it, "Why does Samson not reproach Delilah for her betrayal? Why does he accept Delilah's reproaches without giving his own view? Why does he finally give her the crucial information, thus sealing his undoing, instead of acting to prevent it? These three problems come together in a most crucial question raised by the catastrophe: why does he expect to be saved when he is shaved?"<sup>12</sup> Samson is not naive; rather, heading down a path which is clearly self-destructive, Samson proceeds with haste,

<sup>12</sup>Mieke Bal, Lethal Love, p.40.

failing to pause to consider a more secure route. Finally, once he is in the hands of the Philistines, he prays to God to give him what he seems to have sought for so long--a complete waning of his strength.



## TALMUDIC AGGADAH

## A. From Sotah 9b:

"And it came to pass afterward, that he loved a woman in the valley of Sorek, whose name was Delilah." It has been taught: Rabbi says: If her name had not been called Delilah, she was fit that it should be so called. She weakened ("Dildelah") his strength, she weakened his heart, she weakened his actions. 'She weakened his strength', as it is written, "And his strength went from him." (Judges 16:19) "She weakened his heart," as it is written, "And when Delilah saw that he had told her all his heart." (Judges 16:18) "She weakened his actions," since the Shechinah departed from him, as it is written, "But he did not know that the Lord had departed from him." (Judges 16:20)

## B. From Sotah 9b:

"And it came to pass, when she pressed him daily with her words, and urged him." (Judges 16:16) What means "and urged him"? R. Isaac of the School of R. Ammi said: At the time of the consummation, she detached herself from him.

## C. From Sotah 10a:

R. Johanan said: "Grind" means nothing else than [sexual] transgression; and thus it is stated, "Then let my wife grind unto another" (Job 31:10) It teaches that everyone brought his wife to him to the prison that she might bear a child by him [who would be as strong as he was]. R. Papa said: That is what the proverb tells, "Before the wine-drinker [set] wine, before a ploughman a basket of roots."

## D. From Talmud Yerushalmi, Ketubot 37b:

Why so [that there should be seven obligations for a woman, three for a man]? It is in line with what R. Yohanan said, "The anguish of a man is greater than that of a woman [in being deprived of wifely services]." There is a pertinent verse of Scripture: "And when she

pressed him hard with her words day after day, and urged him, [his soul was vexed to death]" (Judges 16:16). What is the meaning of, "and urged him"? said R. Isaac bar Eleazar, "She would pull herself out from under him." "His soul was vexed to death," but her soul was not vexed to death. And there are those who say that she found the necessary satisfaction with other men. All the more so that she desired sexual relations! [The rule under discussion is in line with what] R. Nahman said in the name of R. Nahman: "That certain organ--if she starves it, she makes it satisfied. The more she satisfies it, the more she makes it hungry."<sup>14</sup>

The biblical material cited in the first section of this chapter suggests at the very least that the Samson myth, like most literature, may be read with a number of varying but more or less equally plausible interpretations. The reputations attributed to the characters of Samson, often seen as loyal and naive, and of Delilah, often seen as deceptive and traitorous, are not as clearly determined in the Judges text as is so commonly assumed. They are much more clearly defined in this manner in texts produced in the post-biblical world, beginning with the talmudic aggadah of the rabbinic period and continuing through modern fiction.

Talmudic aggadah written about Delilah portrays her as a debilitating force in Samson's life, and as a sexual temptress and manipulator. It seems that for the rabbis, Delilah embodied many of their fears regarding

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<sup>14</sup>Jacob Neusner, The Talmud of the Land of Israel: Ketubot, Vol.22, p.192.

seductive women. Of the Yael tale Nehama Aschkenasy writes: "At the core of the Judges tale...as well as of similar later stories, lies a well-defined feminine strategy: the use of sex as a bait to gain man's trust and then overpower him and put him under the woman's control. The biblical narrators use a known formula that stems from the male fear of women, which is the seduction of the unsuspecting man at the hands of the treacherous female. Yet as the tales are recounted and given a historical reality and individualized characters, the various female protagonists are extolled as paragons of virtue and loyalty, and the evil men are seen as being justly punished."<sup>15</sup>

The reader of the above aggadah may note that Aschkenasy is right on the mark in her depiction and analysis of the seduction formula which applies not only to rabbinic portrayals of Yael but to those of Delilah, as well. Regarding the issue of male fear affecting the transmission of myths which share this formula, Mieke Bal writes, "The ideological use of the stories depends on it. Thus the underlying claim is that the women's identity can be simply derived from their sexuality, or rather, from that of the men. It is only through sex that the women gain access to the men at all. And since, in this perspective, the identity of men depends

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<sup>15</sup>Aschkenasy, Op.Cit., p.172.

heavily on their control over women as sexual beings, this reversal of power is what threatens them most. This is the strongest motivation of the survival of these stories as ideostories."<sup>16</sup> In other words, one might conclude, the stories are preserved as warnings to men about the threat of the seductive power women hold.

The validity of Aschkenasy's comment regarding the changed depiction of women like Yael in a "historical reality" was demonstrated in the preceding chapter; it is not the case regarding Delilah, because there is no tension in the story between improper ethical conduct and loyalty to Israel--Delilah, according to this formula, does not act ethically, but neither is she an Israelite who must remain loyal to the people. Therefore, the rabbis who received the Samson myth had no need to reconcile this type of contradiction, as they did in the case of Yael. This is clear in the passages presented above.

The first aggadah from Sotah 9b (A) states that Delilah deserved her name because etymologically it is related to the verb meaning "she weakened." Indeed, the aggadah states with scriptural support, Delilah weakened Samson's strength, his heart and his actions. The verb dildelah does not only have the meaning of weaken; it can also mean exhaust, deplete, loosen, cause to hang

<sup>16</sup>Mieke Bal, Death and Dissymmetry, p.27.

down, make flaccid, or cause to be lax.<sup>17</sup> It seems plausible that on some level, what is being suggested here is that Delilah wore out Samson sexually. She is not blamed for weakening his mind, which might have been the case had the biblical story portrayed her as genuinely crafty and devious; instead, she depleted his strength, heart, and actions. A second interpretation of what the rabbis suggested with the word dildelah, is that Delilah in some way castrated Samson. If it is not clear that this is meant sexually, then the next aggadah from Sotah 10a may be viewed as considerably more explicit.

The means Delilah used in order to weaken Samson are stated here (B) quite straightforwardly. She would engage in sexual relations with him, but at the time of "consummation" she would deny him. In regard to this aggadah, it will prove interesting once again to turn to the work of Mieke Bal. Bal studied not only the myth of Samson as it is presented in the biblical text; she also used her skills as literary critic to examine popular folk renditions of the story. It is fascinating to note the similarity between this aggadah and the more recent versions of the myth which she discovered. About Delilah, much folklore states: "She provokes him with

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<sup>17</sup>R. Alcalay, The Complete Hebrew-English Dictionary, p.438.

coquetry, pretending to refuse him and thus exciting him more."<sup>10</sup> Needless to say, Bal points out, the text does not give the slightest hint that would support these assumptions. Of course, in the case of aggadah, no real textual support is necessary or even suggested. What is suggested is that the implication that Delilah acted thus existed not in the Judges passage, but deep in the fears of the rabbis who wrote the aggadah.

The third aggadah from Sotah 10a (C) is a testimony to the rabbis' view that the Philistines (among whom Delilah was one, of course) lived by no sexual principles. To suggest that all the Philistine women went to the prison to have intercourse with Samson implies that they actively and openly committed adultery; it is also a hint at Samson's great sexual prowess, and perhaps too, his own lack of propriety.

The aggadah from Talmud Yerushalmi, Ketubot 37b (D) begins with a section similar to the one cited in (B). It goes on to say that Delilah satisfied her sexual desires with other men. Again, similarity is found between this interpretation and some of the folklore examined in Bal's study. In some of that literature, of Delilah it is said, "She has many lovers, is engaged to many men, and is greedy; she is a slut."<sup>11</sup> The final

<sup>10</sup>Bal, Lethal Love, p.50.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p.50.

comment of the aggadah, in which women are described as feeders of "that certain organ," can only be viewed as extremely sex-negative; starvation equals satisfaction, whereas satisfaction equals hunger.



## MODERN FICTION

Included in this section are the dramatic readings "The Philistines and Delilah," "Delilah and Samson," and "Delilah" by Moshe Chaim Luzzato, and the poem "Delilah" by Leah Goldberg.

The works by Luzzato progress chronologically according to the biblical story line. In "The Philistines and Delilah," a scene is enacted in which Delilah argues with the Philistines over their offer to pay her to kill Samson. She is portrayed as a clever negotiator, claiming that her love for Samson is deep and thus the Philistines had better be willing to pay a high price in order to acquire her willingness to betray her lover.

The first section of Luzzato's "Delilah and Samson" resembles the biblical text, in which Delilah unavailingly asks Samson three times to reveal the secret to his strength. After her third attempt, Delilah accuses Samson of deception. She threatens to withhold her love from Samson if he refuses to tell her the truth, and of course, he succumbs to her pressure. Interestingly, when Samson is finally defeated, his initial reaction upon realizing what has happened is to blame himself for having transgressed against God. It is not until "Delilah" that Samson expresses his anger at her



betrayal.

An interesting aspect of Leah Goldberg's "Delilah" is her statement that Samson recognized Delilah's motives; nevertheless, he continued to reveal himself to her: "Now he surely knew that she was a traitor,/ Yet he was submissive to her flattering language./ He knew he would die by her hand--/ Philistines are upon you, Samson." Goldberg's depiction of Samson is consistent with Mieke Bal's hypothesis that the biblical text suggests that Samson realized exactly what Delilah was doing, and willingly participated in his own demise.

# THE PHILISTINES AND DELILAH

By Moshe Chaim Luzzato

Philistines:

Between your breasts, burning  
In the flame of your desire, does not Samson sleep  
    soundly  
He, our enemy  
The destroyer of our land.  
Here by the light of your arrows,  
Like a deer by a snare, he shall go into captivity--  
Without you there is no way to help us,  
Only if you shall see with what his strength increases  
And how we can overcome him so that we may imprison him  
To humiliate him, until he is subdued.

