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Jewish Studies



Jephthah's Daughter, James Jacques Joseph Tissot.
Source: The Jewish Museum.

Yiftach's Daughter and Other Reclamations

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Jephthah makes a sacrifice of a his daughter according to his rash vow. Line engraving by J.W. Cook after J. Opie. British Museum



The Sacrifice of Isaac by Caravaggio.
The Uffizi

Yiftach's Daughter

Judges 11

(1) Now Yiftah the Gil'adite was a mighty man of valour, and he was the son of a harlot: and Gil'ad begot Yiftah. (2) And Gil'ad's wife bore him sons; and his wife's sons grew up, and they drove out Yiftah, and said to him, Thou shalt not inherit in our father's house; for thou art the son of a strange woman. (3) Then Yiftah fled from his brothers, and dwelt in the land of Tov: and idle fellows joined themselves to Yiftah, and went out with him. (4) And it came to pass in the course of time, that the children of 'Ammon made war against Yisra'el. (5) And when the children of 'Ammon

שופטים י"א

(א) וַיִּפְתַּח הַגִּלְעָדִי הָיָה גִבּוֹר
 חַיִּל וְהוּא וְהוּא בִן-אִשָּׁה זוֹנָה וַיּוֹלֵד
 גִּלְעָד אֶת-יִפְתָּח: (ב) וַתֵּלֶד
 אִשְׁת־גִּלְעָד לוֹ בָנִים וַיִּגְדְּלוּ
 בְנֵי-הָאִשָּׁה וַיִּגְרְשׁוּ אֶת-יִפְתָּח
 וַיֹּאמְרוּ לוֹ לֹא-תִנְחַל
 בְּבֵית-אָבִינוּ כִּי בִן-אִשָּׁה אַחֲרַת
 אִתָּה: (ג) וַיִּבְרַח יִפְתָּח מִפָּנָיו
 אָחָיו וַיֵּשֶׁב בְּאֶרֶץ טוֹב
 וַיִּתְלַקְטוּ אֵל-יִפְתָּח אַנְשֵׁים
 רִיקִים וַיֵּצְאוּ עִמּוֹ: {פ}
 (ד) וַיְהִי מִיָּמִים וַיִּלְחָמוּ
 בְּנֵי-עַמּוֹן עִם-יִשְׂרָאֵל: (ה) וַיְהִי
 כַּאֲשֶׁר-נִלְחָמוּ בְּנֵי-עַמּוֹן
 עִם-יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּלְכוּ זָקְנֵי גִלְעָד

made war against Yisra'el, the elders of Gil'ad went to fetch Yiftaḥ out of the land of Tov: (6) and they said to Yiftaḥ, Come, and be our captain, that we may fight with the children of 'Ammon. (7) And Yiftaḥ said to the elders of Gil'ad, Did you not hate me, and expel me out of my father's house? and why have you come to me now when you are in distress? (8) And the elders of Gil'ad said to Yiftaḥ, Therefore we turn again to thee now, that thou mayst go with us, and fight against the children of 'Ammon, and be our head over all the inhabitants of Gil'ad. (9) And Yiftaḥ said to the elders of Gil'ad, If you bring me back home to fight against the children of 'Ammon, and the Lord deliver them before me, shall I be your head? (10) And the elders of Gil'ad said to Yiftaḥ, The Lord is witness between us, if we do not so according to thy words. (11) Then Yiftaḥ went with the elders of Gil'ad, and the people made him head and captain over them: and Yiftaḥ uttered all his words before the Lord in Mizpe. (12) And Yiftaḥ sent messengers to the king of the children of 'Ammon, saying, What hast thou to do with me, that thou

לְקַחַת אֶת־יַפְתָּח מֵאֶרֶץ טוֹב׃
 (ו) וַיֹּאמְרוּ לְיַפְתָּח לָכֵּה וְהָיִיתָ
 לָנוּ לְקָצִין וְנִלְחַמָּה בְּבָנֵי עַמּוֹן׃
 (ז) וַיֹּאמֶר יַפְתָּח לְזַקְנֵי גִלְעָד
 הֲלֹא אַתֶּם שָׁנֵאתֶם אוֹתִי
 וּתְגַרְשׁוּנִי מִבֵּית אָבִי וּמִדּוּעַ
 בָּאתֶם אֵלַי לְעַתָּה כַּאֲשֶׁר צָר
 לָכֶם׃ (ח) וַיֹּאמְרוּ זַקְנֵי גִלְעָד
 אֶל־יַפְתָּח לְכֹן עִתָּה שָׁבְנוּ אֵלֶיךָ
 וְהָלַכְתָּ עִמָּנוּ וְנִלְחַמְתָּ בְּבָנֵי
 עַמּוֹן וְהָיִיתָ לָנוּ לְרֹאשׁ לְכֹל
 יִשְׂרָאֵל גִּלְעָד׃ (ט) וַיֹּאמֶר יַפְתָּח
 אֶל־זַקְנֵי גִלְעָד אִם־מְשִׁיבִים
 אַתֶּם אוֹתִי לְהִלָּחֵם בְּבָנֵי עַמּוֹן
 וְנָתַן יְהוָה אוֹתָם לְפָנָי אֲנֹכִי
 אֶהְיֶה לָכֶם לְרֹאשׁ׃ (י) וַיֹּאמְרוּ
 זַקְנֵי־גִלְעָד אֶל־יַפְתָּח יְהוָה
 יְהִיֶּה שְׁמֵעַ בִּינֹתֵינוּ אִם־לֹא
 כַּדְּבָרֶךָ כֹּן נַעֲשֶׂה׃ (יא) וַיֵּלֶךְ
 יַפְתָּח עִם־זַקְנֵי גִלְעָד וַיְשִׁימוּ
 הָעָם אוֹתוֹ עָלֵיהֶם לְרֹאשׁ
 וּלְקָצִין וַיְדַבֵּר יַפְתָּח
 אֶת־כָּל־דְּבָרָיו לְפָנֵי יְהוָה
 בְּמִצְפֶּה׃ {פ}
 (יב) וַיִּשְׁלַח יַפְתָּח מַלְאָכִים
 אֶל־מֶלֶךְ בְּנֵי־עַמּוֹן לֵאמֹר
 מַה־לִּי וְלָךְ כִּי־בָאתָ אֵלַי
 לְהִלָּחֵם בְּאֶרְצִי׃ (יג) וַיֹּאמֶר
 מֶלֶךְ בְּנֵי־עַמּוֹן אֶל־מַלְאָכָיו

