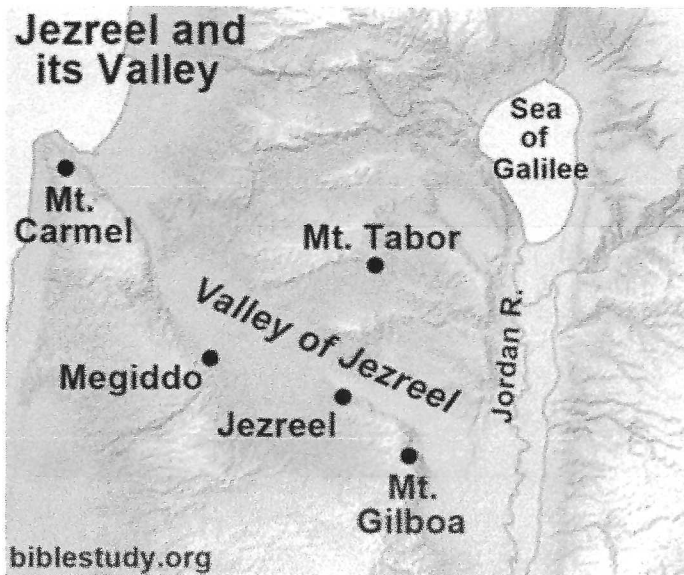


Second class on Judges 4-5

Deborah, Jael, and Sisera's Mother



1

1

Today's Class Part One: Jael Part Two: Sisera's Mother

Summary of Judges 4-5
The Hebrew Tribes Rise Up Against the Canaanites

Deborah is the leader of Israel when the Canaanites are oppressing the tribes. After weather and Barak's army rout the chariot forces of Sisera, Sisera flees on foot. (Deborah has disappeared from the story.) She reappears to sing the victory song.

Sisera approaches the tent of a nomadic tribeswoman, Jael...

Egyptian tile with a Hittite chieftain, hands bound over his head
c.1184-1154 BC, MFA Boston



2

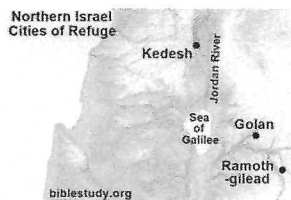
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Who is Jael?

- Jael means a mountain goat or ibex
- Wife of Heber the Kenite
- Kenites: a tribe of itinerant metalsmiths related to the Midianites and the Israelites.

4:11 Now Heber the Kenite had separated from the Kenites, of the children of Hobab the father-in-law of Moses; and he pitched his tent as far as Elon- bezaananim, which is by Kedesh.

4:17 There was peace between Yavin the king of Hatzor and the house of Heber the Kenite.

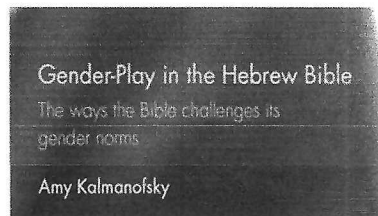


3

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Amy Kalmanofsky, *Gender Play in the Hebrew Bible* (2017)

"The Bible, at large, constructs a world that coheres to a consistent set of gender norms and expectations....[However,] in *these* gender-playing narratives, women seduce, overpower, and kill men, and men obey women at great personal expense."



Deborah—takes on male roles
Jael—acts in stereotypically female ways until....BAM
Motif of "hands"—nurturing hands, powerful hands

4

4

Three Women, Three Settings in Judges 4-5:**Deborah outside, under a palm or ascending a mountain
Official Leader of the Hebrew tribes**

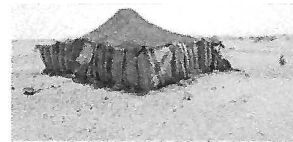
Judges 4:5 And she sat under the palm tree of Deborah, between Ramah and Beth-el, in the mountain of Ephraim; and the children of Israel came up to her for judgment.

4:10 And Barak gathered Zebulun and Naphtali to Kadesh; and ten thousand men went up at his feet; and Deborah went up with him.

**Yael in a tent—from a Southern nomadic ethnic group affiliated with Canaanite king**

4:18 And Jael went out to meet Sisera and ... he turned in to her into the tent, and she covered him with a garment.

5:24 Blessed above women shall Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, be; above women in the tent shall she be blessed.