Delilah:

And how can you want of me  
To betray the companion of my desire, and what will I  
    not be returning  
Hatred and faithlessness in place of his love?  
Before it opens its mouth,  
The earth shall swallow me like it swallowed Korah,  
If this shameful thing be done upon it!  
And how can I see  
The bosom I love slain at the hand of an enemy  
Would I not hasten my bosom to absorb the weapons  
They would even be pleasing to me if  
Fiery arrows and death were to reach my heart  
If I could save his bosom, selah.  
I would consider my death instead of his to be precious  
    delicacies  
Choice honeys--every wish and touch,  
And with his death my life would depart peacefully.  
How can you say to me, unwise people: Give  
The life of your desired companion into our teeth?  
Are you not asking that I give my own life,  
For even death shall not separate us.

משה חיים לוצאטו: פלשתים ודלילה

פלשתים:

הלא בבין שדוד,  
בוצר באט חשקך, ילן בטיח  
שקסוק, זה אויבנו  
המחריב ארצנו.  
הנה לאור חצונך,  
כצבי ליד יקוש, ילך בשבילי.  
אין עוד בלתיך איפא להועיל לנו,  
אשר תראי במה זה כתו ירב  
ובמה נוכל לו ואסרנוהו  
לענותו, עד כי ערפו יכנוע.

דלילה:

ואיך תאבו ממני  
לבד בידיד חשקי, ולא אשיבה  
תחת אהבתו שנאה ופשע?

טרם תפתח את פיה,

תבלע ארץ אותי כבלע קרח,  
כי תעשה נבלה זאת עליה!  
ואיככה אוכל נא וראיתי  
שדוד ביד שונא החיק אהבתיו  
הלא חיקי ארץ נם לקראת נשק,  
אף נמלצו לי אם עד לב יגיעו  
זקים, חצים ומות,  
אם אוכלה מלס את חיקי סלה.  
אחשב מותי תחתיו עדני-מנד,  
נפת צופים - כל אחלה וננע,  
ובצאת נפשו תצא נפשי כרגע.  
איך תאמרו לי, עם לא הקם: תני  
נפש ידיד חשקך לבין שנינו  
הלא את נפשי תשאלו ממני,  
כי גם המות לא יפריד בינינו.

## DELILAH AND SAMSON

By Moshe Chaim Luzzato

Delilah:

My beloved is white and ruddy, the one I love!<sup>20</sup>  
 How much sweeter than honey to my palate is  
 The precious fruit of your love!  
 For I was astounded  
 Upon seeing your great strength (and who can match it)!  
 However you shall tell me--how did you increase  
 This great strength and your plentiful vigour?  
 Is there anyone on earth who can  
 Make you helpless and tie you up, or is there not?

Samson:

A man can make me helpless,  
 If I were to be tied  
 With seven tendons not yet dried  
 Then my might would abandon me and depart,  
 Then I would resemble all mortal men.

Delilah:

Now I shall see if I can make you helpless.

(She binds him)

Wake up, Samson, wake up,  
 The Philistines are upon you.

Samson:

Should Philistines come, I shall not fear them;  
 For this is how I would tear apart  
 All the tendons together, as a strand of tow is torn  
 At the touch of fire.

(He tears them apart.)

Delilah:

Surely you have deceived me! Now tell me  
 The real truth:  
 With what could you be tied up and made helpless?

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<sup>20</sup>See Song of Songs 5:10

Samson:

If one were to tie me up with  
New ropes, then I would become weak  
As long as no work had been done with them.

Delilah:

Now I shall see if you have told the truth.

(She binds him.)

Wake up, Samson, wake up,  
For the Philistines are upon you!

Samson:

Should Philistines come  
I shall not fear them:  
For I will tear all these ropes  
Off my arms like a thread.

(He tears them.)

Delilah:

Surely you have been deceiving me all along, Samson.  
Now tell me the truth:  
With what may you be tied up that would make you  
helpless?

Samson:

If you weave seven  
Locks of my head into the web.

Delilah:

Surely now I shall see if this time too  
You have deceived me or if your words are true.

(She weaves the locks of his head.)

Wake up, Samson, wake up,  
For the Philistines are upon you!

Samson:

Should Philistines come,  
I shall not fear them:  
For now I shall pull out  
The peg, the loom, and the web.

(He pulls them out.)

Delilah:

But how can you declare to me: I love you  
When your heart distances itself so far from me!  
Is this the recompense you offer  
For my love which is strong as death?  
Is this the fruit of my desire which I shall harvest  
From you, cruel one?

Samson:

And am I cruel?

Delilah:

Are you not cruel,  
For you see my heart in a consuming flame  
Cruel (and you are so cruel!)  
It shall burn for you,  
Instead you offer me your stiff-neckedness?  
What is sweeter to my palate than  
The fruit of your love?  
And you scorn the sweetness of my love!  
But I really erred  
Saying: I loved you  
For love can no longer reach you,  
For you will not know it and you will not touch it.  
Surely if you do not know  
To quench my desire, you will be sated with my wrath!  
My stiff-neckedness shall crush your stiff-neckedness  
My evil thought shall rise over your evil thought!  
Speaking sweet words to an evil heart  
Is like a ragged piece of clothing on a chilly winter  
day.  
For gentle speech is worthless next to stiff-neckedness,  
Only a violent answer will crush it!

Samson:

Surely you see that which would enfeeble my strength  
you, beautiful one<sup>21</sup>, and your benevolent face.  
If you move your foot to go away from me,  
My heart will shift from its place to flee  
And to wander after you  
Thus my bones become brittle,  
For they will see their king cut off from the earth;  
And like the dead corpses in the grave,

<sup>21</sup>This means literally "graceful gazelle."

It expired inside me and turned to stone.

Delilah:

Your heart did not just turn to stone,  
For it was thus from the day it was created.

Samson:

Do not cast more of your arrows against me, beauty,  
For I have been weakened by your blows,  
I have almost died.

Delilah:

My heart shall not be melted by the sound of your words.

Samson:

But my heart will be melted by the sound of your words:  
Your words are arrows and death to me.  
Is there no balm which can heal my pain?

Delilah:

Indeed, the balm for your pain is my hand.

Samson:

How long will I be tortured? What fault have you found  
in me?

Delilah:

Until you find the balm for your pains.

Samson:

How can I find the balm for my pang,  
If it is in your hand?

Delilah:

If it is in your hands.

Samson:

The only balm for my pain is for you to love me.

Delilah:

The only balm for your pang is for you to love me.

Samson:

For me to love you! And why am I sick?  
For I only love you, though you love me not.

Delilah:

I should love you? And what am I angry about!  
Only over you, that I love.

Samson:

And what do you desire?

Delilah:

What do I desire--you know:  
For you to tell me what makes your strength so great!  
But do not continue to deceive me as you have until now.

Samson:

If this is all you desire, I shall do your will,  
Come, beauty, and anger shall depart,  
And I shall tell you the truth:  
I have been a Nazirite of God  
Since I was in my mother's womb and I have not been  
shaved.  
Were I to be shaved now--my strength would wane  
And my strength would be like that of the average man.

Delilah:

(She calls a messenger, without Samson seeing)

Call my people's generals, that they should come,  
For now he has revealed to me his whole heart.

Delilah (to Samson):

See now how your pains will cease,  
For you will once again be my lover as you were.  
Now celebrate with me, and I will rejoice with you.  
Now return to my bosom, for I love you,  
Play securely at my knees--  
Since I have seen that you love me,  
Not like when, until now, you acted foolishly.<sup>22</sup>

(He sleeps on her knees.)

<sup>22</sup>See Genesis 31:8.



Delilah (to the man):

Get up, hurry, do not delay--and shave him.

(He shaves Samson.)

Delilah:

Wake up, Samson, wake up,  
For Philistines are upon you!

(He awakens.)

Samson:

What has happened to me--my knees are weak,  
My power is no longer with me, and my strength has  
departed.

What is this, that I can no longer rise? Alas, I am  
shaved!

Philistines:

Now get up and stand opposite us,  
Get up, bestir yourself as before:  
Even if your head has been shaved,  
Your strength has not been shaved!

Samson:

What more can I say, I have done it  
God is just, for I disobeyed!

Philistines:

Now the violence you spread  
Shall fall on your head  
Now get up and seize him,  
Gouge out his haughty eyes, then take him down  
To Gaza,  
There force his foot into chains.

(They seize him, take him down, and do all this to him.)

משה חיים לוצאטו: דלילה ושמשון

דלילה

הודי צח ואדם, אשר אהבתי!  
מה מדבש מתיק לחכי מגד  
פרי ידידותי!  
כן נוראות נפילתי  
בראות רב עוף ובי כמיהו!  
אולם אמר-נא לי: במה הגדלת  
זה כחך גדול ותקפך ירב?  
היכול איש בארץ  
ענותך ואסרך, אם אין?

שמשון

יוכל ענותי ירב,  
כי אם עוד ואסרוני  
בשבעה יתרים כי לא תרבו.  
הן תשוב אותי כחי והלך,  
או אדמה לבני-חלונתם יתר.

דלילה

עתה ארצה אם אוכל ענותך.  
(תאסרתו)

דלילה

עורה-נא, שמשון, עורה,  
כי פלשתים עליך.

שמשון

אם פלשתים יבאו, כי לא מהם אטירה;  
כי כן אנתק עתה,  
כאשר ינתק סתיל וערת

בחריתו אש, היתרים יחד.

(ינתק אותם)

דלילה

אמנם התלת ביו עתה הנידה  
דברי אמונה אמנ:  
במה תאסר נא לענותך?

שמשון

אם אסר ואסרוני  
בעבותים חדשים, או חליתי,  
אם לא נעשה מלאכה בהמה.

דלילה

עתה אראה אם האמת הנדת.  
(תאסרתו)  
עורה-נא, שמשון, עורה,  
כי פלשתים עליך!

