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GEOGRAPHY IN THE PARASHA

**PARASHAT BESHALACH**

**The War of Deborah and Barak: A Different Geographical Perspective**

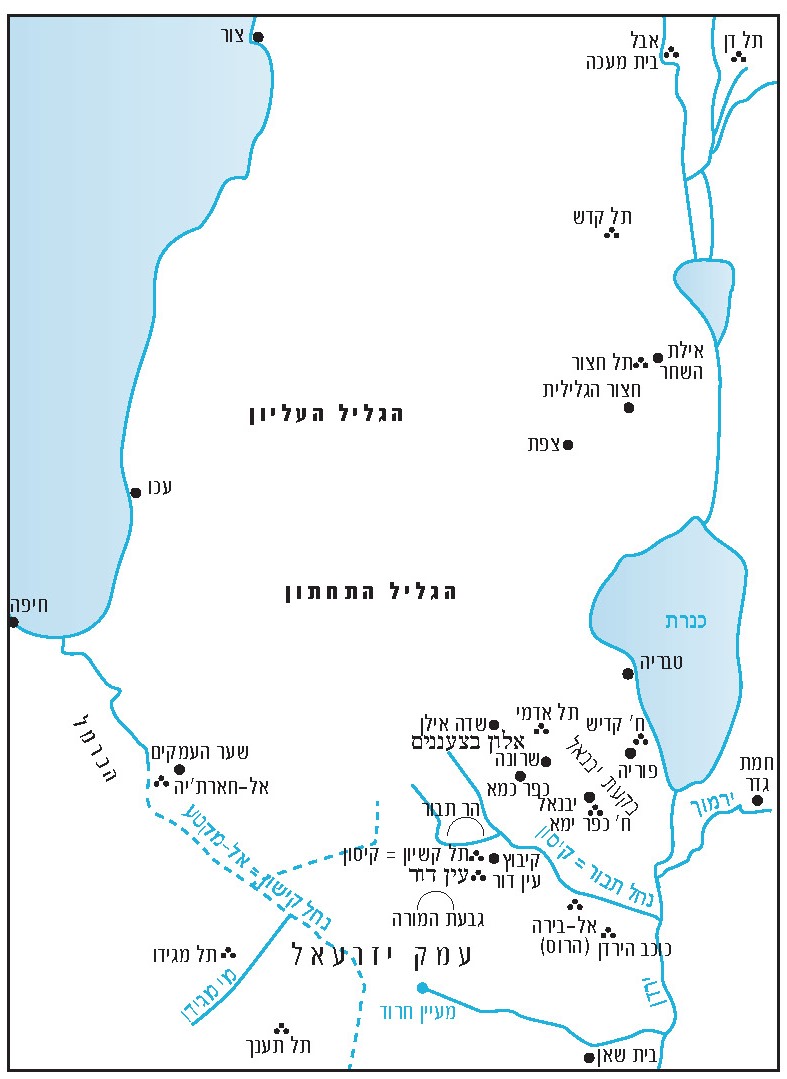
**By Prof. Yoel Elitzur**

**The Historical Significance of the Victory over Sisera and His Army**

In the *haftara* of *Parashat Beshalach*, we read the story of the remarkable victory of the people of Israel, under the leadership of Deborah and Barak, over Sisera, the army commander of King Jabin of Canaan. This was a war of liberation that carried historical significance for generations to come. In order to understand the context of this narrative, let us contemplate for a moment on our own generation. The divine process in which we have participated of the return of the nation of Israel to its land began more than two hundred years ago, reaching climaxes that were unprecedented in history with the establishment of the State of Israel and the War of Independence, the miracles of the Six-Day War and the salvation of the Yom Kippur War. Through all these years, we have defended ourselves against the same, unchanging enemy: the Arabs who reside in the Land and their neighbors in the surrounding countries. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine a change in this fundamental status quo in the foreseeable future.

Returning to *Tanakh*, we find that our ancestors who lived in the Land had a constant enemy as well: the Canaanites, for whom the land was named “the land of Canaan.” From the initial arrival of Abraham to this land, the Canaanites were here – “the Canaanites were then in the land” (Genesis 12:6). When the people of Israel returned under Joshua’s leadership more than four hundred years later, they found the land in the same state. The conquest of the land left Canaanite enclaves, both large and small, and when the power of the tribes of Israel waned in the period of the Judges following the death of Joshua and the elders, the Canaanites reared their heads. From their perspective, the time had come for them to restore their former glory, and they proceeded to crown King Jabin as ruler of the northern part of the land.

But there is a twist to our story. After the victory over Sisera, we read, “The hand of the Israelites bore harder and harder on King Jabin of Canaan, until they destroyed King Jabin of Canaan” (Judges 4:24). From a historian’s perspective, this verse is more important than the entire dramatic story that preceded it. It represents a historical watershed: From this point on, we no longer read – in the rest of *Tanakh* or in any later source – of a Canaanite enemy daring to challenge Israel militarily. The remnants of the Canaanite people became merchants of the Mediterranean coast and servants of King Solomon (I Kings 9:20). It seems that the verses in Joshua and at the beginning of Judges – “When the Israelites became stronger, they imposed tribute on the Canaanites” (Joshua 17:13; cf. Judges 1:28 and *Da’at Mikra* commentary there) – refer to this period, when the hand of the Israelites bore harder and harder on the Canaanites. Through this lens, we can view the Song of Deborah as a song celebrating the completion of the conquest of the land of Israel, in the same way that the Song of the Sea was a victory hymn for the Exodus.[[1]](#footnote-1), [[2]](#footnote-2)



