BAT YIFTACH: VICTIM OR VOICE?
A FEMINIST READING OF JUDGES 11

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The tragic story of Jephthah's daughter, as told in Judges 11, is one of the Hebrew Bible's most troubling texts. Generations of rabbis and writers have grappled with its message and wrestled with its meaning. This narrative episode raises many difficult questions: What happened to Jephthah's daughter? Was Jephthah's daughter a victim throughout the story? Did she ever find her voice? In addition to classical exegesis, feminist scholarship and modern Hebrew poetry offer new layers of interpretation for difficult texts such as this. These scholars and poets struggle with many of the same questions as their rabbinic predecessors; the answers, however, are not always the same.

Each of the interpreters featured in this paper, from rabbis to poets, seeks to redeem this particular story in some way. The first chapter includes my translation and commentary of Judges 11:29-40, accompanied by feminist critical perspectives as well as classical ones. The second chapter discusses child sacrifice in the ancient world, paying particular attention to the subject as it appears in the Bible, ancient Phoenician practice, and Greek mythology. The third chapter focuses on traditional interpretations of the Bat Yiftach story from the pre-rabbinic writings of Josephus and Pseudo-Philo through the classic medieval commentators. The final chapter includes my translations of four modern Hebrew poems about Bat Yiftach, as well as my analysis and commentary on each poem in light of the contributions made by the traditional exegetes and feminist scholars. The presentation of material in this order represents the trajectory of the changing interpretive tradition, documenting the ever-expanding questions, along with their corresponding creative responses, regarding Bat Yiftach's tragic story.

Introduction:

The tragic story of Jephthah's daughter, as told in Judges 11, is one of the Hebrew Bible's most troubling texts. Generations of rabbis and writers have grappled with its message and wrestled with its meaning. This narrative episode raises many difficult questions: What happened to Jephthah's daughter? Was Jephthah's daughter a victim throughout the story? Did she ever find her voice? In addition to classical exegesis, feminist scholarship and modern Hebrew poetry offer new layers of interpretation for difficult texts such as this. These scholars and poets struggle with many of the same questions as their rabbinic predecessors; the answers, however, are not always the same.

In recent years, contemporary feminist scholars have taken up the task of interpreting this difficult text, applying literary techniques and feminist theory to understand the biblical story in a different way. Struck by the absence of Bat Yiftach's perspective in the Bible, these scholars envision the story from her point of view. For Mieke Bal this includes giving her a name, "Bath," which is the transliterated form of the Hebrew name for daughter. This act restores to her a name, yet at the same time serves as a constant reminder that her role in the story is that of daughter, not as a free person with her own agency. In a similar vein, this paper will refer to Jephthah's daughter as Bat Yiftach, maintaining the relational link to her father yet addressing her as an individual.

Deeply troubled by Jephthah's vow and the resulting sacrifice, these scholars argue for additional interpretations. Tikva Frymer-Kensky, for example, points out that stories such

as this "can also be foundational legends for non-sacrificial rites of sanctuary service and for life cycle rituals."[1] She elaborates on this hypothesis by imagining a girls' puberty ritual with a public recitation of Bat Yiftach's story, as suggested by her understanding of the last verse of the biblical text. "Every year the daughters of Israel go to chant to the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite, four days of the year."[2] These contributions from feminist scholars offer an important lens for viewing the traditional rabbinic commentators and modern Hebrew poets discussed in this paper.

In describing her work, scholar Phyllis Trible explains that her approach "recounts tales of terror *in memoriam* to offer sympathetic readings of abused women... It interprets stories of outrage on behalf of their female victims in order to recover a neglected history, to remember a past that the present embodies, and to pray that these terrors shall not come to pass again. In telling sad stories, a feminist hermeneutic seeks to redeem time."[3]

From Pseudo-Philo in the first century C.E., through the medieval commentators, Jewish thinkers have struggled with Jephthah's dangerous vow and its consequences. While Pseudo-Philo names Bat Yiftach and writes a lengthy lament expressing her despair, he appears more interested in Bat Yiftach as a type for the destroyed Jerusalem than as an individual. The later rabbis, too, seem more concerned with Jephthah and God, or with Bat Yiftach's piety and obedience, than with Jephthah's daughter as an individual.

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[1] Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of Their Stories* (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), 113.
[2] Judges 11:40
[3] Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 3.

In the years leading up to the creation of the state of Israel, and continuing until today, modern Hebrew poets have retold the story from Bat Yiftach's perspective. While she has two lines in the biblical text, neither expresses her reaction to the vow or its consequences. These poets give Bat Yiftach an independent voice and uncover her emotions and motivations. Unlike the rabbis, these poets are interested in Bat Yiftach's experience and choose to focus on the daughter rather than the father, offering a deeper understanding of her place in the story. How Bat Yiftach's place is understood, however, varies from poet to poet. Shaul Tchernechovsky, for example, imagines the sorrow Bat Yiftach must feel without a father, husband or son, suggesting that without these men in her life she is nothing. Rahel's poem argues for a lasting legacy through words rather than children and Aliza Strud imagines Bat Yiftach's cries of despair as she desperately hopes for a change of fate. Anda Amir, however, portrays a confident and satisfied Bat Yiftach who does not despair over lost love or life and who goes to her death as a willing martyr.

Each of the interpreters featured in this paper, from rabbis to poets, seeks to redeem this particular story in some way. The first chapter includes my translation and commentary of Judges 11:29-40, accompanied by feminist critical perspectives as well as classical ones. The second chapter discusses child sacrifice in the ancient world, paying particular attention to the subject as it appears in the Bible, ancient Phoenician practice, and Greek myths. The third chapter focuses on traditional interpretations of the Bat Yiftach story from the pre-rabbinic writings of Josephus and Pseudo-Philo through the classic medieval

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As guidance for hearing and telling sad tales, Trible counsels, "if art imitates life, scripture likewise reflects it in both holiness and horror. Reflections themselves neither mandate nor manufacture change; yet by enabling insight, they may inspire repentance. In other words, sad stories may yield new beginnings."[4]

[4] Trible, *Texts of Terror*, 2

Chapter One:

Translation and Notes on Judges 11:29-40 – A Feminist Reading

Judges 11:29-40

The spirit of the Eternal came upon Jephthah and he crossed the Gilead and Manasseh and he crossed to Mitspeh-Gilead and from Mitspeh-Gilead he crossed to the Ammonites.

Jephthah vowed a vow to the Eternal.

He said, "If you give the Ammonites into my hand, then the one who comes out of the doors of my house to greet me upon my peaceful return from the Ammonites, that one will be for the Eternal and I will offer up that one as a burnt offering."

Jephthah crossed over to the Ammonites to fight them and the Eternal gave them to his hand. He smote them from Aroer as far as Minnith, twenty cities all the way to Abel-Kramim, a very great strike.

Jephthah came to Mitspeh to his house. And look! His daughter comes out to greet him with timbrels and with dances. She is the only one, his sole child. He has from himself no other son or daughter.

And it came to pass, when he saw her, he tore his clothes. And he said, "Alas, my daughter, you have surely caused me to kneel, and you have brought trouble upon me. For I, I have opened my mouth to the Eternal and cannot go back."

She said to him, "My father, you have opened your mouth to the Eternal, do to me that which came out of your mouth, now that God has done for you avenging deeds against your enemies the Ammonites."

She said to her father, "Let this thing be done for me: leave me alone for two months and I will go and I will descend upon the mountains and I will cry about my maidenhood, I and my female companions.

He said, "Go," and he sent her away for two months. She went, she and her female companions, and she cried for her maidenhood upon the mountains.

And it happened that at the end of two months, she returned to her father, and he did to her as he had vowed. She never knew a man.

She became a tradition in Israel. Every year the daughters of Israel go to chant to the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite, four days of the year.

וַתְּהִי עַל־יִפְתָּח רוּחַ יְהוָה וַיַּעֲבֹר אֶת־הַגִּלְעָד וְאֶת־מְנַשֶּׁה וַיַּעֲבֹר
אֶת־מִצְפֵּה גִלְעָד וּמִמִּצְפֵּה גִלְעָד עָבַר בְּנֵי עַמּוֹן׃

The spirit of the Eternal came upon Jephthah and he crossed the Gilead and Manasseh and he crossed to Mitspeh-Gilead and from Mitspeh-Gilead he crossed to the Ammonites.

רוּחַ יְהוָה – This phrase, "the spirit of the Eternal," appears frequently throughout the book of Judges (Judges 3:10, 13:25, 14:6 for example). In most cases, the spirit descends upon a person, as if the spirit were in fact something physical that gives one the strength to accomplish a task, usually related to war or leadership. With the spirit of the Eternal upon him, it should have been clear that Jephthah would win this particular battle; the fact that he still makes a vow suggests that the vow itself is the central focus of this story, and not the battle with the Ammonites.

וַיִּדַּר יִפְתָּח נֶדֶר לַיהוָה וַיֹּאמַר אִם־נָתוֹן תִּתֵּן אֶת־בְּנֵי עַמּוֹן בְּיָדִי׃ וְהָיָה
הַיּוֹצֵא אֲשֶׁר יֵצֵא מִדַּלְתֵי בֵיתִי לִקְרָאתִי בְּשׁוּבִי בְשָׁלוֹם מִבְּנֵי עַמּוֹן
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וַיִּדַּר יִפְתָּח נֶדֶר - Vows and battle-oaths are common in the Bible and an accepted part of Israelite tradition. Numbers 21:2, when Israel makes a vow to God in the midst of a battle with the Canaanites, is one such example. This vow is simple and straightforward: "If You deliver this people into our hand, we will destroy their towns

[and deposit the booty in the sanctuary]." According to Tikva Frymer-Kensky, "biblical vows usually have some sort of inner logic, a connection between what is asked for and what is promised."[5] She points to examples such as Jacob, who asks God to be with him and promises to build a sanctuary when he gets home (Genesis 28:20-22). Jephthah's vow lacks this logic. There are examples of general vows in the Bible, such as Absalom's promise to offer sacrifices to God (2 Samuel 15:8), yet Jephthah's vow is specific.

הַיּוֹצֵא אֲשֶׁר יֵצֵא – "the one who comes out" – Sometimes translated as "whoever comes out" and other times as "whatever comes out," the meaning of Jephthah's words is unclear. What is clear is that Jephthah will sacrifice the first one that comes out of his house, but does he expect an animal, a person, or even his daughter? Some scholars suggest that, "given the arrangement of homes with courtyards that housed domesticated animals, Jephthah may have intended that one of these animals would be encountered first upon his return."[6] It is plausible, however, that Jephthah could have expected a person to meet him upon his return, perhaps a slave. Given the well-known role of women in military victory rituals, it is more likely that Jephthah could have expected his daughter to run out and greet him. After the crossing of the sea and the drowning of the Egyptian chariots, for example, Miriam "took a timbrel in her hand and all the women went out after her in dance with timbrels" (Exodus 15:20). In I Samuel 18:6-7, David and his troops return home from battle and are greeted by the women of the town who come out singing and dancing with timbrels. Similarly, the Song of Deborah (Judges 5:1-31) is

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[5] Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 106.
[6] Michael D. Coogan, ed., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 374.

a musical celebration of a military victory that fits the pattern of women's roles in these events.

