

A Note from the Author

This is a work of historical fiction, based on biblical, scholarly and archeological data. Some characters as well as names for places and things are made up to support the story and are not intended to be correct, accurate or factual. The relevant Old Testament portions are Judges, First Samuel and Second Samuel.

One of my favorite references is Chronicles: News of the Past, Volume One, given to me by my brother, Sandy-Joe Liebowitz, which describes biblical events as a modern contemporary newspaper would. The book is actually printed on newsprint broad sheets to add authenticity.

The Bible tells us that 175 years after Moses led the Children of Israel out of Egypt, there arose a woman, Devorah, a daughter of Ephraim, to be a Judge over her people, a prophetess and a righteous example unto them. The Bible also tells us of Devorah's husband, Lappodoth; Barak, the great Haibru general; Sisera the Canaanite general; Yael the Kenite, slayer of Sisera; and of Sisera's mother, Betheena. The Bible touches only the high points of their lives. What follows is a more complete story.

Part One: The Covenant

“Devorah! Devorah! It is time.”

The young woman turned from contemplating the blossoming olive trees to face the climber intruding upon her sacred space. *So soon*, she thought. *I would spend more time with You, Abba.*

Dry wind lifted Devorah's flowing black hair, spilling it across her forehead and into her large green eyes. Arising from the soft grassy place on the rock strewn hill, Devorah adjusted the robes billowing around her. Lappodoth, the man violating her sanctuary, had only a few cubits before reaching her. She sighed, warmth suffusing her chest, heart still aching with devotion.

I am always with you, daughter.

She nodded, and whispered, “I know. I am deeply grateful! I rely on you so....”

This place nourished and nurtured her; gave her strength. It wasn't the grassy knoll on the rock-strewn hill per se, it was the hill *within* her: a place of deep peace she carried everywhere she went. And, if she chose - remembered she *could* choose - she was able to experience it anytime, anywhere. Here on the hill, with the crystal blue sky and windswept, puffy white clouds, choice was unnecessary as she simply experienced that exhilarating contradictory sensation of empty fullness.

Not vacant unconsciousness, oh, no, but a fully-aware alertness, sensitive to the potential in each moment. In this place, she was without identity, not Devorah, not a woman, nor lover, nor Sar – a Judge over Israel, but just a being: a pure, effortless *being* and energy incarnate. It was the place God dwelled; *was* God. In this place, when she thought, felt and acted from this place, all was well. Outside it, life was more difficult. “Thank You, thank You, thank You!” she whispered. Gratitude was cause, not effect.

Devorah brushed the hair from her face and smiled down at Lappodoth, admiring his vigor and sure-footedness as he drew near. Her teeth, even and unstained, gleamed in the bright noon day sun. Raising a hand to shield her eyes and perfect oval of her face from the harsh light, she realized she enjoyed the sun and wind, but preferred experiencing them from the shade of her great palm tree.

She felt Lappodoth's eyes on her and blushed. He'd barely looked away from her the entire time he'd been navigating the boulder strewn slope. After eighteen months of marriage, Devorah was still not used to her husband's carnal appreciation of her. He especially admired the evenness and symmetry of her features and her skin - more white and creamy than olive-tinted, as was normal for her tribe, Ephraim. He was a Judean

and they were more fair. She was a great catch - all four limbs intact, and the great bride price her father Eli had given, and she knew that in spite of her sudden mood shifts, trance-like episodes [which were becoming more frequent] and an assertive directness, bordering on the demanding, Lappodoth considered her a great prize.

Now, panting from his exertions, Lappodoth opened his arms to her as he reached the summit. Devorah stepped into them, hugging him. He smelled of sheep. Not an unpleasant odor, but distinctive. His body was firm and well-muscled beneath his robes. She felt her nipples grow taught, broke the embrace and stepped back, holding him at arms length to admire him.