**Sisera's mother—the enemy—looking out of a latticed window.**

Traditionally women are spectators, men are in motion

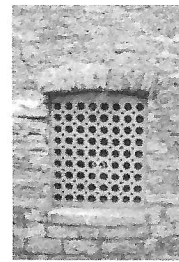
Judges 5:28

Through the window peered Sisera's mother;

behind the lattice she cried out,

'Why is his chariot so long in coming?

Why is the clatter of his chariots delayed?'



5

5

Judges Book 4—The Battle: Men Descending

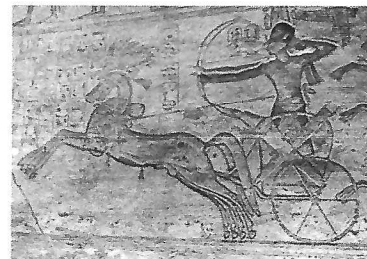
13 And Sisera gathered all his chariots, nine hundred iron chariots, and all the people that were with him, from Harosheth-goyim, to the Kishon River.

14 And Deborah said to Barak, "Rise, for this is the day on which the Lord has given Sisera into your hand. Did not the Lord go out before you?" And Barak went down from Mount Tabor, with ten thousand men after him.

15 And the Lord confused Sisera and all the chariots and all of the camp with the edge of the sword before Barak; and Sisera alighted from his chariot, and fled on foot.

16 And Barak pursued the chariots and the camp, to Harosheth-goyim; and all of Sisera's camp fell by the edge of the sword; not even one was left.

17 And Sisera fled on foot to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite; for there was peace between Yavin the king of Hatzor and the house of Heber the Kenite.



Egyptian relief of the Battle of Kadesh (1274):
the six-spoke wheel was an innovation made by the Hittites.

Kadesh is believed to have been the largest chariot battle ever fought, involving between 5,000 and 6,000 chariots.

6

6

Judges 4—The prose version—Invitation into the Tent

18And Jael went out to meet Sisera and said to him, "Turn in, my lord, turn in to me; fear not." And he turned in to her into the tent, and she covered him with a garment.

וַתֵּאמֶר אֵלָיו סִיֶּרָה אֲדֹנָי סִיֶּרָה אֵלַי אֶל־תִּירָא וַיָּסֵר אֵלָיָהּ הָאֵהָלָה וַתִּכְסֶּהוּ בִשְׂמִיכָהּ:

19And he said to her, "Give me now a little water to drink, for I am thirsty;" and she opened the flask of milk and gave him to drink, and covered him.

20And he said to her, "Stand in the doorway of the tent; and it shall be, if any man comes and asks you and says, 'Is a man here?,' then you shall say, 'There is not.'"

וַיֵּאמֶר אֵלָיָהּ עֲמִד פֶּתַח הָאֵהָל וְהָיָה אִם־אִישׁ

יָבוֹא וְשָׁאַלְךָ וַאֲמַר הִישָׁפָה אִישׁ וְאָמַרְתְּ אֵין:



Captive Philistine chief c.1184-1154 BCE, Egyptian tile at Boston MFA

- "Reversal of power, women > men"
- Hospitality or seduction?
- Covering him—maternal gesture
- "There is no man here"

7

7

The Killing

21Then 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.

22And behold, Barak pursued Sisera, and Jael came out to meet him, and she said to him, "Come and I will show you the man whom you seek," and he came to her, and behold, Sisera lay dead, and the pin was in his temple.

וַאֲרָאָה אֶת־הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר־אַתָּה מְבַקֵּשׁ

Motive?

Tone?



Hans Speckaert, 1577

8

8

Judges 5—The Poetic Version of the Killing

- 24 Blessed above women Jael,
wife of Heber the Kenite,
above women in tents be she blessed.
- 25 Water he asked for, milk did she give,
in a princely bowl she served him curds.
- 26 Her hand for the tent peg reached out
and her right hand for the workman's hammer.
And she hammered Sisera, cracked his head.
She smashed and pierced his temple.
- 27 Between her legs he kneeled, fell, lay,
between her legs he kneeled, he fell,
where he kneeled he fell, destroyed.

יְהוָה לִי־תִתֵּן תִּשְׁלַחֲנָה וַיִּמְיֶנָה לְהַלְמוֹת עֲמָלִים

4:9 "...into the hand of a woman will the LORD deliver Sisera."

motif of "descending"
parody of a sexual encounter?
parody of childbirth?

