

Psalm 68- The Ark of the Covenant

Mr. Ronald Benun

Psalm 68 is one of the most impenetrable in Tehillim. The NJPS prefaces its English translation by noting, “The coherence of this psalm and the meaning of many of its passages are uncertain.” It is the only psalm that warrants such a comment. Among its difficulties is that it contains many words that do not appear anywhere else in the Bible and are therefore hard to interpret. We will demonstrate that the key to the psalm lies in understanding its frequent references to the famous celebratory Song of Deborah in Judges 5 which poetically recounts the battle against Sisera. Awareness of this ancient historical backdrop in conjunction with intertextual links will enable us to clarify the obscure imagery, difficult wording, and central themes of the psalm.

We will begin by providing a brief synopsis of Judges 4 and 5.

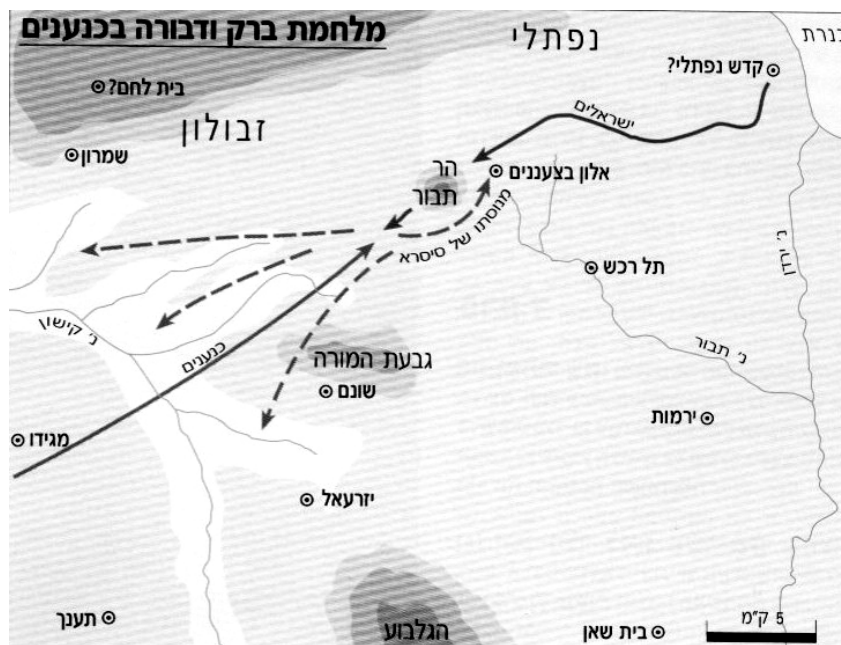
The Deborah Narrative

The Song of Deborah is introduced in the chapter preceding it (Judges 4) by a historical recap of the political circumstances in the land, and the Israelites’ ensuing battle with the Canaanite forces (ca. 12th century B.C.E). The story opens on the note that as Israel continued in its sinful ways before G-d, He “sold them off” (v.2) to the Canaanites. The Israelites were severely oppressed by the Canaanites for 20 years. The Canaanites had a powerful army that included 900 iron chariots - תִּשַׁע מֵאוֹת רֶבֶב בְּרִזְלִים (Jud. 4:3), the strongest weaponry available, iron being the most expensive metal of the period.

The battle is initiated by Deborah who relays her prophecy to Barak that he must gather an army of 10,000 foot soldiers from Kedesh Naphtali to fight Sisera, a paltry army compared to the mighty forces of Sisera’s chariots. They are directed to the Qishon Wadi where G-d will “hand over” the army of Sisera. Barak congregates the army, and moves south and west of Kedesh Naphtali towards Har Tabor. Meanwhile, Sisera is headquartered at חֶרֶשֶׁת הַגּוֹיִם (approximately 1650 feet above the narrow valley of Qishon, in a near vertical slope to the valley).¹ When Sisera receives news of the whereabouts of the Israelites he heads northeast along the Qishon River to battle the Israelites. Normally, the Qishon River is a trivial stream that flows through the Jezreel Valley, with a permanent flow only at its western extremity. During the wet season, normally the winter months of November to February, there is a possibility of floods caused by the overflowing of the Qishon Wadi.² Accordingly, a chariot army would not initiate a war during those months when there could be catastrophic consequences. Therefore, this war surely took place during the spring/summer season. (See map from Olam HaTanakh:)

¹ Although the precise location of חֶרֶשֶׁת הַגּוֹיִם cannot be identified, the approximate location provides a better picture of the stages of the battle. <Baly, Denis. The Geography of the Bible: a Study in Historical Geography. New York: Harper & Row, 1957, pg. 130>

² Mazar, Benjamin, et. al. eds. Illustrated World of the Bible Library. Vol. 2. Jerusalem: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1960, pg. 83



The text then states that G-d cast Sisera and his army into a panic and the mighty chariots were defeated by the Israelites. In Judges 5, we learn that a flash-flood overfilled the Qishon river causing Sisera's chariots that were traveling in the Wadi to be swept away with the water. Sisera then flees by foot with Barak in pursuit. Seeking refuge, Sisera comes to the tent of Yael, wife of Heber the Kenite. Yael, knowing that Sisera is evil, gives him milk and curds provoking him to fall asleep, affording her the opportunity to kill him with a tent peg. Yael then greets Barak and delivers the body of the dead general to him. This scene then leads into Judges 5 and the Song of Deborah.

With the context of the Judges 4 narrative, which serves as the backdrop for the Song of Deborah, we will now proceed to take note of how the psalmist incorporates the elements and imagery from Deborah's song into Ps. 68.

Psalm 68 and the Song of Deborah

In Ps. 68, the psalmist recounts the events of the Battle at Qishon quoting many phrases from the Song of Deborah. The Song of Deborah is one of five such "songs" in the Bible - the Sea³ (Ex. 15), עֲלֵי בָּאָר (Num. 21), הָאֲזִינוּ (Deut. 32), Deborah (Jud. 5), and דָּוָד (2Sam. 22 - repeated almost verbatim in Ps. 18).

³ Although we will not attempt to discuss in detail the similarities between Ps. 68, the Song of Deborah, and the Song of the Sea, there are many points of similarity and intertextuality that deserve a study of their own. Some of these similarities include: הָרִים נָזְלוּ (Jud. 5:5) to נָצְבוּ כְמוֹ גֵד נֹזְלִים (Ex. 15:8) מִן שָׁמַיִם נִלְחָמוּ (Jud. 5:20) to דָּנָד אִישׁ מִלְחָמָה (Ex. 15:3) וְדָנָד אִישׁ מִלְחָמָה (Jud. 5:20) to אֶרְדֹּף אֲשִׁיג אֶחְלַק שָׁלַל (Ex. 15:9) and אֶרְדֹּף אֲשִׁיג אֶחְלַק שָׁלַל (Ps. 68:13). Ex. 15, Jud. 4-5, and Ps. 68 all contain imagery of chariots and water. In Ps. 68:29 - צָנָה אֶלֶּה-יַד עֲנָן עוֹזָה אֶלְקִים זוֹ פְּעֻלַּת לָנוּ - זוֹ פְּעֻלַּת לָנוּ; the words זוֹ פְּעֻלַּת, coming within close proximity in the Bible, only occurs once more in Exodus 15 - זוֹ קִנְיַת in v. 16 and פְּעֻלַּת in v. 17. Ps. 68:30 references Jerusalem- מִהִיכַלְךָ עַל יְרוּשָׁלַם, Ex. 15:17 alludes to Jerusalem - מִקְדָּשׁ אֲדֹנָי-י - מִקְדָּשׁ אֲדֹנָי-י. Ps. 68:23 - מִמְצֹלוֹת - יָרְדוּ בְּמִצֹלוֹת - יָרְדוּ בְּמִצֹלוֹת - יָרְדוּ בְּמִצֹלוֹת, to Ex. 15:5 - יָרְדוּ בְּמִצֹלוֹת - יָרְדוּ בְּמִצֹלוֹת - יָרְדוּ בְּמִצֹלוֹת.