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| --- | --- |
| תל דן | Tel Dan |
| אבל בית מעכה | Abel-beth-maacah |
| צור | Tyre |
| תל קדש | Tel Kedesh |
| אילת השחר | Ayelet HaShahar |
| תל חצור | Tel Hazor |
| חצור הגלילית | Hatzor HaGlilit |
| צפת | Safed |
| הגליל העליון | Upper Galilee |
| עכו | Acre |
| כנרת | *Galilee* |
| הגליל התחתון | Lower Galilee |
| טבריה | Tiberias |
| חיפה | Haifa |
| תל אדמי | Tel Adami |
| ח' קדיש | Khirbet Qedish |
| פוריה | Poriya |
| שדה אילן | Sde Ilan |
| בקעת יבנאל | Yavne’el Valley |
| אלון בצעננים | Elon-bezaanannim |
| שרונה | Sharona |
| חמת גדר | Hamat Gader |
| ירמוך | *Yarmuk* |
| כפר כמא | Kafr Kama |
| יבנאל | Yavne’el |
| ח' כפר ימא | Khirbet Kafr Kama |
| הר תבור | MOUNT TABOR |
| שער העמקים | Sha’ar HaAmakim |
| אל-חארת'יה | al-Harthiyye |
| הכרמל | MOUNT CARMEL |
| נחל תבור = קיסון | *Nahal Tavor (Qisun)* |
| קיבוץ עין דור | Kibbutz Ein Dor |
| עין דור | En-dor |
| תל קשיון = קיסון | Tel Kishion (Qisun) |
| אל-בירה (הרוס) | al-Bira (destroyed) |
| כוכב הירדן | Belvoir Fortress |
| גבעת המורה | GIVAT HAMOREH |
| נחל קישון = אל-מקטע | *Nahal Kishon (el-Mukatta’)* |
| עמק יזרעאל | Jezreel Valley |
| ירדן | *Jordan* |
| תל מגידו | Tel Megiddo |
| מי מגידו | *Waters of Megiddo* |
| מעיין חרוד | *Well of Harod* |
| בית שאן | Beit She’an |
| תל תענך | Tel Taanach |

**How Did the Victory Happen?**

The story of the victory of the people of Israel, under the leadership of Deborah and Barak, is described in prose form in chapter 4, and in poetic form in chapter 5. The two chapters have much in common, but there are also fundamental differences between the two versions of the story. In order to understand properly the precise nature of the events that transpired, we must integrate elements from the song in chapter 5 into the prose narrative of chapter 4.

The narrative relates that Barak assembled ten thousand men in Kedesh, and then ascended with them to Mount Tabor. Sisera ordered all his chariots and troops to Nahal Kishon. We read:

Then Deborah said to Barak, “Up! 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, and the Lord threw Sisera and all his chariots and army into a panic before the onslaught of Barak. Sisera leaped from his chariot and fled on foot. (4:14-15)

According to the reasonable and accepted interpretation of this passage (Josephus, *Antiquities* V, 205), the deciding factor in the battle was a sudden, intense, unseasonal rainstorm: “The Lord is marching before you!” This interpretation is not written explicitly, but it is implied in the text: Compare “and the Lord threw Sisera and all his chariots and army into a panic” to a similar verse from the crossing of the Red Sea – “[The Lord] threw the Egyptian army into a panic. He locked the wheels of their chariots so that they moved forward with difficulty” (Exodus 14:24-25). The sudden inundation of water that caused the panic described in the crossing of the Red Sea seems to have played the same role in the battle against Sisera.

The song adds to the narrative: “The heavens dripped, yea, the clouds dripped water” (Judges 5:4)[[3]](#footnote-3); “the stars fought from heaven” (5:20); “Nahal Kishon swept them away” (5:21). It is clear, then, that heavenly intervention was at work here. Barak himself was initially surprised, but then knew enough to seize the opportunity. But what was Barak’s original plan of action?

Comparing the story in chapter 4 with the song in chapter 5 can help us answer this question. The song states: “**Then the kings came, they fought: The kings of Canaan fought at Taanach, by Megiddo’s waters**” (5:19). This piece of information is not mentioned in the description of the battle in chapter 4. My father, *z”l*, connected this to another difference between the two chapters – the role of the tribes of the central region of the land. In the song, Deborah praises the tribes of Benjamin, Ephraim and Machir (Manasseh) who came to join in the battle (5:14). In the prose narrative of chapter 4, however, there is no mention of this.

According to my father, *z”l*, Deborah and Barak had prepared for a difficult war against vast Canaanite forces scattered throughout the land. The Canaanite strongholds of Taanach and Megiddo, which, as we learn from the song, had their own kings who were subordinate to Jabin, had certainly planned to support Sisera from the south. The tribes of Benjamin, Ephraim and Manasseh, whose territories bordered these Canaanite strongholds on the south, took it upon themselves to attack those cities in an attempt to stop them in the southern part of the valley, undoubtedly at a great human cost. The sudden heavy downpour that turned the entire region into a mass of mud and raging streams neutralized Sisera’s nine hundred iron chariots and turned the horsemen into an unorganized mob trying to flee and survive. This turn of events practically eliminated the need for the central tribes to intervene, and thus they were not mentioned in the narrative of chapter 4.

Similarly, the song describes the tribe of Zebulun as “a people that mocked at death” (5:18): The plan was for the Zebulunites to draw out Sisera’s army – inevitably causing many of them to be trampled by the Canaanite chariots – so that the soldiers of Naphtali and Issachar could attack Sisera from the rear. The downpour eliminated the need for this plan as well. The only thing left was for Deborah to thank God for his kindness and to praise the tribes for their readiness to go to war for the sake of their countrymen.

Following our general approach in this series, our discussion will focus on geography, and the conclusions we draw will lead us to different perspectives as well. This story of war and victory revolves around seven geographical names: Hazor; Harosheth-goiim; Kedesh Naphtali; Mount Tabor; Nahal Kishon; Elon-bezaanannim, which is near Kedesh; and Taanach, by Megiddo’s waters.

**Hazor**

Hazor is mentioned in this narrative twice: “And the Lord surrendered them to King Jabin of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor” (4:2); and “for there was friendship between King Jabin of Hazor and the family of Heber the Kenite” (4:17). Hazor was, at the time, one of Joshua’s most respected conquests. At the time of Joshua’s conquest of the land, King Jabin of Hazor recovered from the initial shock of the Israelites’ sudden intrusion into the land, assembled a large coalition of all the kings in the north and prepared to wage a large-scale war against Joshua. But Joshua surprised them “suddenly” (Joshua 11:7) at their initial place of assembly at the Waters of Merom, conquering in one blow the entire northern part of the land, including, most significantly, Hazor itself.