שמשון

אם פלשתים יבאו,  
כי לא מהם אטירה:  
כי אנתק את העבותים אלה  
מעל זרועותי כחוט גם יחד.  
(ינתקם)

דלילה

הנה התלת בי, שמשון, צד הנה.  
עתה אמת הנידה:  
במה תאסר נא לענותך?

שמשון

אם תארגני את שבע  
אל מחלפות ראשי עם המסכת.

דלילה

הנה עתה אראה, אם גם הפעם  
התלת בי או כי קדש עליך.  
(תארגנו את בחלפות ראשי)

עורה-נא, שמשון, עורה,  
כי פלשתים עליך!

שמשון

אם פלשתים יבאו,  
כי לא מהם אטירה:  
הנה עתה אסייעה  
היתד הארגי והמסכת.  
(יסיעם)

דלילה

אך איך אמר תאמר לי: אהבתיך  
ולבך ירחק מאד מקניו!  
הזה נמול תשיבה  
אל אהבתי העזה כמות?  
הזה פרי חשקי אשר אקצרה  
אאתך, אכנור?

שמשון

ואכנור אני!

דלילה

האם לא אכנור אתה,

א.ה.ה.ה.ה.ה.

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עֲלֵה לְךָ מִן הָאֵשׁ וְעָלָה אֶת הָאֵשׁ וְעָלָה אֶת הָאֵשׁ וְעָלָה אֶת הָאֵשׁ

[illegible]

ငါ့ ကံကံ, ကံကံ

שִׁלְמֵהֶם אֶת־הַכֶּסֶף

וְהָיָה כִּי יִשְׁמַע ה' אֶת הַקּוֹל  
וְהָיָה כִּי יִשְׁמַע ה' אֶת הַקּוֹל

[illegible]

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וְהָאֵלֹהִים מְלֵאךְ מְלֵאכֵי

בְּלִילֵי מַצּוֹת וְלֵילֵי מַצּוֹת

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וְהַלְלָתֶם, סֶלָה, עַל יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ

ΣΟΦΙΑ

אֵלֶּיךָ יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְלֹא אֵלֶּיךָ יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ.

אברהם בן יצחק

ה'תשנ"ב

2000

五、六、七、八、九、十、十一、十二、十三、十四、十五、十六、十七、十八、十九、二十、二十一、二十二、二十三、二十四、二十五、二十六、二十七、二十八、二十九、三十、三十一、三十二、三十三、三十四、三十五、三十六、三十七、三十八、三十九、四十、四十一、四十二、四十三、四十四、四十五、四十六、四十七、四十八、四十九、五十、五十一、五十二、五十三、五十四、五十五、五十六、五十七、五十八、五十九、六十、六十一、六十二、六十三、六十四、六十五、六十六、六十七、六十八、六十九、七十、七十一、七十二、七十三、七十四、七十五、七十六、七十七、七十八、七十九、八十、八十一、八十二、八十三、八十四、八十五、八十六、八十七、八十八、八十九、九十、九十一、九十二、九十三、九十四、九十五、九十六、九十七、九十八、九十九、一百。

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THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

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משה חיים לוצאטו: דלילה

--- ארור יהי היום אותך ידעתי,  
יום כי צבי אשה עיני בחרו!  
יהי נה תנים ומדבר חרב  
נחל שורק, מקום קמוש וחוח!  
תבלע ארץ אותך, בת בליעל,  
הוי, דלילה בונדת!  
תשכן צננה על היום ראיתי  
אותך, יום כי יסיר בונד חסדתי.

יום כי לקח לבי זיו עפעפיד.  
יום חלק שפתוך הדינני!  
הנה חשך יהי יום האמנתי  
דברי תרמיתך כאמנה אמן,  
אז כי לבך לי אש בוער הראית,  
בו תעמדות כל תועבות יחד,  
אז כי הרך לבי וליד הרשע  
ונאת סודי לך, בונדת, הנדתי.

אז כי לראשי קדמת ברכים  
ועליהם שכבתי ואישנה!  
אך מה אמרו הן אנכי חסאתי  
אל צור אשר גומן ליעף כח,  
ובחיק נצירת לב אותו שכחתי.  
שמתו פלשתים כי לכם לשמת,  
כי זרועי נשבר כשבר נבל.  
בלחי החמוד אלף איש הכיתי,  
ובאין שרפא בחיק אשה חליתי.  
אמנם, לא דען הוא כי הדינני.  
אך אלהי אבי - כי בו סרדתי.

צורי ישועתי - כי בו בונדתי.

האנק דם, לבי! לקח תצעקה  
ברעתך, ואמה הסבות!  
לשוא חבכה נישועתך רתקה,  
כי פריד זה אשר הרעות!  
זכרה, אלהי נא, אשר שססתי  
עשרים שנותא ישראל עמך  
והתוק עזי נא אך הפעם.  
עד כי נקמת אחת מעיני עתה  
אנקמה מני פלשתים אלה!

## DELILAH

By Leah Goldberg

## A. Opening

Camel drivers told it at the inn,  
Donkey drivers jested about it,  
It was said of Samson at the inn:  
There is none like him, he is a unique one.

His arm is like a hardened sledgehammer,  
His fist like a striking mallet,  
And his strength is reinforced by cunning.  
The enemy shall flee like a rabbit.

For he trapped foxes in the forest  
Their tails carried the flame,  
And his wife's house was burned too  
For a lustful heifer deceived him.

This is what camel drivers told at the inn.  
Donkey drivers jested scornfully.  
His name went from inn to inn  
For he was strong, heroic, singular.

The fools opened their mouths agape,  
Wise men nodded their heads,  
And even the Philistine rulers  
Spoke publicly of his praise.

And a tribe of judges was given to him  
And tribes and nations trembled,  
And it was said in battlefields and at feasts  
That he was a hero, a ruler, a prince.

And perhaps even he did not know  
That his law was the law of the Nazirite and the  
visionary,  
That simple as the solution to any riddle  
Was the fragile heart in his chest.

## B. Their word

The honey sweetens in the carcass of young lions<sup>24</sup>  
 And a weak heart--in the body of heros.  
 Young women told it near and far:  
 Thus from the strong came out sweetness.<sup>25</sup>

## C. The young Philistine women

And it was told in battlefields and at feasts,  
 And the story became legend--  
 That he tore ropes like flax,  
 Cords like threads of chaff.

As he passed, women went to their window  
 Gazing with desire and fear,  
 The young women of Gaza and all those of Ashkelon.  
 Men's wives and harlots alike.

And the slander burned in their mouths  
 When they saw the youth approach:  
 How he left the harlot's chamber at midnight  
 Carrying the gate on his shoulders.

And in every house a younger sister  
 Whispered into the ear of her sister:  
 He slept in the harlot's arms  
 And our city is unwalled, conquered.,.

And when his figure dimmed in the window  
 And disappeared down the king's road,  
 The young women of Gaza and all those of Ashkelon  
 Would return to the loom<sup>26</sup>, to the spindle.

They would sit and spin the flax,  
 They would weave cords like those  
 That none of the Philistine heros  
 Could hope for even in their greatest dreams.

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<sup>24</sup>See Judges 14:8.

<sup>25</sup>See Judges 14:14.

<sup>26</sup>Reference is made here to the rabbinic statement, "There is no wisdom for a woman except at the distaff;" in other words, "A woman's place is in the home." (ein l'ishah chochmah ki b'felech)



## D. The honey

And he went walking and eating  
 While the honey was dripping from his hands,  
 And he rejoiced over his strength for it was great,  
 And he rejoiced over his strength for he had conquered.

And he went and sang in the hills  
 With a riddle and its solution in his heart.  
 And the sun's rays became golden  
 In the drops of honey that fell.

And he brought his father and mother  
 A gift of honey to their poor dwelling-place.  
 And they ate it for its taste was good,  
 And they went down to the Timnite house with him.

And he went, with a new solution  
 To the riddle, like a worm in a piece of fruit:  
 Woman is sweeter than honey  
 And the inclination is stronger than a lion!

## E. Song of the damsels

Seven locks of hair on your head, Samson  
 Like the sun's rays on your head, Samson,  
 Pretty young women in your bosom, Samson,  
 Darken your mother's house, Samson.

And the hero left the village, alas,  
 And the hero loved a foreign woman, alas.

Beware of the uncircumcised men's daughters, Samson.  
 From the captivating glances, from the chains, Samson,  
 Be sharp, sharpen a riddle for the uncircumcised,  
 Samson,  
 Hunt, hunt foxes in the forest, Samson.

And the hero left the village, alas,  
 And the hero loved a foreign woman, alas.

## F. And he loved a woman by the brook of Sorek.

There are seven roads from the village  
 Every vain and light fellow walks down them.  
 And Samson chose just one road  
 The one leading to the brook of Sorek.



## G. Delilah

Now he surely knew that she was a traitor,  
Yet he was submissive to her flattering language.  
He knew he would die by her hand--  
Philistines are upon you, Samson.

And he returned and lay in her bosom  
With his figure on guard in the darkness.  
For through all her betrayal she said sweetly--  
Philistines are upon you, Samson.

For he conquered her as one conquers his enemy  
And every night was like their first tryst.<sup>27</sup>  
And his heart shouted alarms--  
Philistines are upon you, Samson.

Only when the riotous mass,  
In a moment when love slapped him into a rude awakening  
Did he open his eyes and see  
While her comrades gouged out his eyes.

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<sup>27</sup>There may be a play here on hesed meaning disgrace, shame, abomination.

## לאה גולדברג: דלילה

א. פתיחה

ספרו נמלים בפנדק,  
חמרים לצון חמדו.  
ידבר בשמשון בפנדק:  
אין כמוהו, יחיד, אחד הוא.

זרועו כקרנס נחושה,  
אגרומו כהולם במקבת,  
ואונו בערמה יחשל.  
ויעס האויב כארנבת.

כי צודד שועלים בתרשה  
ונבזתם נסאו השלהבת,  
ותשרף גם בית האשה  
כי רמתהו עגלה עונבת.

כך ספרו נמלים בפנדק.  
חמרים לצון חמדו.  
שמו הלך מפנדק לפנדק  
כי חזק, כי גבור, כי אחד הוא.