art come against me to fight in my land? (13) And the king of the children of 'Ammon answered the messengers of Yiftah, Because Yisra'el took away my land, when they came up out of Mizrayim, from Arnon as far as the Yabboq, and the Yarden: now therefore restore those lands again peaceably. (14) And Yiftah sent messengers again to the king of the children of 'Ammon: (15) and said to him, Thus says Yiftah, Yisra'el did not take away the land of Mo'av, nor the land of the children of 'Ammon: (16) but when Yisra'el came up from Mizrayim, and walked through the wilderness to the Sea of Suf, and came to Qadesh; (17) then Yisra'el sent messengers to the king of Edom, saying, Let me, I pray thee, pass through thy land: but the king of Edom would not hearken. And in like manner they sent to the king of Mo'av: but he would not consent: and so Yisra'el remained in Qadesh. (18) Then they went along through the wilderness, and went round the land of Edom, and the land of Mo'av, and came by the east side of the land of Mo'av, and camped on the other side of Arnon, but came not within the border of Mo'av: for

יִפְתָּח כִּי־לָקַח יִשְׂרָאֵל
 אֶת־אֲרָצוֹ בְּעֵלוֹתוֹ מִמִּצְרַיִם
 מֵאֲרֹנוֹן וְעַד־הַיַּבֶּק וְעַד־הַיַּרְדֵּן
 וְעַתָּה הֲשִׁיבָה אֶתְהֶן בְּשָׁלוֹם:
 (יד) וַיֹּסֶף עוֹד יִפְתָּח וַיִּשְׁלַח
 מִלְּאָכִים אֶל־מֶלֶךְ בְּנֵי עַמּוֹן:
 (טו) וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ כֹּה אָמַר יִפְתָּח
 לֹא־לָקַח יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־אֲרָץ
 מוֹאָב וְאֶת־אֲרָץ בְּנֵי עַמּוֹן: (טז)
 כִּי בְּעֵלוֹתָם מִמִּצְרַיִם וַיֵּלֶךְ
 יִשְׂרָאֵל בַּמִּדְבָּר עַד־יַם־סוּף
 וַיָּבֹא קָדֶשׁ: (יז) וַיִּשְׁלַח
 יִשְׂרָאֵל מִלְּאָכִים אֶל־מֶלֶךְ
 אֱדוֹם וַיֹּאמֶר אֶעֱבְרָה־נָּא
 בְּאֲרָצְךָ וְלֹא שָׁמַע מֶלֶךְ אֱדוֹם
 וְגַם אֶל־מֶלֶךְ מוֹאָב שָׁלַח וְלֹא
 אָבָה וַיֵּשֶׁב יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּקָדֶשׁ: (יח)
 וַיֵּלֶךְ בַּמִּדְבָּר וַיָּסֹב אֶת־אֲרָץ
 אֱדוֹם וְאֶת־אֲרָץ מוֹאָב וַיָּבֹא
 מִמִּזְרַח־שֶׁמֶשׁ לְאֲרָץ מוֹאָב
 וַיַּחֲנוּן בְּעֵבֶר אֲרֹנוֹן וְלֹא־בָאוּ
 בְּגִבּוֹל מוֹאָב כִּי אֲרֹנוֹן גְּבוּל
 מוֹאָב: (יט) וַיִּשְׁלַח יִשְׂרָאֵל
 מִלְּאָכִים אֶל־סִיחּוֹן
 מֶלֶךְ־הָאֱמֹרִי מֶלֶךְ חֶשְׁבוֹן
 וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל נַעֲבְרָה־נָּא
 בְּאֲרָצְךָ עַד־מְקוֹמִי: (כ)
 וְלֹא־הֶאֱמִין סִיחּוֹן אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל
 עֵבֶר בְּגִבּוֹלוֹ וַיֹּאסֶף סִיחּוֹן

Arnon was the border of Mo'av.
 (19) And Yisra'el sent messengers to Sihon king of the Emori, the king of Heshbon; and Yisra'el said to him, Let us pass, we pray thee, through thy land to my place. (20) But Sihon did not trust Yisra'el to pass through his border: but Sihon gathered all his people together, and pitched in Yahaz and fought against Yisra'el. (21) And the Lord God of Yisra'el delivered Sihon and all his people into the hand of Yisra'el, and they smote them: so Yisra'el possessed all the land of the Emori, the inhabitants of that country. (22) And they possessed all the border of the Emori from Arnon even as far as Yabboq, and from the wilderness as far as the Yarden. (23) So now the Lord God of Yisra'el has driven out the Emori from before his people Yisra'el, and shouldst thou possess their land? (24) Wilt not thou possess that which Kemosh thy god gives thee to possess? So likewise that which the Lord our God has voided before us, that shall we possess. (25) And now art thou at all better than Balaq the son of Zippor, king of Mo'av? did he ever strive against Yisra'el, or did he ever fight against them, (26) while Yisra'el dwelt in Heshbon