Although Ps. 68 does not have a title that classifies it as a “song” as the other songs do, its unique superscription⁴ - לְמִנְצַח לְדָוִד מְזִמּוֹר שִׁיר - does contain the word שִׁיר. The same words are found in the superscription of Ps. 65 with the two middle words inverted. In fact the word שִׁיר (song) is found in all the superscriptions of Pss. 65-68, forming a sub-unit of these psalms, which reach a climactic conclusion in Ps. 68. Aside from the superscription, the word שִׁיר occurs once as a noun in v. 26 - שָׁרִים - and twice more as an imperative verb calling the reader to “sing to G-d...who rides on the clouds” in vv. 5 and 33. Note how v. 33 repeats and elaborates on v. 5’s call to “sing to G-d” forming an envelope with the opening of the psalm⁵.

תהילים 5:68 שִׁירוּ לְאֵלֵי קִיָּם זַמְרוּ שְׁמוֹ סִלְוֵי לְרִבְבַּת בְּעֶרְבוֹת בְּנֵי-הַשָּׁמַיִם וְעֲלֹזוּ לְפָנָיו:
 “Sing to G-d, chant hymns to his name; extol him who rides the clouds; the LORD is his name; exult in his presence.”

תהילים 33:68 מִמְּלָכוֹת הָאָרֶץ שִׁירוּ לְאֵלֵי קִיָּם זַמְרוּ אֲדֹנָי-סֵלָה:
 “O kingdoms of the earth, sing to G-d; chant hymns to the Lord, *selah*.”

In addition to the repeated usage of the root שִׁיר, the joyous scene of the procession welcoming the Aron (the Ark) in Ps. 68:25-26 with singers and musical instruments, conveys the imagery of the celebratory scene we would imagine taking place during Deborah’s recitation of the victory song.

The call to praise G-d in Ps. 68:5 parallels the praise of G-d in the Song of Deborah, Judges 5:3.

תהילים 5:68 שִׁירוּ לְאֵלֵי קִיָּם זַמְרוּ שְׁמוֹ סִלְוֵי לְרִבְבַּת בְּעֶרְבוֹת בְּנֵי-הַשָּׁמַיִם וְעֲלֹזוּ לְפָנָיו:
 שופטים 3:5 שִׁמְעוּ מְלָכִים הֶאֱזִינוּ רֹזְנִים אֲנִי כִי לִידֵי נָד אֲנִי כִי אֲשִׁירָה אֲזַמְרָ לִידֵי נָד אֵלֵי-הַיְיָ יִשְׂרָאֵל:
 “Hear, O kings! Give ear, O potentates! I will sing, will sing to the LORD, will hymn the LORD, the G-d of Israel.”

In fact, Jud. 5:3 is the only verse outside of Psalms that contains the roots זמר, שיר, and the name of G-d (אלה*/ם*/הוה) in a single verse. Furthermore, three verses later in Ps. 68 we have an explicit reference to the Song of Deborah. After she proclaims “I will sing to the Lord” she begins the song by recalling how G-d “went out from Seir” - יָדָה בְּצִאֲתָרְךָ - מִשְׁעֵרִי, and “marched from the country of Edom” - בְּצִעְדְּךָ מִשְׁדֵּי אֲדוֹם. The “went out - marched” pair is duplicated in Ps. 68:8 but replaces “fields of Edom” with “the desert”. In addition, there are striking parallels between both texts in the imagery they use of the

⁴ As we demonstrate in our other commentaries (e.g. Ps. 22), superscriptions are an essential tool for analyzing a psalm.

⁵ The general word שִׁיר in v. 5 becomes the specific name אֲדֹנָי in v. 33. סִלְוֵי in v. 5 shares its consonants with סֵלָה in v. 33 and may also share a musical instruction. סֵלָה may mean to strike the final note while סִלְוֵי is a command to sing. בְּעֶרְבוֹת in v. 5 refers to G-d riding in the clouds, and is the ancient imagery of G-d, paralleling the ancient skies קָדָם שָׁמַיִ שְׁמַיִ קָדָם in v. 34. שָׁמַיִ in v. 34 shares sounds with שְׁמוֹ from v. 5 and may also hint to its meaning, making v. 34 read “to the one who rides with the ancient names” one of which was specified in v. 5 וְעֲלֹזוּ לְפָנָיו. שְׁמוֹ in v. 5 meaning “exult before him [in song]” parallels תְּגַדֵּל in v. 35 meaning “ascribe might to G-d [in song]”. עֲזָרָה shares both of its consonants with עֲזָרָה and is often used in conjunction with singing as in Ex. 15:2 and Ps. 59:17-18. An important difference between the two verses is that v. 5 only speaks to the צַדִּיקִים, while v. 33 speaks to מְלָכוֹת הָאָרֶץ. We see a build up within the psalm.

“earth shaking” - אָרֶץ רָעָשָׁה and the “heavens pouring” שָׁמַיִם נָטְפוּ. Finally, both use the unique phrase “זֶה סִינַי”, as well as the phrase - אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.

שופטים 4:5 יְדֹד בְּצֵאתְךָ מִשְׁעִיר בְּצֵעֲדֶךָ מִשְׁדֵּה אֲדוֹם אָרֶץ רָעָשָׁה גַם שָׁמַיִם נָטְפוּ גַם עָבִים נָטְפוּ מֵיָם:
“O LORD, when You came forth from Seir, advanced from the country of Edom, the earth trembled; the heavens dripped, yea, the clouds dripped water.”

שופטים 5:5 הָרִים נָזְלוּ מִפְּנֵי יְדֹד זֶה סִינַי מִפְּנֵי יְדֹד אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:
“The mountains quaked- before the LORD, Him of Sinai, before the LORD, G-d of Israel.”

תהילים 8:68 אֱלֹהֵי קַיִם בְּצֵאתְךָ לְפָנַי עָמַךְ בְּצֵעֲדֶךָ בִּישִׁימוֹן סְלָה:
“O G-d, when You went at the head of Your army, when You went at the head of Your army, when You marched through the desert, *selah*.”

תהילים 9:68 אָרֶץ רָעָשָׁה אַף שָׁמַיִם נָטְפוּ מִפְּנֵי אֱלֹהֵי קַיִם זֶה סִינַי מִפְּנֵי אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:
“the earth trembled, the sky rained because of G-d, yon Sinai, because of G-d, the G-d of Israel.”