“The children are assembled, my Queen.” Lappodoth had taken to calling her that early in their relationship. At first, it bothered her. Now she enjoyed it, especially when he paid homage to her with his tongue and mouth. *Oh, what joy*, she thought. *I am blessed! Thank you, Father.*

Devorah nodded and lowered her arms. “What news, husband?”

The playfulness disappeared from Lappodoth’s eyes. “Sisera may be on the move.” His voice was low and tinged with anger.

At last! Devorah thought. *Thank you, Abba!* Now, Barak. “You know this...how?” Devorah’s green eyes stared intently into his brown ones. If this were true....

“Daniel told me. He was taking a flock of our father’s sheep to Charoshet.”

“If Sisera goes west....” Devorah saw the plain of Sharon stretched out in her mind’s eye, from the Great Sea to the Jordan.

Lappodoth completed her thought. “He will cut us in two.”

“And we will have to fight!” Devorah’s chin jutted, her eyes narrowed, and Lappodoth thought he saw sparks of green fire fly from them. A truly magnificent woman!

Devorah blinked, breathed deeply. The children were waiting and after that, the majlise. The majlise... If they were to fight, the assembly would have to agree, as would the twelve tribes. The wind whipped her hair. The Canaanites have chariots, many chariots, we....

“I must be a clear channel,” she said.

“What?” Lappodoth asked.

“I must be a clear channel, husband.” She smiled up at him. She was only 5’ 1” and he, 5’ 6”. “For the Lord,” Devorah added, wanting to be clearly understood.

Lappodoth nodded slowly. His eyes searched Devorah’s. “What is it like, when God speaks through you?” His eyes shone and his voice was filled with compassionate curiosity.

Devorah knew he’d wanted to ask her that question from before they’d been formally introduced or ever spoken - from when he’d sat before her in the majlise beneath the palm tree that was in the hill country of Ephraim, between Ramath and Bethel. She’d been attracted by this same sensitive curiosity in his eyes and his strong handsomeness. More intelligent than most of those she judged in majlise, and Lappodoth accepted her authority less grudgingly than did other males, even though she was 20 and he 25.

“God does not speak through me, my husband. I hear something. Words or sometimes see visions, then tell what I understand.” She reached out and caressed his

bearded cheek. “Sometimes it is easy and I merely repeat exactly what I hear. More often I must think about what He means. It is for these times that I pray to be a clear channel, to get my own self out of the way of the Presence, and give the message as He intends, not as I intend...”

“You get yourself out of the way very nicely,” Lappodoth said, reaching around to squeeze her buttocks, “for such a lusty maiden.”

She stepped closer and hugged him back, allowing his hands to linger, enjoying their soft caresses. “I have had much practice,” Devorah said, stepping back, taking his hand in hers and bringing it to her lips for a kiss. “This...” she kissed his hand again, “my lips, your hand, this kiss, the soft breeze, birds singing, bright sunlight -*this* is God. *All is God.*” Lappodoth’s eyes sparkled into hers. “Shame, fear, hatred - these are not of God, but are instead what we do when we forget we are one with God. Evil is not a power of itself, my beloved; it is simply the absence of God.”

The breeze gusted strongly from the encampment, carrying the laughter and shouts of the children.

“Come, Devorah, Sar, Judge over Israel,” Lappodoth said. “Your students,” his eyes met hers, smiling, “your *other* students await.”

As they walked carefully, hand-in-hand down the rock-strewn hill, the joy and blessedness again arose spontaneously in Devorah. *Thank you, Abba*, she thought. *I am so deeply grateful.* She squeezed Lappodoth’s hand. *I shall not fear the Canaanites, but will deal with them from that place of deep serenity, invulnerability, calm assurance and joy within me, that is You. Thank You!*

~ CHAPTER ONE ~

Twenty three children scampered around the well at the center of the large oasis in the hill country of Ephraim; their cries and laughter echoing up from the cool, damp depths. The children, ages three to thirteen, were gathered for Devorah's daily school. No other Sar before her had cared to educate the clan's children. Devorah believed instructing the children was a joy and an honor, not an obligation, and she enjoyed it mightily. She also had a weekly class for the older children. Still unable to conceive her own until recently, though not due to lack of trying, Devorah felt that all of these raucous, racing, little people were her own.