אֶת־כָּל־עַמּוֹ וַיַּחֲנוּ בְּיַהֲזָה
 וַיִּלְחָם עִם־יִשְׂרָאֵל׃ (כ׳) וַיִּתְּן
 יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־סִיחֹן
 וְאֶת־כָּל־עַמּוֹ בְּיַד יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּכּוּם
 וַיִּירֶשׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת כָּל־אֶרֶץ
 הָאֱמֹרִי יוֹשֵׁב הָאֶרֶץ הַהִיא׃
 (כ״ב) וַיִּירְשׁוּ אֶת כָּל־גְּבוּל
 הָאֱמֹרִי מֵאֲרֹנוֹן וְעַד־הַיַּבֶּק
 וּמִן־הַמְּדְבָר וְעַד־הַיַּרְדֵּן׃ (כ״ג)
 וַעֲתָה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
 הוֹרִישׁ אֶת־הָאֱמֹרִי מִפְּנֵי עַמּוֹ
 יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֹתָהּ תִירָשׁוּ׃ (כ״ד)
 הֲלֹא אֵת אֲשֶׁר יוֹרִישֶׁךָ כְּמוֹשׁ
 אֱלֹהֶיךָ אוֹתוֹ תִירֶשׁ וְאֵת
 כָּל־אֲשֶׁר הוֹרִישׁ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ
 מִפְּנֵינוּ אוֹתוֹ נִירֶשׁ׃ (כ״ה) וְעַתָּה
 הֲטוֹב טוֹב אֹתָהּ מִבְּלֶק
 בֶּן־צִפּוֹר מֶלֶךְ מוֹאָב הַרְּוֹב רַב
 עִם־יִשְׂרָאֵל אִם־נִלְחָם נִלְחָם
 בָּם׃ (כ״ו) בְּשִׁבַת יִשְׂרָאֵל
 בְּחֻשְׁבוֹן וּבְבִנְוֹתֶיהָ וּבְעַרְעוֹר
 וּבְבִנְוֹתֶיהָ וּבְכָל־הָעָרִים אֲשֶׁר
 עַל־יַדֵּי אֲרֹנוֹן שָׁלַשׁ מֵאוֹת שָׁנָה
 וּמִדּוֹעַ לֹא־הִצַּלְתֶּם בָּעֵת הַהִיא׃
 (כ״ז) וְאַנְכִּי לֹא־חָטַאתִי לָךְ
 וְאַתָּה עָשִׂה אֵתִי רָעָה לְהִלָּחֵם
 בִּי יִשְׁפֹט יְהוָה הַשֹּׁפֵט הַיּוֹם
 בֵּין בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וּבֵין בְּנֵי עַמּוֹן׃
 (כ״ח) וְלֹא שָׁמַע מֶלֶךְ בְּנֵי עַמּוֹן

and its hamlets, and in 'Ar'or and its hamlets, and in all the cities that are along by the shores of Arnon, for three hundred years? why did you not recover them within that time? (27) But I have not sinned against thee, but thou doest me wrong to war against me: the Lord the Judge be judge this day between the children of Yisra'el and the children of 'Ammon. (28) Howbeit the king of the children of 'Ammon did not hearken to the words of Yiftah' which he sent him. (29) Then the spirit of the Lord came upon Yiftah' and he passed over Gil'ad, and Menashe, and passed over Mizpe of Gil'ad, and from Mizpe of Gil'ad he passed over to the children of 'Ammon. (30) And Yiftah' vowed a vow to the Lord, and said, If Thou shalt deliver the children of 'Ammon into my hands, (31) then whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the children of 'Ammon, shall surely be the Lord's, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering. (32) So Yiftah' passed over to the children of 'Ammon to fight against them: and the Lord delivered them into his hands. (33) And he smote them from

אֶל־דְּבָרַי יִפְתָּח אֲשֶׁר שָׁלַח
אֵלָיו: {פ}

(כט) וַתְּהִי עַל־יִפְתָּח רוּחַ יְהוָה
וַיַּעֲבֹר אֶת־הַגְּלָעָד וְאֶת־מְנַשֶּׁה
וַיַּעֲבֹר אֶת־מִצְפֵּה גְלָעָד
וּמִמִּצְפֵּה גְלָעָד עָבַר בְּנֵי עַמּוֹן:
(ל) וַיֵּדֶר יִפְתָּח גִּדְרָה לַיהוָה
וַיֹּאמֶר אִם־נָתַן תִּתֶּן אֶת־בְּנֵי
עַמּוֹן בְּיָדִי: (לא) וְהָיָה הַיּוֹצֵא
אֲשֶׁר יֵצֵא מִדֹלְתֵי בֵיתִי
לְקִרְאתִי בְּשׁוּבִי בְּשָׁלוֹם מִבְּנֵי
עַמּוֹן וְהָיָה לַיהוָה וְהָעֲלִיתִיהוּ
עֹלָה: {פ}

(לב) וַיַּעֲבֹר יִפְתָּח אֶל־בְּנֵי עַמּוֹן
לְהִלָּחֵם בָּם וַיִּתְּנֵם יְהוָה בְּיָדוֹ:
(לג) וַיִּכֶם מֵעָרוֹעֵר וְעַד־בְּאֵר
מַנִּית עֶשְׂרִים עִיר וְעַד אֲבֵל
כַּרְמִים מִכָּה גְדוֹלָה מְאֹד
וַיִּכְנְעוּ בְּנֵי עַמּוֹן מִפְּנֵי בְּנֵי
יִשְׂרָאֵל: {פ}

(לד) וַיָּבֹא יִפְתָּח הַמִּצְפָּה
אֶל־בֵּיתוֹ וְהִנֵּה בַתּוֹ יֹצֵאת
לְקִרְאתוֹ בַּתָּפִים וּבְמַחְלוֹת וְרַק
הִיא יַחֲזִיקָה אֵין־לוֹ מִמֶּנּוּ בֶן
אוֹרֶבֶת: (לה) וַיְהִי כִרְאוֹתוֹ
אוֹתָהּ וַיִּקְרַע אֶת־בְּגָדָיו וַיֹּאמֶר
אֵהָה בַּתִּי הַכְרַע הַכְרַעַתִּנִי
וְאֵת הַיֵּית בְּעַכְרִי וְאֲנֹכִי פְצִיתִי
כִּי אֶל־יְהוָה וְלֹא אוֹכֵל לָשׁוּב:

‘Aro‘er, as far as Minnit, twenty cities, and as far as Avelkeramim, with a very great slaughter. Thus the children of ‘Ammon were subdued before the children of Yisra‘el. (34) And Yiftah came to Mizpe to his house, and, behold, his daughter came out to meet him with timbrels and with dances: and she was his only child; beside her he had neither son nor daughter. (35) And it came to pass, when he saw her, that he rent his clothes, and said, Alas, my daughter! thou hast brought me very low, and thou hast become the cause of trouble to me: for I have opened my mouth to the Lord, and I cannot go back. (36) And she said to him, My father, if thou hast opened thy mouth to the Lord, do to me according to that which has proceeded out of thy mouth; seeing that the Lord has taken vengeance for thee of thy enemies, of the children of ‘Ammon. (37) And she said to her father, Let this thing be done for me: let me alone two months, that I may go and wander down the mountain sides, and bewail my virginity, I and my friends. (38) And he said, Go. And he sent her away for two months: and she went with her companions, and wept for

(לו) וַתֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אָבִי פְּצִיטָהּ
 אֶת־פִּיךָ אֶל־יְהוָה עֲשֵׂה לִּי
 כַּאֲשֶׁר יֵצֵא מִפִּיךָ אַחֲרָי אֲשֶׁר
 עָשָׂה לְךָ יְהוָה נִקְמֹת מֵאִיבֶיךָ
 מִבְּנֵי עַמּוֹן: (לו) וַתֹּאמֶר
 אֶל־אָבִיהָ יַעֲשֵׂה לִּי הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה
 הַרְפֵּה מִמְּנֵי שָׁנַיִם חֳדָשִׁים
 וְאֵלְכֶה וְיִרְדַּתִּי עַל־הָהָרִים
 וְאֶבְכֶּה עַל־בְּתוּלָי אֲנֹכִי
 (ורעיתי) [ורעותי]: (לה) וַיֹּאמֶר
 לָכִי וַיִּשְׁלַח אוֹתָהּ שְׁנַיִם חֳדָשִׁים
 וַתֵּלֶךְ הִיא וְרַעוּתֶיהָ וַתִּבְּרַךְ
 עַל־בְּתוּלֶיהָ עַל־הָהָרִים: (לט)
 וַיְהִי מִקֶּץ | שְׁנַיִם חֳדָשִׁים
 וַתָּשָׁב אֶל־אָבִיהָ וַיַּעַשׂ לָהּ
 אֶת־נְדָרוֹ אֲשֶׁר נָדָר וְהִיא
 לֹא־יָדָעָה אִישׁ וַתְּהִי־חֶק
 בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל: (מ) מִיָּמַיִם | יָמִימָה
 תֵּלְכָנָה בְּנוֹת יִשְׂרָאֵל לְתַנּוֹת
 לְבַת־יִפְתָּח הַגִּלְעָדִי אַרְבַּעַת
 יָמִים בַּשָּׁנָה: {פ}

her virginity upon the mountains. (39) And it came to pass at the end of two months, that she returned to her father, who did with her according to his vow which he had vowed: and she knew no man. And it was a custom in Yisra'el, (40) that the daughters of Yisra'el went yearly to lament the daughter of Yiftah, the Gil'adite four days in the year.



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The Legends of the Jews

Louis Ginzberg

אגדות היהודים ד'ב'

...

Legends of the Jews 4:2

(57) JEPHTHAH

(58) The first judge of any importance after Gideon was Jephthah. He, too, fell short of being the ideal Jewish ruler. His father had married a woman of another tribe, an unusual occurrence in a time when a woman who left her tribe was held in contempt. Jephthah, the offspring of this union, had to bear the consequences of his mother's irregular conduct. So many annoyances were put upon him that he was forced to leave his home and settle in a heathen district.

(59) At first Jephthah refused to accept the rulership which the people offered him in an assembly at Mizpah, for he had not forgotten the wrongs to which he had been subjected. In the end, however, he yielded, and placed himself at the head of the people in the war against Getal, the king of the Ammonites. At his departure, he vowed before God to sacrifice to Him whatsoever came forth out

of the doors of his house to meet him when he returned a victor from the war.

(60) God was angry and said: "So Jephthah has vowed to offer unto me the first thing that shall meet him! If a dog were the first to meet him, would a dog be sacrificed to me? Now shall the vow of Jephthah be visited on his first-born, on his own offspring, yea, his prayer shall be visited on his only daughter. But I assuredly shall deliver my people, not for Jephthah's sake, but for the sake of the prayers of Israel."

(61) The first to meet him after his successful campaign was his daughter Sheilah. Overwhelmed by anguish, the father cried out: "Rightly was the name Sheilah, the one who is demanded, given to thee, that thou shouldst be offered up as a sacrifice. Who shall set my heart in the balance and my soul as the weight, that I may stand and see whether that which happened to me is joy or sorrow? But because I opened my mouth to the Lord, and uttered a vow, I cannot take it back." Then Sheilah spoke, saying: "Why dost thou grieve for my death, since the people was delivered? Dost thou not remember what happened in the day of our forefathers, when the father offered his son as a burnt offering, and the son did not refuse, but consented gladly, and the offerer and the offered were both full of joy? Therefore, do as thou hast spoken. But before I die I will ask a favor of thee. Grant me that I may go with my companions upon the mountains, sojourn among the hills, and tread upon the rocks to shed my tears and deposit there the grief for my lost youth. The trees of the field shall weep for me, and the beasts of the field mourn for me. I do not grieve for my death, nor because I have to yield up my life, but because when my father vowed his heedless vow, he did not have me in mind. I fear, therefore, that I may not be an acceptable sacrifice, and that my death shall be for nothing." Sheilah and her companions went forth and told her case to the sages of the people, but none of them could give her any help. Then she went up to Mount Telag, where the Lord appeared to her at night, saying unto her: "I have closed the mouth of the sages of my people in this generation, that they cannot answer the daughter of Jephthah a word; that my vow be fulfilled and nothing of what I have thought remain undone. I know her to be wiser than her father, and all the