Many are of the opinion that the imagery of the “earth shaking” - אָרֶץ רָעָשָׁה in Jud. 5:4 and Ps. 68- references the imagery of the theophany at Sinai - וַיִּחָרַד כָּל הָהָר מְאֹד - “and the whole mountain trembled violently” (Ex. 19:18). While the imagery does bring the theophany at Sinai to mind, the continuation of Jud. 5:4 - גַם שָׁמַיִם נָטְפוּ גַם עָבִים נָטְפוּ מֵיָם - “the heavens poured the clouds poured water” gives a description of rain that is not associated with the theophany. The description at Exodus 19:16 includes lightening and a description of G-d represented through the עָנָן כֶּבֶד “dense cloud” (Exodus 19:16); however, there is no literal mention of rain at Sinai. On the other hand, the imagery of a blessed rain comes up repeatedly in Ps. 68, such as in v. 9: אַף שָׁמַיִם נָטְפוּ מִפְּנֵי אֱלֹהֵי קַיִם, “the sky poured because of G-d,” and then again in the following verse (10): גִּשְׁמֵם נְדָבוֹת תִּגְיִר אֱלֹהֵי קַיִם, “You released a bountiful rain.”

This description of rain in Ps. 68 and the Song of Deborah are alluding to the same miraculous rain that G-d brought to the Jezreel valley during the battle at Qishon. In Judges 5:5, Deborah praises G-d and describes how the mountains flowed with water from the rain - הָרִים נָזְלוּ, which is echoed in Ps. 68 vv. 9-10 (גִּשְׁמֵם נְדָבוֹת). She later states that the “heavens” fought with Sisera - מִן שָׁמַיִם נִלְחָמוּ - (v. 20), and recalls that the Qishon Wadi “swept” Sisera’s chariots - נָחַל קִישׁוֹן גָּרַפָם (v. 21). The reader now gets a clear picture of the great miracle that happened at Qishon where it began to rain in the middle of the dry season! This flash-flood caused the Qishon Wadi to quickly fill with water, thereby drowning and sweeping away Sisera’s army. In Ps. 68 verse 15 the psalmist recounts this miracle, and asserts: בְּפָרֶשׁ שִׁדְיֵי מְלָכִים בָּהּ תִּשְׁלַג בְּצַלְמוֹן, “When Sh*dai scattered the kings in it, it was like a snowstorm in Zalmon.” Zalmon appears to be a place where it never snows, but with G-d’s miraculous intervention, the impossible becomes a reality – it pours in the middle of the summer. Indeed, without G-d’s intervention the Israelites had no chance of defeating their oppressors; they were fighting a superpower with foot soldiers and limited weaponry.⁶ With the backdrop of the

⁶ As a modern analogy, this war is similar to the wars modern Israel has fought in the 20th century, especially the Independence war – a great miracle considering that the new-born nation was faced with battling all of its Arab neighbors on all sides simultaneously with a paltry army and limited weaponry, yet emerged victorious.

miraculous rain at Qishon, the psalmist's description of rain in Ps. 68:10 - גִּשְׁם גְּדִבּוֹת תִּגְיֶיךָ - "You released a bountiful rain O G-d; Your land languished, You sustained it" - corresponds well with the Judges account. Perhaps the word גִּלְעָה corresponds to the mighty oppression the Canaanites exercised over the Israelites: וְיִשְׂרָאֵל בְּחִזְקָהּ לְחַץ אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל "and he had oppressed Israel ruthlessly" (Jud. 4:3). The rain that caused the flood is one that is certainly a bountiful donation from G-d - גִּשְׁם גְּדִבּוֹת תִּגְיֶיךָ and is a "measure for measure" for those who donated to the war effort, described in Jud. 5:2 - בְּהִתְנַדְּבַם עִם, "When people dedicate themselves" and Jud. 5:9 - הַמִּתְנַדְּבִים בָּעַם, "with the dedicated of the people."

Under normal circumstances Sisera's iron chariots were the pride of his army; once G-d initiated the flash flood, however, they became a liability, as the torrential rains quickly filled the Wadi, and bogged down, drowned or swept away the chariots- causing confusion. This is reflected in onomatopoeia that describes the sounds of the horses' hooves as they tried to plod through the muddy waters in the Wadi - אָז הִלְמוּ עֲקָבֵי סוּס - מִדְּקֵרוֹת דְּקֵרוֹת אַבְיָרָיו, "Then the horses' hoofs pounded as headlong galloped the steeds" (Jud. 5:22). Sisera was forced to flee by foot through the quagmire. The psalmist appears to mock Sisera and the other kings with him in Ps. 68:13 - מַלְכֵי צָבָאוֹת יָד דָּוֶן יָד דָּוֶן - "the kings and their armies are in headlong flight" that is, the מַלְכֵי צָבָאוֹת, who are יָד דָּוֶן (also onomatopoeia), now move very slowly.⁷ Although Sisera may be running at top speed, he is moving slowly.

In Ps. 68, the story of Israel's victory against the Canaanites is retold using the Song of Deborah as a backdrop. The miracle at Qishon and the defeat of Sisera exemplifies a time in the nation's history where, although faced with extraordinary odds, the nation put their faith in G-d and triumphed over their enemies. The psalmist is writing at a time when the nation finds itself in similarly dire circumstances, and therefore conveys this inspirational message. Here the psalmist will focus on two major aspects of the Deborah narrative: the role of women as the heroines, and G-d's presence in the Aron leading Israel to victory. In the following sections we will analyze each of these two themes separately.

The Heroines

One important theme in Ps. 68 is the central role of women in the narrative. The Judges story is unique in that Deborah, a woman, is not only the prophetess/judge of the nation, but she is also well-respected among the soldiery and their leader. Barak refuses to go to war without her joining him, even though she warns that he will receive no glory with this approach; Sisera will then be delivered to the hands of a woman. Barak, however, is a G-d fearing individual who prioritizes the security of the nation above his own ego, and is willing to forsake his status as the hero of the war (Jud. 4:8-9).

Another woman, not part of the Israelite nation, is also a heroine of the story. During the description of the battle, the text makes an abrupt detour in v. 11 to provide a background note about הַקְּיִנִּי and their lineage from Hobab (Moshe's father-in-law). This statement foreshadows the appearance of Yael who is אִשֶּׁת הַקְּרַר, noting this as she will continue her family's tradition of acting as allies to the Israelites and doing what is moral. For her bravery and faithfulness to the Israelites, Deborah calls the time period the "Era

⁷ Brown-Driver-Briggs Lexicon

of Yael” - תבֹרַךְ מְנָשִׁים - (Jud. 5:6), and blesses her from all the women of the tent - תבֹרַךְ הַתֵּבָה מְנָשִׁים בְּאֵל הַתֵּבָה הַזֶּה, “Most blessed of women be Yael, wife of Heber the Kenite, most blessed of women in tents” (Jud. 5:24). Ps. 68 pays homage to Yael by remarking how a housewife, albeit a courageous and sensitive one, puts her life in danger. Yael could have easily refrained from interceding, but knowing that Sisera is evil, she realizes that she has the opportunity to help the Israelites, and kills Sisera, the mighty general of the Canaanite forces. In Ps. 68:22 a reference is made to Yael’s brave act - “G-d will smash the heads of his enemies, the hairy crown of him who walks about in his guilt.” In Jud. 5:26 the same words are used to describe how Yael took the peg from the tent and drove it into Sisera’s head.