וַיַּעֲבֹר יִפְתָּח אֶל־בְּנֵי עַמּוֹן לְהִלָּחֶם בָּם וַיִּתְּנֵם יְהוָה בְּיָדוֹ׃ וַיַּכֵּם
מֵעֲרוֹעֵר וְעַד־בּוֹאֲךָ מִנִּית עֶשְׂרִים עִיר וְעַד אָבֵל כְּרָמִים מַכָּה גְדוֹלָה
מְאֹד וַיִּכָּנְעוּ בְּנֵי עַמּוֹן מִפְּנֵי בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל׃

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וַיָּבֹא יִפְתָּח הַמִּצְפָּה אֶל־בֵּיתוֹ וְהִנֵּה בִתּוֹ יֹצֵאת לִקְרָאתוֹ בְתֻפִּים
וּבְמְחֹלוֹת וְרַק הִיא יְחִידָה אֵין־לוֹ מִמֶּנּוּ בֵּן אוֹ־בַת׃

Jephthah came to Mitspeh to his house. And look! His daughter comes out to greet him with timbrels and with dances.

The similarity between the words בֵּיתוֹ (his house") and בִתּוֹ ("his daughter") reflect the confusion and chaos that results. Jephthah's daughter is meant to be inside, yet she comes out, and in so doing she sets in motion her own predetermined demise.

Commenting on the word הִנֵּה Mieke Bal asserts that, "enhanced by the suspense of her slow introduction, and by this pointed word that inserts the visual aspect of the scene, Bath is the object of vision rather than the subject of the action that follows."[7] Bal continues with an alternate reading of this text that suggests the scene is one of a virgin and a hero brought together for a celebration. Jephthah's despair, argues Bal, is that God

[7] Mieke Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 62.

is the real hero for whom his daughter dances. God is the real victor to whom the virgin will be given.

בִּתּוֹ - Unlike Isaac, whose own story of near-sacrifice at the hands of his father is often compared with Bat Yiftach's, Jephthah's daughter is nameless. Furthermore, she is from a far less illustrious family than Isaac, the favored son of Abraham the patriarch. As Phyllis Trible notes, "her father is of illegitimate birth; her mother is never mentioned; her grandmother was a harlot; and her grandfather cannot be identified. So the girl emerges as an isolated figure in the traditions of Israel as well as in this particular story."[8]

יְחִידָה - "his sole child" - This is the same word used in the Binding of Isaac narrative and again leads the reader to a comparison of the two texts. Mieke Bal notes, however, that in Genesis 22:2, the phrase "the one you love" is added. In Judges 11:34, יְחִידָה receives no such complement. Bal explains, "The daughter is bound to the father by interests other than patrilineal descent: namely, by possession... As the verse stands, the modifier 'only' without its complement receives an altogether different meaning. Where it held protection for Isaac, it holds exposure for Bath. She is not simply 'only;' she is alone... No one protects her – no God, no mother, no father."[9]

וַיְהִי כִרְאוֹתוֹ אוֹתָהּ וַיִּקְרַע אֶת־בְּגָדָיו וַיֹּאמֶר אֲהָהּ בִּתִּי הַכְרֵעַ הִכְרַעְתִּנִי
וְאַתְּ הָיִית בְּעֹכְרָי וְאָנֹכִי פָּצִיתִי־פִי אֶל־יְהוָה וְלֹא אוּכַל לָשׁוּב׃

[8] Trible, *Texts of Terror*, 101.
[9] Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry*, 60.

And it came to pass, when he saw her, he tore his clothes. And he said, "Alas, my daughter, you have surely caused me to kneel, and you have brought trouble upon me. For I, I have opened my mouth to the Eternal and cannot go back."

כִּרְאוֹתוֹ - "when he saw her" - Furthering her reading of the text, Bal argues that "the crucial event of the entire vow-and-fulfillment episode, the moment of decision, is inscribed in this verb: when-he-saw-her. It is here his awareness of the consequence of the victory, of his appeal to an ally more competent and more heroic than himself, of his giving away the status of *gibbor* is brought about"[10]

וַיִּקְרַע אֶת־בְּגָדָיו - "and he tore his clothes" - Upon seeing his daughter, Jephthah realizes that it is she who will be sacrificed. He responds by tearing his clothes, a common mourning ritual and sign of despair.

אֲהָהּ בִּתִּי הַכְרֵעַ הִכְרַעְתִּנִי וְאַתְּ הָיִיתְ בְּעֹכְרָי – "Alas, my daughter, you have surely caused me to kneel, and you have brought trouble upon me." - This phrase has been understood, and criticized, by many for seeming to blame the victim. Bal asserts that Jephthah is indeed blaming his daughter, but not for greeting him with a victory ritual. Rather, he blames her for her readiness to marry the real victor, and for reaching maturity and being ready to leave him.[11] While I agree that Jephthah blames his daughter in this verse, Bal's assertion that he blames her for reaching marriageable age and choosing God as a husband, rather than her father, is questionable. Bal's argument assumes willingness to imagine a father marrying his daughter, which is prohibited

[10] Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry*, 63.
[11] Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry*, 63.

elsewhere in the Bible and certainly is not acceptable practice in later Jewish tradition. Furthermore, it understands Bat Yiftach as a willing daughter who would "marry" God through death as a sacrificial offering. This is also a statement without precedent; no where else in the tradition is there reference made to a "marriage" such as this between a woman and God. While nuns in various Christian sects wear wedding bands and consider themselves "married" to Jesus, this is not a practice found in Judaism.

As Frymer-Kensky points out, the phrase הַכְרֵעַ הִכְרַעְתִּנִי "you have surely caused me to kneel" is a war term. She notes "what the enemy tried and failed to do, his daughter has done unintentionally in her desire to honor him."[12] With regard to Jephthah's reproach, Frymer-Kensky cites a similar parental response by Jacob when Shimon and Levi destroy Shechem. Jacob says to his sons, "You have brought trouble upon me."[13] Her conclusion, that Jephthah is indeed blaming his daughter for her own misfortune, precipitated by his own reckless vow, seems to best represent the meaning of the biblical text. This understanding only highlights Jephthah's self-centered nature, as he chastises his daughter for bringing trouble upon *him*, while she is the one who will suffer the ultimate tragedy.

וְאָנֹכִי פָּצִיתִי־פִי - In repeating the first person subject of the sentence, "And I, I have opened my mouth," Jephthah acknowledges his own role in the unfolding saga. He also recognizes that this one act has defined his future and that of his daughter. Indeed, his

[12] Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 109.
[13] Genesis 34:30

very name comes from the Hebrew word meaning "to open," highlighting the centrality of this act to Jephthah's story.

וַתֹּ֣אמֶר אֵלָ֗יו אָבִי֙ פָּצִ֣יתָה אֶת־פִּ֔יךָ אֶל־יְהוָ֖ה עֲשֵׂ֣ה לִ֑י כַּאֲשֶׁ֨ר יָצָ֤א מִפִּ֙יךָ֙ אַחֲרֵ֔י אֲשֶׁ֣ר עָשָׂ֥ה לְךָ֖ יְהוָ֑ה נְקָמ֥וֹת מֵאֹיְבֶ֖יךָ מִבְּנֵ֥י עַמּֽוֹן׃

She said to him, "My father, you have opened your mouth to the Eternal, do to me that which came out of your mouth, now that God has done for you avenging deeds against your enemies the Ammonites."

עֲשֵׂ֣ה לִ֑י כַּאֲשֶׁ֨ר יָצָ֤א - Trible points out the structure of the father's statement and his daughter's response. She explains, "The word that has gone forth (יָצָא) from his mouth (11:36) has become the daughter who has gone forth (יֹצֵאת) from his house (11:34). To her he must do (עֲשֵׂה) what he has declared to the Lord, because the Lord has done (עָשָׂה) for him what he asked."[14] Trible's comment points out an interesting chiastic structure within the language of these verses. By making this argument, that the "going forth" in each instance requires the "doing" in response, the sacrifice of Bat Yiftach seems a foregone conclusion. While this limits the story and rules out alternative endings, the biblical text itself seems clear enough to support this line of thinking.

וַתֹּ֣אמֶר אֶל־אָבִ֗יהָ יֵעָשֶׂ֤ה לִי֙ הַדָּבָ֣ר הַזֶּ֔ה הַרְפֵּ֥ה מִמֶּ֖נִּי שְׁנַ֣יִם חֳדָשִׁ֑ים וְאֵלְכָ֣ה וְיָרַדְתִּ֤י עַל־הֶֽהָרִים֙ וְאֶבְכֶּ֣ה עַל־בְּתוּלַ֔י אָנֹכִ֖י וְרֵעֹתָֽי׃

She said to her father, "Let this thing be done for me: leave me alone for two months and I will go and I will descend upon the mountains and I will cry about my maidenhood, I and my female companions.

[14] Trible, *Texts of Terror*, 103.

הַדָּבָר – "thing," but also "word" – Jephthah's daughter cannot alter the outcome of the story, but she speaks nonetheless. Trible explains, "hers is not a quiet acquiescence. Within the limits of the inevitable she takes charge to bargain for herself. The victim assumes responsibility, not for blame but for integrity."[15] While it is important to note that Bat Yiftach speaks, not something to be taken for granted with regard to unnamed female biblical characters, the biblical text does not allow her to use her voice in a way that significantly alters her reality. She may bargain, as Trible points out, but she does not bargain for what is most essential: her life.

וְאֶבְכֶּה עַל־בְּתוּלָי - "and I will cry about my maidenhood" - Bal comments on this phrase extensively, building a case for understanding בְּתוּלַי as the stage in a young woman's life when she is sexually mature and therefore eligible for marriage, rather than the common translation which refers to virginity. She further notes that the mountains and the wilderness spatially symbolize time.[16] Given the uncertainty of the Hebrew term, I have chosen to translate בְּתוּלַי as "my maidenhood," as this word can be read as a reference to either a stage of life or a state of virginity.

אָנֹכִי וְרֵעֹתָי - Trible notes, "the closing words of her speech introduce a new dimension… thus far emphasis has fallen upon her isolation... At the time of deepest sorrow, the last days of her life, the girl reaches out to other women… In communion

[15] Trible, *Texts of Terror*, 103.
[16] Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry*, 65.

with her own kind, she transcends the distance between daughter and father."[17] Indeed her last spoken word is וְרֵעֹתָי "my female companions," highlighting her connection to these other young women and the distance she feels from her father.

וַיֹּאמֶר לֵכִי וַיְשַׁלַּח אוֹתָהּ שְׁנֵי חֳדָשִׁים וַתֵּלֶךְ הִיא וְרֵעוֹתֶיהָ וַתֵּבְךְּ עַל־בְּתוּלֶיהָ עַל־הֶהָרִים׃

He said, "Go," and he sent her away for two months. She went, she and her female companions, and she cried for her maidenhood upon the mountains.