The narrative in Joshua stresses that “Hazor was formerly the **head of all those kingdoms**” (11:10). In the archives from the nineteenth-eighteenth centuries BCE found in ancient Mari, on the Euphrates River, the only city in the land of Israel mentioned is Hazor. In the Amarna letters from the fourteenth century BCE (which, according to the chronology I have adopted, dates back to the conquest of Canaan; see our discussion on *Parashat Shemot*), the ruler of Hazor is the only ruler who dared to give himself the title of “king.” Hazor is enumerated in Joshua 19 among the cities of Naphtali, whose territory extends through the length of the eastern Galilee. According to I Maccabees 11:68, Hazor is located on the border between the hill country and the valley north of the Sea of Galilee, and is not far from Kedesh. According to *Antiquities* V, 199, it is located above the lake Semechonitis, known today as Lake Hula. The identification of Hazor is accepted by all as Tel Hazor, adjacent to Kibbutz Ayelet HaShahar and north of the city of Hatzor HaGlilit. This fortified tell is enormous for the standards of its time (approx. 200 acres; compare to Tel Megiddo – approx. 15 acres – and Tel Lachish – approx. 30 acres). Based on excavations of the tell in the 1950s and 1960s, and again in the 1990s and 2000s, it has become clear that the Canaanite city of Hazor was destroyed by a huge fire, consistent with the events recorded in Joshua. One particularly interesting finding at the site was a wide variety of idolatrous statues and figurines that were intentionally destroyed and thrown into the fire throughout the city!

Many scholars have had difficulty answering two historical questions in connection with Hazor, in the context of the story of Deborah and Barak. First, if Hazor was destroyed by fire in the time of Joshua, how is it that King Jabin reappears in Hazor during the time of Deborah and Barak? Second, why was Sisera’s base in Harosheth-goiim and not in Hazor, the city of Jabin his king? Furthermore, why doesn’t the text apprise us of the fate of Hazor following the war of Deborah and Barak? The critical scholarship has tended to provide answers to these questions that are either critical and overly complicated (different, contradictory sources were stitched together haphazardly by an unintelligent editor) or critical and overly simplistic (the words “who reigned in Hazor” are the result of a clerical error, influenced by Joshua 11). The correct solution was provided by the Radak, and my father, *z”l*, followed his approach in an article dedicated to this topic. The answer is that “Jabin” is a dynastic name (as hinted at in the verse, “The hand of the Israelites bore harder and harder on King Jabin of Canaan, until they destroyed King Jabin of Canaan”). The phrase “who reigned” is conjugated in the past perfect, indicating that in the past, before the conquest of Canaan at the hands of the people of Israel, this royal house was situated in Hazor. Now, since Hazor was destroyed, it is situated in Harosheth-goiim.

**Harosheth-goiim**

We do not possess enough information in order to identify the location of Harosheth-goiim. The general region where it can be found is a derivative of our geographical interpretation of this entire narrative. Various identifications have been suggested. Some are based on etymology, connecting the word *charoshet* to craftsmanship, as in “to cut stones (*u-vacharoshet even*)for setting and to carve wood (*u-vacharoshet etz*) – to work in every kind of designer’s craft” (Exodus 35:33), forests and woodlands, as in “a cedar in Lebanon with beautiful branches and shady thickets (*ve-choresh*)” (Ezekiel 31:3) or to plowed land, as in “You shall not plow (*lo tacharosh*) with an ox and an ass together” (Deuteronomy 22:10). Other identifications are based on a slightly similar Arabic name (Haris or Harthiyye). However, all of these are mere speculations. The identification with Harthiyye is especially common in the scholarly literature. In truth, however, Harthiyye is a modern-era name for a place where the members of the Arab family known as “the sons of Haritha” resided. Benjamin Mazar argued that Harosheth-goiim was a territorial name and not the name of a city. In addition, a new speculation has arisen in recent years: Prof. Adam Zertal wrote an entire book built on the speculative connection of Sisera to the island of Sardinia, in light of a lone place in Sardinia whose name sounds similar to “Sisera.” Based on this, Zertal identified Harosheth-goiim, the city of Sisera, with an interesting archaeological site above Wadi Ara that bears resemblance to parallel Sardinian sites.

Based on a linguistic analysis of the name, it seems to me that the second element, “goiim,” was a place name, rather than a reference to “gentiles.” This conclusion can be drawn from the verse, “the king of Goiim in Gilgal (*melekh Goyim le-Gilgal*),” at the end of the list of Canaanite kings in Joshua 12:23. In this list, when we find the pattern “the king of X in Y,” X is always the name of a city and Y is always the name of a large region. What might be the region described here as “Gilgal”? It is reasonable to conjecture that our “Gilgal” here is a similar form to “Galil.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Indeed, the Septuagint translates in this vein: “Basilea Gōim tēs Galilaias” – the king Goim of the Galilee. The expression “Galilee of Goiim (*Gelil Ha-goyim*)” is mentioned in a northern context in Isaiah 8:23, and apparently in the Hebrew substrate of I Maccabees 5:15 as well. This expression should be interpreted as “the part of the Galilee that is in the vicinity of the location Goiim” (compare to “the Negeb of Arad,” “the Negeb of the Jerahmeelites” and “the Negeb of the Kenites”). In my opinion, the expression *Charoshet Ha-Goyim* bears the same form as *Timnat Cheres* – Timnah in the vicinity of Heres, and *Ta’anat Shilo* – Taanah in the Shiloh region. According to this, our case is referring to a place called Harosheth that is adjacent to the city of Goiim. As for more precise identifications for Harosheth and Goiim, as we have stated, there is simply not enough information.