תהלים 22:68 אך אלֹקִים יִמְחֶזֶק אִישׁ אִיבִיו קִדְקֹדַד שֹׁעֵר מִתְהַלֵּךְ בְּאֲשָׁמוֹ:
 שופטים 26:5 יָדָה לִיְתֵד תִּשְׁלַחנָה וַיִּמְיָנָה לְהַלְמוֹת עַמְלִים וְהִלְמָה סִסְרָא מְחַקָּה רֵאשׁוֹ וּמְחַצָּה וְחִלְפָה רַקתוֹ:

“Her (left) hand reached for the tent pin, her right for the workmen’s hammer. She struck Sisera, crushed his head, smashed and pierced his temple.”

The psalmist captures the imagery of a young general (later it is his mother who awaits his arrival, not his wife) with a “hairy head filled with guilt.” The use of שֹׁעֵר קִדְקֹדַד plays off of the Judges story, where Sisera, full of his ego and evilness, will end up with his head smashed by a housewife. The psalmist continues this imagery in v. 24 - לְמַעַן בְּדָם תִּמְחֶזֶק רַגְלֶךָ בְּדָם - “that your feet may wade through blood.” Blood from Sisera’s head is gushing from the peg that Yael drove through his skull. Now the psalmist recalls how Yael’s feet were soaked in the blood of Sisera.

Another allusion to the Yael and Sisera scene is made by hinting at Sisera’s arrival at Yael’s tent - אֶלֹקִים מוֹשִׁיב יְחִידִים בְּיָתֵהּ מוֹצִיא אֲסִירִים בְּכוֹשְׁרוֹת אַךְ סוֹרְרִים שְׂכָנוֹ צְחִיקָה - “G-d restores the lonely to their homes, sets free the imprisoned, safe and sound, while the rebellious must live in a parched land” (Ps. 68:7). Here the word סוֹרְרִים is hinting at Sisera⁸ who came to Yael and asked for a drink, because he was “parched” - צְחִיקָה. Sisera runs to Yael because there is peace between them (Jud. 4:17), but Yael’s true loyalty is to Israel. Upon his arrival at her tent she begins formulating a plot to kill him. In a stroke of brilliance, she gives him milk to drink as well as curds instead of water, making him even drowsier, prompting him to fall asleep, and allowing her to kill him. She takes the tent peg, perhaps the only item fit for the purpose available to her (surely not the ideal weapon), and strikes Sisera dead.

In the Song of Deborah, Yael is contrasted to Sisera’s mother, who is described with vivid imagery. She is standing by the window, peering through the lattice at the distance - בְּעֵד הַחַלּוֹן נִשְׁקָפָה וַתִּיבַב אִם סִסְרָא בְּעֵד הָאֲשָׁנָב - (Jud. 5:28) puzzled at why she does not hear the clatter of her son’s returning chariots - מְדוּעַ בִּשְׁשׁ רִכְבוֹ לְבוֹא מְדוּעַ אֶחָרוּ פְּעָמַי - מְרַכְבוֹתַי? She is sure that the battle with the Israelites is an effortless undertaking, therefore she repeats what her “wise” maidens had assured her – Sisera must be at that very moment dividing the Israelite spoils and raping the women. The term used for raping is - רָהַם רַחֲמָתִים לְרֵאשׁ גָּבֵר - “A damsel or two for each man” (Jud. 5:30). The phrase לְרֵאשׁ גָּבֵר is only used here in the entire Bible. The word לְרֵאשׁ - “to the head of a man,” appears to be a play on the previously described crushed “head” of Sisera in v. 26.

⁸ This is supported by a play on Sisera’s name in Judges 4:18 - וַתֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו סוֹרָה אֲדִנִי - סוֹרָה אֵלַי אֵל תִּירָא וַיִּסַּר אֵלֶיהָ הַחֵלֶה וַתִּכְשֶׁהוּ בְשִׁמְכָה וַתִּצָּא יָעַל לְקִרְאָתָהּ סִסְרָא וַתִּסְרָא וַתִּיבַב אִם סִסְרָא בְּעֵד הָאֲשָׁנָב - סוֹרָה אֵלַי אֵל תִּירָא וַיִּסַּר אֵלֶיהָ הַחֵלֶה וַתִּכְשֶׁהוּ בְשִׁמְכָה.

Sisera's mother and her friends reveling in the rape of captive women is despicable. The vulgar description of the rape as "a womb or two to each man" is abominable. This imagery is immediately contrasted to what actually is happening at that moment. Sisera's mother is correct - he is located with a woman, and between the legs of that woman; however, that "hairy head walking in all his guilt" is now lying dead, smashed and bloodied between the legs of Yael! - בֵּין רִגְלֶיהָ פָּרַע נָפֶל שָׁכָב, "At her feet he sank, lay outstretched" (Jud. 5:27). The description at Ps. 68:13 highlights the irony. It is not mighty Sisera who is divvying up the loot, but rather - וּנְוֹת בַּיִת תַּחֲלֵק שָׁלָל - a housewife is sharing in the spoils.⁹ Yael, who Deborah praises as "a woman of the tent," - מְנַשִּׁים בַּאֲהֵל - תְּבַרְךָ, i.e. a housewife, is holding Sisera's dead body in her tent and now calls Barak to show him the man he seeks.

Furthermore, when Yael approaches Barak who is searching for Sisera their encounter is described as follows - וְהִנֵּה בָרַק רֹדֵף אֶת סִסְרָא וַתֵּצֵא יָעֵל לְקִרְאָתוֹ וַתֹּאמֶר לוֹ לֵךְ - וְאֶרְאֶנְךָ אֶת הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה מְבַקֵּשׁ וַיָּבֹא אֵלָיָהּ וְהִנֵּה סִסְרָא נֹפֵל מִתּוֹ וְהִיָּתַד בְּרַקְתּוֹ "Now Barak appeared in pursuit of Sisera. Yael 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 4:22). Aside from this verse, every other occurrence of the phrase וַיָּבֹא אֵלָיָהּ in the Bible refers to sexual relations. Of course Yael's encounter with Barak is purely business – she has come to hand over Sisera to the Israelites, but the unusual usage points out the irony. In addition, when the text describes Yael's encounter with Sisera it states - וַתֵּצֵא יָעֵל לְקִרְאָת סִסְרָא וַתֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו סוּרָה אֲדָנִי סוּרָה אֵלַי - "Yael 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." (Judges 4:18). It seems strikingly odd that the text would use the term אֵלָיָהּ with Barak, with its sexual implications, when it should have used the words אֵלָיָהּ הָאֵלָהּ as it did with Sisera. It appears that the ambiguity here is purposeful. As we explained, in the Song of Deborah the ambiguous imagery - בֵּין רִגְלֶיהָ פָּרַע נָפֶל שָׁכָב - (5:27) served to highlight the poetic justice of the plot vis-à-vis Sisera and his evil mother. Here this ambiguous term is used with Barak, because in this context the words וַיָּבֹא אֵלָיָהּ certainly do not have the implication it usually does. It is used here instead, as are all the other double entendres in this story, to reveal irony and poetic justice.

Verse 12 of Ps. 68 is another difficult phrase that scholars often grapple with.¹⁰

תהלים 12:68 אֲדָנִי יְהוָה אֱמֹר הַמְבַשֵּׂר רוֹת צָבָא רַב:

The NJPS translates: "The Lord gives a command; the women who bring the news are a great host." With the backdrop of the battle in Judges 4-5, this otherwise difficult verse fits perfectly with the rest of the psalm. It is not any women bringing news, but the news that the two heroines, Yael and Deborah, brought to Barak regarding the war.¹¹ The אֱמֹר is referring to G-d's prophecy to Deborah to gather an army and fight Sisera –

⁹ Ps. 68:31 reechoes this imagery - בְּרִצְיֵי כֶסֶף בָּזַר עַמִּים קְרָבוֹת יַחֲפָצוּ - על מי מגדו בַצַּע כֶּסֶף - ל' אֵל לְקַחוּ. The psalmist may be playing on the irony that those who ran after money - רִצְיֵי כֶסֶף (Sisera) didn't get any - בַּצַּע כֶּסֶף ל' אֵל לְקַחוּ.