לֵכִי - "Go" - Jephthah's last word to his daughter is a command that explicitly states separation, calling further attention to the rift between father and daughter. This command conjures up images of the Torah portion *Lech Lecha*, where God tells Abraham to leave his family and his homeland for a new place.[18] Unlike the command for Abraham, which ultimately promises blessing, prosperity, and progeny, this לֵכִי is the beginning of the end for Bat Yiftach. Her father's command sends her away, but hers is only a temporary escape; the understanding implicit in this command is that she will return to meet her fate. She will not prosper and neither she, nor her father, will enjoy the continuity of their family through children.

וַיְהִי מִקֵּץ | שְׁנַיִם חֳדָשִׁים וַתָּשָׁב אֶל־אָבִיהָ וַיַּעַשׂ לָהּ אֶת־נִדְרוֹ אֲשֶׁר נָדָר וְהִיא לֹא־יָדְעָה אִישׁ וַתְּהִי־חֹק בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל׃

And it happened that at the end of two months, she returned to her father, and he did to her as he had vowed. She never knew a man. She became a tradition in Israel.

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[17] Trible, *Texts of Terror*, 104.
[18] Genesis 12:1-2

וַיַּעַשׂ לָהּ אֶת־נִדְרוֹ אֲשֶׁר נָדָר - "and he did to her as he had vowed" - Rabbi David Kimchi, a medieval commentator (1160-1235), also known as RaDaK, argues that in the end Jephthah does not actually sacrifice his daughter, rather he dedicates her to Temple service. The meaning of the biblical text seems clear, however. עוֹלָה refers to an offering that is burnt in the fires on the sacrificial altar. There are more than 200 instances in the Bible where this word, in this particular form, is used and each time it refers to a burnt offering. As horrific as it may be, the biblical text seems to say that Jephthah did as he vowed to do; he sacrificed his daughter as a burnt offering to God.

וְהִיא לֹא־יָדְעָה אִישׁ – "and she never knew a man" - This phrase highlights her father's tragedy more than her own, for if she, an only child, had never known a man, then Jephthah would be without descendants. In sacrificing his daughter, he also sacrificed his own future.

וַתְּהִי־חֹק בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל – "she became a tradition in Israel" – While חֹק can mean a statute, law, or decree issued either by God or a human ruler (as in Exodus 18:16, Deuteronomy 4:5, or Genesis 47:26), it is generally understood to mean social convention or custom in this particular verse.[19] חֹק has a similar meaning in the Samuel text

[19]*The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew,* ed. David J.A. Clines (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), vol. 3, 299.

describing the custom of dividing spoils of war evenly between those who go to battle and those that remain with the belongings.[20]

Interestingly, *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* also defines חֹק as "lot, appointed destiny, appointed time of death," though the citations for this particular meaning of the word do not include the Judges reference. (They include extra-biblical sources such as the texts from Qumran, Ben Sira, and Maccabees, as well as one biblical reference to this particular usage, found in Job 14:13).[21] While it is unlikely that this would be the sense of the word in the Judges text, keeping this other definition in mind certainly adds a new dimension for the reader. This new dimension, however, raises certain problems, namely that it removes the blame from Jephthah and places responsibility for Bat Yiftach's tragic death squarely on God. For me, it is preferable to indict one reckless father than hold God responsible for the violent death of this innocent girl.

This phrase וַתְּהִי־חֹק בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל is usually translated, "and it became a custom in Israel." Trible notes "the verb clause is a feminine singular form of *be* or *become*. Since Hebrew has no neuter gender, such feminine forms may carry a neuter meaning so that the traditional reading, 'it became,' is certainly legitimate – but it may not be perceptive... The preceding clause has *she* as the subject of its verb: 'Now she had never known a man.' An independent feminine pronoun (*hi*) accents the subject. Similarly, the feminine grammatical gender of the verb *become* may refer to the daughter herself.

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[20] I Samuel 30:25

[21] *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, Clines, 299.

Further, the term that is usually designated *custom* (*hok*) can also mean *tradition*. The resulting translation would be, 'She became a tradition in Israel.'"[22] Given the persuasive and compelling nature of this argument, as well as the previous discussion regarding the word חֹק, I have chosen to use Trible's translation, "she became a tradition in Israel."

מִיָּמִים | יָמִימָה תֵּלַכְנָה בְּנוֹת יִשְׂרָאֵל לְתַנּוֹת לְבַת־יִפְתָּח הַגִּלְעָדִי
אַרְבַּעַת יָמִים בַּשָּׁנָה׃

Every year the daughters of Israel go to chant to the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite, four days of the year.

לְתַנּוֹת – "to chant" - Often translated as "to mourn," this Hebrew word has multiple meanings. In the Song of Deborah, for example, it is used in a celebratory context to describe the chanting done in acknowledgement of God's great deeds (Judges 5:11). In her interpretation of this last verse, Frymer-Kensky imagines what a women's ritual honoring Jephthah's daughter might contain. She translates לְתַנּוֹת לְבַת־יִפְתָּח as "to chant (the story of) the daughter of Jephthah." She suggests that four days each year, young women would gather for a puberty ritual to tell the story of Jephthah's daughter and "mark the 'death' of a girl child, their own prepubescent selves, as they relive her experience."[23] She argues that "all girls undergo this death-and-transformation when they die as girl children and emerge as marriageable young women. In ancient societies, the advent of puberty must have been terrifying to girls. They knew they were not masters of their own fate… In a society in which women had so few choices, a ritual for girls would

[22] Trible, *Texts of Terror*, 106.
[23] Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 113.

be an opportunity to alleviate the anxiety of puberty, or at least to help girls endure it by enabling them to share 'women's mysteries' and women's destinies... There is no element of radicality here: the ritual, which temporarily removed girls from the male-dominated world, prepared them to return and accept this world."[24]

Utilizing the tools of literary criticism and feminist theory allows for a close reading of the biblical text, a reading which focuses on Bat Yiftach rather than her father. The result is a commentary that speaks the language of biblical scholarship as well as that of gender studies. Bat Yiftach is no longer presented as simply the sacrificial daughter; she is the center of her story, as painful as that story may be.

[24] Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 114.

Chapter Two:

Child Sacrifice in the Ancient World

As the story of Jephthah's daughter is essentially one of child sacrifice, it is necessary to explore this idea in the ancient world. This chapter explores child sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible, evidence for the actual practice of child sacrifice in Carthage and Phoenicia, and stories of child sacrifice in ancient Greek mythology.

Ancient Israel

There are two types of biblical references to the practice of child sacrifice: those that refer to the law of the firstborn and first fruits, and those that refer to *Ba'al* or *Molech.*

The law of the firstborn and first fruits is mentioned in several verses throughout the book of Exodus. God speaks to Moses saying, "consecrate to Me every first-born: man and beast, the first issue of every womb among the Israelites is Mine."[25] Later, God again declares, "you shall give Me the first-born among your sons."[26] These verses do not necessarily indicate the practice of child sacrifice, however, since the redemption of the first-born child is allowed elsewhere in Exodus.[27] References to the sacrifice of first-born children or only children appear in other biblical books as well. In Kings, for example, the king of Moab fails in battle and sacrifices his first-born son as a burnt offering.[28] In Judges 11, the subject of this thesis, Jephthah sacrifices his only child, a daughter, after

[25] Exodus 13:2
[26] Exodus 22:28
[27] Exodus 13:11-15, 34:19-20
[28] 2 Kings 3:26-27

vowing to give God the first thing that comes out of his house, as a thanksgiving offering for military victory.[29]

Other biblical references to child sacrifice do not specify the birth-order of the child and are associated with *Ba'al* (a well-attested Semitic god) or *Molech* (either a divinity or a sacrificial term).[30] The book of Jeremiah, for example, decries this practice and states,

> They have built shrines to *Ba'al*, to put their children to the fire as burnt offerings to *Ba'al* – which I never commanded, never decreed, which never came to My mind. Assuredly, a time is coming – declares the Lord – when this place shall no longer be called *Topheth* or Valley of *Ben-hinnom*, but Valley of Slaughter.[31]

Other texts refer to sacrifices made to *Molech*. Again, Jeremiah is the voice of God's rebuke concerning this practice:

> And they built the shrines of *Ba'al* which are in the Valley of *Ben-hinnom*, where they offered up their sons and daughters to *Molech* – when I had never commanded, or even thought [of commanding], that they should do such an abominable thing, and so bring guilt on Judah.[32]

Child sacrifices are referenced in Leviticus as well, as God commands the Israelites not to allow any of their offspring to be offered up to *Molech*[33] and declares that such an act is punishable by death.[34] Given the frequency with which the biblical authors condemn child sacrifice, it is reasonable to assume that it was indeed practiced somewhere in the ancient world. Whether or not Israel practiced child sacrifice, however, is unclear. The

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[29] Judges 11:30-40
[30] Shelby Brown, *Late Carthaginian Child Sacrifice and Sacrificial Monuments in their Mediterranean Context*, (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 27.
[31] Jeremiah 19:5-6
[32] Jeremiah 32:35
[33] Leviticus 18:21
[34] Leviticus 20:2

presence of numerous statements forbidding child sacrifice could show that the practice was indeed outside accepted behavior and therefore not done. Or, perhaps this polemic against child sacrifice is the very proof that it was a practice among Israelites and needed to be addressed.

Phoenicia and Carthage

Phoenicia was the Greek name for an area north of Palestine comprised of various cities. Phoenicia was not a country or a nation, but rather "a conglomerate of city-states that was distinguished from adjacent areas by its habitual outreach into the Mediterranean world and by its preferred dealings with Indo-Europeans and Greeks."[35] The main cities in Phoenicia were Tyre, Sidon, and Byblos, all three of which are mentioned in the Hebrew Bible. The Deuteronomic Historian (mid-6th century BCE), for example, "was familiar with Tyre's preeminence in the Mediterranean world... the Phoenicians are Canaanites who live in the east and in the west, along the coast and in the Jordan valley...but Phoenicia was not part of the land of Canaan that was allotted to the tribes of Israel."[36]

Literary, epigraphic and archaeological evidence supports the claim that the ancient Phoenicians actually practiced child sacrifice, which may shed some light on the many child sacrifice references in the Bible.[37]

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[35] *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel-Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), vol. 5, 349.
[36] *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Noel-Freedman, 350.
[37] Brown, *Late Carthaginian Child Sacrifice,* 13.