She even accepted Canaanite children into her classes. The oasis was after all, just off the main road. And her primary concern, both as a Judge and as a person, was peace. What better way to ensure peace than through mutual understanding and education? Yet in spite of her best efforts, perhaps at this very moment, Sisera was massing his war chariots.

She shut her eyes tightly, swayed, heard the thunder of horses' hooves and saw the heavy iron chariots' wheel scythes turning and flashing, blood and flesh dripping from them. She reached out her arm and Lappodoth steadied her.

Fear not my daughter, in whom I am well pleased; for I am with you.

"Yes, my Lord. Thank you," she whispered.

"Are you well?" Lappodoth asked.

“A moment husband,” Devorah said. “But a moment.” It was too much at times. After all, she was only human. And this understanding of what He, or It was... He was not like Baal or Toth or the gods of the nations surrounding them. He was not like a ‘He’ at all. Much more like an It - a presence in, around and through her, everywhere equally present, all knowing and *oh wonder*, all loving.

“Then why these ceaseless wars, *Abba?*” Devorah whispered. Yet the joy and the deep sense of connection, even in times of danger, remained. When she was able to come from that sacred inner space, all would be well.

“What?” Lappodoth asked.

She opened her eyes and smiled. “To the children,” she said, taking his hand and stepping out on the downward sloping path. “Then the majlise.” She laughed softly.

“What?” Lappodoth asked warmly.

“Oh, I was just thinking that perhaps my concern about the Canaanites is a bit misdirected. My first concern will be our own people, and getting the priests at Shiloh and the twelve tribes to agree.”

“Indeed!”

Soon they heard the yelps of the children mingling with the flapping of the tents, and the braying of camels and donkeys. The sounds of civilization. A dog with a stumpy tail raced around Devorah’s feet, almost tripping her. The aroma of dung fires, unwashed people, animals and roasting meat filled the dry air.

“I have very often wondered,” Lappodoth said, “why we can not live in houses like other peoples.”

“I have also wondered, husband. I think some day we shall. But now, too many think cities are unclean and ungodly. And consider how very many of our people who have settled in the cities have since gone over to the gods and goddesses of our neighbors.”

Lappodoth nodded. They were almost to the encampment. “Yet we have been here, in this place, without breaking camp from before I was born.”

“We have always wandered in search of Him...” She said.

“But if he is everywhere, as you have said, can he not be in the cities of Moab, and Jerhico and Hazor? Did not Joshua purify those cities in the Lord’s name?”

“He did, Lappodoth,” Devorah said, “almost two hundred years ago. But now King Jabin, Sisera’s master, rules in Hazor.”

Lappodoth spit at the names, scowling; he stopped walking and turned to face her. “How long will your gracious God allow us to be tormented? It has been nearly a generation since Shamgar, son of Anath, was Judge over us and subdued the Philistines. Will Jabin’s atrocities go un-avenged?”

“Do not blaspheme, Lappodoth.” Devorah’s voice was low and rough-edged, very like a growl. “Have I not been a good Judge over Israel? Have I not nurtured Barak and our army? Am I not a good daughter to my parents and wife to you?”

Chagrined, not wanting to attack or upset her, but only wanting to relieve the anger and distress in his own heart, Lappodoth stepped forward and enveloped Devorah in his arms. “Forgive me, my Queen,” he said. “I meant no harm to you. And I meant no blaspheme. But, *when?*”

Shouting and laughing, a young boy, Kenaz, 12, and a young girl, Abishag, 11, ran up to them. Kenaz grabbed Lappodoth's robes and pulled him in the direction of the well. Abishag did the same with Devorah.

"You are late, teacher," Abishag said to Devorah.

"Yes," Kenaz said. "We are tired of waiting. We want to hear the rest of the story."