פערו את פיהם השוטנים,  
חקמים ראשיהם הנידו,  
ואסלו סרני הפלשתים  
את שבחו ברבים הנידו.

ותן לו שבס שופטים  
ושבטים וגוים הרעידו,  
וידבר בקרבות ובמשטים  
כי גבור, כי שליט, כי נגיד הוא.

ואולי אף הוא לא ידע  
כי דיעו דין נזיר והזהה,  
כי פשוט כפתרון כל חידה  
לכבו השכיר בתזה.

ב. מלחם

ימתק הדבש במסלת כפירים  
ולב חלש - בטף גבורים.  
הנידו בנות לקרוב, לרחוק:  
אכן מעז יצא מחוק.

ג. בנות מלחם

ויספח בקרבות ובמשטים,  
ויהי הספור למסרת -  
כי נחק יתרים כפשתים,  
עבזתים כפתילי הנערת.

בעצרו ונשים בחלון  
ושקפות בתשוקה נפתח.  
בנות עזה וכל בנות אשקלון.  
אשת-איש חוננה גם יחד.

ודולקה בפיהן הדבה  
בראותן כי קרב הנער:  
איד יצא בחצות מקבה  
ונשא על כתפיו את השער.

ובכל בית אחות קטנה  
על אגני אחותה מלחשת:  
הוא שכב בזרעות חוננה  
ועירנו פרוצה, נכבשת.

ודמיתו כי חכמה בחלון  
ואבדה בדרך המלך.  
בנות עזה וכל בנות אשקלון  
אל הגול חזרות, אל הפלך.

הן יושבות ומזרות כפשתים,  
הן שוזרות עבזתים כאלו  
אשר כל גבורי הפלשתים  
במיטב חלומם לא יחלו.

ד. הרבש

מלך הלוד ואכול  
ונטף מידיו הדבש,  
וישמש על כחו כי גדול,  
וישמש על כחו כי כבש.

מלך וישיב ברמה  
ויכלבו גם סתרון גם חידה.  
ויהיבו קרני החמה  
באגלי הדבש שרדה.

ויביא לאביו ואמו  
דבש מנחה לגנה העני.  
ויאכלוהו כי טוב טעמו,  
וירדו עמו בית התמני.

מלך, ופתרון חדש  
בחידה כתלעת בפרי:  
האשה מתוקה מדבש  
והיצר עז מארי!

ה. שיר העלמות

שבע מחלמות לראשך, שמשון  
 כקרני השמש לראשך, שמשון.  
 עלמות יפות בתיקך, שמשון.  
 מהבנוף אמש בית-אמך, שמשון.

וילך הנבור מן הכפר, אבוי.  
 ויאהב הנבור בת-נכר, אבוי.

הזהר מבת הערלים, שמשון.  
 מקסמי מבט, מן הכבלים, שמשון.  
 חזרה, תוד חידה לערלים, שמשון.  
 צודה, צוד ביער שועלים, שמשון.

וילך הנבור מן הכפר, אבוי.  
 ויאהב הנבור בת-נכר, אבוי.

ו. ויאהב אשה בנחל שורק

שבעה דרכים מן הכפר  
 כם ילך כל פוחז וריק.  
 ושמשון רק בדרך אחד יבחר:  
 בואכה נחל-שורק.

ז. דלילה

הן ידוע ידע שבגדה  
 ונכנע לחלקת הלשון.  
 הוא ידע שימות מידה -  
 פלשתים עליה, שמשון.

ויחזר וישכב בתיקה  
 עם דמותו הצופה באישון.  
 כי בכל בידותיה מתקה -  
 פלשתים עליה, שמשון.

כי כבשה כובש את אויבו  
 וכל לילה לו חסד ראשון.  
 ויצהל חרדות לבבו -  
 פלשתים עליה, שמשון.

רק בבוא העדה הפרועה,  
 עת ססחה אהבה על פניו.  
 הוא פקח את עיניו וראה  
 ורעה נקרו את עיניו.

## CHAPTER THREE: THE STORY OF JUDITH

The story recounted in the Book of Judith bears a strong resemblance to the tales of Yael and Sisera, and Delilah and Samson. Here again, in the case of Judith, a woman protagonist uses her sexual strength to manipulate an enemy warrior into a position of submissiveness. Once again, the seductive woman is victorious, the male soldier meets his demise, and the enemy is (for the time being) defeated. Because Judith is a Jew, the parallel between her act and that of Yael is most striking, since each is regarded for having played a redemptive role in the journey of the Jewish people. This similarity has been noted by a number of authors, a few of whom will be mentioned below. Given this similarity, it is curious to note that the story of Judith was not canonized; surely it seems unlikely that it was omitted from the canon because of its portrayal of a seductive and violent female subject, as expunged too, then, would probably have been the story of Yael, and perhaps that of Delilah as well. Nevertheless, at least one critic--Toni Craven, author of Artistry and Faith in the Book of Judith--suggests that Judith was too radical a woman for the tradition to memorialize; other critics have posited different theories which attempt to explain Judith's exclusion from the canon.

Nehama Aschkenasy addresses the parallel between

Judith and Yael. "The Apocryphal story of Judith, who delivered her people from the hand of the ruthless Assyrian Holofernes, is an elaborate version of the Jael and Sisera tale. Here the protagonist is a beautiful Hebrew woman who comes over to Holofernes' camp and bewitches him with her wisdom and charm. The man interprets her demeanor as signifying sexual promise, but when the right moment comes, the woman sees to it that the man gets heavily drunk, and when he falls asleep she beheads him, puts his head in her bag, and returns to her people with a tangible sign of victory. Unlike in the Jael story, where the narrator seems to be making an effort to suppress the sexual aspect, the narrator of Judith plays up Holofernes' desire for the beautiful woman, and delights in its frustration. What materializes is not the man's lust, but the woman's revenge."<sup>1</sup>

Andre LaCocque, author of The Feminine Unconventional, also describes the similarity between the story of Judith and the story of Yael. "The parallel with Judith is arresting. Jael also beguiles a general; she also wins his trust in order better to destroy him; the scene also occurs in a tent, and if Sisera is not beheaded by Jael, his head is all the same transfixed by

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<sup>1</sup>Aschkenasy, Eve's Journey: Feminine Images in Hebraic Literary Tradition, p.172.

a peg. Furthermore, Jael is eulogized, 'blessed among women is Jael,' (Judges 5:24) while to Judith it is said almost similarly, 'more blessed are you by God Most High than all other women on earth' (13:8). About Judith, as about Jael, the text concludes that she brought her people peace for a long time after that (16:25); in the case of Jael, Judges 5:31 speaks of forty years of tranquility."<sup>2</sup>

While the tales of Yael and Judith do follow very similar story lines, they are certainly not identical. Henry Bamberger, in his article "The Book of Judith: Some Further Notes," discusses what he regards as a significant difference. Yael used a wooden tent stake in order to kill Sisera, while Judith used Sisera's own sword to cut off his head; the differing nature of the weaponry used by each of the two female protagonists may explain why Judith did not ultimately get canonized. "An important difference marks the two killings. In the Book of Judges, Jael kills the enemy general with a mallet and tent pin. In both versions of Judith the heroine makes use of Holofernes' own sword...By the time the canonization of Judith could be considered, Judith's very use of the sword put her in violation of the law. It was not that she had killed an enemy; that, in itself, would have been deemed heroic. However, the

<sup>2</sup>Andre LaCocque, The Feminine Unconventional, p.37.



sword was forbidden to her."<sup>2</sup>

Another hypothesis as to why the Book of Judith did not get canonized is related to an issue regarding the Jewish laws of conversion. In the narrative, one of the characters--Achior--converts to Judaism. The conversion of Achior is problematic for two reasons: He is an Ammonite, and the passage in Deuteronomy 23:3 states that it is forbidden for Ammonites to convert to Judaism; in addition, while Achior is circumcised, he does not undergo a ritual immersion. For the rabbis to enter into the sacred canon a book that does not instruct readers on the proper conduct rabbinically prescribed would be antithetical to the canonizers' interests; thus, it is suggested, the rabbis did not canonize the Book of Judith.<sup>4</sup>

Toni Craven rejects this view explaining why Judith was not included in the canon. "The explanation that Achior's conversion forbade the inclusion of the book in the canon because of his nationality and because he was not first baptized is not wholly convincing. Is his joining of the community not comparable with that of Ruth? Deuteronomy 23:3 expressly forbade the admission of an Ammonite or a Moabite to the assembly of Yahweh.

<sup>2</sup>Henry Bamberger, "The Book of Judith: Some Further Notes," in Journal of Reform Judaism Spring 1980, p.86.

<sup>4</sup>Carey A. Moore, The Anchor Bible: Judith, p.87.