According to scholar Shelby Brown,

> The Carthaginians were the most influential, famous representatives of western Phoenician culture, and the sacrificers of the largest numbers of their own children. The sacrificial cemetery at Carthage is the largest ever found and the one with the longest span (from roughly 750 to 146 BCE), and it has produced the largest number of known monuments commemorating child and animal sacrifices; over seven thousand stelae of the late period alone have been excavated during the past century.[38]

These sacrificial stelae bear inscriptions dedicating the child sacrifices to the gods and many follow a similar pattern. The one who is dedicating the child gives his or her name and genealogy as well as the name of the god or gods to whom the offering is being made. It is also commonly stated that the sacrifice is being made in response to a vow, with some inscriptions stating that the vow was indeed heard by the gods.[39]

Some scholars have made a connection between the Phoenician cult of child sacrifice, described by the sacrificial term *mlk,* and the biblical references to child sacrifices made to *Molech.* This has led to debate regarding the accurate understanding of the biblical word *Molech*, with some arguing that it is a sacrificial term rather than the proper name of a deity.[40] Two scholars in particular, G. C. Heider and J. Day, support a return to the traditional understanding of an ancient Near Eastern deity named *Molech*, to whom idolatrous sacrifices, including children, were offered; their argument has gained increasing support in recent scholarship.[41]

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[38] Brown, *Late Carthaginian Child Sacrifice,* 14.
[39] Brown, *Late Carthaginian Child Sacrifice,* 29.
[40] Francesca Stavrakopoulou, *King Manasseh and Child Sacrifice: Biblical Distortions of Historical Realities* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), 207.
[41] Stavrakopoulou, *King Manasseh and Child Sacrifice*, 207, 211.

The archaeological findings related to child sacrifice in Phoenicia are significant for the purposes of this paper because the ancient Phoenicians were cotemporaneous with the ancient Israelites and were connected to each other through geographic proximity and trade routes.[42] The references to child sacrifice found in Exodus, for example, were written by the E source, compiled between 922-722 BCE. The references from Leviticus are part of the P text, which was compiled not long after the J and E texts were combined.[43] The book of Judges in particular, written by the Deuteronomic Historian in the mid-6th century, includes several references to the Phoenicians from Sidon (Judges 3:3, 10:11-12, 18:7, 28). Many of the rebukes against child sacrifice are found in the book of Jeremiah, which was written at a later date by authors who would have known about the previous works of the Deuteronomic Historian. The time span for these various biblical texts (10th c. BCE – 6th c. BCE) is the same time period in which the Phoenicians were rapidly expanding their trade routes, gaining fame in the Mediterranean as successful merchants, and sacrificing children.[44] Philo of Byblos (20 BCE – c. 45 CE), for example, writes that in times of great emergency, the kings of Phoenicia would sacrifice their most beloved children.[45]

While the book of Jeremiah mentions Tyre and Sidon as among the enemies of Judah, "the attitude of the biblical writers to the Phoenicians of Tyre and Sidon...was dictated by theological theory and often conflicted with an implicit admiration for the relentless

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[42] *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Noel-Freedman, 350-351.
[43] Richard Elliott Friedman, *The Bible with Sources Revealed: A New View into the Five Books of Moses* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2005), 4.
[44] Eli Barnavi, ed., *A Historical Atlas of the Jewish People: From the Time of the Patriarchs to the Present* (New York: Schocken Books, 1992), 17.
[45] Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 110.

adventurers who had discovered the Mediterranean world and given the East a new role in the history of civilization." Given these divergent feelings toward an admired enemy, perhaps the admonishments regarding child sacrifice serve as yet another reminder that even though the Phoenicians may be admirable for their economic prowess, they are not to be emulated with regard to this forbidden act. These frequent reminders not to sacrifice to Ba'al or Molech highlight for the Israelites their distinct culture and practice, apart from that of the cities and nations around them.

Ancient Greece

Stories of vows leading to child sacrifice can be found in several ancient Greek myths and three, in particular, are very similar to the biblical story of Jephthah and his daughter. In the first, Idomeneus, the king of Crete, is caught in a storm on his return from the Trojan War. Idomeneus makes a vow to Poseidon, the god of the sea, that he would sacrifice to him whomever he should meet immediately upon arriving safely on his native shores. This person turns out to be his own son. Similarly, Maeander, another character in Greek myth, is at war with the people of Perssinus. He vows to the Great Mother that if she grants him victory, he will sacrifice to her the first person who comes out to greet him when he returns home. Again, it is his son.[46] It is interesting to note that while the parent and sacrificed child in both of these myths are male, one of the gods requesting the sacrifice is Great Mother. This maternal image seems to be in direct contrast with the bloodthirsty request of a sacrificed child.

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[46] Theodor Gaster, *Myth, Legend, and Custom in the Old Testament: A Comparative Study with Chapters from Sir James G. Frazer's* Folklore in the Old Testament (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 430.

In the story of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, it is their daughter, Iphigenia, who is sacrificed. The entire Greek fleet is assembled at Aulis and has been held there for a very long time due to bad winds. The Oracle declares that they will not be allowed to sail until Iphigenia is sacrificed to the goddess Artemis. Once Artemis is satisfied in this way, they will be able to set forth for Troy and wage their battle. Accordingly, Agamemnon is prevailed upon to call for his daughter, under the pretense that she is to be married to an accomplished prince. Upon Iphigenia's arrival, however, she and her mother, Clytemnestra, discover that which Artemis has demanded. The Greek playwright Euripides wrote two different endings to the story. In "Iphigenia in Tauris" (414-412 BCE) Iphigenia heroically devotes herself to the altar and is sacrificed to the goddess Artemis;[47] in "Iphigenia at Aulis" (410 BCE) however, she escapes death and is carried off to the goddess's sanctuary at the last minute.[48]

While the Judges text (6th - 7th c. BCE)[49] most likely predates these Greek myths (5th c. BCE), it is interesting to note the fascination with the story of Jephthah and his daughter and the way in which this story has captured the imagination of writers and artists for centuries. The changes made to the Bat Yiftach story by the ancient Greeks are also significant. In the Bible, for example, God saves the male son (Isaac) from being sacrificed, while God allows Jephthah to go through with the sacrifice of his daughter. In

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[47] Euripides, "Iphigenia in Tauris," trans. Robert Potter, The Internet Classics Archive, http://classics.mit.edu/Euripides/iph_taur.html.
[48] Euripides, "Iphigenia in Aulis," trans. Robert Potter, The Internet Classics Archive, http://classics.mit.edu/Euripides/iphi_aul.html.
[49] Friedman, *The Bible with the Sources Revealed*, 5.

the Greek myths, however, male and female children are sacrificed, though in each story it is the father who makes the vow and commits the act. In the biblical text, the mother is not present, yet Iphigenia's mother is part of the story and is just as shocked as her daughter to discover what the goddess has demanded. It is also notable that in the Greek version of the story, the vow and sacrifice are often made to a goddess, rather than a male god. Many of these innovations will appear later as the rabbis and poets grapple with the text and offer various midrashim and interpretations.

Chapter Three:

Pre-Rabbinic and Rabbinic Treatment of Jephthah's Daughter

Josephus and Pseudo-Philo

Josephus and Pseudo-Philo are two Jewish sources that offer a fitting bridge between a discussion of Greek mythology and an assessment of classic rabbinic treatment of Jephthah's daughter.

It is well known that Josephus (37 CE – c. 100 CE) wrote Jewish Antiquities in order to present the Jewish people in a favorable light to a Greco-Roman audience. According to a recent study by Cheryl Brown, however, this is not the only reason for the revisions and omissions in his rendition of the story of Jephthah and his daughter. She argues that Josephus crafts the story of Jephthah in a particular way that intentionally alludes to similar stories in ancient mythology and literature.[50] In describing the moment when Jephthah sees his daughter approaching, for example, Brown notes that Josephus,

> replaces the biblical "he tore his clothes," which would have had little meaning for his audience, by a phrase from Thucydides: "stunned at the magnitude of the calamity before him..."[51]

She observes that Josephus also calls to mind familiar Greek myths, such as those of Idomeneus and Iphigenia, in which a vow is made and a child is sacrificed, or dedicated, to the gods. These references serve to underscore the notion that Jephthah's daughter was

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[50] John Thompson, *Writing the Wrongs: Women of the Old Testament among Biblical Commentators from Philo through the Reformation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 107.

[51] Cheryl Brown, *No Longer Be Silent: First Century Jewish Portraits of Biblical Women; Studies in Pseudo-Philo's Biblical Antiquities and Josephus's Jewish Antiquities* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 120.

dedicated, and not sacrificed, therefore responding to the accusation that the Jews practiced human sacrifice.[52] At the same time, Jephthah's daughter is characterized in a way similar to Iphigenia, as if Josephus were highlighting the shared Greco-Roman and Jewish appreciation for a "dutiful, patriotic, and selflessly noble daughter."[53]

While Josephus condenses the biblical story of Jephthah, Pseudo-Philo (late 1st c. CE) expands and significantly rewrites the text. One such revision is the inclusion of an angry response from God, who chastises Jephthah for his rash, and vague, vow. In Pseudo-Philo's version, God says,

> Behold, Jephthah has vowed that he will offer to me whatever meets him first on the way; and now if a dog should meet Jephthah first, will the dog be offered to me? And now let the vow of Jephthah be accomplished against his own firstborn, that is, against the fruit of his own body, and his request against his only-begotten. But I will surely free my people in this time, not because of him but because of the prayer Israel has prayed.[54]

In contrast to Judges 11, in which God is portrayed as silent, Pseudo-Philo imagines God's angry response to Jephthah's vow. Cynthia Baker, however, points out that God's response indicates concern with divine dignity rather than with the daughter's life.[55] According to Cheryl Brown, in this version of the story Jephthah's vow is "superseded by God's own vow, which is all the harsher for its specificity."[56] Pseudo-Philo's expansion of the text allows for God's involvement, but not in a way that comes to the aid of

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[52] Brown, *No Longer Be Silent,* 119-120.
[53] Thompson, *Writing the Wrongs*, 107.
[54] Pseudo-Philo, *Biblical Antiquities*, 39:11, as cited by Thompson, *Writing the Wrongs*, 108.
[55] Cynthia Baker, "Pseudo-Philo and the Transformation of Jephthah's Daughter," in *Anti-Covenant: Counter-Reading Women's Lives in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Mieke Bal (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), 197.
[56] Brown, *No Longer Be Silent*, 97, as cited by Thompson, *Writing the Wrongs*, 108.

Jephthah's daughter. Indeed, God is the one who focuses Jephthah's hasty words and causes his daughter to be the subject of his rash vow.

Pseudo-Philo also indicates that when Seila (the name he has given Bat Yiftach, meaning "loaned" or "dedicated to the Lord") left her father to go into the mountains, she first went to the wise men of the people in order to tell them what happened and request that the vow be annulled.[57] She reports, however, that none of them could respond to her word and so she continues to the hills to mourn with her companions.

According to Brown, God's role in the demise of Jephthah's daughter and her willing acceptance of her fate, are important aspects of understanding Pseudo-Philo's motives. She claims that Pseudo-Philo was interested in canonizing Jephthah's daughter and connecting her death with divine will because he wished to portray her as a type for the city of Jerusalem. Brown demonstrates how many of the motifs applied to Jephthah's daughter, named Seila by Pseudo-Philo, are applied to Jerusalem elsewhere in the Bible. First, God is ultimately responsible for the destruction of the city, "the virgin daughter of Zion,"[58] as well as the death of Jephthah's virgin daughter. Second, the death of Jerusalem has an atoning quality (the city was destroyed so that the people might live), as does the death of Jephthah's daughter (the vow was made and the Israelites prevailed).