wise men, and now her soul shall be accepted at her request, and her death shall be very precious before My face all the time." Sheilah began to bewail her fate in these words: "Hearken, ye mountains, to my lamentations, and ye hills, to the tears of my eyes, and ye rocks, testify to the weeping of my soul. My words will go up to heaven, and my tears will be written in the firmament. I have not been granted the joy of wedding, nor was the wreath of my betrothal completed. I have not been decked with ornaments, nor have I been scented with myrrh and with aromatic perfumes. I have not been anointed with the oil that was prepared for me. Alas, O mother, it was in vain thou didst give birth to me, the grave was destined to be my bridal chamber. The oil thou didst prepare for me will be spilled, and the white garments my mother sewed for me, the moth will eat them; the bridal wreath my nurse wound for me will wither, and my garments in blue and purple, the worms will destroy them, and my companions will all their days lament over me. And now, ye trees, incline your branches and weep over my youth; ye beasts of the forest, come and trample upon my virginity, for my years are cut off, and the days of my life grow old in darkness."

(62) Her lamentations were of as little avail as her arguments with her father. In vain she sought to prove to him from the Torah that the law speaks only of animal sacrifices, never of human sacrifices. In vain she cited the example of Jacob, who had vowed to give God a tenth of all the possessions he owned, and yet did not attempt later to sacrifice one of his sons. Jephthah was inexorable. All he would yield was a respite during which his daughter might visit various scholars, who were to decide whether he was bound by his vow. According to the Torah his vow was entirely invalid. He was not even obliged to pay his daughter's value in money. But the scholars of his time had forgotten this Halakah, and they decided that he must keep his vow. The forgetfulness of the scholars was of God, ordained as a punishment upon Jephthah for having slaughtered thousands of Ephraim.

(63) One man there was living at the time who, if he had been questioned about the case, would have been able to give a decision. This was the high priest Phinehas. But he said proudly: "What! I, a high priest, the son of a high priest, should humiliate myself and go

to an ignominious!" Jephthah on the other hand said: "What! I, the chief of the tribes of Israel, the first prince of the land, should humiliate myself and go to one of the rank and file!" So only the rivalry between Jephthah and Phinehas caused the loss of a young life. Their punishment did not miss them. Jephthah dies a horrible death. Limb by limb his body was dismembered. As for the high priest, the holy spirit departed from him, and he had to give up his priestly dignity.

(64) As it had been Jephthah's task to ward off the Ammonites, so his successor Abdon was occupied with protecting Israel against the Moabites. The king of Moab sent messengers to Abdon, and they spoke thus: "Thou well knowest that Israel took possession of cities that belonged to me. Return them." Abdon's reply was: "Know ye not how the Ammonites fared? The measure of Moab's sins, it seems, out against the enemy, slew forty-five thousand of their number, and routed the rest."



Jephtha's Daughter

by Gail White

My father said he thought it would be the dog. He rent his clothes and tears poured down his face as he lamented his fate. I said There, there, it's all right, never mind. I don't really mind dying, only give me two months to mourn, and I will be ready. And all the while I waited for him to say there was a way out, that he would cheat God and sacrifice the dog after all. But he took my consolation and said nothing.

My time is nearly up and it is true. I am ready. I have trusted God and then the idea of God, my father and the thought of my father, and all have betrayed me. My virgin companions have come to lead me home. Daughters of Jerusalem, one word: do not go forth to meet life early in the morning, singing and clasing your cymbals. Stay behind doors, keep house, bake bread. When life is ready it will find you: the knife is seeking for your throat.



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April 18, 1997

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Endthoughts

Attending to details: a pesah meditation on God, grandmothers, and gratitude

■ Lori Lefkowitz

The time between Purim and Pesah is anticipatory, designed in various ways to heighten expectation. When I was growing up, conversation about Passover food shopping and cleaning began at Purim. My grandmother, until her last days, *schlepped* cartons of Pesah dishes up from the basement and assigned us all our Pesah duties. She was terribly exacting, and she religiously supervised our going through our coat pockets for gum wrappers.

The *Seders* were, of course, the main event, but as an adult, I now realize how much those family experiences around the dining room table felt important precisely because there was so much anticipatory preparation. The readying behind the scenes, the cooking, and the learning for the *Seders* in the weeks before created the necessary atmosphere for a momentous week. The *Seders* loom large in my memory now because the devoted labors of advanced planning—like the planning before a *bar mitzvah* or a wedding—sanctify the occasion and make it awesome.

Often it is the behind-the-scenes work, that which we are likely to take for granted, that is especially important. The cliché tells us that God is in the details. At no season is that more apparent than in Spring, and Passover is the holiday of Spring. It is now, when we see the crocuses determinedly rising from ground so recently snow-covered, when we see buds on the branches and we know that we are in transition between winter's barren landscape and what will soon be a lush green world, that we are most inclined to be hopeful, to believe in a power for good in the world, a generous lifegiving force, a force that liberates Nature from the cold and human beings from slavery.

All of which is to say that God and grandmothers have a good deal in common. Their work is often done so reliably that unless we pause to take notice we might forget to appreciate the greatness in the details. If we have been lucky all our lives, we have found comfort in an infinity of detailed loving attentions, from mittens to hot lunches, blessings that are blessings precisely because they were given naturally and unconditionally.

Miriam's Time

Moses is the main actor of the season, and Moses, Aaron, and the priesthood are the principle characters of the Torah readings of these weeks. But I like to think of the weeks between Purim and Pesah as Miriam's time. For, behind the central liberation myth of our people, the drama of Moses pleading with Pharaoh, the plagues, the parting of the Red Sea, and the fulfillment of the dream of nationhood in the Promised Land, is the story of the bravery of a slave mother and her daughter, and an Egyptian Princess who was moved by the sight of a slave baby in a basket.

At an even earlier moment, we are told that though the Pharaoh ordered the midwives to see to it that there would be no male babies, Shifra and Puah, the Hebrew midwives, defied these orders and bravely did their work.