If Ruth the Moabite was permitted to join the community, should not Achior the Ammonite have had the same privilege? Enslin and Zeitlin point out that the sages reconciled this difficulty by declaring that the Pentateuchal law referred to males only, and thus only Achior was excluded from community membership. This explanation rings of sophistry, and one wonders what motivated it..."<sup>2</sup>

Instead, Craven posits an interesting theory, one that may be influenced by feminist criticism. She suggests that the story of Judith proved to be too threatening to the rabbis, Jewry's male transmitters of literary tradition. This is due to what may have been perceived as an untenable contradiction between Judith's high level of piety and her outrageous stepping out of the traditional gender roles assigned to the women of her day. "Though Judith's story is set squarely within the framework of the tradition, its program is far from traditional. From the moment that Judith appears in the story until the moment of her death, she is faithful to the letter of the law but not restricted to traditional modes of behavior. Judith's fear of the Lord is so profound that she fears no one or thing other than Yahweh. Imagine what life would be like if women were free to chastise the leading men of their communities,

<sup>2</sup>Craven, Op.Cit., p.117.

if they dared to act independently in the face of traumas, if they refused to marry, and if they had money and servants of their own...[But] the endurance of the story testifies to the validity of the message that life need be based on no security other than faith in Yahweh...Indeed on theological grounds...the Book of Judith may have stood as good a chance as the Book of Ruth of becoming part of the Hebrew canon had Judith been a male in this story and had Achior been a female."<sup>6</sup>

That the story recounted in the Book of Judith may have been too threatening to the traditional gender role order for the rabbis to declare it to be sacred text seems plausible. However, for the critic who keeps this in mind to then re-examine the character of Judith, looking to her either as a paradigm of virtue or at least as an ancient model of feminist activism, is equally threatening to the feminist spirit. To do so is to embrace a character who represents certain values advanced by an ancient patriarchy which feminism suggests ought to be rejected today; not to do so is to reject the consensual traditional view of Judith. Bernard Mehlman and Daniel Polish write, "Judith has been held up as an exemplar of the virtues of devotion to the Jewish people, heroism and piety. Jews have

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p.118.

looked to her, along with Hannah, Deborah, and Yael, as an instance of the possibility that a woman could play a major--even redemptive--role in Jewish life."<sup>7</sup>

At times the views represented on polar opposite ends of any spectrum begin to resemble each other, and in literary criticism this is no different. Regarding Judith as one who ought to be emulated may be the perspective of tradition; it is also that of feminist critic Andre LaCocque. LaCocque acknowledges that "to be invited to praise a murderous gyp as a heroine is somewhat embarrassing in religious milieus." Yet, he offers her praise nonetheless. "Perhaps we need to learn again how to play. In the story of Judith, the men of the establishment keep their hands clean, but the eventual price for their purity is the surrender of Bethulia to Holofernes...Judith...risks perhaps even more than her own head--she risks her soul. But she saves her people and the honor of God."<sup>8</sup> In addition, LaCocque adds, "Judith is subversive by showing that a woman can take the lead and become the model of faith and martyrdom, while 'elders' recoil in the holes of their complacency. Judith is not only a David redivivus

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<sup>7</sup>Mehlman and Polish, "Ma'aseh Yehudit: A Chanukkah Midrash" in Journal of Reform Judaism Winter, 1979, p.73.

<sup>8</sup>LaCocque, Op. Cit., p.34-35.

of sorts, she is Judas Maccabee in the feminine..."<sup>9</sup>

It is LaCocque's final point that undermines his claim. If Judith is indeed a female version of Judah Maccabee, then she can hardly be considered subversive; she is like so many other female characters in male-authored works who become, in the words of Gilbert and Gubar, "custodians of male values, agents of patriarchal culture who enforce the subjugation of others."<sup>10</sup> To take the standard notion of what a heroic role is, and to place a female character into that role may be considered, at best, in keeping with a spirit of egalitarianism. However, it is certainly not subversive, nor is it necessarily feminist.

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p.39.

<sup>10</sup>Gilbert and Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic, p.433.

## CONCLUSION

Stewart House and Ellen House, 1880.  
1881, p. 1.

Frederick Rich. Diving into the Past, p. 83.



No more masks! No more mythologies!

"The Poem as Mask"  
Muriel Rukeyser, 1971<sup>1</sup>

the thing I came for:  
the wreck and not the story of the wreck  
the thing itself and not the myth...

We are, I am, you are  
by cowardice or courage  
the one who find our way  
back to this scene  
carrying a knife, a camera  
a book of myths  
in which  
our names do not appear.

"Diving into the Wreck"  
Adrienne Rich, 1971<sup>2</sup>

### Myths

Two myths--the tales of Yael and Sisera, and Delilah and Samson--are explored in the central body of this work, and an additional one--that of Judith--is addressed tangentially. Each of these myths takes place at a different time in a different context with a different set of characters. This study is concerned, however, with certain traits that are commonly shared by all three stories. Each tale revolves around a woman protagonist who acts autonomously and assertively to destroy a powerful male enemy. Each of these female characters successfully uses her sexuality in order to

<sup>1</sup>Florence Howe and Ellen Bass, eds., No More Masks!, p.1.

<sup>2</sup>Adrienne Rich, Diving into the Wreck, p.23.



gain control over the man she seeks to destroy.

All three of these myths have played a role in shaping the culture in which we live. The Delilah and Samson tale is well-known, while the story of Yael and Sisera is perhaps more obscure. Judith is a fairly prominent character in the Western mind, if only because a number of the world's great artists once chose her as a frequent subject for their paintings.

The stories transmit a variety of strong messages on a number of different levels, not all of which are consistent from myth to myth. However, in at least one respect, the myths do cohere consistently to put forth one very powerful statement. The statement they share in common elucidates their "sexual poetic." All three of these myths serve as a strong warning regarding the snare of feminine seduction. Both men and women who participate in the culture shaped by this literature are put on guard. Men are cautioned against putting their trust in women, and are discouraged from allowing themselves to love freely and romantically. Females are warned against acting autonomously and assertively, lest they unwittingly take on the characteristics of Delilah, Yael or Judith and begin to resemble these violent, deceitful, and murderous women.

In a patriarchal society where misogyny functions to maintain cultural hierarchies, and where, as a

consequence, women are effectively prevented from accessing any source of power other than--perhaps--their own sexuality, these myths have proven to be instrumental in preserving the status quo. However, as efforts are made to eradicate misogyny and to deconstruct societal hierarchies which keep women powerless, these myths can prove poisonous. The warnings they transmit to men and women are ostensibly put forth based on some truth about the nature of relations between the genders. However, they do not reflect in the slightest way the real experience of women; instead, they are rooted in certain fears men have had of assertive women, fears which rooted in ignorance.

\* Alice Bach writes: "Women have moments of strong speech and proud action in male-centered biblical narratives, but strong independent women act at the pleasure of their male creators. Too forceful and they embody male fears, and must be silenced or written out of the narrative."<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the characters of both Yael and Delilah (and Judith, too) are extremely forceful, and thus they become mythically evil. As a result, the hate men have for assertive women remains unchallenged, and the thirst women have for models of female heroism in the Bible burns unquenched. The fact remains, at least in regard to the biblical text: "Judaism provides

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<sup>2</sup>Alice Bach, ed., The Pleasure of Her Text, p.x.

no viable model on whom women can base their lives, no mythic heroines whose acts they can imitate and so reclaim themselves, no images of powerful creators/artists in whose image women readers can find their own in either history or the literary tradition."<sup>4</sup>

#### Reality

In the passage cited above from Muriel Rukeyser's poem, "The Poem as Mask," the demand is made for an end to masks, an end to mythologies. Likewise, in Adrienne Rich's poem "Diving Into the Wreck," the poet states her need not for "the story of the wreck," but for "the wreck itself." She seeks "the thing itself," and not the myth. The poems of these women point to a recognition that there is a disparity between the myths we have inherited, and the reality of women's experience. This recognition is essential for attaining a genuine understanding of the terrible damage myths can cause. Revealing the "unrealness" of the archetypes portrayed in the myths discussed here frees their recipients. Understanding that they are rooted in fear, not in reality, sheds a whole new light on the warnings they transmit.

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<sup>4</sup>Claire R. Satlof, "History, Fiction, and the Tradition: Creating a Jewish Feminist Poetic" in On Being a Jewish Feminist, ed. by Susannah Heschel, p.191.

## Revision

The roots of "authority" tell us...that if woman is man's property then he must have authored her, just as surely as they tell us that if he authored her she must be his property. As a creation "penned" by man, moreover, woman has been "penned up" or "penned in." As a sort of "sentence" man has spoken, she has herself been "sentenced": fated, jailed, for he has both "indited" her and "indicted" her. As a thought he has "framed," she has been both "framed" (enclosed) in his texts, glyphs, graphics, and "framed up" (found guilty, found wanting) in his cosmologies.

The Madwoman in the Closet

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar

Full recognition of the fact that historically women have been "penned in" by the creators of myths like the ones discussed here equips the feminist critic with one of three essential tools required for breaking out of the pen, for obtaining an acquittal, for sating the appetite for women's self-determination. Acknowledging the disparity between the portrayal of women in myth through characters like Yael and Delilah, and the reality of women's experience is a first step; a second and third step must be taken as well, if that disparity is to be eliminated.

The second step is to reject when necessary the defined gender roles, and the notions of good and evil, honesty and deception, and freedom and oppression which are imbedded in the ancient myths our culture has held to be sacred. For example, if a myth suggests that the ideal woman is a passive one, then it must be stated today that what is ideal for women is not passivity but

assertion of the self; if a myth suggests that female sexuality is evil, then it must be made clear that what is evil is not female sexuality but the exploitation thereof; if a myth suggests that strong women are deceptive, then it must be stated that real deception occurs not when women act, but when they are kept powerless and prevented from behaving aggressively by societal structures which are never challenged; if a myth suggests that subservience is freedom, then it must be made clear that freedom for women is autonomy--and that when women who act autonomously are regarded as a threat to society, then they are not free, rather, this view is a form of oppression.

Finally, the third step which is absolutely necessary in eliminating the disparity which exists between the portrayal of women in myth and the reality of female experience is what Alicia Ostriker calls "revisionist myth-making," and which in the Jewish context can be referred to as "modern midrash." Ostriker defines her term: "Whenever a poet employs a figure or story previously accepted and defined by a culture, the poet is using myth, and the potential is always present that the use will be revisionist: that is, the figure or tale will be appropriated for altered ends, the old vessel filled with new wine, initially satisfying the thirst of the individual poet but



ultimately making cultural change possible... [Revisionist poems] generally assume the high literary status that myth confers and that women writers have often been denied because they write 'personally' or 'confessionally.' But in them the old stories are changed, changed utterly, by female knowledge of female experience, so that they can no longer stand as foundations of collective male fantasy. Instead...they are corrections; they are representations of what women find divine and demonic in themselves; they are retrieved images of what women have collectively and historically suffered; in some cases they are instruction for survival."<sup>3</sup>

In other words, literary works must be created which employ the images of classic myths but which at the same time utterly and totally alter the meaning of the myths. Although this process has already been demonstrated in this study through the presentation of classical midrash, which in itself was often "revisionist myth-making," it may be useful here to provide an example of feminist modern midrash.