¹⁰ Robert Alter calls verse 12 an "obscure verset." All other translations mistranslate this verse as well.

¹¹ Note that the war imagery in Ps. 68 is also supported by other later verses we will comment on. Ps. 68:30 states - מִהַיְכָלְךָ עַל יְרוּשָׁלַם לֵךְ יוֹבִילוּ מַלְכִים שִׁי. The words יוֹבִילוּ...שִׁי appear only once more in Tehillim in Ps.

שופטים 6:4 ותשלח ותקרא לברק בן אבינו עם מקדש נפתלי נת אמר אליו הלא צנה יד נד אל ה-י ישראל לך ומשכת בהר תבור ולקחת עמך עשרת אלפים איש מבני נפתלי ומבני זבלון:

“She summoned Barak son of Abinoam of Kedesh in Naphtali, and said to him, ‘The LORD, the G-d of Israel, has commanded: Go march up to Mount Tabor, and take with you ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun.’”

Deborah relays her prophecy to Barak in which she was commanded - צנה יד נד - to gather a large army, the 10,000 soldiers from Naphtali and Zebulun that Barak will muster to fight the 900 chariots of Sisera - the צבא רב. Ps. 68:29 alludes to the commandment G-d gave Deborah with - צנה אל קיך ענך עונה אל קים זו פעלת לנו - “Your G-d has ordained strength for you, the strength, O G-d, which You displayed for us”. At the end of the war, Yael also brings news regarding the צבא, telling Barak that Sisera has been killed.

שופטים 22:4 והנה ברק ר דף את סיסרא ותצא ועל לקראתו נת אמר לו לך ואראך את האיש אשר אתה מבקש ויב א אליה והנה סיסרא נפל מת והיחד ברקתו:

Notice that the same words נת אמר and לך are used to describe the news Yael and Deborah brought. These two women are contrasted to Sisera’s evil mother who tells herself that her son is probably raping and pillaging the village, using the root אמר.

שופטים 29:5 תקמות שרותיה תענינה אף היא תשיב אמריה לה:

“The wisest of her ladies give answer; she, too, replies to herself:”

In Ps. 68, a reference is made to Izebel, the evil queen, further contrasting Deborah and Yael with evil women. Verse 24 describes - למען תמחץ רגלך בדם לשון כלביך מא יבים מנהו - “that your feet may wade through blood; that the tongue of your dogs may have its portion of your enemies.” Similarly, In 2 Kings, Izebel is cursed that the horses will trample her blood - ויז מדמה אל הקיר ואל הסוסים וירמסנה - (9:33) and that the dogs will eat her flesh - י אכלו הכלבים את בשר איזבל - (9:36).

To summarize, until this point, we have clarified some of the difficult phrases in Ps. 68 by examining the Judges 4-5 story and placing it as the backdrop for this psalm. The association between the two texts allows us to recognize a thematic flow in the psalm, focusing on praise for the great miracle at Qishon and recalling the bravery of the heroines in the story.

The Ark

The major theme in Ps. 68 is the imagery of the Aron (the Ark) containing the tablets. In this section we will explain how the Aron is symbolic of G-d’s presence, and how the Numbers 10 context, the Judges narrative, and Ps. 68 share the common theme of G-d represented by the Aron battling Israel’s enemies, using similar imagery and words to convey this theme.

The opening of Ps. 68 makes an explicit reference to Numbers 10 where the Aron leads the nation into battle –

תהלים 2:68 יקום אל קים פוצו אויביו וינוסו משנאיו מפניו:

“G-d will arise, his enemies shall be scattered, his foes shall flee before Him.”

76:12 - נדרו ושלמו ליד נד אלהיכם כל סביביו יובילו שי למורא - Both psalms recall previous battles: Ps. 68 with the battle against Sisera and Ps. 76 against Aram.

במדבר 35:10 וַיְהִי בְנֵס עַד הָאָרֶץ וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה קוּמָה יְדָד וַיִּפְצוּ אֶת יְבִיבֵי וַיִּגְסוּ מִשֹּׁנְאֵיךָ מִפְּנֵיךָ:

“When the Ark was to set out, Moses would say: Advance (Rise), O LORD! May Your enemies be scattered, and may Your foes flee before You!”

The Numbers imagery represents the earliest stage of G-d conquering His enemies during Israel’s travels through the wilderness as well as in the conquest of Canaan. When the Israelites would go into battle, the Aron would precede the soldiers - וַיְהִי בְנֵס עַד הָאָרֶץ. As the troops would march forward into the battlefield, Moshe would pray, summoning G-d to rise – קוּמָה – and scatter his enemies - וַיִּפְצוּ אֶת יְבִיבֵי, from before him – מִפְּנֵיךָ. When the Aron was stationed, Moshe would recite the rest of the prayer (v. 36) - וַיִּבְגַּח ה' יֹאמֶר שׁוּבָה יְדָד רַבּוֹת אֶלְפֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל - that G-d should return all the soldiers back safely from the battle.

In Judges 4:14 Deborah summons Barak to battle –

וַתֹּאמֶר דְּבִרָה אֶל בְּרָק קוּם כִּי זֶה הַיּוֹם אֲשֶׁר נָתַן יְדָד אֶת סִסְרָא בְּיַדְךָ הֲלֹא יְדָד יִצֵּא לְפָנֶיךָ וַיִּרְדַּ בְּרָק מִהָר תַּבּוֹר וַעֲשֶׂתָ אֶלְפִים אִישׁ אַחֲרָיו:

“Then Deborah said to Barak, ‘Up (Rise)! This is the day on which the LORD will deliver Sisera into your hands: the LORD is marching before you.’ Barak charged down Mount Tabor, followed by the ten thousand men.”

Barak is summoned using the same verb as in the prayer Moshe recites to summon for G-d to rise and scatter his enemies in Numbers 10:35 – קוּם. Deborah then says that G-d is going out before him וַיִּבְגַּח ה', similar to the statement in Numbers 10:35 - וַיִּגְסוּ מִפְּנֵיךָ, where the Aron metaphorically goes out from before G-d and scatters his enemies. While Deborah’s words are meant to encourage Barak, ensuring him that G-d will bring victory to the nation, she is also reminding him that G-d, represented by the Tablets in the Aron, is going to lead the Israelites into battle. Presence of the Tablets recalls the battles in the desert when the Israelites were a new nation and put their faith in G-d. Now, as Barak and his army face a battle against an enemy much stronger than they, Deborah reminds Barak that these are the same Tablets and Aron, meaning G-d that fought for the nation in the past will surely fight again. Ps. 68 recalls the historic Canaanite battle, and the backdrop of the battles against Israel’s oldest enemies as a hopeful vision that G-d will continue to fight for Israel like he had done in the past. The imagery of G-d scattering Israel’s enemies - וַיִּפְצוּ (v. 2) is repeated again later in Ps. 68.