In these small ways, the Passover story recognizes the significance of women's work and courage. The Talmud, too, acknowledges the centrality of midwives, mothers, and sisters in this liberation story. One tradition insists that it is *because of the merit of the women* that God freed us from bondage. This story elaborates that it was women's faith and hopefulness that allowed the miracles to occur. For when the Hebrew men, desperate because of Pharaoh's order to destroy their sons, decided it would be better not to have children at all, their wives and daughters, tradition tells us, maintained their attractiveness and persuaded them to change their minds and not give up on the Jewish future. When it came time to construct the Tabernacle, Moses was ready to reject the jewelry and mirrors of women as gifts out of which to make holy ritual items because he worried that they symbolized vanity. But he was prevailed upon to accept these items, and it turned out that they were particularly pleasing to God because they were the signs of the vitality and hope of the people.

Every year at my family *Seder* we make my mother tell us about Passover when she was a little girl in Siberia. My mother's family are *hasidim*, and when she was a child, and Hitler was invading Poland, her family, along with many others (but tragically not with enough others) willingly abandoned all of their possessions, were packed into cattle cars, and were deported to Siberia to live out the war years in the safety of Stalinist Russia.

Though practicing religion was strictly forbidden, the first thing they did when they got to Siberia was reconstruct from memory the Jewish calendar. These Jews, who gave up everything they had, risked it all to bake *matzoh*. My mother remembers that they made *matzoh* in the middle of the night and that the children stood watch to sound warning in case someone might be coming. As in the Exodus of old, in Russia in the 1940s, the courage of women and children was intimately connected to the preservation of a Jewish way of life. What is so moving here are the Jewish priorities. They saved their lives before their things but understood that it was only worth it if they did not lose their identity in the process.

Our tradition, in saying that it is because of the merit of women that the people were freed, hints at an understanding of the value of the intricate work behind the

scenes and the importance of details in a Jewish life and community. Pesah especially invites us to take notice of every crumb. Such attention makes us mindful of and grateful for not only the grand miracles of liberation but also for the small miracles of our everyday lives. †

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Sh'ma 27/532

Other Resources

Chag haBanot on Chanukah:

<https://www.ritualwell.org/ritual/chag-habanot-festival-daughters>

Miscarriage or Stillbirth:

<https://ritualwell.org/ritual/grieving-ritual-following-miscarriage-or-stillbirth>

<https://ritualwell.org/ritual/and-she-laughed-kitchen-ritual-healing-miscarriage>

Agunah:

<https://eng.beithillel.org.il/agunah-day-taanit-esther/>

Simchat Beit haShoava:

https://www.ou.org/holidays/the_water_libations/

Performing Jephthah's Daughter: A Lament

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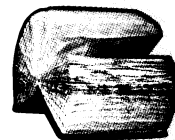
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J Performing ephtah's Daughter

by Alicia Ostriker

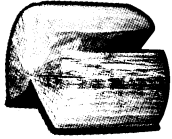
INTRODUCTION

The Book of Judges recounts the history of the Israelite people after settling in the promised land, as the tribes struggle against neighboring peoples such as the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Ammonites and the Moabites.

The story of Jephthah's daughter (Judges 11) tells us that Jephthah the Gileadite made a vow to the Lord before going into battle with the Ammonites. He vowed that if he succeeded in battle he would offer up to the Lord as a burnt offering whatever first came forth from the doors of his house to meet him. When his daughter (who is unnamed in the text) comes out with timbrels and dances to greet him, he rends his clothes, saying that she has brought him very low and troubled him, but that a vow to God cannot be retracted. She does not protest, but obtains permission to spend two months in the mountains with her companions, to bewail her virginity. When she returns, Jephthah fulfills his vow. An epilogue tells us that it was a custom for the daughters of Israel to lament her death for four days each year.

"Jephthah's Daughter: A Lament" is a ceremony which offers an opportunity to grieve the sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter, and to ponder the meaning of her sacrifice to us today. Groups of women are invited to experiment with the text. A group may choose to read or perform the entire Lament, or it may select sections. Portions of "Death and the Maiden" might be played before and after the performance; the performance itself may be accompanied by drums or other instruments, if available.

A final note: the poems printed here are part of a work in progress. Comments and suggestions by readers or performers will be welcomed. My thanks to the women of the Women's Research Forum of Ma'yan in New York City for the opportunity to present the work in the spring of 1998, and for valuable criticisms. Thanks especially to Merle Feld for her response and suggestions.



JEPHTHAH'S DAUGHTER: A LAMENT

And it came to pass at the end of two months, that she returned unto her father, who did with her according to the vow which he had vowed; and she had not known man.

And it was a custom in Israel, that the daughters of Israel went yearly to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite four days in a year.

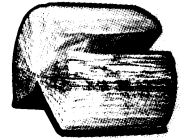
—Judges 11:38-39

(Performers come on-stage to this chant, which may be repeated between sections of the performance.)

Going forth in mourning
Returning in joy

Going forth in mourning
Returning in joy

Going forth in mourning
Returning in joy



SUNRISE: WE EMERGE FROM THE FOREST INTO A CLEARING

(Full chorus, dancelike, but uppercase is shouted)

Into a clearing
from the forest of our lives
every year it is
a wild high climb

Light stands on the mountain
almost too bright
like a truth from which
we hide our eyes

The presence of God
is in the rocky ridge
the wildflowers the stunted pines
the ghostly wind

Today we do not remember
the angel, the ram, the thicket
we remember the war
and the death of our sister

The sons of Ammon were coming
we feared their army
we begged Jephthah
be our leader

The spirit of God was upon him
he made a great slaughter
when he returned home he was
greeted by his daughter

(Sopranos alone)

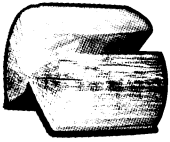
for he had one daughter, no other
to praise him after the war
so the child danced out with timbrels
and with dancing from the door

but Jephthah rent his clothes he said
you have brought me very low
if a man open his mouth to God
he must fulfill his vow

then the child asked leave to go
two months in the mountains
to bewail her virginity
among her companions.