[57] Thompson, *Writing the Wrongs*, 109.
[58] Lamentations 2:1

Third, the elders and leaders of Jerusalem were blameworthy in the city's demise, just as Jephthah's father is implicated in her untimely death.[59]

Cynthia Baker comments on yet another key expansion of Judges 11, namely Pseudo-Philo's arrangement of Seila's concluding lament. In Pseudo-Philo's rendition of her closing words, Seila speaks not only to her father, Jephthah, but also to her mother, a character not mentioned in the original biblical text. In the first half of the lament, Seila addresses her father and prays that her life has not been in vain. Brown argues that from her father's perspective the expectations for his daughter's obedience, whether in marriage or in death, have been met. From her mother's perspective, however, Seila recognizes that her life may have been in vain. None of her mother's expectations for her daughter will be fulfilled. Therefore, in the second half of her lament, addressed to her mother, Seila says that her birth was in vain. Baker concludes that

> the "mother" section of the lament provides a response to the distant (and deadly) "realm of the fathers."[60]

In his work, Writing the Wrongs, John Thompson concludes that Pseudo-Philo's decision to close with Seila's lengthy lament highlights the daughter's tragedy over her father's. He argues,

> that the Biblical Antiquities replaces the silence of Judges 11:38 with such a lengthy monologue surely represents a significant shift in sympathies, narrative and otherwise. Clearly, Seila's father, together with his vow and his grief, have been thoroughly upstaged by his daughter's death, as noble as it is tragic. What

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[59] For more on the parallels between Pseudo-Philo's Seila and Jerusalem, see Brown, *No Longer Be Silent*, 109-115.

[60] Baker, "Pseudo-Philo and the Transformation of Jephthah's Daughter," in *Anti-Covenant*, 202.

> remains to be seen of course, is whether any of Pseudo-Philo's insights or sympathies recur in his successors."[61]

While Pseudo-Philo allows Seila to express her voice in a powerful way, she ultimately remains a victim in this version of the story as well.

Midrash Rabbah

In Biblical Antiquities Jephthah's daughter, Seila, is portrayed as an independent woman who seeks the counsel of the wise men before retreating to the mountains to mourn her impending death. Several midrashim make reference to a situation similar to that which takes place in Pseudo-Philo's narrative.

In *Exodus Rabbah*, the phrase "that I may go down upon the mountains" (Judges 11:37) is understood to mean that Jephthah's daughter went to the elders. Rabbi Nehemiah asks, "did she then go upon the mountains? No, she went to the elders to prove to them that she was a pure virgin" in the hope that they would absolve her father of his vow."[62]

A midrash on the Song of Songs echoes *Exodus Rabbah* and also says that "mountains" refers to a group of people, in this case the courts of justice. In this interpretation, Jephthah's daughter went to the rabbinic courts to try to get her father's vow annulled.[63]

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[61] Thompson, *Writing the Wrongs*, 111.
[62] *Exodus Rabbah* 15:4 (Soncino 3:163).
[63] *Midrash Rabbah*, the Song of Songs, 2.8:2 (Soncino 2:117).

Similarly, in *Tanhuma*, the phrase "I will go down to the mountains" is understood as Jephthah's daughter "went down" to the Sanhedrin to argue her case.[64] Employing traditional exegetic techniques, Jephthah's daughter quotes Torah and invokes the patriarch Jacob to show that the vow her father made need not be fulfilled. (She cites the story in Genesis in which Jacob vows to give God the tenth part of all that God gave him, yet does not sacrifice any of his sons).[65] In the end, however, her pleas were not successful and in this *midrash* the story's tragic ending remains.

Leviticus Rabbah, in the midst of discourse about vows, focuses on Jephthah rather than his daughter. In this midrash, God offers a response to Jephthah's vow that is very similar to the outburst recorded in Pseudo-Philo's text.

> Said the Holy One, Blessed be He: 'If a camel or an ass or a dog had come out, would you have offered it for a burnt-offering?' So the Holy One, Blessed be He, answered him correspondingly by bringing him his daughter to hand.[66]

Furthermore, this midrash expands on the notion that something could have been done to annul the vow. First, Jephthah could have consulted the high priest Phinehas, but because of his pride he thought, "I am a king! Shall I go to Phinehas?" Second, Phinehas could have annulled the vow himself, yet he argued, "I am a High Priest and the son of a High Priest! Shall I go to that ignoramus?" The midrash concludes that due to their pride, neither of these men did what they could have done to prevent the young woman's death, and therefore they were both held responsible. Their punishment is also explained. As regards Phinehas, the Holy Spirit departed from him. As for Jephthah, on the other hand,

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[64] Leila Leah Bronner, *From Eve to Esther: Rabbinic Reconstructions of Biblical Women*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 133.
[65] Genesis 28:22, as cited by Bronner, *From Eve to Esther*, 132.
[66] *Leviticus Rabbah* 37:4 (Soncino 4:470).

> limb after limb fell off his body and was buried separately; as it is proved by the text 'and was buried in the cities of Gilead.' It does not say, 'in the *city* of Gilead' but 'in the *cities* of.' this teaches that limb after limb fell off his body and he was buried in many places.[67]

This particular midrash ends with a discussion of what else Jephthah might have done to avoid sacrificing his daughter. Rabbi Simeon ben Lakish comments that Jephthah should have given money for his daughter and offered a sacrifice bought with that money, instead of sacrificing her. Rabbi Johanan argues that he did not even need to give money because his daughter was an improper sacrifice and therefore did not need to be offered at all.[68]

In each of these midrashim, the rabbis are more concerned with Jephthah and God than with Jephthah's daughter. Though they go through great pains to show that Jephthah had other options and need not have killed her, they do not show the same sympathies or sensitivities to her experience as shown earlier by Pseudo-Philo. While these texts give the daughter the agency to address the rabbinic court and argue for the annulment of the vow, this seems mainly to serve their interest in showing the illegality of Jephthah's vow, and in the end, her fate remains unchanged. None of these midrashim imagines what the daughter herself may have said or how she might have experienced the vow and the ensuing events. Similarly, the mother who made a cameo appearance in Pseudo-Philo's telling of the story is just as noticeably absent in the midrashim as she is in the biblical text.

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[67] *Leviticus Rabbah* 37:4 (Soncino 4:471).
[68] *Leviticus Rabbah* 37:4 (Soncino 4:471).

Medieval Commentators

Just as earlier texts assume the literal meaning of Judges 11:39, that Jephthah indeed fulfilled his vow by offering his daughter up as a burnt-offering, many rabbinic commentators in the medieval period understood the text in the same way. Rashi (1040-1105) and Nahmanides (1194-1270), for example, both interpret the text in this manner. Nahmanides wrote that the "the subject is to be understood in its plain meaning (*kipeshuto*)."[69]

The first to address the possibility that Jephthah did not actually sacrifice his daughter, but fulfilled his vow in another way, is the medieval exegete Rabbi David Kimchi (1160-1235), writing in Narbonne, France.

In his work on the subject, David Marcus notes that,

> adopting his father's novel interpretation of the apodosis of the vow, he [Kimchi] suggests a conclusion for the story to be that of a life of virginity, not literal sacrifice.[70]

To make his argument, Kimchi points to the daughter's words in verse 37:

> It is quite clear that he did not kill her because the text [in verse 37] does not say "I will mourn for my life," [but only "I will mourn for my virginity"]. This indicates that he did not kill her but rather that she did not know a man [remained a virgin], because the text says [verse 39] "she did not know a man."[71]

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[69] Ramban, as cited by David Marcus, *Jephthah and His Vow* (Lubbock: Texas Tech Press, 1986), 8.
[70] Marcus, *Jephthah and His Vow*, 8.
[71] Kimchi, as cited by Marcus, *Jephthah and His Vow*, 8.

Kimchi's novel interpretation that Bat Yiftach is dedicated to God by remaining a virgin may have been influenced by the surrounding Christian culture of nuns.

While earlier *midrashim* restore power and voice to Jephthah's daughter, they do not go as far as Kimchi, who gives her not only power but also her life. Later exegetes, such as Ralbag (1288-1344) and Isaac Abravanel (1437-1508), adopted a similar non-literal interpretation, as does the popular 18th century commentary of Yehiel Hillel Altschuler (Mesudat David).[72] In the 19th century however, rabbinic commentators tended towards a literal interpretation, indicating that Jephthah did indeed sacrifice his daughter. This debate continues until today, with the contemporary scholar David Marcus recently advocating for the non-literal view to be reconsidered.[73]

In each generation, the rabbis have understood the text differently. While they debate whether or not the vow was carried out through sacrifice, their focus remains on Jephthah rather than his daughter. They go through great pains to show that Jephthah had other options and need not have sacrificed her, though the rabbis do not show the same sympathies or sensitivities to her experience as shown earlier by Pseudo-Philo. Even Kimchi, who is the first to argue that Bat Yiftach was consecrated to God's service rather than sacrificed, seems to make this radical statement more out of concern for Jephthah's reputation than for Bat Yiftach's future.

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[72] Marcus, *Jephthah and His Vow*, 9.
[73] Marcus, *Jephthah and His Vow*, 9.

Chapter Four:
Bat Yiftach in Modern Hebrew Poetry

Following the tradition of the rabbis, modern Hebrew poets also grappled with the story of Bat Yiftach and her father's vow. Troubled by her tragic death, these writers employ various poetic strategies to understand her life and give her a voice not present in the biblical text. Unlike the rabbis, these poets are interested in Bat Yiftach's experience and choose to focus on the daughter rather than the father, offering a deeper understanding of her place in the story.

However, each poet's interpretation of Bat Yiftach is different. Shaul Tchernechovsky, for example, writes of Bat Yiftach's despair and bemoans the absence of a father, husband or son, suggesting that without these men in her life she is nothing. Anda Amir portrays a confident and satisfied Bat Yiftach who does not despair over lost love, and Rahel's poem argues for a lasting legacy through words rather than children. Aliza Strud writes of Bat Yiftach's cry of hope that her father will absolve himself of the vow and change her fate. While the portrayals of Bat Yiftach vary between accepting and bemoaning her fate, not one of the poems offers an alternate ending to the story. By highlighting the daughter and expressing her perspective, each of these poets offers commentary not only on the story of Bat Yiftach, but also on the role of women.

בת יפתח הגילעדי

שאול טשרניחובסקי

ותשב אל-אביה ויעש לה את נדרו
אשר נדר, והיא לא-ידעה איש (שופטים י"א, לט)

לי היתה אמי אומרת: "לא תישהי פה עמדי,
ימהרך אביר שבטינו – בת יפתח הגילעדי."

לי החניפו אמהותינו: "מה יפית בניזמי דדן!
מי כמוך יפה בארץ מבאר שבע ועד דן!"

לי בחלקות שית שתו השפחות: "יה שהדי,
בבנות תאושרי, גבירתינו, בת יפתח הגילעדי!"

לחשו לי רעותינו: "אהבוך – עת על שכמי
עם כדי ארד העינה – כל בחור גילעד עמי..."

לי סיפרו בדמי הלילה גיליוני – לי לבדי:
את, רק את חלום כל נער גדור יפתח הגילעדי..."