תהלים 68:15 בַּפָּרֶשׁ שֶׁדֵי מְלָכִים בָּה תִשְׁלַג בְּצִלְמוֹן:

“When Sh*ddai **scattered** the kings, it seemed like a snowstorm in Zalmon” (or metaphorically speaking, if necessary He will make it snow in summer.)

תהלים 31:68 גֵּעַר חַיַּת קִנָּה עֲדַת אַבִּירִים בְּעִגְלֵי עַמִּים מְתַרְפֵּס בְּרִצֵי כֶסֶף בְּזֶרַע עַמִּים קְרָבוֹת יִתְפָּצוּ:

“Blast the beast of the marsh, the herd of bulls among the peoples, the calves, till they come cringing with pieces of silver. **Scatter** the peoples who delight in wars!”

The prayer for return of the soldiers from Numbers 10:36 - שׁוּבָה יְדָד רַבּוֹת אֶלְפֵי - יִשְׂרָאֵל, is alluded to in Ps. 68 as well. In v. 23, G-d is described as saying He will return (the soldiers) from Bashan and the depths of the sea - מִמְצֵלוֹת יָם - אָשִׁיב אָשִׁיב doubling the word אָשִׁיב (return) which comes from the same root as the word שׁוּבָה in the prayer at Numbers 10. The reference to Bashan, the mountainous area immediately East of Hazor, which may also include Hazor, is mentioned in Jud. 4:2 - וַיִּמְפְּרֵם יְדָד בְּיַד יִבְיָן מֶלֶךְ כְּנַעַן אֲשֶׁר -

מֶלֶךְ בְּהַצֹּר “And the LORD surrendered them to King Jabin of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. His army commander was Sisera, whose base was Harosheth-goiim.” The “depth of the waters” - מִמְצֵלוֹת יָם, refers to the overflowed Qishon Wadi (Jud. 5:21). Similar to Moshe’s prayer in the desert, the psalmist recalls how G-d returned the Israelites during the war with Canaan, both those who fled to the Bashan mountains, escaping the oppressive Canaanites, as well as the Israelite soldiers who fought in the Qishon Wadi. In addition, in Ps. 68:18 G-d’s chariots are described as being “myriads upon myriads, thousands upon thousands” - רָכַב אֶל־קַיִם רַב־תַּיִם אֶלְפֵי שָׁנָאן. This recalls the words in Num. 10:36 - רַבְבוֹת אֶלְפֵי - , where Moshe prays that the myriads of thousands of Israelites be returned from battle. The psalmist uses the Numbers reference to make a sharp contrast to the description of Sisera’s 900 chariots, which of course cannot compare to G-d’s chariots.

The intertextual references between these three are striking. In Numbers 10:29, directly preceding the description of the Aron going out to battle, there is a short account of Moshe’s dialogue with Hobab (his father-in-law).

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה לְחֹבָב בֶּן רְעוּאֵל הַמִּדְיָנִי חֵן מִשֶׁה נִסְעִים אֲנִי וְהָאֵלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר אָמַר יְהוָה אֵתְנוּ לָכֶם לְכֶה אֲתָנוּ וְהִטַּבְנוּ לָךְ כִּי יְהוָה דִּבֶּר טוֹב עַל יִשְׂרָאֵל:

“Moses said to Hobab son of Reuel the Midianite, Moses’ father-in-law, “We are setting out for the place of which the LORD has said, ‘I will give it to you.’ Come with us and we will be generous with you; for the LORD has promised to be generous to Israel.”

This is followed by -

וַיְהִי בְנֵס עַד הָאָרֶץ וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה קוֹמָה יְהוָה וְנִפְצוּ אֲרָבִיךָ וְנִגְסוּ מִשְׁנֵאֵיךָ מִפְּנֵיךָ:

Shortly prior to Deborah summoning Barak to battle, we find a one-verse digression about the Heber clan, which as stated, foreshadows the heroic acts of Yael.

שׁוֹפְטִים 11:4 וְחֹבָב הַקֵּינִי נִפְרָד מִקְּנָן מִבְּנֵי חֹבָב חֵן מִשֶׁה וַיֵּט אֶהְלוֹ עַד אֵלוֹן בְּצִעְנָנִים אֲשֶׁר אֵת קֵדֶשׁ: “Now Heber the Kenite had separated from the other Kenites, descendants of Hobab, father-in-law of Moses, and had pitched his tent at Elon-bezaananim, which is near Kedesh.”

This is followed by -

שׁוֹפְטִים 14:4 וַתֹּאמֶר דִּבְרָה אֶל בָּרַק קוּם כִּי זֶה הַיּוֹם אֲשֶׁר נָתַן יְהוָה אֶת סִסְרָא בְיַדְךָ הֲלֹא יְהוָה יִצָּא לְפָנֶיךָ וַיִּרְדַּ בָּרַק מֵהַר תְּבוֹר וַעֲשֶׂת אֶלְפִים אִישׁ אַחֲרָיו:

Similar to the Numbers 10 context and Judges 4, Ps. 68 opens on a reference to יְהוָה and then alludes to Yael, a descendent of Hobab. This seeming pattern further suggests that these intertextual references are purposeful, all focusing on the imagery of the Aron from Numbers.

Psalm 68 contains extensive imagery of the Aron. The opening reference to the Numbers description of the Aron, with G-d’s enemies fleeing “before him” – מִפְּנָיו in v. 2, is expanded upon in subsequent verses. The root פָּנִי occurs eight times in the eight verses between verses 2 and 9: מִפְּנָיו (v. 2); מִפְּנֵי אִשׁ (v. 3); מִפְּנֵי אֶל־קַיִם (v. 3); לְפָנֵי אֶל־קַיִם (v. 4); מִפְּנֵי אֶל־הִי יִשְׂרָאֵל (v. 9); מִפְּנֵי אֶל־קַיִם (v. 9); אֶל־קַיִם בְּצִאֲתְךָ לְפָנָי (v. 5); וְעָלוּ לְפָנָיו (v. 9). Each time it is used with G-d’s name or referring to Him. These repeated usages are extensions of its usage in v. 2 with the imagery of the Aron from Numbers 10, where the word פָּנִי is used to describe the enemies fleeing before G-d- מִפְּנָיו. These eight

repetitions highlight that G-d, represented in the Aron which contains the Tablets from Sinai, is going before the nation. In v. 25, there is an explicit reference to G-d being in the holy - **ראו הליכותיך אל קים הליכות א-לי מלכי בק דש** - “Men see Your processions, O G-d, the processions of my G-d, my king, into the sanctuary.” The psalmist, once again stresses G-d’s presence represented by the Aron.

Ps. 68:19 uses imagery of the Aron fighting Israel’s battles recalling the battle in Judges 4-5.

תהלים 19:68 **עלית למרום שבית שבי לקחת מתנות באדם ואף סוררים לשפן י-י. ה אל קים:**

“You went up to the heights, having taken captives, having received tribute of men, even of those who rebel against the LORD G-d’s abiding there.”

שופטים 10:4 **ויזעק ברק את זבולן ואת נפתלי קדשה ויעל ברגליו עשרת אלפי איש ותעל עמו דבורה:**

“Barak then mustered Zebulun and Naphtali at Kedesh; ten thousand men marched up after him; and Deborah also went up with him.”

שופטים 18:5 **זבלון עם חרף נפשו למות ונפתלי על מרומי שדה:**

“Zebulun is a people that mocked at death, Naphtali – on the open heights.”