A Princely Bowl or A Bowl of Princes

בְּסֶפֶל אֲדִירִים



Mycenaean Greek Warrior Vase dating to 12th c BCE



Phoenician bowl from Boston MFA
Neo-Assyrian Period, 883–612 BCE

9

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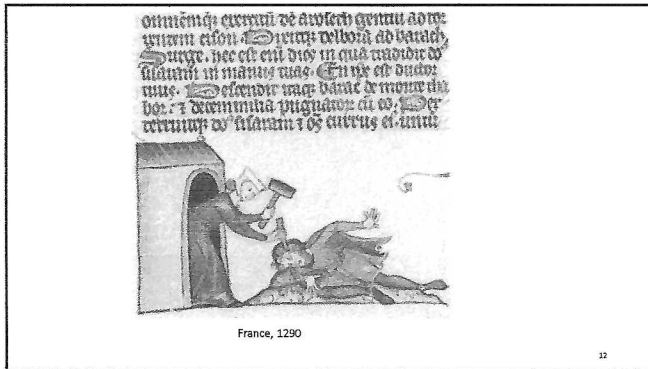
Talmud Nazir 23b

The Gemara asks: How is it derived that Yael engaged in sexual intercourse with Sisera? As **Rabbi Yoḥanan said: That wicked one, Sisera, engaged in seven acts of sexual intercourse with Yael at that time, as it is stated: "Between her feet he sunk, he fell, he lay; between her feet he sunk, he fell; where he sunk, there he fell down dead"** (Judges 5:27). Each mention of falling is referring to another act of intercourse.

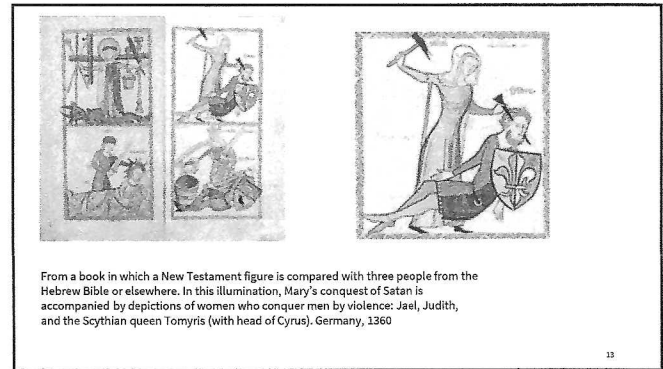


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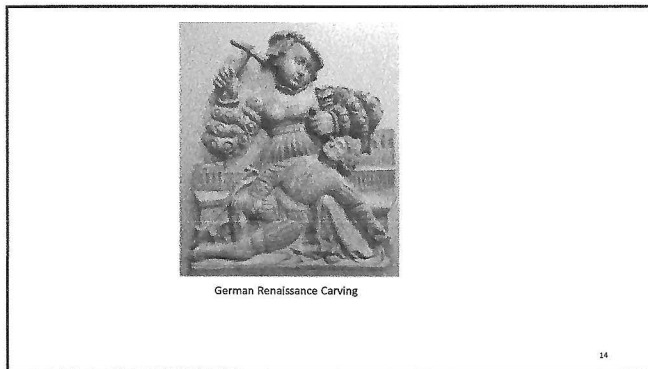
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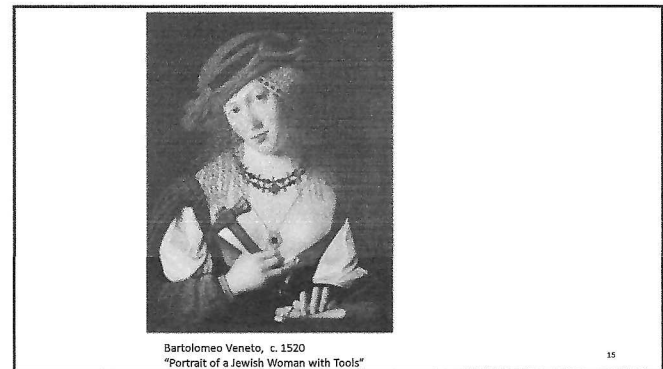
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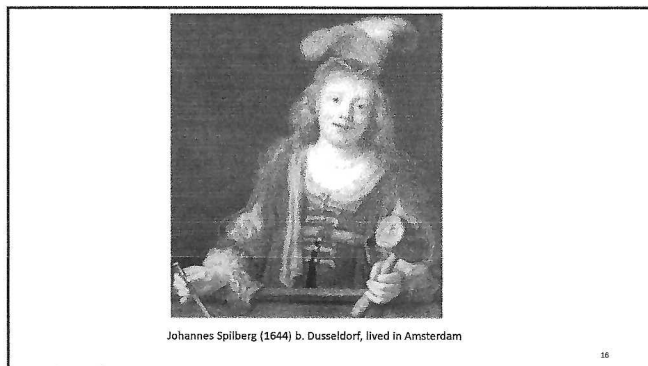
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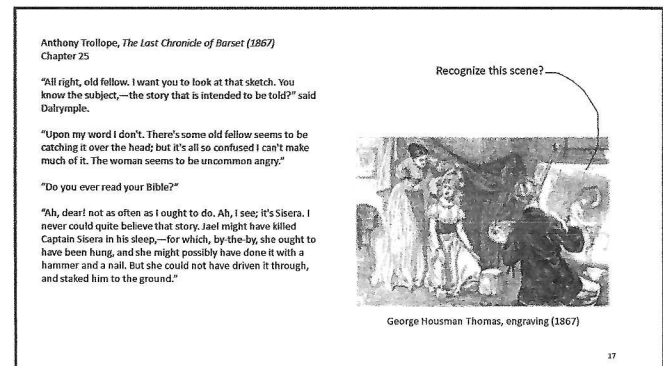
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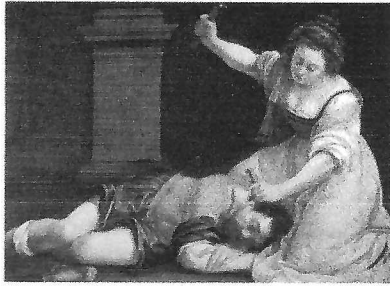
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16