לי לאט ראי הנחושת, ראי צידון: "את יפיפית...
מנגינה בעם – עיניך ממצפה ועד מינית..."

לי ניבא יודע נחש: תאושרי – ארים ידי!
גדי-היקר ליפתח קצינינו בן גילעד הגילעדי."

לי יקדו עיני העלם גחלים: "היי שלי,
היפה באילות השחר, אור יומי, מיקסם לילי!"

נתקימו חלומותיך... לבדד, בילבוש בדי,
הרכה והמעונגת - בת יפתח הגילעדי,

ובאין אב, אין איש, אין ילד יתרפק עלי: אמי...
היפה והמאושרת בבנות, כל בנות עמי.

צוארי התוה התלם, קודם זמן צמק הודי.
הלזאת תמהו רואיך: "בת יפתח הגילעדי!"

אהבה... בחגוי הסלע יסובב היון יונה,
מרדף איל אילת בעונתה ובאונה.

ובשמעי רועה העדר המחלל לשה וגדי,
"מי שומעת?" – תהמה נפש בת יפתח הגילעדי.

קול בוצר אשמע מכרם, שיר של אושר, שיר תחנה,
"מי, אשאל, מי המאושרת, בישבילה זה, למענה?"

"אוי, למי את תיתגעגעי, השרה, עודה עדי?
לא ידעתי זאת, אנכי - בת יפתח הגילעדי.

איש בא שב, יורד לשער מהכות בצר מכה.
אנחש: "אי הפילגש הצעירה לו מחכה?"

קול בוכים אשמע, קול ילד – לא בכה, שחק ילדי,
לא חלצה שד לתינוקת בת יפתח הגילעדי!

במחולות בנות תצאנה... קול חתן וקול כלה...
לי לא שרו ולא שרתי לבתי האמולה.

על הרי אתעה רוקמת חזיוני לא-קם, בדי,
אל תפארת הכינרת, אל הדר הגילעדי.

לא אהבתי, לא יקדתי אהובה בחיק אישי...
אלוהי רצה הנדר, אביבי לו ואשי.

אין לי אב, אין איש, אין ילד על הרי ובמועדי,
ליפה ולמאושרת - בת יפתח הגילעדי...

Bat Yiftach haGiladi
by Shaul Tchernichovsky

> "And she returned to her father and he did to her as he vowed, and she had not known a man." (Judges 11:39)

My mother said to me: "You will not stay here with me,
The strongest one of our tribe will pay the marriage price –
daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite."

The maidservants flattered me: "How beautiful you are in the earrings of Dedan!
Who is like you in beauty in all the land, from Be'er Sheva to Dan!"

The women servants complimented me: "God is my witness,
Among girls you will be content, our lady, daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite!"

Our friends whispered to me: "They love you – time has come to place on my shoulder
my pitcher and go down to the spring – with every young man of Gilead, my people..."

To me, my pages spoke in the quiet of the night – to me alone:
You, only you are the dream of every youth in the battalion of Jephthah the Gileadite ..."

The copper mirror quietly told me, mirror of Sidon: "You have become very beautiful...
a melody among the people – eyes are on you from Mitzpeh to Minit."

The sorcerer prophesied to me: "You will be happy – I raised my hands!
The precious kid of Jephthah our leader, son of Gilead the Gileadite."

For me, the young lad's eyes burned like coals: "Be mine,
the beauty of the sunrise, the light of my day, the charm of my nights!"

Your dreams have come to be... Solitary, in a cloak of loneliness,
the tenderness, the enjoyment - daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite,

Without father, without husband, without a son clinging to me: Mommy...
The beautiful and happy one among the daughters, all the daughters of my people.

My neck was the outline of a furrow, before the time when my splendor shriveled.
I saw you, they were surprised by that one: "daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite!"

Love... in the clefts of the rock, a dove encircles another dove,
a buck pursues a deer, in her seasons, and in her strength.

And in my hearing, a shepherd piping to flock, to the lamb and the kid,
"Who is listening?" – wonders the soul of the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite.

I hear the voice of the vintner in the vineyard, a song of happiness, a song of supplication,
"Who, I ask, who is the happy one, who is happy for her, on her behalf?"
"Woe, for whom do you long, the singing one, bedecked in jewels?"
I myself do not know, I – daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite.

A man returns, he descends to the gate, from dealing blows.
I wonder: "Where is the young concubine waiting for him?"

I hear the voice of the crying, the voice of a boy – he did not cry, he did not play with me,
She did not ever bare her breast to a baby, the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite!

The daughters will come out dancing... the voice of the groom and the voice of the bride...
They did not sing to me and I will not sing to my unfortunate daughter.

I will wander upon my mountains, embroidering impossible visions, alone,
facing the splendor of the Kinneret, to the glory of Gilead.

I did not love, I did not burn beloved in the bosom of my man...
My God wanted the vow, my spring is His, along with my man.

I have no father, no husband, no son upon my mountain or in my time,
To the beautiful and the happy – the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite...

This poem by Shaul Tchernichovsky (1875-1943) gives Bat Yiftach a voice and allows for other voices to be heard as well. Each stanza of the poem highlights different characters speaking to Bat Yiftach, such as Bat Yiftach's mother, who is not heard from in the biblical text. In his poem, Bat Yiftach recalls the many hopes people had for her bright future, and then contrasts these dreams with her reality. Her story is ultimately ironic, representing a complete reversal of expectations and predictions for her.

Despite the assurance of her mother that she would not remain at home as an old maid, despite the flatteries and compliments of those who told her that her beauty was unmatched and her happiness secured, Bat Yiftach describes her reality with these stark words,

> אין לי אב, אין איש, אין ילד על הרי ובמועדי
> ליפה ולמאשרת – בת יפתח הגילדי...

> I have no father, no husband, no son upon my mountain or in my time,
> To the beautiful and the happy – the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite...

All the flatteries in the world could not save Bat Yiftach from her fated end, and despite jewels and the beauty of her youth, in the end she was not the happy woman married off to the strongest man. Rather than accept this cruel twist of fate, however, in this poem Bat Yiftach is given the voice and the space to express her sadness and her questions. Upon hearing a shepherd lovingly pipe to his flock, she wonders מי שומעת "who is listening?" Who hears her cries? Who listens to her questions?

Upon hearing the happy song of a vintner in his vineyard, she asks,

מי המאשרת בשבילה זה למענה?

Who is the happy one, who is happy for her, on her behalf?

Where is her protector, her shepherd? Who hears her and who is happy on her behalf? Who is watching out for her as a vintner carefully tends his vines? An unnamed voice asks Bat Yiftach "for whom do you long?" and her reply is that she herself does not know. The rest of the poem from this point forward explores the various answers to this question. She longs for a child, a son to suckle, a daughter for whom to dance and sing. She longs for the love of a man: a father, a husband, or a son. Yet none of these are to be hers.

God appears only at the end of this poem by Tchernichovsky. In the second to last verse, Bat Yiftach declares that

אלוהי רצה הנדר אביבי לו ואישי

My God wanted the vow, my spring is His, along with my man.

Without disowning God, or referring to the God of her father, Bat Yiftach acknowledges that her God wanted the vow, her God wanted her spring, her youth, her fertility, and her potential man. All this belongs to her selfish, bloodthirsty God. She herself is left with nothing, no father, no husband, no son. Wandering alone upon her mountains, Bat Yiftach is left "embroidering impossible visions, alone." This is a particularly gendered image as embroidery is a woman's art, a solitary craft. Despite the chorus of voices highlighting her attributes at the beginning of the poem, in the end she is alone. The poem

ends with a painful list of longings and unfulfilled dreams, and closes with an ironic salute,

ליפה ולמאשרת – בת יפתח הגילדי...

To the beautiful and the happy – the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite…

תפילה
רחל

אם את חיי לא נתתי לעם,
לו ענוי מותי ממושך
יחלה את פני האל הניזעם,
כמיתת בתו של יפתח.

ובבוא הכורת לכרת את נופי
לו קול גרזינו יתערב
בקולות רנה של אחים עיפים,
בשובם בשלום מן הקרב.

T'filah ("Prayer")
by Rahel

If I haven't given my life to the people
then let the torment of my prolonged dying
appease the furious face of God,
like the death of Jephthah's daughter.

And when the executioner arrives to cut off my view –
let the sound of his hatchet mix with
the joyous voices of tired brothers
in their return in peace from the battle.

In the poem titled "*T'filah*," the poet Rahel (1890-1931) bemoans her own terminal illness and the inevitability of her dying young, before having married or having given birth to children. A young, single woman who suffered from tuberculosis for many years before her eventual death at age 41, Rahel compares her situation to that of Bat Yiftach, who also died before her time, childless and alone. In this poem, both Rahel and Bat Yiftach are portrayed as victims, women whose lives are cut short, without the chance to create a legacy or fulfill their dreams. Rahel's hope, however, is that if she is indeed to die young, that her death be memorialized and remembered as Bat Yiftach's death is memorialized in the Bible. This seems a desperate and misplaced wish, however, since Bat Yiftach's death was pointless and not imbued with meaning as Rahel would hope. Through her poem, Rahel creates the legacy and memory she will not gain through children. And yet, what a mixed legacy; not many women would hope to be compared to Bat Yiftach! Her wish to be remembered through her words, if not through children, is poignantly expressed in the first stanza of the poem.

אם את חיי לא נתתי לעם
לו ענוי מותי ממושך
יחלה את פני האל הניזעם
כמיתת בתו של יפתח.

If I haven't given my life to the people
then let the torment of my prolonged dying
appease the furious face of God,
like the death of Jephthah's daughter.

In these verses, Rahel employs lyrical rhymes and simple, yet powerful, language to express her anguish and her deep desire to have her life and death mean something. She invokes the memory of Bat Yiftach as one whose tragic death had meaning and "appeased the furious face of God." This verse is very troublesome, however, because it

implicates God in Bat Yiftach's tragedy, suggesting that God was furious with Jephthah's careless vow, and the only way to appease this bloodthirsty God is with death and child sacrifice. Understanding the text in this way means that ultimately, God is more concerned with Jephthah than with the daughter. Rahel, who died the slow, painful death of terminal illness rather than the quick, honorable death of a soldier, seems to understand her own suffering as an appeasement for the furious God. Rahel's suggestion that God needed the sacrifice of Bat Yiftach is similar to Tchernechovsky's assertion in his poem that God wanted the vow and ensuing violence to occur.

In the final line of this stanza, Bat Yiftach is referred to as בתו של יפתח. While בת יפתח would have sufficed, Rahel chose בתו של יפתח, which overemphasizes the father's possession of the daughter. This possessive phrase sets up an expectation that the father will protect that which is his, but instead he imperils her in the ultimate sense. This further implicates God the Father, who is meant to protect Israel but instead seems willing to imperil them as well. God is linked in this poem to the executioner and his axe, who gets blamed for the brothers having to go to war and for Bat Yiftach's death.