**Kedesh Naphtali**

The identification of Kedesh is seemingly clear: Tel Kedesh (formerly Qadas) in the eastern part of the Upper Galilee, near Yiftah, Malkiya and Ramot Naftali. The certainty of this identification is based on six factors:

1. General consideration: The three cities of refuge in the land of Canaan were Hebron, Shechem and Kedesh in the Galilee, in the hill country of Naphtali (Joshua 20:1). The principle of “You shall… divide into three parts the territory of the country” (Deuteronomy 19:3), which the Talmud explains to mean, “so that [the distance] from Hebron to the south is equivalent to [the distance] from Hebron to Shechem, and [the distance] from Hebron to Shechem is equivalent to [the distance] from Shechem to Kedesh” (*Tosefta Makkot* ch. 3; and *Bavli* and *Yerushalmi* ch. 2) leads us to place Kedesh within the limits of the Upper Galilee.
2. Kedesh is enumerated in Joshua 19:37 in the list of Naphtalite cities between Hazor and Iron, which have been identified in that area.
3. “In the days of King Pekah of Israel, King Tiglath-pileser of Assyria came and captured Ijon, Abel-beth-maacah, Janoah, Kedesh, Hazor…” (II Kings 15:29). Janoah is not mentioned anywhere outside of this verse, and its identification is unknown.[[5]](#footnote-5) Connecting Ijon (Tel Dibin, adjacent to Marj Ayyun), Abel-beth-maacah (Tel Abel, south of Metula), Tel Kedesh and Tel Hazor yields a continuous north-south line.
4. Post-biblical sources, including I Maccabees 11:63-74 (Kedes/Kades in the Galilee, near Hazor); Josephus, in *The Jewish War* II, 459 (Kadasa/Kedasa “of Tyre”); and Eusebius, in the *Onomasticon* (Kades [Cades] – “It is now called Kydissos, twenty miles from Tyre, near Paneas”) all point to this region.
5. The name is preserved in the form of Qadas.
6. It is the largest tell in the mountainous Upper Galilee region (approx. 25 acres), with a spring at its feet and walls 16 feet thick (it is listed in Joshua 19 among the “fortified cities”). Excavations of the site have yielded rich findings from the early and middle Canaanite periods, while findings from the late Canaanite period and the Israelite period are meager in comparison. Later findings prominently include remnants from a pagan temple from the Roman period.

**Mount Tabor**

There is no need to elaborate on the identity, location and prominent appearance of Mount Tabor, as these features are well known and well documented in sources throughout history.

**Nahal Kishon**

Outside of the narrative of Deborah and Barak, Nahal Kishon is mentioned one other time in *Tanakh*. After the fire descended from heaven at Mount Carmel, I Kings 18 relates:

When they saw this, all the people flung themselves on their faces and cried out: “The Lord alone is god, The Lord alone is God!” Then Elijah said to them, “Seize the prophets of Baal, let not a single one of them get away.” They seized them, and Elijah took them down to the Nahal Kishon and slaughtered them there. (18:39-40)

Since Nahal Kishon is mentioned in connection with both Mount Carmel and Mount Tabor, it must be identified with a stream connecting these two regions. The modern-day Kishon River (known in Arabic as Nahr el-Mukatta’) is the only stream that fits this description. However, a certain difficulty remains, as the upper tributaries of the Kishon do not reach Mount Tabor itself. Rather, Mount Tabor itself is surrounded on all sides by the tributaries of Nahal Tavor, which flows east, toward the Jordan. The upper tributaries of the Kishon are located approximately three miles from Mount Tabor. An additional difficulty is the use of the word *nachal*. Most of the Jezreel Valley and the Kesulot Valley is within the drainage basin of the Kishon, and while maps of these valleys generally contain dashed blue lines indicating surface flow channels, ultimately most of the area covered by the Kishon is a large plain rather than a clearly-defined stream. If what transpired here was flooding and troops sinking into the water, then it was not quite that “Nahal Kishon swept them away” (Judges 5:21), but more that “the Jezreel Valley flooded them.” We will return to these questions later on.

**Elon-bezaanannim, Which is near Kedesh**

The term “*Elon*” is an ancient feature of the geographical terminology of *Tanakh*. It is the first component of nine non-settlement geographical names in the ancient parts of *Tanakh* (i.e., the books preceding Samuel). Today, most people tend to think that *Elon* refers to a tree or woodland. In an article published in 2003, I brought proofs supporting the early Targumic interpretation that *Elon* actually refers to a plain.

The verse states that Elon-bezaanannim is located in the vicinity of Kedesh. Elon-bezaanannim is mentioned one other time in *Tanakh* – in the description of the territory allotted to the tribe of Naphtali: “Their boundary ran from Heleph in Elon-bezaanannim, Adami-nekeb and Jabneel to Lakkum, and it ended at the Jordan” (Joshua 19:33). Does the information provided by this verse match the descriptor “which is near Kedesh” found here in Judges? We will attempt to answer this question later on.

**Taanach, by the Waters of Megiddo**

Taanach and Megiddo are paired together here and in other sources as well, both Biblical and extra-Biblical. They have been identified with certainty in the southwestern edge of the Jezreel Valley, in two tells five miles apart that are rich in findings. “The Waters of Megiddo” are apparently the Nahal Qana springs (Wadi al-Lajjun) adjacent to Megiddo Junction. From a territorial perspective, it seems that these springs were associated at the time with Taanach, while the territory associated with Megiddo included the sections of the valley that lay north and west of the city.