The story of Yael and Sisera describes a woman welcoming an enemy general into her tent, and--at least according to rabbinic midrash--seducing him, having sexual intercourse with him, and then killing him. The

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<sup>3</sup>Alicia Ostriker, "The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking," in The New Feminist Criticism ed. by Elaine Showalter.

female protagonist appears to be bold and crafty and very powerful. It is not at all clear that the episode described in Judges 4 depicts a realistic portrayal of women's historical experience. However, in the following poem by Irena Klepfisz, a Holocaust survivor, all of the actions of the Yael story are present; the meaning of the poem, however, is altogether different from that of the myth. To read "herr captain" as if its title were "sisera" and its perspective were that of Yael is to shed an entirely new light on one's understanding of the events which took place in Yael's tent. It is to recognize the fact that the notion which is suggested in the biblical myth--that women have used sex as a way to achieve victory in military battle--is far less identifiable in the human condition than the reality that throughout history women have been forced to use sex as a means to survival.

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"Irena Klepfisz, A Few Words in the Mother Tongue:  
Poems Selected and New (1971-1990), p.45.



herr captain

i whispered as he came through the gate  
captain i am clean i've been trained  
well i said captain i'm not over  
used

he was hard so hard forcing bending me  
till i could not breathe slamming against me  
my mouth filled with terror i was pierced  
in two when he suddenly pulled out  
my head back he murmured what a light rider  
my grandmother too rode her cossack lover  
in pain he moaned harder quicker ride me now  
fearful i ran jumping the gate with the guard  
laughing grimacing through the window nervous  
biting their nails the dogs barked my legs spread  
slapped

around his waist i whipped him further deeper till  
i felt the blood flooding the field filling the  
drowning well

lapping over me drinking in the smell of his hair  
his stomach swollen against me he collapsed  
but i held on pushing my heels into his back  
my teeth clenched i hissed for my grandmother her  
crooked wig

her gold teeth and her cossack lover crawling from the  
well she

pushed up her buttocks as she came over the wall fell to  
the ground

head first her wig cocked over one eye a butcher knife  
under her

skirt m mother floats in well water zeyde in mourning  
tears his red

hair hears them again on the kitchen floor slipping in  
so smoothly she

was wet from the beginning the horse neighing outside  
and bobed her ears pierced at the age of three weeks  
pulls out the butcher knife

begins slashing till his hands severed he falls back

he brings me soap

his boots are shiny

not like the others who arrive from the fields  
trusted over

Identifying Yael with the voice that speaks in this poem adds an entirely new layer of meaning onto the Judges passage. It preserves a very real and painful memory with which countless Jewish women throughout history have had to live; at the same time, it affirms the on-going potential of the biblical text to speak with relevance and instructiveness to the whole spectrum of human experience. To take such leaps, and to venture with a feminist perspective into the creative realm of midrash and poetry is to engage in the transformative endeavor of "revisionist myth-making" while preserving the sacred process of "drashing" the text.

Judith Plaskow writes: "While feminist midrash--like all midrash--is a reflection of contemporary beliefs and experiences, its root conviction is utterly traditional. It stands on the rabbinic insistence that the Bible can be made to speak to the present day. If the Torah is our text, it can and must answer our questions and share our values; if we wrestle with it, it will yield meaning."<sup>7</sup>

Holy One of Blessing,  
Grant us the strength to wrestle  
And the courage to face the meaning.

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<sup>7</sup>Judith Plaskow, "Jewish Memory from a Feminist Perspective," in Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality, ed. by Judith Plaskow and Carol P. Christ.

## SOURCE MATERIAL ON Yael

הכל זה היה סיכרא מה בתיב (שמיים ד) והוא לחץ את בני בחוק  
 כ' שנה. מה היה סיכר (פ) לפי שהיה מהרפס (פ) ומרפס בנהיגה  
 לכך מת מיתה גדולה שספרו ביד אשה במיד (פ) כי ביד  
 אשה וספר ה' את סיכרא לכך נאמר וכשוכב זה היה סיכרא  
 שכתוב בו (פ) בן רגליה ברע נפל שוכב. בראש חבל שהבלו  
 ועל בראשו עם היתר שבאהל ההיר (פ) ידה ליתר השתנה וסימנה  
 וט' סדה כנגד מדה.

k. במספר  
 רבג י"ג

מדר ותבסרו בשמיטה. שישלשה הם שפלו סן העבירה ושהן  
 הקב"ה שמו בשמן ואלו הם יעל ויוסף ושלמי. יוסף  
 סנין סיגדות ביהוסף שמו ביהוסף שמויה בעד שלא נגע באשת  
 מטייפר. יעל סנין ותבסרו בשמיטה שרו בשמיטה רבנן דהא אסרן  
 בסדרא. ורבנן דהמן אסרן. סיבשכילא. אידב"ל חורנו על כל  
 הכקרא טלה והא קעט דבר שסמו שמיטה וסמו שמיטה שמי  
 שמי סעד בה. שלא נגע בה אותו רשע. שלמי סנין כתוב אחר  
 אוסר פירשאל נתן בתו לשלמי בן ליש וכחוב איד אוסר פירשאל  
 כאן נכס שלמי ודוב פירשאל אלא אל סעד עליו שלא נגע במיכל:

ה. יקרא  
 רבג כ"ג

תו רבנן  
 ארבע נשים ישימות זה בקדם מיה (ואבניל דוב) ואסר ולסאן דאסר  
 אסר יקדוקה היתה סניק אסר וכדיל וסמו תו רבנן דרב בשה דעתה  
 יעל בקרה אבתל בוכדנה סכל בה שאל ברארה

ז. מג"ע י"ו

אסר ר"ג כי יצחק נחלה עבירה לשמה  
 בבשה שלא לשמה והאסר רב יהודה אסר  
 רב יעקב יעקב ארם בתורה ובסעוד  
 אסר שלא לשמן שספר שלא לשמן בא  
 לשמן אלא אסר כבשה שלא לשמה  
 דכחב' הסודר מניח על אשת רב רב  
 הדין באהל הסודר מאן נשים שבאהל  
 שיה רבקה דהא ואלה אר יותן שבע  
 כעלות מלל אותו רשע באותה שעה  
 שנאסר בן רגליה ברע נפל שוכב וט'  
 והא קא מתרעא בבעילה דליה אד  
 יותן כל סבתן של רשעים אנה אלא  
 רעה אצל צדיקים שנאסר ההסד לך  
 יסדו עם יעקב שוכב ועד רע בשלמא  
 רע סעד אלא סב אסר לא אלא לא  
 שם סבתו רעה הא שם:

ז. יצ"ר כ"ז

בן רגליה ברע נפל. י"א ר' יוחנן כשם ר' שבען בן יוחאי  
 שבע בעילות בעל אותו רשע שנאסר בן רגליה ברע וט'. הא קא  
 כתרעיא כעבירה, א"ר יוחנן כשם ר' שבען בן יוחאי כל מובחם של  
 רשעים רעה היא אצל צדיקים רחביב' להסדר לך סדר עם יעקב  
 סבוב עד רע, בשלכא רע לחי אלא מוב אסאי לא, אלא שם אסאי  
 מובחם של רשעים רעה היא אצל צדיקים. בשלמא רחם וילכא  
 סדנר ליה שם ע"ז אבל הכא כה רעה איכא, סבוס דקא סדנר כה  
 ווהסא דאסר רבי יוחנן כעשה שם נחש על חיה רסיל כה ווהסא  
 ישראל טעסוד על ר' סנין סכקה ווהסחן כוהים שלא עסוד על  
 ר' סנין לא סכקה ווהסחן:

ה. יקמות ק"ז

כזה ותפתח את נאך הלב. שישנו רבתינו מ' מסקי וכ הם  
 שיש דעה וליתה כרורה ודעיו וט', סתורם ככלם רסעות  
 עינו דם כנפתי וחלב שבאשה כסמאן מוכא כשקן ברביעית אבל  
 וזבו ורוקו וסיי רגליו כסמאן מוכא חסרה. רכית עינו רחביב  
 סוהקטו ברסעות, דם מנפתי רחביב סוהם חללים ישתה מה לי  
 קטלה כוליה מה לי קטלה מלנא. חלב שבאשה רחביב ותפתח את  
 נאך הלב ותקדש:

א. י' דב י"ה

Deborah, wife of Lappidat, was a prophetess... and the Israelites would come to her for judgment... She summoned Barak, son of Abinoam [to fight Sisera]... [When he insisted that she accompany him, she said,] "...there will be no glory for you in that... God will deliver Sisera into a woman's hand." (Judges 4:4-9)

Why did Deborah become a pacifist?

Deborah sat hidden under a palm tree hoping that no one would see her. Her last case had exhausted her patience. She had spent the entire morning trying to convince a soldier who had killed a prisoner of war that he had sinned.

"Why?" he had demanded. "You said that Yael was the most blessed of women. And for what? For striking Sisera, crushing his head, smashing and piercing his temple with the tent pin when he was at her mercy. So what's wrong with what I did?"

Finally she had ordered him to bring a sacrifice and atone for his crime.

As the soldier left, he spat on the ground and said to the crowd gathered outside, "Deborah's become a pacifist."

It was inconceivable that Deborah, who had once proudly led the people of Israel into battle, would condemn soldiers for killing prisoners of war. Yet she had done precisely that. At first, the elders ignored these decisions and continued to refer to her as a conqueress. Yael, however, knew the truth and avoided Deborah. Yael was still proud of the bloody act which had won her fame in Israel. Her answer to Deborah was to declare in public that Deborah had turned into an "old woman."

I was young once! To think that Barak and I were equals—at least at first, when he wouldn't do a thing without consulting me. He said, "If you will go with me, I will go; if not, I will not go." (4:8) But he changed after our victory. Though he went reluctantly into battle, he quickly forgot who had dragged him to glory once he gained manhood under fire. He sang my song too well. I struck up the chant and Barak dealt with the captives and the division of booty. Later it became his song—and hers! For Yael decided to become a woman warrior. Did she think she was imitating me?

Deborah knew she would never go to battle again, not even if Barak called. Barak had been irresolute about the necessity of war, but success had changed him and soldiering today was his major preoccupation. Now Deborah was the reluctant one. She had appropriated Barak's former uncertainty and translated it into sensitivity about wasting human life. Deborah now had a cause: she was determined never again to be responsible for shedding blood.