Perhaps this emphasis on the father's possession of the daughter is also a subtle reference to a form of patriarchy Rahel recognized in her own day as well. As an early Zionist and one of the first trainees at the young women's training farm at Kinneret, Rahel was at once a pioneer and a woman who was bound by the cultural norms of her time. While she was a poet, certainly not a traditional role for women, her poetry was seen as simple and

was not given the status or serious attention enjoyed by male poets of her time. And she too saw her future as bound up in her ability to marry and have children.

Without a husband or a child, however, Rahel turned to her poetry as a means for continuing on after she has died. Rahel's poem expresses her desire that, if she is indeed to die young and without descendants, then let her death at least be memorable and remembered, as Bat Yiftach's death is. It is no accident that the biblical character Rahel references is one who is well known and remembered through the telling of the story and the enactment of a women's ritual. Through her poetry, Rahel is also remembered by future generations. Her words live on long after she herself is no longer a part of this world. Bat Yiftach, like Rahel, also becomes memorialized for future generations, even without children. The annual women's ceremony commemorates both her life and her death and guarantees her survival in the memories of future generations. For Rahel and Bat Yiftach, the lasting power of art and ritual save them from obscurity and ensure their continued existence for generations to come.

For scholar Tikva Frymer-Kensky, Bat Yiftach is a victim. She is not one who acts, but rather one who is acted upon. Her father made a vow and she must suffer the consequences. Her leaving for the mountains to bemoan her fate is not an act of individual autonomy, but rather a necessary step in the sequential chain of events following her father's thoughtless vow. Frymer-Kensky continues,

> Jephthah was a victim who rose to be a hero, and then by his own action turned himself back into a victim. His daughter was a victim's victim with all the faith and fortitude of a heroine.[74]

Phyllis Trible, however, focuses on Bat Yiftach's speech and reaches a different conclusion. Trible does not see her as a victim, but rather as someone with a voice. She explains that, although Bat Yiftach tells her father he must fulfill his vow,

> Hers is not quiet acquiescence. Within the limits of the inevitable she takes charge to bargain for herself. The victim assumes responsibility, not for blame but for integrity.[75]

Modern Hebrew poets are also concerned with the question of "victim or voice" concerning Jephthah's daughter. Rahel's poem includes the word קול ("voice") twice, though both times it only serves to enforce the status of victimhood: the first is in reference to the sound of her executioner's hatchet, and the second is in reference to the voices of the tired brothers returning from war.

While Rahel's poem portrays Bat Yiftach as a victim, though "with all the faith and fortitude of a heroine," the poem by Aliza Strud (b. 1931) imagines her with her own independent voice.[76]

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[74] Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 115.
[75] Trible, *Texts of Terror*, 103.

בת יפתח
עליזיה סטרוד

ושוב זרחה השמש ושוב שקעה
חלף לעד יום אמש בהוד שלוה
וברוח הערבים האהל נע
מול פאתי שמים-הומה שכינה.

ובנוגה הירח צללים רוקדים
לדמות אשה כורעת לקול תפים.
ומתרונן היער בשכרון
ועם עלות השחר ימוג החזיון.

בלילה בלילה
אשא קולי בבכי
בלילה בלילה
אשא תפילה ונהי.
בלילה בלילה
אולי תקוה תהי,
אולי נדרו
יתיר אבי.

מירכתי התמר בוקעים צלילים
עלמות שרות בלי אומר בלי מילים.
ועל מורד הדרך ובשבילים
ירעד ריחו של פרח יחרישו עשבים.

בשנים חדשים ללא חדות נשים
יגועו בתולים בצל האהלים.
ללא עוון וחטא, בת-יחידה
חזרת מן ההרים כאגדה.

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[76] Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 115.

Bat Yiftach
by Aliza Strud

Again the sun rises, and again it sets.
Yesterday evening passed forever in tranquil splendor,
and the tent moves in the twilight wind.
Against the corners of the sky hums the Shechina.

In the radiance of the moon, shadows dance
before the likeness of a kneeling woman, to the sound of drums.
And the forest rejoices drunkenly;
yet at dawn the vision will disappear.

> At night, at night
> I will raise my voice in weeping,
> At night, at night
> I will lift up prayer and wailing.
> At night, at night
> perhaps there will be hope,
> perhaps my father will absolve himself
> of his vow.

Shadows penetrate from the inner reaches of the palm tree
maidens sing without speaking, without words.
And on the way down and on the paths
the scent of flowers will tremble and the grass will turn quiet.

For two months, without the joy of women,
virginity will pine away in the shadow of the tents.
Without crime or sin, an only daughter
You returned from the mountains as a legend.

In this poem by Aliza Strud (b. 1931), Bat Yiftach has a voice with which she is free to express her own perspective in unambiguous terms. While she does speak twice in the biblical text, the speech there is restrained and the reader does not have a clear view into Bat Yiftach's emotions. In Strud's poem, however, Bat Yiftach's voice is unmistakably hers. In comparison to the Rahel poem, the word קול appears less often, only once, yet it is an entirely different type of voice.

Strud's poem is composed of four stanzas of poetic verse in the second person voice of a narrator, and includes one first person stanza in the middle to highlight Bat Yiftach's voice. The poem opens with two beautifully descriptive stanzas about the tranquil splendor of the mountains to which Bat Yiftach has temporarily escaped. Despite the impending violence, the scene is calm; the mountains are a natural haven and Bat Yiftach is surrounded by supportive female presence. Unlike the Rahel and Tchernichovsky poems, which implicate a furious, selfish God in the violence, this poem remarks that "against the corner of the sky hums the Shechina." Even in the midst of great tragedy, Strud imagines that the feminine aspect of the Divine Presence is with Bat Yiftach in the form of the humming Shechina. The support of women is also present for Bat Yiftach as "shadows dance before the likeness of a kneeling woman" in the radiance of the moon. Long associated with women, the reference to the moon is yet another aspect of the female imagery present in this poem.

The poem ends with two stanzas that confirm the importance of Bat Yiftach's companions, singing with her and accompanying her on her path. The very last stanza

speaks directly to Bat Yiftach. For two months, the maidens have been in the mountains, without the company of men, and in the shadow of the tents their virginity pines away. While these women will return from the mountains and find husbands, Bat Yiftach will return, "without crime or sin," only as a legend.

The centerpiece of the poem, however, is a fifth section with eight short lines of Hebrew, written in the first person. Bat Yiftach's voice gets center stage in Strud's rendition of the story, and her words are placed at the very center of the poem. Bat Yiftach says boldly,

בלילה בלילה
אשא קולי בבכי
בלילה בלילה
אשא תפילה ונהי.
בלילה בלילה
אולי תקוה תהי
אולי נדרו
יתיר אבי.

At night, at night
I will raise my voice in weeping,
At night, at night
I will raise a prayer and wailing.
At night, at night
perhaps there will be hope,
perhaps my father will absolve himself
of his vow.

This is not the voice of a victim who has resigned herself to the fate that others have decided for her. Strud's Bat Yiftach is raising her voice, crying, wailing, praying, and hoping that her father will change his mind and her life will be saved. This is not the voice of a woman who, as the biblical text suggests, bravely goes off into the mountains to face her death, compliant and complacent. Rather, in this poem Bat Yiftach's voice is

restored and the poet imagines her fear and her hope that her fate might be different. The reference to the nullification of vows recalls rabbinic comments and shows enduring discomfort with the idea that Jephthah actually sacrificed his daughter.

While the last stanza reaches the same dreaded conclusion as the Bible, Strud acts in the tradition of the rabbis and feminist scholars who sought to insert Bat Yiftach's voice into the narrative. Unlike the rabbis, however, who gave Bat Yiftach a voice in order to illustrate her piety and her obedience or highlight the stupidity of her father's vow, Strud gives Bat Yiftach a voice with which to express her pain. Her death may be inevitable in this poem, as it is in the biblical text, yet Strud gives Bat Yiftach a place to express her fears and raise her sorrowful voice in the company of other maidens and the Shechina. This modern poet offers an ancient daughter a safe space among women to cry and pray and hope.

בת יפתח
אנדה אמיר

ותלך היא ורעותיה ותבך על-בתוליה
על-ההרים (קרי: ותבכינה).
לא ידע אהב החיים אשר לא למד
אהב את המות.

הנערות: יום יאיר ויום יכבה
ואת לא תעורי.
רן יתרוננו החיים בחלד,
כנורות פלאים,
ואת לא תקשיבי.
בכינה, הנערות,
עץ פורה יכרת,
טרם נתן את פריו.

בת יפתח: על מה תבכינה, רעותי,
על מה עגמו נפשותיכן?
הן יפו לי מאוד ימי,
ואברכם.
כל יום כשי קבלתי,
ואין עוד תשורות אתבע,
והן ניתנו לי בשפע?
כל יום חגו חגותי:
לשחרו השתחויתי,
עטיתי אדמומיתו השקופה,
בבקרו קרנתי,
נגהתי בנגה טלליו.

בצהריו נאלמתי,
קפאתי בשפע האור,
שקועתו הכריעתני

אחדל ואבד נדמדומיו.

ואיך לימים אערג עוד,
ורבו לי ימי הברוכים?

רבו אף לילותי,
שקוי כבד בעורקי נסכו,
שקוי משכיר ומרנין.
ארנן בלילות,
שירה כל עצמותי תאמרנה.
ויגבר הרן מהכילו,
בדמי ילהט כאש צורבת.
יגיח מכל אברי.
ואיכה ללילות יבואו אצפה,
ואשר עברו,
חסדם עלי השפיעו?

הנערות: בכינה, הנערות, על האובדת
בין ימיה ובין לילותיה,
והיא יורדת שאולה,
וחמדת דודים לא ידעה.

בת יפתח: קטנו לי כל דודים מדודי בי,
באנוש לא ימצאו מענה.
האקח זהב-חמה
ושביבים שביבים אפוררהו?
האקח ים ללא חופים
ופלגים פלגים אזילנו?
אחניק דודי בחבי –
ולא אחללם יומם ולילה,
ללא פתר, ללא גאל.

דמו, החיים!
כל בקרים חלפו,
כל בקרים יבואו,
בשחר זה מאדים דם אצרתי,
בחמה זו תקועה בצוקי הסלעים,
בחמה זו פצועה ורוננת.

בלב בקר זה האדם
דם ידם העולם לי לעד.

נכונותי אבי,
עקדני,
ויקד איקד בשלהבת-יה.

Bat Yiftach
by Anda Amir

"She went, she and her friends, and she cried for her maidenhood upon the hills."
(Judges 11:38) [read: they cried]
One does not know how to love life until one learns to love death.

The Maidens: Day shines and the day goes out,
but you will not awaken.
Wondrous violins will sing of lifetimes in this world
yet you will not pay attention.
The young women, weeping,
a fertile tree cut down
before it gave its fruit.

Bat Yiftach: For what are my friends weeping,
what distresses your souls?
My days were very beautiful to me,
and I blessed them.
I accepted every day as a gift,
how many more offerings can I demand
given the bounty I have received?
I celebrated the festival of each day.
I bowed down to its mornings,
I wrap myself in its clear redness,
I radiated in its mornings,
I shine in the brightness of its dews.