**Two Geographical Questions**

1. Kedesh Naphtali is located almost thirty miles from Mount Tabor. Why did Barak summon thousands of men from the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun to Kedesh, only to send them shortly thereafter to Mount Tabor? Barak’s actions are particularly puzzling with respect to the Zebulunite draftees, since Mount Tabor is located on the border of their territory. The Zebulunites, then, had to travel back and forth this entire distance needlessly.
2. How could Sisera have fled on foot 25-30 miles to Elon-bezaanannim, which is near Kedesh, after a long day of battle and defeat, without stopping for food or rest? My father, *z”l*, and others answered that the text was referring to the general nomadic area of the household of Heber the Kenite. Those who know that the descendants of Moses’ father-in-law generally lived in the southern part of the land would be surprised to read that Jael, wife of Heber the Kenite, suddenly appeared in the north. Therefore, the text informs us that Heber the Kenite had recently separated from the other Kenites, and was wandering in the northern part of the land, as far north as Elon-bezaanannim, which is near Kedesh. During the battle at the Kishon, Heber’s tent was near Mount Tabor, and it was there that Sisera fled. With all due respect, this answer seems insufficient. Furthermore, the answer does not fit well with the description of the borderline of Naphtali in Joshua. Let us examine this point.

**Elon-bezaanannim on the Southern Borderline of Naphtali**

We read in Joshua: “The sixth lot fell to the Naphtalites… Their boundary ran from Heleph in Elon-bezaanannim, Adami-nekeb and Jabneel to Lakkum, and it ended at the Jordan. The boundary then turned westward to Aznoth-tabor” (19:32-34). It would seem that the borderline described here is the southern border of Naphtali. The verse uses a technique found several times in Joshua: delineating a borderline by moving east from a certain midpoint, and then returning to move west from that same midpoint. In this case, the midpoint is Heleph, which is located within Elon-bezaanannim. The borderline then moves east, toward Adami-nekeb, Jabneel, Lakkum and the Jordan. Returning to Heleph, the borderline then moves west toward Aznoth-tabor.

Many of the locations mentioned here can be identified, at least to a certain extent. “Aznoth-tabor” is a two-word place name that should be interpreted as “Aznoth, which is near Tabor.” It is clear, then, that the western end of the borderline described here is close to Mount Tabor. On the east, the borderline ends at the Jordan, south of the Sea of Galilee, in the general area of the modern-day moshava of Menahamiya. An excellent identification has been suggested for Adami, in the middle of this borderline: Tel Adami, a prominent, fortified, Canaanite-Israelite tell from the Biblical period, above the Yavne’el Valley, two miles east of Sde Ilan.[[6]](#footnote-6)



Observation from the slope that delimitates the Yavne’el Valley, the Sea of Galilee and the Golan Heights. Along this slope passes the southern borderline of Naphtali (courtesy of Amit Horn).

*Chazal* had their own traditional identifications for each of the sites listed in this verse, three of whose names were preserved until the modern era: “Adami – Damin, Nekeb – Siyadathah, and Jabneel – Caphar Jama” (*Yerushalmi Megilla* 1:1). “Damin” is linguistically equivalent to “Adami,” in a variant typical to the period of the *Talmud Yerushalmi*,and it is also equivalent to the later “Damia.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Siyadathah is Khirbet Ṣiyada (three miles southeast of Tel Adami) and Caphar Jama is Khirbet Yamma (south of the moshava of Yavne’el). The borderline described in the verse makes topographical sense. It seems that it follows the length of the steep grade that delimits the Yavne’el Valley from the southwest. In order to complete the picture in a logical manner, we must estimate that Aznoth-tabor was located several miles north of Mount Tabor. Thus, our analysis of this borderline described in Joshua leads us to the conclusion that **Elon-bezaanannim**, which lay between Adami on the east and Aznoth-tabor on the west, was apparently the plains region of modern-day Sde Ilan, Sharona and Kafr Kama.

**How Can Elon-bezaanannim be “near Kedesh”?**

The conclusion drawn from the previous section leads to a new problem: Kedesh lies more than 25 miles north of the location we proposed for Elon-bezaanannim! A solution to this problem was suggested by Isaiah Press (in an important article with whose details I do not entirely agree), and consequently advanced by many others as well. Press explained that we have no choice but to conclude that there was a different place called Kedesh in the vicinity of Mount Tabor. This name duplication should not surprise us; in Judea, for example, there are two places named Ziph (Joshua 15:24, 55) and two places named Socoh (15:35, 48). Within the small territory allotted to the tribe of Benjamin, there were two places named Gibeah (Gibeah of Saul/Gibeah of the Benjaminites and Gibeah of Kiriath-jearim), not to mention Geba and Gibeon as well. The name Kedesh itself is found in other contexts in *Tanakh* as well (not including instances of Kadesh, which is a different name entirely). Different locations named Kedesh are found in Judah (Joshua 15:23) and in Issachar (I Chronicles 6:57). It may be that the Kedesh mentioned in the story of Deborah and Barak is actually the Issacharite Kedesh, whose identification is not agreed upon. However, it is more likely that Barak son of Abinoam of Kedesh, in Naphtali, assembled his soldiers to his own hometown, and therefore we can conclude that there were two places named Kedesh within Naphtali – one in the north and one in the south. There is even a plausible suggestion for this southern Kedesh's identification: Khirbet Qedish in the topographical terrace below Poriya, located above a steep incline that descends to the Sea of Galilee. This ruin contains remnant of a fairly large settlement that was inhabited during the Canaanite period and the Israelite I period, and later in the Roman and Byzantine periods. In light of this, it appears that all mentions of Kedesh in the story of the war of Deborah and Barak do not refer to the northern Kedesh but to the southern Kedesh, which is not far from Mount Tabor (nine miles, if the identification with Khirbet Qedish is correct). It was to this southern Kedesh that Barak assembled ten thousand men, and it was from there that he brought them to Mount Tabor. Sisera fled by foot only a few miles before he reached Jael's tent in Elon-bezaanannim, the plains region northeast of Mount Tabor.

**Nahal Kishon – A Reassessment**

We concluded our discussion of Nahal Kishon with two questions. These questions do not constitute serious problems, but they are somewhat discomfiting. First, Mount Tabor is surrounded on all sides by the tributaries of Nahal Tavor, while the tributaries of the Kishon are at least three miles away. Second, the upper tributaries of the Kishon are virtually unrecognizable as part of the stream; as we said, it would be more fitting to say that “the Jezreel Valley flooded them” rather than “Nahal Kishon swept them away” (Judges 5:21).