17



Artemisia Gentileschi, b. Rome (1620)

18

18



Jael, Deborah, and Barak
Salomon de Bray 1635 (Dutch Catholic painter)

19

19



James Northcote 1787 (English)

20

20



Marcelle Hanselaar b. 1945 Dutch 2007 Etching

21

21



Rene Klarenbeek, Conterfeyter project (2011 or later)

22

22

The Moans of Sisera's Mother

End of song of Deborah, *Judges 5*:

- 26 Her hand for the tent peg reached out
and her right hand for the workman's hammer.
And she hammered Sisera, cracked his head.
She smashed and pierced his temple.
- 27 Between her legs he kneeled, fell, lay,
between her legs he kneeled, he fell,
where he kneeled he fell, destroyed.
- 28 Though the window she looked out, moaned,
Sisera's mother, through the lattice:
'Why is his chariot so long in coming,
why so late the clatter of his cars?'
- 29 The wisest of her ladies answer her,
she, too, replies on her own:
- 30 'Why, they will find and share out the spoils—
a damsel or two for every man.
Spoil of dyed stuff for Sisera,
spoil of dyed stuff,
dyed needlework,
needlework pairs for every neck.'
- 31 Thus perish all your enemies, O Lord,
And be his friends like the sun coming out
in its might!

כד תברך מנשים ילל אשת חֲבֵר הַקִּינִי מְנָשִׁים
בְּאֵהָל תִּבְרָךְ:

כה מִיָּם שָׁאֵל חֶלֶב נִתְּנָה בְּסַפֵּל אֲדִירִים הַקְרִיבָה
חֲמָאָה:

כו יָדָהּ לִיתֵּד תִּשְׁלַחְנָה וַיִּמְיֶנָה לְהִלָּמוֹת עַמִּלִּים
וְהִלָּמָה סִיסְרָא מִחֻקָּה רָאשׁוֹ וּמִחֻצָּה וְחִלְפָה רָקֶתוֹ:

כז בֵּין רַגְלֶיהָ כָּרַע נָפֵל שָׁכַב בֵּין רַגְלֶיהָ כָּרַע נָפֵל
בְּאִשֶּׁר כָּרַע שָׁם נָפֵל שְׂדוּד:
va-t'yabev

כח בְּעַד הַחֲלוֹן נִשְׁקָפָה וַתִּיַּבֵּב אִם סִיסְרָא בְּעַד
הָאֶשְׁנָב מְדוּעַ בָּשָׁשׁ רָכְבוֹ לָבֹא מְדוּעַ אַחֲרָיו פְּעָמֵי
מִרְכַּבוֹתָיו:

כט חֲכָמוֹת שְׂרוּתֶיהָ תַּעֲנִינָה אֶף־הִיא תִּשָּׁיב
אֶמְרֶיהָ לָהּ:

ל הֲלֹא יִמְצְאוּ יַחֲלָקוּ שְׁלָל רַחֵם רַחֲמָתִים לְרָאשׁ
לְכָר שְׁלָל צָבָעִים לְסִיסְרָא שְׁלָל צָבָעִים וְקִמָּה צָבָע
רַקִּמָּתִים לְצֹאגֵי שְׁלָל:

24

24

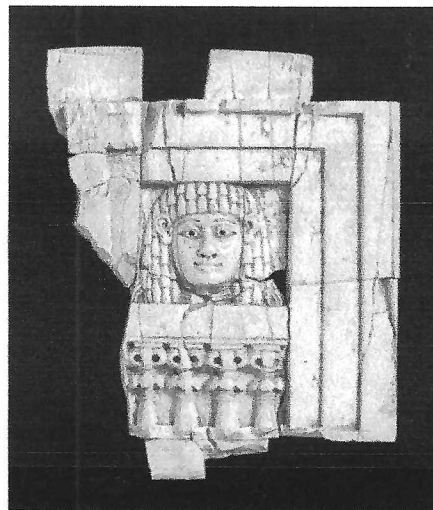
A Surprising Rosh Hashanah Connection

5:28 Through the window peered Sisera's mother,
Behind the lattice she moaned:
Or "gazed"; meaning of Heb. uncertain.

"Why is his chariot so long in coming?
Why so late the clatter of his wheels?"

וַתִּיַּבֵּב va t'yabev

כח בְּעַד הַחֲלוֹן נִשְׁקָפָה וַתִּיַּבֵּב אִם סִיסְרָא בְּעַד
הָאֶשְׁנָב מְדוּעַ בָּשָׁשׁ רָכְבוֹ לָבֹא מְדוּעַ אַחֲרָיו פְּעָמֵי
מִרְכַּבוֹתָיו:



Woman-at-the-window plaque, ivory. Nimrud, Iraq,
900 -700 BCE. Ht. 11 cm. The British Museum.

25

25

Trying to understand the verb *va t'yabev*

Talmud Rosh Hashanah 33b—talking about shofar blasts

As it is written (Numbers 29:1) **"It is a day of *terua* (sounding the shofar) to you,"** and we translate this verse in Aramaic as: **It is a day of *yevava* to you.** And to define a *yevava*, the Gemara quotes a verse that is written about the mother of Sisera: **"Through the window she looked forth and wailed [*va t'yabev*], the mother of Sisera."** One Sage ... holds that this means moanings, broken sighs, as in the blasts called *shevarim*. And one Sage... holds that it means **whimpers**, as in the short blasts called *teruot*.

Tosafot (medieval commentators) on Rosh Hashanah 33b

The measure of a *teru'ah* is equal to three wailing calls. ... And in the *Arukh* it explains... those who are strict and blow ninety blasts (thirty blasts after the reading of the Torah, thirty during the silent prayer, and thirty during the repetition of the Amidah), do so to correspond to the hundred moans that Sisera's mother moaned. The [remaining] ten are when the whole Tefillah is completed, so the sound of the lone *teki'ah* has to amount to ten: *teki'ah shevarim-teru'ah teki'ah, teki'ah shevarim teki'ah, teki'ah teru'ah teki'ah* - making a total of a hundred.

Reactions?

26

26

The Surprising Strength of the Tent

Sisera's mother is juxtaposed with Deborah and Jael as an icon of failure, gazing without comprehension on her son's defeat. Her house stands in relation to Jael's tent much in the same way that Lot's house in Sodom stood in relation to Abraham's idyllic tent in Genesis 18:19. In each case, the house seems to represent security and power, but quickly gives way under attack while the tent prospers.



Don Seeman, "The Watcher at the Window: Cultural Poetics of a Biblical Motif" 2004

Sisera's Mother	Jael
powerful woman	marginalized woman—uses a domestic tool as weapon
woman with attendants	woman alone
ruling-class woman	ethnic minority
palace dweller	tent dweller
	and yet...
passive, nameless	active, has a name

27

27

Compassion for our enemies' suffering

Shai Held, from Hadar Institute 2014

[Note—2014 summer was the Gaza War]

No matter our political persuasion, no matter our sense of what military response is necessary at any given time, one thing ought to remain clear: It is never a crime, never an act of treachery, to hear the cries of the mother of one of our enemies. We are invited — required, in fact — to do just that on Rosh Hashanah.