In its noontime, I disappeared,
I congealed in the excess of the light.
Its sinking caused me to bow down,
I will cease, and perish in its silence.

How can I long for more days,
when I have had so many blessed ones?

Even my nights are many,
A heavy drink has been poured into my veins,
a drunken drink causing joy.
I will sing out at night
all my bones will sing a song
the song will gain strength from what it contains,
it will blaze up in my blood like a scorching fire,
it will burst forth from all my limbs.
I will wait expectantly as they go forth in the night,
and where they pass their grace will pour over me.

The Maidens: The maidens are weeping for the lost one
between her days and her nights,
she goes down to Sheol,
yet the delight of lovers she never knew.

Bat Yiftach: All lovers were smaller than the lovers within me,
in all mankind, they can not find a match.
Can I take the gold of the sun,
and the sparks of light, and make the sparks ashen?
Can I take the sea, but not the shores,
and the streams, and make the streams flow?
I will trap my loves within me –
and I will not let them be pierced day and night,
without solutions, without redemption.

Quiet, life!
All the mornings have passed,
all the mornings will come,
In the reddening morning I collected silence,
In this heat, stuck in the rocky cliffs,
In this heat, bruised and singing.

In the heart of this red morning,
surely the world will be silent about me forever.

I am ready, my father,
bind me,
and I will surely burn in the blaze of God.

This poem by Anda Amir (1902-1981) is written either as a dialogue between Bat Yiftach and הנערות, the maidens who mourn her death, or as a ritual reenactment performed annually at the ceremony to lament Bat Yiftach. Unlike the daughter in Strud's poem, who cries and prays for a different future, the poem by Amir features a Bat Yiftach who is satisfied with her lot and pleased with the life she has led. Indeed, she appears as a heroine, accepting her fate with confidence. Amir signals this at the very beginning of the poem, through a neo-midrashic application of the rabbinic tool of *kri u'khtiv*; in the opening epigraph quoting Judges 11, instead of "and she wept," she writes *kri: vativkena*, "read: 'they wept,'" which alters the emotional tenor of the episode entirely. When the maidens weep for their friend, whom they liken to a fertile tree cut down before it gave its fruit, Bat Yiftach replies,

על מה תבכינה רעותי
על מה עגמו
נפשותיכן?
הן יפו לי מאד ימי
ואברכם.

For what are my friends weeping,
What distresses your souls?
My days were very beautiful to me,
And I blessed them.

Not only did she bless her days and find them beautiful, but Bat Yiftach goes on to ask "how can I long for more days when I have had so many blessed ones?" In response to her friends' mourning, Bat Yiftach responds with acceptance of her fate and focuses on the beauty of her life rather than the tragedy of her death. She does not cry out, desperate for more time, rather she recalls the beauty of the life she has lived. This seems to be an idealized response from Bat Yiftach, and may be too good to be true. It is as if Amir

responds to the acquiescent Bat Yiftach of the Bible by creating a strong Bat Yiftach in poetry, a heroine who so loved her life that she does not mind being sacrificed to God.

When the maidens weep for Bat Yiftach's virginity and the idea that she is going to her death without knowing חמדת דודים "the delight of lovers," again she responds with confidence in what she has, rather what she is missing.

She replies to the maidens,

קטנו כל דודים מדודי בי
באנוש לא ימצאו מענה.

> All lovers were smaller than the lovers within me,
> in all mankind, they can not find a match.

It as if she is saying, "don't feel sorry for me, it is not so bad that I've never had a lover, because the greatest love of all is the love inside me – and that could never find its perfect match in someone else." As if in direct response to Tchernichovsky's poem, Amir uses this verse to argue that a woman's worth is not defined by a husband or child. Bat Yiftach accepts her fate and feels blessed by the days she has lived. She hears the pitying comments of the maidens and rejects them by focusing on the love within her, rather than the lost love of others. She faces a terrible future thrust upon her by her father's dangerous vow. Within the confines of her fate, she has two choices: to go to her death angry and sorrowful, mourning the many lost opportunities of her short life; or she can focus on the beauty and the blessings, sustaining herself with what she has, rather than fixating on what is lost. In this poem, Bat Yiftach concentrates on the pleasant aspects of

her life, the clear redness of mornings, the brightness of dew, and the joyful song of many nights.

At the end of the poem, Bat Yiftach is sure of herself and prepared for what will happen to her. In the closing stanza she states,

נכונותי אבי
עקדני
ויקוד אקיד בשלהבת יה.

I am ready, my father,
bind me,
and I will surely burn in the blaze of God.

This is a grim ending for a daughter, yet Bat Yiftach seems to be reassuring her father, and perhaps herself, that she is indeed prepared for what is to come. The solitary placement of the word עקדני highlights the connection to the Isaac narrative and draws the reader's attention to Bat Yiftach's utter loneliness at this moment. Like Isaac, she too is upon the altar as a father's sacrifice, and similar to medieval renditions of Isaac in the Akeidah story, this poem casts Bat Yiftach as a willing martyr. It is as if this poem wants to place Bat Yiftach in the center of the peak spirituality of the Akeidah experience. Bat Yiftach is ready because she knows that in the binding and the burning, she will move from her father's house into the blaze of God. She will not return home, as Isaac did, yet she will no longer be alone. She will have the memories of the beautiful days and joyful nights, she will have all the lovers within her, and she will be with God.

Like Rahel, Anda Amir is a woman, poet and pioneer writing in pre-state of Israel. Much of her work combines these three aspects of her identity and features female biblical

characters. Writing about the collection of poems titled *Me-Olam, Demuyot mi-Kedem*, Yaffa Berlovitz argues that Amir's work proposes a feminine Bible. She explains,

> Anda Amir sets this pantheon of women in a kind of chronological-genealogical order that relates to the development of ancient Israelite history. To this point, she begins with Genesis and concludes with the kingdom of David, with her biblical narrative to be perceived as a matriarchal alternative to the traditional patriarchal story... In other words, Amir, in this poetic collection, proposes a different Bible, a feminine Bible, that serves to appropriate these canonical cultural texts and retell them in her own way. Through this feminine Bible, she turns to defining her identities as a woman, *halutzah*, and poet.[77]

Each of these four poets, Shaul Tchernichovsky, Rahel, Aliza Strud, and Anda Amir, grappled with his or her own questions about troubling aspects of the Bat Yiftach story. Tchernichovsky's poem portrays Bat Yiftach as a disappointed young woman whose dreams of happiness and family will not come true, reinforcing the stereotype that a woman's worth is bound up in her husband and children. For Rahel, the story of Bat Yiftach is reminiscent of her own struggles and her own desire to be remembered even if she dies as a young, childless woman. This poem also implicates God in the tragedy of the text. Aliza Strud refuses to accept that Bat Yiftach went complacently to her death and thus makes space in her poem for the expression of anger, fear, and a desperate hope that the outcome might be different. She also includes the presence of the Shechina, as if to counter the image of a bloodthirsty God expressed in the other poems. In Anda Amir's poem, Bat Yiftach answers the mournful maidens with reproach, telling them that she was blessed by many beautiful days and that she does not long for more of them.

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[77] Yaffa Berlovitz, "Anda Amir's Me-Olam, Demuyot mi-Kedem: A Proposal for a Modern Feminine Bible," in *Jewish Women in Pre-State Israel: Life, History, Politics, and Culture*, ed. Ruth Kark, Margalit Shilo, Galit Hasan-Rokem (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2008), 258-9.

Drawing parallels to the Akeidah text, Bat Yiftach's closing words in this poem declare her readiness for what lies ahead and her acceptance of her fate.

While only Amir and Tchernichovsky began their poems with quotes from the book of Judges, it is clear that all four poets were well versed in the story of Bat Yiftach and were writing as if in dialogue with the biblical text. Just as the rabbis used various midrashic tools to fill in gaps in a story or offer alternative perspectives, so too do these modern Hebrew poets provide additional layers of meaning through their words. Each of these poems gives Bat Yiftach another voice, each offers her another space to share her side of the story and make herself heard. Through their words, these poets add to the legacy of Bat Yiftach and ensure her continued remembrance.

Conclusion:

This paper addressed many of the difficult questions raised by Judges 11: What happened to Jephthah's daughter? Was Jephthah's daughter a victim throughout the story? Did she ever find her voice?

For contemporary feminists, Bat Yiftach was at once a victim and a voice. Mieke Bal, Tikva Frymer-Kensky, and Phyllis Trible each offered various readings of the biblical text based on literary analysis, biblical scholarship, and creative interpretation. The unifying principle for all of these writers was to explore the story from Bat Yiftach's perspective, even as the conclusions they reached were not always the same.

For most of the traditional rabbinic commentators, Jephthah did indeed sacrifice his daughter, and she was understood as the ultimate victim. Others, like Kimchi, argued for a non-literal understanding of the biblical text and imagined that Bat Yiftach lived out the rest of her life as a virgin, but lived nonetheless.

All of the modern Hebrew poets referenced in this paper maintained that Bat Yiftach was sacrificed, yet they each restored her voice and allowed her perspective to be expressed. For Tchernichovsky, this expression took the form of a lament that Bat Yiftach died unmarried and without children, underscoring the stereotypical idea that a woman's worth depends on her husband and children. Aliza Strud's poem imagines Bat Yiftach's retreat into the mountains as a temporary escape where she is surrounded by the support

of other women and the Shechina. For Rahel and Anda Amir, poetry was a way to express their understanding of Bat Yiftach's perspective as well as an outlet for expressing their own frustrations with God and early Israeli society. For Rahel, Bat Yiftach served as a model for creating a lasting legacy through art or ritual, rather than through children. Amir, on the other hand, focused on Bat Yiftach's point of view as part of a larger project involving a feminine perspective of the Bible as a whole.

Through their writing, each of these rabbis and poets offers the reader not only a particular perspective on the Bat Yiftach story, but also a glimpse into the author's perceptions of the role of women in general. The majority of the rabbinic material on Judges 11, for example, is more concerned with Jephthah and his vow than with the consequences of that vow for his daughter. Feminist scholars, on the other hand, focus their remarks on Bat Yiftach on seek to redeem her in some way through their analysis of the biblical text. The female poets used their poetry as a forum for challenging the status quo, while the male poet, Tchernichovsky, wrote a poem that served to further the commonly held stereotypes of women during his time.

Judges 11 ends with the following verse:

מִיָּמִים | יָמִימָה תֵּלַכְנָה בְּנוֹת יִשְׂרָאֵל לְתַנּוֹת לְבַת־יִפְתָּח הַגִּלְעָדִי
אַרְבַּעַת יָמִים בַּשָּׁנָה׃

> "Every year the daughters of Israel go to chant to the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite, four days of the year."

Trible notes that the last verse of this narrative episode "shifts the focus of the story from vow to victim, from death to life, from oblivion to remembrance."[78] The same can be said for the feminist scholars and modern Hebrew poets who gave Bat Yiftach a voice and carried her legacy through the generations with their questions.

[78] Trible, *Texts of Terror*, 107.

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