Before I drop the forthcoming bombshell, I would like to say a few words about Nahal Tavor. This stream’s tributaries surround Mount Tabor on all sides, was blessed with an abundance of springs, ensuring a constant flow in the stream. The stream flows rapidly, descending to the Jordan Valley at the foot of Belvoir Fortress. Because of the combination of this abundance of water and the steep inclines on either side of the stream, several ancient settlements were built on the stream bed, close to the stream itself, and an ancient road passed through the stream bed as well. Until the foundation of the State of Israel in 1948, the stream was known as Wadi al-Bira, after the village of al-Bira that lay at the edge of the plain above its southern bank.

And now for the twist: Rabbi Ishtori Haparchi, a resident of Beit She’an, who completed his well-known work *Kaftor Va-ferach* in 1322 CE, writes: “South of Tiberias about a half day [journey] lies Beit She’an, and in the middle of the way lies **Nahal Kishon, which is called Qisun**” (ch. 11, p. 287 [Lunz ed.]). The large stream that lies in the middle of the road between Tiberias and Beit She’an is Nahal Tavor. Rabbi Ishtori Haparchi is informing us that in his time, almost 700 years ago, the Arabs called this stream **Qisun**, and he thus identified it plainly as the Biblical Nahal Kishon. This Nahal Kishon is mentioned twice more in *Kaftor Va-ferach*. First: “South of the where the Yarmuk meets the Jordan about a half hour [journey], Nahal Kishon meets the Jordan, and it descends from the west, south of Mount Tabor” (ch. 7, p. 125). Actually, the distance from the mouth of the Yarmuk River, where it meets the Jordan River, to the mouth of Nahal Tavor is about two miles. Second, and more significantly: “West of Mount Tabor is Chisloth-tabor… directly to the south about an hour [journey] is Kishon, and from there extends the stream” (ch. 11, p. 293).

Lower Galilee scholar Nehemiah Zimbalist-Zori visited the southern springs of Nahal Tavor in the summer of 1943, and found that the ruin above the springs was known to the Arabs as **Khirbet Qisun**. The ruin is an exceptionally large tell (35-50 acres) made up of four mounds, and containing remnants from the prehistoric, Canaanite, Israelite, Hellenistic, Roman and early Arab periods. This city was apparently **Kishion**, a Levite city in Issachar (Joshua 19:19; 20:28). **Kishon** may be a parallel version of the same name.[[8]](#footnote-8) In the list of the conquests of Tuthmose III of Egypt, the name ***qswn*** appears (immediately preceding Shunem) and it is reasonable to claim that this name also refers to this same city. Upon further examination, Zori found that in an early map that originated in the Byzantine period and is attributed to Jerome, as well as in a few other maps from the Medieval period and even in a map from 1830, Nahal Kishon is labeled as flowing southeast from Mount Tabor to the Jordan.

The apparent conclusion is that just as we have found that there were two distinct locations in the allotment of Naphtali named **Kedesh**, there were also two streams named **Kishon**. The Kishon associated with Elijah was located on the slopes of Mount Carmel,[[9]](#footnote-9) while the Kishon associated with Barak was apparently Nahal Tavor. The meaning of the name “Kishon” is unknown, as is its linguistic root.[[10]](#footnote-10) It is likely that the early meaning of the name was relevant in both districts and thus led to its use for two different streams. Another (late) example of two streams on parallel opposite sides of a watershed bearing the same name is ‘Ūja or ‘Ōja (‘Auja in literary Arabic), which is the Arabic name for both Nahal Yitav, which descends to the Jordan Rift Valley, and the Yarkon River on the west.[[11]](#footnote-11) It may also be speculated that the apparently obscure expression *nachal* ***kedumim*** *nachal kishon* (Judges 5:21)[[12]](#footnote-12) might simply be interpreted as “the eastern torrent Kishon.” In the light of the fact that there were indeed two different streams known as Nahal Kishon along the same line of latitude, the verse is stressing that it is the **eastern** Kishon that featured in the battle.[[13]](#footnote-13)

It may be added that there is another hint to the identification of the Nahal Kishon of Judges with Nahal Tavor in the writings of Josephus. He writes:

And when they were come to a close fight, there came down from heaven a great storm, with a vast quantity of rain and hail, and the wind blew the rain in the face of the Canaanites, and so darkened their eyes… while the storm did not so much incommode the Israelites, because it came in their backs. (*Antiquities* V, 205)

Josephus understood that the Canaanites advanced facing west, while the Israelites advanced facing east. This description only makes sense if the stream in question is Nahal Tavor, and not the tributaries of the Kishon (el-Mukatta’) in the Jezreel Valley.

Here is another interesting point. The *Daat Mikra* *Bible Atlas* cites a unique eyewitness account of a sudden, heavy downpour that occurred in this region. The author of the account is Yifrah Haviv of Kibbutz Beit Keshet, who writes:

It was… Independence Day [April 16] of 1964. It was a typical spring-sirocco day…. Suddenly in the evening, lightning cleaved the sky from horizon to horizon…. There was deafening thunder as in the time of the Deluge and the gates of the heavens opened wide. Within two hours, 120 millimeters [almost five inches] of rain fell. The thunder and lightning never let up during those two hours…. Tens of millions of cubic meters of water flowed… in the handful of wadis in the area, sweeping away titanic rocks and trees, destroying fences, changing the look of the land…. Nahal Tavor… turned into a roaring river. (p. 176)

What is curious about this anecdote is that while the authors of the *Daat Mikra Bible Atlas* surely followed the prevailing opinion that Nahal Kishon, which swept away the army of Sisera, refers to the tributaries of the modern-day Kishon River in the Jezreel Valley, the account that it cites describing a “roaring river” refers to none other than Nahal Tavor!