Two months in the mountains.

(Omni) AND JEPHTHAH HOME FROM SLAUGHTER
WAS GREETED BY HIS DAUGHTER!



LITTLE FUGUE (OR: FUGUE STATE)

(A section for several voices: A begins loudly then continues softly under the voice of B, who speaks her section twice, then yields to C, who speaks very quickly, etc. Variations can be tried; in any case the overall effect should be one of cacophony, but each voice should be heard clearly at least once. The final section is to be said in unison by all speakers. The duration of this piece should be no longer than one minute.)

- A. She weeps in the night
her tears are on her cheek
my eye, my eye runs down with water
because the comforter is far from me
- B. The Lord is become an enemy
he has swallowed up Israel (2x)
- C. He actually blames her claims she
made him compelled
do to her this awful thing
can you believe
never otherwise
lament
- D. Fault stands in door fault fault
fist is his whoever cries be hit (2x)
- E. Obedience shallow law
repeat repeat a tale of terror repeat
comply complain
complain comply
deny deny
- OMNI: Want to say no
want to jump in
want to say stop
stop stop
- want to stop
 being afraid, want
 the power
 to say no



INTERROGATION AND REPLY

(The implicit question asked by this section is what keeps someone in an apparently oppressive or abusive situation when the option of walking out seems possible. The question has many resonances, including the issue of the feminist within a patriarchal religion, and the issue of God in a post-Holocaust age. The structure of the piece is modeled on the alphabetical acrostics of the Book of Lamentation)

In the beginning, the wound is invisible.
—Edmund Jabes

A question to pose to the celebrants. The participants. You women, of outraged eyes and grinding teeth, resemble birds whipping themselves against the walls of a room into which they have accidentally flown. In its frustrated attempts to escape a bird becomes frenzied. It leaves bloodspots on the walls. But in your case no walls exist. Against what do you fling yourselves so extravagantly?

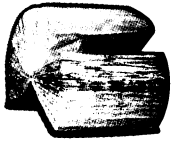
—Against this very question, hurling ourselves at it in vain. This irresistible, unanswerable question encloses us like the swaddling blanket around the squirming infant. Like a Polish chimney. Like a used star. Like a crown and a balloon. Like a glass bell jar.

—Because walls of stone or plaster would include windows from which to climb, doors to unlock, keyholes to squint through, we are not permitted images. Instead, we inhabit a penitentiary of fire (or alphabets) which is a cage of cages.

—Chained to earth from before the beginning of the world, the destiny of the human heart is to ache. We alone offer it the exalted thin wind of the mountaintop.

—Do you think you are immortal? Do you think you are innocent? We will die but we cannot abandon our sister. Do you claim we are extravagant? Do you believe we are strident? Have you heard that if you save one life it is as if you saved the universe? Down the collapsed mineshaft of time we call until our voices grow hoarse, we are coming though we delay. We beg our sister to breathe, to forgive our slow machinery.

—Expert at stillness, we are whirling in place like Sufis. We are dancing on the inflamed heart. As it heaves we almost fall.



—From the forest of our lives
into the clearing
lightning rapes the mountaintop
violent like the truths
of which we only dream
forgetting
the ancient screaming of God
answers our scream

—God who is One warns us that to escape is to perish. Outside these nonexistent walls they have removed the air! Did you not know that? Nothing is outside but vipers and tigers.

—Her desire was for her beloved. Her boyfriends, her girlfriends, her life.

—If a baby is beaten by a parent, and then put down on the floor, the baby will crawl, not *away* from the parent, but *toward*. So we— So we—

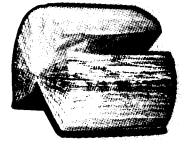
—Just then I stood in the doorway of a ruined stone castle. A tuft of thick grass lay beneath my feet. The Mediterranean sun hammered against my forehead until it felt like a brass amphora. I offered my brass forehead as a bride. Here, I said, is the soul. Before me tumbled the hillside of grass and boulders to the sea edge. The blue sheerness offered itself as a husband.

—Killing God, killing God....if I walk away God will commit suicide. At any rate, that is what he threatens. I cannot risk it.

—Lovely little lies. The truth is that we are afraid of our passions. And afraid of history.

—More lies. The truth is that we are terribly, passionately hopeful. The truth is that we are tethered like fiery-eyed horses. The truth is a mystery. The truth is, it is a mystery. The truth is that the razor is in my pocket.

—No, the truth is that we are on vacation. Lament, for us, is recreational. A pilgrimage is an excuse for adventure, look at Chaucer, look around, women in every culture pursue some religious rites or other, groveling massively, doing novenas, wearing veils, lighting candles, you must perceive that this is not simply a matter of oppression. Of course they are oppressed. Of course we are. The ritual of lament faithfully encodes our oppression and we enact our part faithfully. On another mountain you might see women from a neighboring oppressive culture excising the clitorises and labia of their daughters. We might exchange signals from our twin peaks. Or not. And for Jephthah's daughter, we get four whole days off from work.



—One may not desert the sickbed of a friend. Or of a nation.

—Perhaps the story has been edited, perhaps the daughter was a priestess, perhaps the vow was not an accident: what then?

—The Question always is how to go on living after the holocaust. Each and every holocaust. How to value life *enough*. Is Palm Beach *enough*? Are the Catskills *enough*? Is mooing the cow on the kibbutz *enough*? How about Carnegie Hall and the invention of land-of-the-free America by Hollywood? And being dredged from the Mississippi riverbottom with your black and white companions?

—Riverbottom mud, the unassuaged, the infinite screaming of the moon.

—Since Isaac was saved, they can pretend that men are not wounded. Since Jephthah's daughter was a woman, they can pretend that her murder was insignificant. Since *Adonai* transcends the body, they can sacrifice the planet. These imbecilities do not fail to make us writhe as if bound upon an altar.