Lappodoth broke free of the child's grip. "Yes," he said, turning to Devorah to lightly brush her cheek with his lips. "Finish the story. I must relieve Daniel with the flocks. I will stop at your father's tent on my return."

"Thank you, Lappodoth," Devorah's smile was weary. "Until this evening."

"Come! Come!" Abishag called, dancing around her.

The children led Devorah through the bustling encampment toward their meeting place at the well. The hill country of Ephraim was steeper and rockier than the name suggested, Devorah thought, as she walked past the looms, tinsmith, grain and butcher's stalls that lined the upwardly-sloping main path. But the rugged terrain gave them security, as did their nomadic ways. Tents could be struck quickly and easily, at the first sign of trouble. The steep rock-strewn inclines were easier to defend and made the use of chariots impossible. And since the land was useless for farming, their neighbors had no need of it and left them alone.

Yet over the last decades, as they prospered and their numbers increased, the Ephramites needed more food and land they could farm. Their movement down to the fertile soil of the Jezreel valley and the villages of the Canaanites, once gradual - a family here, a family there - was now accelerating. Her own sister, Micah, her husband, Ehud,

and their six children had been living among the Canaanites for eight years. Abishag, the child who was tugging at her arm, was the oldest of them.

The land was theirs. God had given it to them and Devorah felt the Covenant keenly. It lived deep in her heart and illuminated her soul and mind. Never could she even contemplate living among the unbelievers. Being near their gods and goddesses, their rituals of death and fornication, were an anathema to her. Yet, here was the beautiful, no radiant, Abishag, healthy, intelligent and no worse for her family's living among the unbelievers for eight years.

Lappodoth *had* touched a nerve though. More and more of Jacob's descendants, especially the tribes of Judah, Nephtali and Zebulon, along with her own, were living in houses and farming, acting as merchants and artisans, and, as they expanded, took root, traveled to trade and visit, their Canaanite neighbors were threatened and the violence against them increased. Only the most heavily armed caravans dared travel.

The taxes and the money the Canaanites extorted from them for protection was unconscionable. Hadn't the Lord given this land to *them*, the Israelites? The time for action was fast approaching, but her general, Barak, was a weak reed. Still, Lappodoth's question remained in her mind: were not their so-called 'enemies,' the others surrounding them - the Kenites, Sidonians, Canaanites, Moabites, Philistines and Jebusites - also made in the image and likeness of God...?

Devorah welcomed all to partake of the Covenant. Birth mattered not. To experience the reality of the One God as she experienced it, to know the everlasting love and forgiveness, and to live from that place was the greatest blessing one human could

give another. Bestowing that blessing was the focus of Devorah's life. So, Abishag had brought Kenaz, son of the Canaanite iron worker, to the class with her.

The One God Devorah worshipped did not require punishment, attack and destruction. He, or It, was about asserting the good, the true and the beautiful - not eliminating evil. There was no opposition to It's Oneness. It was whole and complete, abiding in all of Its creation, human and inanimate. It's greatest joy, and the greatest joy of Its servants, was to awaken human beings to their birthrights: the reality of being spiritual beings having earthly experiences.

Kenaz reached his small hand up to Devorah's. "Faster, Devorah, faster," he called. "You think too much. Your mind wanders."

She smiled down on him. He had no idea of the danger his presence here created for himself and his family. Not from Devorah or the Israelites, but from his own people, the Canaanites. Only two months ago, their king, Jabin, had decreed it a crime for iron or any iron-making technology to be given to the Haibrus. The king feared it would be used as he used it, to make weapons.

Devorah saw the humor, thought that God enjoyed a good joke. How much was enough? King Jabin, ruler of Hazor, and his General in Chief, Sisera, already had 900 iron chariots and 40,000 soldiers armed with iron-tipped spears, knives, swords and shields. While the children of God (well, yes, they were all children of God, but those who had a Covenant with the One God) had all of 10,000 soldiers armed with older bronze weapons – one or two weapons per man, not the spear, sword, knife and shield of *each* Canaanite soldier.