שופטים 12:5 **עורי עורי דבורה עורי דברי שיר קום ברק ושבחה שבין בן אבינו עם:**

“Awake, awake, strike up the chant! Arise, O Barak; take your captives, O son of Abinoam.”

In Ps. 68:19 the phrase **עלית למרום** is used to capture the idea of the Aron going up Mount Tabor with the Israelites.¹² While in the psalm it is the Aron that went up **למרום** in Jud. 5:18 Barak is **על מרומי שדה**. The textual link is especially striking since the phrase **שבית שבי** occurs only in this psalm and in Jud. 5:12 (aside from Deut. 21:10 - the law of the woman taken captive in battle).

Beyond the psalm’s description of the Aron representing G-d going forth in battle, the Aron is introduced in verse 5 with the imagery of being the “chariot of G-d.” That verse extols G-d as the one who “rides the clouds,” - **לך כב בערבות**. With the backdrop of Judges 4-5, it is evident that this imagery was not used solely for poetic purposes, but is another allusion to the miracle at Qishon, where G-d brought rain from the “clouds.” The imagery of the chariot appears again in v. 18 - **לך כב אל קים רב תים** - as well as in v. 34 - **לך כב** - **בשמי שמי קדם**, non-literally translated as “Him who rides the ancient highest heavens.” This imagery is also found in Deut. 33:26 - “O Jeshurun, there is none like G-d, riding through the heavens to help you, through the skies in His majesty” - **ר כב שמים בעזרך** - **ויבגאנתו שתקים**. In Ps. 18:11, the imagery of the Aron, specifically serving as G-d’s chariot is used - **וירכב על כרוב ויערף וינדא על פנפי רוח** - “He mounted a cherub and flew, gliding on the wings of the wind.” The cherubim, that rest on the *kaporet* on the Aron, are described metaphorically as the “chariot” of G-d, using the same imagery of riding through the skies used twice in Ps. 68.

The most striking statements regarding the Aron are found in Psalm 68:9,18 and Judges 5:5.

תהלים 9:68 **ארץ רעשה אף שמים נטפו מפני אל קים זה סיני מפני אל קים אל ה-י ישראל:**

תהלים 18:68 **רכב אל קים רב תים אלפי שנאן אד נ-י כם סיני בק דש:**

¹² Although Mount Tabor is not a very high mountain, it is higher than the surrounding mountains and is a strategically important location. (Harpers Bible Dictionary).

In the Song of Deborah, she recalls the events of the war describing the rain dripping down the mountain from the overflowed Qishon, with the words מִפְּנֵי יְדֵי נָדָה flanked on both sides of the statement זֶה סִינַי. Once more, the מִפְּנֵי recalls the imagery of the Aron, only here a stunning play on words is made with the words זֶה סִינַי. Deborah is stating that the miracles happened because of G-d's presence with the Aron, followed by a demonstrative phrase - this is Sinai! To what is Deborah pointing when she says "this" is Sinai- the mountain where Israel received the Tablets? As Rabbi S. D. Sassoon taught us, Deborah is pointing to the Aron, more specifically to the Tablets, which are from Sinai, carved from the mountain itself! Thus, Deborah's statement to Barak that the Aron is joining him is exceptionally inspiring. She relates to him that the Aron accompanying him to battle contains the original Tablets handed down from Moshe! The presence of the original Tablets represents an unbroken chain of tradition that G-d will come through for the nation. The Jud. 5:5 verse is repeated almost verbatim in Ps. 68:9. In v. 18, the psalmist describes G-d's chariot - רָכַב אֶל־קַיִם, which is imagery of the Aron, and states that G-d is among them, Sinai are in them. When recalling the ancient war, the psalmist recalls G-d's presence in the nation, as seen by the fact that the Tablets given at Sinai were in the Holy (Aron). Moreover, there is a structural connection between the two סִינַי phrases of vv. 9 and 18: there are exactly 80 words from the זֶה of v. 9 to the בֶּקֶדֶשׁ of v. 18. As we have seen throughout Tehillim, the number eight and its multiples represent the covenant. The 80-word span is very appropriate structural symbolism as the סִינַי phrases both represent the Ark of the Covenant.

We can now understand one of the most difficult verses in Ps. 68. The NJPS tortuously translates v. 14 as "even for those of you who lie among the sheepfolds there are wings of a dove sheathed in silver, its pinions in fine gold." The first part of the verse alludes to our Judges context:

תהלים 14:68 אִם תִּשְׁכְּבוּן בֵּין שְׂפֹתַיִם כַּנְּפֵי יוֹנָה נִחְפָּה בַּכֶּסֶף וְאֶבְרֹתֶיהָ בִּירְקָרֶקֶת חֲרוֹץ:

שופטים 16:5 לָמָּה יִשְׁכַּבְתָּ בֵּין הַמְּשֻׁפְּתִים לְשֵׁם עַ שְׂרָקוֹת עֲדָרִים לְפִלְגוֹת רְאוּבֵן גְּדוֹלִים חֲקָרֵי לֵב:

"Why then did you stay among the sheepfolds and listen as they pipe for the flocks? Among the clans of Reuben were great searching of heart!"

In that verse Deborah rebukes the tribe of Reuben: "Why did you stay within your borders listening to the bleating of the flocks"? Reuben (the firstborn who made the commitment to Moshe to fight alongside his brothers) remained on the sidelines as his brothers went to war. In contrast to Reuben who "sat by," Deborah commends the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali who were the main forces fighting Sisera - זְבֻלוֹן וּמַבְּנֵי זְבֻלוֹן- (Jud. 4:6) and זְבֻלוֹן עִם חֲרָף נִפְשׁוּ לְמוֹת וְנִפְתְּלֵי עַל מְרוֹמֵי שָׂדֶה, "Zebulun is a people that mocked at death, Naphtali – on the open heights" (Jud. 5:18). The psalmist likewise praises the tribes who were involved in the war effort against the Canaanites, specifically mentioning Zebulun and Naphtali (v.28).

The אִם תִּשְׁכְּבוּן בֵּין שְׂפֹתַיִם statement appears to be a double entendre of sorts. While we think of the rebuke of Reuben, the continuation of the phrase redirects our thoughts. The "wings of a dove covered with silver and whose pinions are covered with gold" is a reference to the old imagery of the Aron and Cherubim. Ps. 68 draws much of its imagery from the ancient conception of G-d and the Aron. Verse 14 plays off of the rebuke of Reuben who stayed "in their borders" to now mean "if you stay **within** the borders/edges of the Aron," or rather, "if you fulfill the words of the prophecy that ensues from between

the Cherubim.” Reuben chose to stay within his borders, perhaps lacking the faith that G-d would save Israel from the Canaanites. Now the psalmist uses these charged words to inspire the nation with the hopeful vision that “if you abide under G-d’s protection [with full commitment],” as the nation had in the past and had been victorious, G-d will come through once again.¹³ The results will then be as spectacular as a snowstorm in the summer as described in Ps. 68:15 - בְּפֶרֶשׁ שֶׁד־י מְלָכִים בָּהּ תִּשְׁלַג בְּצִלְמוֹן. In addition, there appears to be a poetic play on the phrase as the syllables have a chiasmic structure - **אם תשכבון בין שפתים**. Here, the center consonants ב and ן are back-to-back, so to speak, the word “between” – בֵּין is found at the center of the chiasm (“in-between” the chiasm). The play on the middle letters then means that if the nation upholds what is in the middle of the wings of the cherubim, i.e. the covenant, G-d will protect them as he had in the past.