—To let go, we once knew, was to plunge into the abyss. Suddenly we learn that there is no abyss, or rather that the abyss is everywhere. Now we cling with desperate arms and legs, because we love the smell of God. The milk-yielding nipples of God. God's tongue.

—Underneath everything we are women. Hear us sigh. Do not call us *sweetness*.

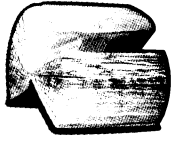
—Very often we meet on the mountaintop for the same reason that we perform in the theater of religion. Here we are allowed to wear masks. And if you question people in their masks, they will tell the truth. And we love the truth.

—What strategies we have used to survive. How inventive our means, how diligent our metamorphoses. We use even the moon. Even the mountaintop.

—X = the unknown that may yet be discovered, the truth that may yet be born, for the sake of which I am prepared to punch a hole in the membrane of God, if he dares to show his face. I would reach up among his gizzards and drag out the Goddess concealed there, all these centuries, even if he himself denies that such a Goddess exists. Especially if he is ignorant of her existence because of his terrible busy memory.

—You remember it is the obligation of every Jew to remember.

—Zero my fate, infinite my dream.



RAIN FALLS ON THE MOUNTAINTOP

Can these bones live?
—Ezekiel 37.6

No one bears witness for the witness.
—Paul Celan

(To be performed slowly, with grief.)

She has no name, has neither face nor eyes
they were drowned in blood
they were burnt
in fire

She is a garden shut, a fountain sealed
She sought her beloved and found him not
no kisses of the mouth no child at breast
no belly of heaped wheat
she is the song of nothing
and never

She loved the man she called father
a great a mighty warrior
a rock an outstretched arm his enemies fled
she ran after his love she praised she danced
hallelujah father but he
was angry

He said she hurt him, she caused him grief
he took her she consented he raised the knife
she lay on stone and showed her throat she said
blessed be he who protects and saves
who comforts the captive and raises up
the dead

Her father will die at a good old age
but where was the angel to stop his hand
where was the sacred messenger
who is this God of stone and knife and fire
why does he hide, what can he see
when a woman prays

will he ever hear

From the forest of our lives
into the clearing
rain falls on the mountaintop
soaking the wordless stone
year after year
like the truth of tears



IN TIME

(Three voices together speak the epigraph, then one by one the separate parts.)

Of our own accord, with our intelligence
and understanding, we can distinguish
between good and evil, doing as we choose.
Nothing holds us back from making this choice.
—Maimonides

So then there was a moment in time
the knife might fall
or it might
not fall

So then there is a moment
in time
the knife may fall
or it may not fall

there is
a moment
in time



SHE REFUSES TO BE COMFORTED

(A single voice)

Yes I am dead
Yes I was a daughter of Israel
Yes I am nameless

Yes my father was a very great warrior
Yes the spirit of the Lord came upon him
Yes the Ammonites were delivered into his hand

Yes I ran after his love I praised I danced
Yes he had opened his mouth to the Lord
Yes he felt pain he blamed me

Yes I went with my companions on the mountains
Yes for two months I lamented my virginity
Yes I was a girl I wanted love

Yes I wanted a man to push into me
Yes like a long flash of light and babies to push out
Yes my companions kissed me and embraced me

Yes the men lay me on stone like a sheep
Yes I was naked like a sheep
Yes I cried God God Mama

Yes the angel of the Lord rescued my ancestor Isaac
Yes the Lord sent a messenger to stop the father's hand
Yes he would save a boy but not save me

Yes we are born into a theater of war
Yes the violence of my father
is a mirror he holds to the face of God

Yes I was unblemished
Yes I was a proved virgin
Yes I am very long dead

Yes I am weeping
Yes what else do you want of me



LAMENT

We look into Torah with regard to women,
and we see that women are perceived as lesser,
and are thereby dehumanized....There is no
immutable moral principle to countermand
what humankind will do if left to the
willfulness and negligence and indifference and
callousness of its unrestraint.

—Cynthia Ozick

Holocaust, from Gr. holokaustos, a sacrifice
wholly consumed by fire; a burnt offering.

(Full chorus, call-and-response, crescendo)

how is she slain
who was full of life

holocaust
holocaust

our eyes run down
with bitter water

holocaust
holocaust

never to be scholar
worker leader

holocaust
holocaust

physician judge
rachmanes din

holocaust
holocaust

image of God
denied rejected

holocaust
holocaust

how many daughters
sisters mothers

holocaust
holocaust

how to lament
the unremembered

holocaust
holocaust

is there any sorrow
like this sorrow



MOUNTAINTOP

(Full chorus for the words in roman type. The italicized words may be understood as the voice of the wind, of the spirit, ruach—the voice of God who finally replies. It should be played from a tape and seem to come from everywhere and nowhere.)

I desired mercy and not sacrifice, and the
knowledge of God more than burnt
offerings.

—Hosea 6.6

Going forth in mourning
returning in joy

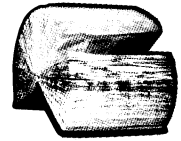
From the forest of our lives
into the clearing
weeds grow on the mountaintop
between the stones
the ancient breathing of God
is strong here barbed jagged relentless

Wind increases
shiver and listen
is it the wind
is it a voice

*You who lament
you are the one
you are my angel
beloved messenger
you stop the warrior's hand*

*it will take ages
it will begin today
you will die many times
you will slip in blood
you will be humbled
you will fail
it will take all your strength
it will appear to take forever
it will begin today*

we must go forth in mourning
we will return
in joy



AN UNCLOSED CLOSURE

(“Mountaintop” may conclude the performance of “Jephthah’s Daughter: A Lament.” Performers will freeze for applause. They will then walk toward the audience but instead of bowing, an option is the following naming ceremony.)

The performer who has read the part of Jephthah’s daughter steps forward one step, and speaks:

Remember me
and tell me
what is my name

The other performers step forward one by one to stand at her side. Each states her own name.

When they have all done so, it may be possible to gesture toward the audience, inviting members of the audience to state their own names.