<https://forward.com/opinion/206286/hearing-a-mothers-pain-on-rosh-hashanah/>



28

28

Avoid Arrogance: Remember the Fragility of Life

Dr. Norman Lamm, "Rosh Hashanah—Three Who Cried," about Sisera's mother, Hagar, and Rachel—excerpted from his *Festivals of Faith: Reflections on the Jewish Holidays* (1962)

What the Rabbis intended, I believe, was a moral of great significance: The mother of Sisera lived in a dream world. She refused to face reality and contemplate its bitter side. ... She had imagined that her exalted position as mother of a successful conqueror inured her to pain and tragedy—that was reserved only for the contemptible enemy, Israel. She was guilty of an immoral optimism, the kind of outlook that characterizes the unthinking and arrogant of all ages.... And this indeed is what the shofar and Rosh Hashanah remind us of: there is a *Yom ha-Din*, a day of judgment and accounting. ... He who sits on top of the world has no assurance that his world will not collapse under him. Absolute security is a myth. Life is not as certain, as guaranteed, as the haughty, unreflective mentality of the mother of Sisera lead her to believe. Beware of such vain and dangerous illusions.



<https://oupres.org/excerpts/three-who-cried/>

29

29

A broken heart is the master key

Karen Wolfers-Rapaport

Why does the cry of the *shofar* recall the mother of Sisera, our foe? ... One possible answer is that there is nothing more genuine than a mother crying over the death of her child. This is a true broken heart. This type of cry is stripped of ego and fear. ... And this is the cry we must hear when the *shofar* is blown.

"In the king's palace," said the Baal Shem Tov, "there are many gates and doors, leading to many halls and chambers. The palace-keepers have great rings holding many keys, each of which opens a different door. But there is one key that fits all the locks, a master key that opens all the doors. That master key is a broken heart."

The *shofar's* sound breaks our heart.

Breaking anything is hard, especially the heart. But the rewards are great for such work—the gates to G-d are open.

Think of our enemy's mother. We are meant to memorialize even her on Rosh Hashanah, because of her broken heart.

https://www.chabad.org/theJewishWoman/article_cdo/aid/3430740/jewish/How-Heartbreak-Helps-Us-Heal-on-Rosh-Hashanah.htm



30

30



"The Mother of Sisera," Albert Joseph Moore (1866)

Tullie House Museum and Art Gallery, Carlisle

Jamaican-born Fanny Eaton modelled for this painting

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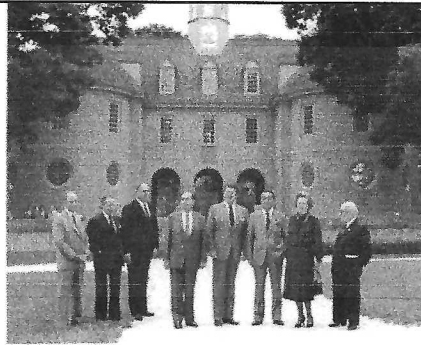
31

The Modern Woman Warrior Leader: Straddling a Line



Golda Meir saluting Israeli paratroopers while carrying her handbag....part of her "grandmotherly uniform."

During one of her visits to the US, she was asked by one of the Washington newspapers: "Mrs. Meir, your seven-year-old grandson Gideon says that you make the best gefilte fish in the world. If that is so, how about giving us your recipe."



Margaret Thatcher at the 1983 G-7 Economic Summit in Williamsburg, VA. "Men were scared of that handbag. It contained secrets, it wielded power. It said 'I am a woman, but I'm a better man than all of you.'" Forcible rebukes of other politicians came to be known as "handbaggings."



32

32

Bonnie Lyons

DEBORAH'S WAR SONG

Nothing of me survives.
My prophecies, my judgments,
nothing. Only that war song.

True I prophesied God
would grant Barak his victory
at Mount Tabor and Sisera would be destroyed
by a woman.

What I didn't tell Barak,
what is absent from the song:
I thought I would be that woman.
When we found Sisera
with the bloody peg in his temple
I seethed with envy
and rage at the Lord's cunning,
chastened for my vanity.

The war song extols Jael
but I know she killed him
for her own reasons.
Worse, the song taunts Sisera's mother
awaiting his return
imagining the division of spoils—
to every man two women.
Shameful gloating
ours, more than hers.

Years after
in my dreams
I hear the shrieks
of captured women,
the wailing of mothers.
For forty years
the land had peace.
That I know was good.
But the rest—error,
lies, half-truths, rash judgments . . .
what *they* call history.

Bridges

Vol. 8, No. 1/2, Confronting Text
and Tradition (Spring, 2000), p. 58

33

33