But of course, that was adequate for the Israelites. What else but faith in the One God was necessary? Devorah laughed out loud; would that were true! She shook her head, sadly. *God does help, but I have a people to govern and defend.* Davorah knew that Barak is a fine General, but one could not fight chariots of iron, wheel scythes twisting and gleaming, with stones - though they did have those in abundance. She kicked one away and it rolled, harder than she'd intended, into an old man sitting beside the path.

“Forgive me, Sire,” Devorah bowed.

“No forgiveness is necessary, daughter,” he responded.

A few more paces and the children engulfed them.

“Teacher! Teacher!” they shouted. “Finish the story.”

“I can not finish the story, my darlings,” Devorah said, settling herself cross-legged, her back against the well. “It is too long. But I can continue it. Where did I leave off?”

Loud, frightened voices behind Devorah interrupted the story telling. A soldier, covered with dust, thick leather vest speckled with bright blood, face bruised and bronze helmet askew, raced through the circle of children and stood before Devorah, He dipped his head as a sign of respect. “Jeremiah’s caravan was attacked on the road to Hazor two hours ago. Jeremiah and four others are wounded, three are dead. Everything was taken. The survivors are on their way here.”

“Who were the attackers?” Devorah asked.

“They wore no uniforms,” the soldier said. “But their swords and knives were of iron. I think they were Canaanites; Sisera’s men.”

Almost everywhere she and Haber went, especially around the Temple, Yael saw naked and partially naked female flesh. It fascinated her. She stared so much that Haber asked her about it. But Yael felt drawn to it, in spite of her self. Aroused and repulsed at the same time, she would look away, but her eyes were pulled back to it again and again, especially to the breasts and buttocks.

Now the vision of feminine nakedness displayed so publicly and casually for all to see, danced at the edge of Yael's heart and mind. Those women *wanted* to be stared at, *wanted* their nakedness admired and appreciated, even by other women. They did not cringe with shame and want to hide and cover up their nakedness as the Haibrus did. What would it be like to be as they were; to be naked and to display oneself that way?

Yael patted her own buttocks and lifted her breasts. But oh, what was she doing? What was all this about, she wondered? There was no need of feminine tricks and sensual nakedness here with her husband. Haber, though eight years older than her twenty-two, was still vigorous and a fine figure of a man, who knew how to make love to her. But it was plain, unadorned procreation without much allure or passion, leaving Yael with a sense of lack.

Haber was a righteous Kenite artisan, a tinsmith, a trade much in demand; passed down in his clan from the time of his forebear, Jethro, and from even as far back as the exodus. I have no *need* of kohl, rouge and passion, she thought. But something in me burns for it. I am still young and without children. She shuddered at the thought of children, the pain of childbirth and the drudgery of caring for them. The elegant, regal ladies of the Canaanites, if they bore children, had slaves to care for them. Ah, to be as they were; or to be one of their slaves....

Haber released the pack mule's lead and the animal wandered a few feet, then bent its head to nibble the succulent grass. As he loosened the carefully arranged packs, Arak came and asked about the cooking pot Haber was making for him. They wandered off and it fell to Yael to finish unpacking. The last and longest bundle was the tent. She unrolled the stitched-together skins and removed the mallet and the sharp tent pegs stored at its center. Yael's movements were deft and rapid. She enjoyed this work and was good at it.

She paused and stared at the mallet, as if seeing it for the first time. She picked up a wooden spike, touched its sharp point with her thumb. The tent pegs started out much longer, but after each use, Yael sharpened them. Her eyes clouded over and her heart beat more rapidly. She felt frozen in time, tense, waiting. An image of a handsome man in armor, Canaanite armor, drifted before her. She looked down; he was lying at her feet in a fetal position. Yael felt a thrill and her nipples grew taut. She felt out of control yet guided by an inexorable power. It was hard to breathe. She could hear the blood pounding in her ears. She gripped the tent peg, pointed it down and reached for the mallet.