This type of thinking did not endear her to tribal leaders, who educated their troops to exteriorize evil and project it onto the enemy. Yael the warrior accepted their view. In becoming one of them, she denied her womanly, life-sustaining instincts and substituted manly acts of destruction.

Lately Deborah had felt that she was regarded as an alien. She heard mumblings that it was unnatural for women to be leaders. Am I getting old? Thinking back, she realized that a scurrilous smear campaign had begun on the anniversary of her return from the war. During one of the festivals celebrated by the people at Shiloh to commemorate their victory she had gone with a peace offering. Standing at the door of the Tent of Assembly was a self-appointed zealot who refused to allow her into the sanctuary, saying, "Woe unto the generation whose leader is a woman."

She had answered, "When it suited you, you created legends about me. You said I was like a hind let loose to conquer Sisera and that I sang goodly words in my song of victory. Now you are making puns about my name. 'Hornet,' you call me."

There was no bite in Deborah's alleged sting. She had become convinced it was not right for women to lead men into battle; moreover, it was wrong to build a society that required men to waste their lives and talents leading others into battle.

If Yael sets the tone for women, who will be left to point out the wasteful and destructive side of war?

Deborah's convictions did not sit well with the elders, and they denounced her as an illegitimate prophet. Sitting under her palm tree in the heat of the day, Deborah wondered whether history would treat her kindly. Will they write me out, as they did my ancestor, Miriam? Or will they tell posterity that I thought war was wrong, that it was a sin to revere combat and that I learned the hard way that our enemies' blood was also red?

"So may all your enemies perish, O Lord!  
But those who love you shall be as the sun when  
it rises in its strength!"

And the land was tranquil forty years."  
(Judges 6:31)

Naomi Graetz



The Wife of Heber the Kenite

By Amy Blank

Blessed above women shall Jael be,  
The wife of Heber the Kenite. (Judges 5:24)

A woman stands by her kitchen table inside an old one-room house. There is a closed door at the back of the room and a small window looking out on nothing but sky. It is evident that the house stands near the top of a bare hill. The sky may be imagined filled with rainclouds or else a brilliant, drought blue, according to mood.

The room is bare except for a table, two chairs, an old bed covered with a sheep skin and an ancient iron stove. In the opposite corner from the bed there is a pallet on the floor. The only decoration is a few fine metal pots and pans strung across the unfinished stone wall.

The woman, Jael, is clearly the only inhabitant of the house. She is elderly, of medium height; her face, hewn in angular lines, is grey and of a ravished beauty; her hair is piled on her head. There is a strain of Gypsy wildness about her eyes. She wears nondescript clothes (perhaps a dark skirt and shawl) beautifully.

It is surprising to see quite so outstanding a character in this poor house and lonely situation. Surprising? Perhaps, or perhaps not.

Jael stands at the table with her back to the door. She is warming her hands on an old black tea pot. Her head is slightly bent and she speaks to herself.

Jael If I speak of flocks and tents, of sex unshamed  
And tribal wars, still hugging my tea pot,  
My warm iron stove, these are anachronisms  
And they may pass, seeing that all is put  
To human use. I stand alternately  
At both ends of time — able, may be,  
To span the interim.

The present and the past ...  
(She puts down the tea pot and slowly lifts  
her hands to her head)

The past ... the present and the past ... like steam  
It rises ...

My head! the pain ...  
There have been killers a plenty  
Throughout the stretch of thirty centuries:  
Plenty of men, some women ... but women  
should not kill.  
Not even one man ... one man.

(She looks up as though listening)

There is constriction,  
A drumming in the ears. Someone will come ...  
(With horror)  
Will they? the child? the mother? —  
or the man?

(There is a knock on the door. With evident  
relief Jael turns toward the door)

I knew it! Oh! come in

(A tall, handsome woman near Jael's age enters.  
She has blue eyes, wispy white hair escaping from  
a battered felt hat and wears an ancient grey coat  
which still shows signs of aristocratic cut. She  
looks a queen.)

Jael (After a pause and in a changed and somewhat  
triumphant voice)

Welcome, Deborah!

Deborah Thank you. How could you know?

Jael I knew at first  
Someone would come. As you approached I heard  
The rhythm of your steps. It's unmistakable —  
When great ones walk the earth responds in purpose.  
We shuffle up inconsequentially  
In this high solitude the ear wearies  
Of silence strains toward sounds even beyond  
The natural scale; sounds move on stepping stones  
Across the air; or else the earth groans  
Under strange footfall.

Yes, I heard you come  
But did not turn for fear I was mistaken.  
I put the kettle on the stove: we will drink tea ...  
(She presses her hands to her temples again)  
The gain is bad.

Deborah They did not tell me that you suffered,  
Only that you were alone year upon year.  
Therefore I came.

Jael Years packed away in silence  
Multiply the pain.

Deborah Is Heber dead?  
Jael Heber was always dead. And now it's true  
I am not more alone.

Deborah I came to make an end  
Of solitude. Who could believe that you and I,  
Sharing so great a past, are strangers?  
Jael How otherwise? You who are — Judge?  
Deborah No longer Judge:  
Authority has passed from me long since.  
We are two women whose great days are gone.  
Only in song we live together now.

Jael What song?  
Deborah Have you not heard? Are you so much alone?  
Jael Always alone since Heber brought me here  
Up from the Arabah.

In early days  
A stranger came once in a while, perhaps  
To buy a pot or pan from Heber;  
But he was sparse of hospitality;  
The stranger never stayed.  
Since it is known  
That I killed Sisera and that my husband  
Then fled in terror I have lived alone.

He yearned to see the southland once again,  
He said. Perhaps he was afraid; perhaps  
He understood I waited Sisera ...  
Now both are dead.

Deborah You lay with Sisera?  
Jael Alas! I did not - though I might have wished.  
Defeated, he was still a man.  
Heber was not

Deborah Not to his wife?  
Jael To none.

Never. I did not fear virility,  
I longed for it. Judge, mother in Israel,  
Do you understand?

Deborah (She nods and deliberately brushes aside the  
question.)

There's a chill about us now.

(They sit down at the table.)

Jael Like a tide rising and ebbing, in me

The past and present alternate

(She pauses.)

There is, lately, confusion in the seasons.

(Another pause.)

Ah yes: there are no trees: set in the rock

The Arabah is desolate and arid.

My people live in tents and sometimes move

To other grounds - the tribes are straggling -

Many are tinkers - well regarded craftsmen.

(She pauses and comes halfway back in time)

See! I still have pride.

It's cold, it's cold here.

(She shivers and pulls her shawl closer around  
her shoulders.)

Childhood memories are of the sun,

The patch of shade behind the tent;

Of stones, small beasts, milk and a warm mother.

Fathers came and went, something like goatskins

Hairy and mostly kind.

One day they sold me,

A little virgin child, to Heber's folk;

My mother dressed me, yes, consenting; kissed,

And sent me packing to my loneliness - -

One more girl child dispatched. I found a home

Of sorts: instead of mother a lean husband,

A no-man tinker with a wandering heel.

He was not purposefully cruel, only

Uninterested. He thought starvation lodged

Alone in stomachs - if he thought at all.

I grew and hungered. As I am now dry

In skin and flesh I was in heart despairing.

Then I stole a child.

(She sits up suddenly and leans over toward  
Deborah)

See! a lovely babe

Lying outside a tent, kicking the sand

With his brown heels, glowing

I snatch him up

Breathless; I am not seen; now he is mine  
To nourish - though my breasts are dry  
But for their anguish.  
(It is as though she holds a baby under her shawl  
Then with a sigh she sinks back.)

Son of a stranger

Camel herd he was.

Deborah What of the mother's pain?

Jael I would not care. Later, when equally

Bereaved, I thought of her and mourned

For her and then again for me

And for the little light gone out

Deborah The child died soon?

Jael He was so small ....

(The past creeps up into her eyes and hands  
again)

Heber fears my madness;

The herdsmen's sure revenge. I'll not give up  
the child

Then Heber sells his flocks - the goats and  
sheep

And camels; all that bear and throw by seed  
and womb.

The she-goats udders swinging full, heavy

With milk denied to me: All sold, all gone

We flee the droughty Arabah: the boy

Starving and dying at my barren breast.

(She stretches out her empty hands to Deborah)

He's dead! he's dead.

We'll bury him somewhere:

Somewhere along the way. And we go on,

One stony hill sloping upon another.

I think my senses shrink. I cannot see

Except the darkness in myself; or hear

Except my footfall.

And another sound

Behind me, thudding in the sand and stone:

A mother's feet heavy with sorrow

Greater than mine ....

(She jerks back suddenly)

On this hill Heber

Set up his tent. Later he built a house,

This house, his token of stability.

But he, the Kenite smith, returned to his old  
trade -

He always was a tin pan man. Enough.

He'd had enough of husbandry. Fruitless

In body, niggardly of mind he fled

The soil's fertility and with his pots

Slung over his jackass' back he clattered

Down valleys to the coast and bought and sold -

Especially to Jabin's folk - some pact

There was between them: With his age, the old

Seared wanderlust, his only twitter, gathered

Like dust in his grey beard. He rattled off,

Shouting his wares in a clear sparrow bell.