As Ps. 68 comes to its conclusion, the imagery of the Aron leading the victorious warriors returning from battle inspires the psalmist to burst out in repeated blessing to G-d, recalling Deborah’s repeated blessings when she praises G-d in her song. The בָּרַךְ in imperative form followed by G-d’s name is very rare; aside from Ps. 103, it occurs only in Ps. 68:27 and Jud. 5:2,9.

תהלים 20:68 בָּרוּךְ אֲדֹנָי יוֹם יוֹם יַעֲמֹס לָנוּ הָאֱלֹהִים יִשׁוּעָתָנוּ סֵלָה:
 תהלים 27:68 בְּמִקְהֵלוֹת בָּרַכְנוּ אֱלֹהִים אֲדֹנָי מִמְּקוֹר יִשְׂרָאֵל:¹⁴
 תהלים 36:68 נוֹרָא אֱלֹהִים מִמְּקַדְשֵׁיךָ אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הוּא נִתְּנָה עֲזָרְתָּנוּ וְתַעֲצֹמוֹת לְעַם בָּרוּךְ אֱלֹהִים קִים:
 שופטים 2:5 בְּפֶרֶשׁ עֲפָרְעוֹת בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל בְּהַתְּנַדֵּב עִם בָּרַכְנוּ יְדֹנָד:
 שופטים 9:5 לְבִי לְחֹקְקֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הַמִּתְנַדְּבִים בְּעַם בָּרַכְנוּ יְדֹנָד:

The return of the Aron from battle is accompanied by a parade in G-d’s honor, along with singers, musicians, dancers, and maidens playing timbrels all adding to the joyous scene -

תהלים 26:68 קְדָמוּ שָׁרִים אַחַר נְגִינִים בְּתוֹךְ עֲלָמוֹת תּוֹפְפוֹת:

“First come singers, then musicians, amidst maidens playing timbrels.”

The blessings turn into intense praise of G-d in vv. 33-35. Verse 36 concludes Ps. 68 with a recap of the major themes in the psalm. It opens with an allusion to the Aron, i.e. G-d in his holy dwelling - נוֹרָא אֱלֹהִים מִמְּקַדְשֵׁיךָ. Next is the statement that G-d gives strength to the nation - הוּא נִתְּנָה עֲזָרְתָּנוּ וְתַעֲצֹמוֹת לְעַם, and then closes on the note of a blessing with the 26th occurrence of Elokim in the psalm.

תהלים 5:68 שִׁירוֹ לְאֵלֵי קִים וְמָרוּ שְׁמוֹ סֵלָה לְרֹכְבֵי בְּעֲרָבוֹת בְּנֵי-הַשָּׁמַיִם וְעֲלִיזוּ לְפָנָיו:
 תהלים 33:68 מִמְּלִכוֹת הָאָרֶץ שִׁירוּ לְאֵלֵי קִים וְמָרוּ אֲדֹנָי סֵלָה:
 תהלים 34:68 לְרֹכְבֵי בְּשִׁמֵי שָׁמַיִם קָדָם הוּא יִתֵּן בְּקוֹלוֹ קוֹל עֲזָרָה:
 תהלים 35:68 תָּנוּ עֲזָרָה לְאֵלֵי קִים עַל יִשְׂרָאֵל גְּאוֹתוֹ וְעִזּוֹ בַשָּׂחָקִים:
 תהלים 36:68 נוֹרָא אֱלֹהִים מִמְּקַדְשֵׁיךָ אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הוּא נִתְּנָה עֲזָרְתָּנוּ וְתַעֲצֹמוֹת לְעַם בָּרוּךְ אֱלֹהִים קִים:

¹³ This is similar to Ps. 91:1 - יִשָּׁב בְּסִתְרֵי עֲלִיּוֹן בְּצִלְ שֶׁד־י יִתְלוֹנֵן - and Ps. 91:4 - בְּאַבְרָתוֹ יִסָּךְ לְךָ וְתַחַת כַּנְּפָיו תִּתְחַסֶּה -

¹⁴ Ps. 68:27 shows some parallelism to Jud. 5:9-11.

תהלים 27:68 בְּמִקְהֵלוֹת בָּרַכְנוּ אֱלֹהִים אֲדֹנָי מִמְּקוֹר יִשְׂרָאֵל:
 שופטים 9:5 לְבִי לְחֹקְקֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הַמִּתְנַדְּבִים בְּעַם בָּרַכְנוּ יְדֹנָד:
 שופטים 10:5 רֹכְבֵי אֶת נוֹת צֶחַר רֹתֵי יִשְׁבִי עַל מַדְיָן וְהָ לְבִי עַל דָּרְךְ שִׁיחַ:
 שופטים 11:5 מִקּוֹל מַחֲצִיצִים בֵּין מִשְׁאֲבִים שָׁם תָּנוּ צִדְקוֹת יְדֹנָד צִדְקוֹת פְּרוּנוֹ בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל אֲזַי יָרְדוּ לְשָׁעִרִים עִם יְדֹנָד:
 (Jud. 5:9-11). מִחֲצִיצִים and רֹכְבֵי אֶת נוֹת צֶחַר רֹתֵי יִשְׁבִי עַל מַדְיָן וְהָ לְבִי עַל דָּרְךְ and הַמִּתְנַדְּבִים expands to בְּמִקְהֵלוֹת יִשְׂרָאֵל means the history of Israel, the early times when it became a nation. מִקּוֹר also alludes to Jud. 5:11 “מִשְׁאֲבִים.”

Conclusion

The inspirational message of Ps. 68, given that *זֶה סִינֵי* refers to the Tablets of the Ark of the Covenant, is especially apropos to Shabu`ot when we commemorate the giving of the Ten Commandments. The Torah makes a point that it is the Ten Commandments that are inscribed on the Tablets¹⁵. Deborah the judge who led the nation is referred to as *אִשָּׁה נְבִיאָה אֲשֶׁת לְפִידוֹת*. Her name is of course a play on *דבר* – “the Word,” alluded to in the song of Deborah – *עוֹרֵי עוֹרֵי דְבוֹרָה עוֹרֵי עוֹרֵי דְבָרִי* (Jud. 5:12). She is first and foremost a prophetess who brings the word of G-d to the nation. She also is the wife of *לפידות* – “torches” – which provides an additional description of her. The word of G-d is often referred to as *אש* – “fire”- and in her case she symbolizes the dimension of giving inspiration. The name of Barak, the military leader, translates as “lightening,” another form of fire. He refuses to battle until accompanied by the one who brings the “Word” of G-d. Thus, the story represents the time when the nation put its faith in G-d, focused on the Tablets of the Ark - *בֵּין שְׁפָתַימָּהּ כְּנֶפֶץ יוֹנָה* – and in the message that ensued from it. Today, after wandering through the “*מִדְבַּר הָעַמִּים*” “the wilderness of the nations” (Ez. 20:35) for 2000 years, the nation of Israel has been blessed with the wondrous miracle of returning to its land. Many have tried and are trying to destroy Israel but G-d has performed miracle upon miracle. We pray that He will continue to protect us as He did in the past.

¹⁵ Ex. 34:28; Deut. 4:13, 10:4