**A Glimpse at the Story of Gideon**

Begging the permission of the readers, I would like to jump for a moment to the geography of the story of Gideon. We read in Judges: “All Midian, Amalek and the Kedemites joined forces; they crossed over and encamped in the Valley of Jezreel” (6:33). In response, Gideon and his men assemble as well: “Early next day, Jerubbaal – that is, Gideon – and all the troops with him encamped above En-harod, while the camp of Midian was in the plain to the north of him, at Gibeath-moreh” (7:1). Following the test of the “lappers” (7:4-8), three hundred men remained with Gideon: “The Midianite camp was below him, in the plain” (7:8). Gideon and his attendant descended to this Midianite camp at the beginning of the night and heard a dream and its interpretation (7:9-14). Gideon then returned to the Israelite camp and attacked the Midianite camp just before midnight, “at the beginning of the middle watch” (7:19). The geographical picture here is clear: The vast Midianite camp was spread out in the Jezreel Valley between Gibeath-moreh in the north and En-harod in the south, and Gideon attacked this camp from the south, from the direction of En-harod.

This geographical description makes perfect sense, as long as one takes what he reads in the chapter at face value while looking at a map of the region. However, the moment one opens any modern work or commentary on the conflict between Gideon and the Midianites, he is in for a shock. Modern Bible atlases and commentators move the Midianite camp more than six miles to the north, past Gibeath-moreh, forcing Gideon and his men to march a total of seven miles in the beginning of the night, including ascending and descending the ridge of Gibeath-moreh (Jabel ed-Dahi). This geographical shift is accompanied by a linguistic distortion as well. *Da’at Mikra*’s commentary on verse 1 reads:

“While the camp of Midian was in the plain to the north of him, at Gibeath-moreh.”: “To the north” – this phrase refers to both the words preceding it and the words following it; it is as if it was written twice. The camp of Midian was to the north of Gideon, to the north of Gibeath-moreh, in the plain. The Midianites encamped north of Gibeath-moreh, far north of Gideon’s camp.

*Da’at Mikra*’s commentary on verse 8 reads:

“Retaining only the three hundred men” – … Here end the events that transpired at En-harod at the foot of Mount Gilboa, about 11 km. [7 miles] from the Midianite camp in the Ksalot Valley (north of Gibeath-moreh).

“The Midianite camp was below him, in the plain” – Here the verse teaches us that at nightfall, Gideon’s three hundred men traveled secretly to Gibeath-moreh, preparing themselves there next to the Midianite camp, from above. The Midianites… did not notice a handful of men moving through the plain in the darkness.

**What Is Going On Here?**

What is going on here? Why is it that in the story of Deborah, where, according to the simple reading of the text, the military clash took place at the foot of Mount Tabor, the scholars moved the battlefield more than three miles to the west, while in the story of Gideon, where the text seems to place the attack in the Jezreel Valley (seemingly even in its southern part), the scholars moved the story seven miles north, to the vicinity of Mount Tabor?

The key factor here can be found in Psalms: “Deal with them as You did with Midian, with Sisera, with Jabin, at Nahal Kishon – who were destroyed at En-dor, who became dung for the field” (83:10-11). Ancient En-dor is well known; it was located in the ruined village of Indur (some say in the adjacent site of Khirbet Safsafeh) about two miles south of Khirbet Qisun above the tributaries of Nahal Tavor. The simple meaning of the verse from Psalms makes sense in light of our analysis: Sisera and Jabin’s army were destroyed in the fields of En-dor, and from there they were swept away by Nahal Kishon, which is none other than Nahal Tavor.

Despite this, virtually all the scholars and modern commentators, in their confidence that Sisera and his army were defeated between Afula and Nazareth, far west of En-dor, were forced into a far-fetched interpretation of the verse in Psalms. They explained that it was not Sisera who was destroyed at En-dor, but the Midianite army at the hands of Gideon and his three hundred “lappers.” This interpretation distorted the meaning of the verse in Psalms, and dragged not only the story of Deborah and Barak, but the story of Gideon as well into this convoluted mess.

In this context, here is some more food for thought: The book of Judges teaches us that the tribe of Asher did not come to the aid of Deborah and Barak in their war against Sisera, and was admonished as a result (5:17). However, the same tribe of Asher did participate in the war between Gideon and the Midianites (6:35). According to the prevailing view, the battle between Barak and Sisera took place in Asher, while Gideon’s battle at En-dor took place in Issachar. It might have been expected, then, that the people of Asher would participate precisely in the war of Deborah and Barak, as it took place in their own territory. In contrast, according to the new geographical perspective we have presented here, Gideon’s battlefield was located in the Jezreel Valley on the border of Asher, while Barak and Sisera clashed further east – in the basin of Nahal Tavor, far from Asher.

**Summing Up**

It seems clear that the Kedesh that appears in the story of Deborah and Barak is not the well-known Kedesh in the northern part of Naphtali, but a different Kedesh near Mount Tabor. Furthermore, the Nahal Kishon of Deborah and Barak is not Elijah’s Nahal Kishon, but Nahal Tavor at the foot of Mount Tabor. This stream preserved its ancient name at least until the end of the Middle Ages. Sisera’s chariots and soldiers were defeated in the area around En-dor and Kishion-Kishon, south of Mount Tabor – and it was Nahal Tavor that “swept them away.” Sisera himself fled on foot north 3-6 miles to Jael’s tent, where he met his demise at the hands of a woman. “So may all Your enemies perish, O Lord!” (Judges 5:31).