The Kenite resurrected - less Cain's passion.  
I hardly patient, waited here; for whom?  
Deborah Could you forget the child?  
Jael Forget him? No.  
But with the years and as I grew  
Into live womanhood the body craved  
Not child but man.  
I have not known a man.  
Deborah It is a hunger that besets a woman -  
Jael How can you know, whose life, like ripened fruit,  
Is rounded out with satisfactions?  
Deborah Sometimes I see behind my eyes and feel  
Without my fingers and the aroma  
Of truth is strong between my nostrils.  
I understand.  
Jael One day during the rains  
I heard the roar of a great battle  
Rise from the valley. When the fighting ebbed  
A man came, panting, cursing up the hill.  
Deborah Sisera!  
Jael (wincing). Even now the name cuts deep.  
He came as though by right to Jabin's friend;  
Was I not Heber's wife? In his extremity  
He sought shelter. He did not seek a woman -  
Of course I wanted him. Instead, I killed.  
Ugly! ugly!  
Deborah And none came in homage?  
Jael Barak, your husband, verified the deed.  
He gasped appreciation of a sort  
And turned away in haste. Was he afraid?  
Deborah Barak told: As I pursued Sisera  
A woman rushed from her house to meet me.  
Under her fallen hair her eyes were wild,  
Glowing and radiant with madness.  
She stooped as one not straightened up after  
A heavy task. At her demand I entered -  
There on the bed Sisera lay dead.  
The tent pin through his temples.  
Jael He saw the end.  
He did not see me drag the heavy body  
On to the bed; nor scour the floor and wash  
My hands on up to armpits ...  
(In response to Deborah's glance.) No, not there.  
I sleep in that far corner on the pallet ...  
Deborah But Barak saw that madness lent you strength.  
Jael I was not mad then; I was complete.  
Deborah He did not understand. But what he saw  
He told the people and they joined our names  
Shouting: A victory for Deborah!  
A victory for Jael!  
Some poet picked the gleanings - as poets do -  
Made up a song, an oft repeated song  
Sung by the villagers around the hearth,  
Or at the winnowing.  
Of me they sing:  
(She chants the words, every now and then  
pretending to strike a chord on a stringed  
instrument.)

Awake, awake Deborah,  
Awake, awake utter a song!  
Arise Barak. Lead away your captives  
O son of Abinoam.

In the days of Shamgar,  
(With pointed emphasis)  
In the days of Jael caravans ceased -  
Travellers kept to the by ways,  
The country folk fled,  
They fled until you arose, Deborah,  
Arose as a mother in Israel -  
Jael Ah! Mother in Israel!  
Deborah (Still chanting)  
The kings came, they fought;  
Then fought the kings of Canaan,  
The stars fought from heaven,  
The stars in their courses fought against Sisera.  
The river Kishon swept them away,  
The onrushing torrent, the torrent Kishon,  
O my soul, march with strength!  
(She pauses looking intently at Jael and sings in a different  
chant and much more personally)  
Blessed above women, Jael  
(The wife of Heber the Kenite) -  
Above women in the tent  
She shall be blessed.  
Water he asked, milk she gave.  
Her hand she put to the tent pin,  
And her right hand to the workman's mallet ...  
Jael (who has been listening in mounting horror)  
Quiet! quiet! It hurts me.  
(She puts her hands to her temples)  
Oh! be still,  
I will not hear ...  
Deborah (Continuing the chant)  
She struck down Sisera  
She crushed his head  
She shattered and pierced his temple.  
Between her feet he sank, he fell;  
Where he sank he fell down dead.  
(Jael is rocking back and forth in misery.  
Deborah looks at her closely)  
How strange you should not know the song.  
Why, why did you not come to gather in  
Praise for your great deed?  
Jael The murderess?  
Deborah No, the exalted woman who has done  
What women will not.  
Jael Should I boast, "Jael killed?"  
Or should I dance into the camp and act  
My salty tale?  
(She gets up from her chair, pretends to open  
the door and bows low in mock deference)  
"Welcome, my lord!"

Come in; come in to me, my lord,  
Welcome to Heber's house.

Alas! your wounds,  
Your bloody raiment, sweat of a great warrior.  
Ah! the great sinews of your thighs,  
The clotted hair, the knotted muscles of your chest,  
The troubled heart and the grim brow -  
I will bring water for your refreshment,  
And cleanse away your blood;  
I will anoint your skin with oil - like this -  
Like this - and spread a cloak over your nakedness  
(she scurries around in mock business)  
And here is food for strength - a bowl of milk,  
Alas! a simple bowl, no lordly dish  
As is befitting to my lord.

We Hebrews - ah!  
We Kenites are quite poor, despite Heber,  
My man, sells his tin wares to Jabin, your great king.  
But see, fresh curds from the small cattle's milking;  
The good buttermilk - we call it 'the Lord's bounty.'  
You say, I have a lovely voice? my thanks,  
My deep and grateful thanks ... and payment?  
Look you, there is  
A bed, fresh made and soft - for you ...  
(She addresses herself to Deborah again)  
I put the bowl  
Into his hands, in his two hands - like this -  
Hoping that he would look above the rim  
And read the greed of passion in my eyes

And on my trembling lips smell out my need.  
"A lordly dish for a defeated man"  
He said, and bowed his head to drink, long  
draughts  
As a slow-weary, bitter man may take.  
I watched the muscles of his throat; the curve  
And thrust of wrist, the span of his great hands  
Around the bowl and his wide planted feet.  
He finished. From his hands to mine.  
The bowl's lip brushed the feeling of my breasts.  
He sighed, looked up into my eyes and saw -  
I know not what - he had no thought of woman.  
Then I hated him. Tongue glued to palate,  
Nostrils distended to my heat, ravaged by desire  
I panted and a faintness clouded in my eyes -  
A moment only.

When my blindness cleared  
A light shone down on the great hammer  
And tentpin at my feet - a cutting light  
Red, pulsing, meaningful. I bent,  
Lifted them, stepped unseen behind his back  
Like this - I raised the mallet and the pin -  
The angers of virginity gave strength -  
And as a rock he fell.  
(She sits down, exhausted)  
I cannot tell the rest ... Here, here it hurts.  
The tent pin presses. Do you see the mark?  
My fingers know it ...

Deborah  
Jael  
Yet the poets sing your praise.  
Faugh! faugh! They did not feel the blood  
Run on their hands. Judge, you have not killed.  
You had your captains, they lent innocence  
I hammered in the peg as might a man  
Deborah  
Jael  
Was there no spring of joy in you?  
There was no courage in me  
Yes, in the completion I was glad  
Upon the crash and pulse of bludge my life  
Was vindicated. Enemy? I cared not -  
Because he was a man denied me  
Who was now dead  
Deborah  
(After a pause) The song continues.  
The people sing - it is a bitter taunt -  
Of her, mother of Sisera ...

Jael  
Deborah  
Another woman! No!  
(She chants again)  
The mother of Sisera looked out of  
a window  
And cried through the lattice  
'Why is his chariot so long in coming?  
Why so delayed the clatter of his chariots?'  
Her wise ladies answered her:  
Impatient, she gives answer to herself -  
'Are they not finding and dividing the  
spoil?  
To every man a wench or two,

Booty of dyed stuffs for Sisera,  
Booty of dyed stuffs embroidered,  
Two scarves for his neck as spoil."  
Jael  
"A wench or two" - ah! she should know.  
She suffers ...  
Deborah  
(Breaking out of the spell of the song and looking  
anxiously at Jael.)  
I came to bring reality. The song  
Has set your deed upon its feet. Years gone  
And still the people sing your praise. No need  
To sit alone ...  
Jael  
I need not but I will.  
And not alone. As living waters spring  
In a dry wilderness they are in me ...  
That poor wit Heber and the babe - and Sisera  
Deborah  
Long since they all are dead:  
Jael  
(Her voice has risen a tone higher)  
Ah! see.

A tea leaf in my cup. A visitor!  
(She has been fidgeting uneasily in her chair  
and now arises abruptly, pushing her cup aside.)  
Besides the tea is cold.  
(She looks out at the window)  
The sky's a sullen gray:  
Wrap up and go. Kishon may flood again;  
The valley swells with overflowing veins.  
Huge shadows thicken the horizon.  
I hear the prancings.  
The prancings of the mighty ones ...

Go quickly Deborah, for he may come ... I know  
Most certainly ... the pain returns ... he comes.

Deborah (Staring at Jael in horror.)

I did not understand. Forgive me, Jael

Jael Quick! Leave me now. He comes in all his weakness.

Two mothers drag their feet behind ... They come,

They come! Now that I know the song perhaps

They'll mock me and smile crookedly, asking:

"Where is the little skeleton, the babe

I bore?" - "Where is the man, my son,

Whom warriors could not strike down?" -

I am afraid

My breasts will wither and my hands drop blood

I am afraid of mothers - not of him.

Deborah Jael, Jael! They are no more. All this is past.

Come back with me.

Jael Ah! no. The past is now.

Go quickly Deborah; for this you may not see.

I hear - hush! I hear footsteps; the ground shakes.

The trapped air deafens me. These are the great ones;

They will not delay.

(She kisses Deborah hastily; throws open the door  
and eases her out.

There is a moment's silence, then Jael, who has  
suddenly grown majestic in stature stands in the  
doorway. Her shawl slips off; her hair falls in  
a silver cloud about her shoulders. She bows to  
the ground.)

My lord! my lord ...

Come in to me.

SOURCE MATERIAL ON DELILAH

[illegible]

יחזי כוונתו כי בזה נכלל המעשה האמיתי באמיתות אדם  
 וזה יצא דבר רב ואם נשקף נשקף נשקף נשקף

וְהָיָה כִּי יִשְׁמַע ה' אֶת הַקּוֹל אֶת הַבְּתוּלָה וְהָיָה כִּי יִשְׁמַע ה' אֶת הַקּוֹל אֶת הַבְּתוּלָה  
 וְהָיָה כִּי יִשְׁמַע ה' אֶת הַקּוֹל אֶת הַבְּתוּלָה וְהָיָה כִּי יִשְׁמַע ה' אֶת הַקּוֹל אֶת הַבְּתוּלָה

ולא עונה הרי אינו חייב לה כלום מאי כדון כי דמר  
רבי יוחנן צערו של איש מרובה יותר מן האשה  
הרא הוא דמתיב יויה כי הציקה לו בדבריה כל <sup>השם</sup>  
הימים ותאלצו מהו ותאלצו \*אמר רבי יצחק בר  
לעזר שהיתה יסובמת עצמה מתחתיו והקצר נפשו  
למות הוא קצרה נפשו למות היא לא קצרה נפשה  
למות ויש אומרים שהיתה עושה צורכה באחרים כ"ש  
התבעה \*דאמר רב נחמן בשם רב נחמן האבר הזה  
שבאדם הרעיבתו השביעתי השביעתי הרעיבתו

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