**Addendum**

On *Rosh Chodesh Av* 5769 (July 22, 2009), I gave a lecture at the Tanakh Study Days at Herzog College on the topic, “Who Was Destroyed at En-Dor?” Several days later, I received a fascinating letter from one of my former students, David Cohen, who today is a resident of the moshav HaZor’im in the Lower Galilee. In it, he gives his personal perspective on this entire discussion. I felt that I should share this letter with my readers, so I present it here, in his own words:

“Nahal Tavor swept them away”: Memories of a Rainy Navigation at Nahal Tavor

Winter 1993 – We set out for a series of solo navigations at night, our unit’s first navigation on this particular trail. The truck bus dropped us off at Kochav HaYarden Junction and we began the climb to Belvoir Fortress, all together in the pouring rain. From Belvoir Fortress we split up, each man going his own way. The waypoints were scattered throughout the Issachar Heights, while the endpoint of the navigation was the summit of Mount Tabor. The rain did not stop the entire night. When I arrived at Nahal Tavor and prepared to cross, I saw that the current was strong. Based on my calculations, I had planned to cross about a kilometer east of where Nahal Tavor intersects the paved road connecting Kfar Tavor and Afula. It was late at night, and in my laziness I decided to cross the stream by foot rather than walk to the highway – “The water will probably go up to my knees; I’ll get to the end of the navigation and change clothes then,” I thought to myself. Upon entering the water, I suddenly realized (too late to change course) that I was no longer standing, and I was forced to cross the stream in a panicked swim. At the other side, I became tangled in the bushes and managed to drag myself to the mud at the opposite bank. Dripping wet at this point, I attempted to turn on my two-way radio and call for help, but the wet equipment did not work. I realized that I had no choice – I had to climb Mount Tabor soaking wet. My platoon mate Eitan attempted to cross Nahal Tavor in a similar manner, and he too ended up swimming as I did. Unfortunately for him, however, the opposite bank was too high where he crossed and he was unable to climb onto the other side. He shouted for help until one of the members of the platoon in the area heard him and managed to pull him out of the stream. The other members of the platoon were smarter than the two of us and crossed the stream via the road.

On the second night we set out for another navigation, this time from the junction at the entrance to Daburye through the Kesulot Valley, to the Nazareth Mountains, and ending at Nahalal Junction. By that time the rain had stopped falling, but the entire valley was wet and muddy. One or two kilometers from the start of the navigation, my platoon mate Yaron became stuck in the mud, unable to move. Zohar, who was in the area, tried to reach him, but then he too became stuck in the mud up to his hips, unable to move as well. I tried to approach them, but the mud was too deep and I couldn’t really get close. Meanwhile, the rest of the platoon continued on in the navigation. Shai, the platoon leader, attempted to help the two men using the Abir [a tactical military vehicle], but the Abir became stuck as well (it was only extracted close to dawn by a large excavator brought from Kibbutz Gazit). In the end, Shai was able to get close enough to the men to throw them ropes, which he used to pull them out to safety. They then boarded a truck bus and were brought to the midpoint of the navigation. I, on the other hand, was instructed by the platoon leader to continue on the navigation, so I found myself wading through the mud by myself, while the rest of the platoon had already arrived at the midpoint. I remember that at every step I took I was afraid that my boot would remain stuck in the deep mud. Later in the navigation, Amit reported that he was seeing a village on his coordinates. It became apparent later on that the mud caused his compass to malfunction; instead of heading west he had been heading generally northward, and had reached the village of Iksal. It was only when we reached the Nazareth Mountains region that it became possible to progress more easily until the end of the navigation.

At the time, I thought of the story of Barak and Deborah and what we were taught about the chariots becoming stuck in the mud of the Jezreel Valley – I felt that we were in a similar situation.

Today, with a new understanding of the battle, I truly believe that the incident of the first night fits the phrase, “Nahal Kishon swept them away,” more than the incident of the second night. There, in the valley, even elite infantry soldiers were only able to move through the mud-filled valley with difficulty.

**For further study:**

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Translated by Daniel Landman

1. Based on Dr. Yael Ziegler’s lectures at Herzog College [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See map. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A bit of literary wisdom: The opening of the song speaks generally about the mighty acts of God, but prepares us for the rainstorm that will arrive and decide the outcome of the battle. Compare to Elihu’s speech in Job 36-37, which describes the might of God manifested in storm, rain and thunder, and immediately thereafter God reveals himself to Job “out of the tempest” (38:1). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. From a linguistic perspective, the roots G-L-L and G-L-G-L are identical in meaning; compare Joshua 15:7 to 18:17. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Based on the geographical context, it seems that it should not be identified with either of the two Arab villages in the western Galilee that bear the same name, one of which lies east of Tyre, and the other of which lies east of Nahariya. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The Arabic name of the site was Khirbet et-Tell, and the later ruins nearby were known as Tel ed-Damiyeh. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Regarding the dropped *aleph*, compare to “Lazar” (Eleazar) and “Rabbi Ba” (Rabbi Abba). Regarding the added *nun*, compare to “Zipporin” (Zippori) and “Caesarin” (Caesarea). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. In one version of the Septuagint, Kishion is rendered as “Kisōn.” [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Consequently, we cannot be certain that this was the same river as the modern-day Kishon (Nahr el-Mukatta); perhaps it was a different wadi or stream. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Suggestions include: *Kish* + *-on*; the root K-Š-N; and the root K-Š-Y + *-on*. The connection to Kishion fits well with the last suggestion. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Fittingly, the meaning of the name “‘Auja” in Arabic is “twisted” or “convoluted.” I am grateful to my friend Yaki Fried for this insight. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Translators and commentators have been perplexed by this verse. Some, including the Septuagint version A, the Vulgate, Douay-Rheims 1899 American Edition and (recently) the Orthodox Jewish Bible, transliterated the Hebrew word “Kedumim” without translation. Most of the versions and commentaries (beginning with the Septuagint version B and Targum Jonathan, continuing with Radak and terminating with the majority of the English translations and *Da’at Mikra*) translated it “that ancient river” or the like, suggesting a variety of interpretations to explain this title. Other interpretations have been suggested as well. According to the Peshitta, *nḥla dqrmin* (!) was another stream that swept away the Canaanites together with the Kishon. Additionally, some modern sources translated *kedumim* as “onrushing” or “raging,” others (on the basis of an Arabic parallel) translated as “of the daring men,” or “stream of encounter,” i.e., the meeting point of the two armies. As can be expected in such cases, some researchers emend the difficult expression to read *nachal kishon gerafam*, *kiddemam nachal kishon* (“Nahal Kishon advanced before them”). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The word *kedumim* is related to the word *kedem*, which can mean east. This theory was proposed by my friend Yehuda Etzion. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)