

***She'ilah, The Daughter of Jephthah:
Victim of Domestic Violence?***

Parshat Hukat

Numbers 19:1 - 22:1 / Judges 11:1 -33



*Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt
in memory of their grandson, Oren Jacob Brandt-Rauf
“He was the perfect child”*

To understand this Haftorah one must know something about the geography and politics of ancient Israel. The events in this Haftorah took place in Gilead, a region on the eastern side of the Jordan River where the tribes of Reuben, Gad and Manasseh settled. This region was originally conquered from the Edomites in the time of Moses. Sometime in the 11th or 12th century, the Moabites and Ammonites who lived just south of this region laid claim to this area and accused the Israelites of stealing this land from them. During the wilderness sojourn the Israelites had by-passed the land of the Moabites and Ammonites but had conquered the Edomite kingdoms which the other nations now claimed as their own. God sent, Jephthah, a military-judicial leader to redeem the Israelites from disaster.

Who was Jephthah? He was the son of a prostitute and Gileadite man. Because his mother was a low social status, Jephthah was disinherited by his father's other children and forced to live his life as an outlaw. Years later the leaders of Gilead came looking for Jephthah to lead them in battle. Initially, Jephthah tried to negotiate with the other nations. When they failed to listen to him, 'the spirit of God' came upon Jephthah and he led the people in battle. As he left for battle, Jephthah made a promise that would have tragic implications for his family. Jephthah seems like a strange choice as the leader of his generation. Yet he is not so very different from many of the leaders of his generation. Jephthah is a man filled with divine spirit but fatally flawed (just as Samson was).

The Bible never mentions the name of Jephthah's daughter. It first appears in an obscure first century work referred to as Pseudo-Philo. In contemporary times this tradition has been retrieved in an attempt to reclaim 'her-story.' For more on Sheila, see the addenda to this week's study material.

Judges 11:30-31

And Jephthah vowed a vow to the Lord, and said, "If you shall without fail deliver the Ammonites into my hands, then it shall be, that whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the Ammonites, shall surely be the Lord's, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering."

Pseudo-Philo, Chapter 40

And Jephthah came and fought against the children of Ammon, and the Lord delivered them into his hand, and he smote threescore of their cities. And Jephthah returned in peace. And the women came out to meet him with dances. And he had an only begotten daughter; the same came out first in the dances to meet her father. And when Jephthah saw her he fainted and said: **Rightly is thy name called Sheila, that thou shouldst be offered for a sacrifice.**

Judges 11:34 – 40 *(This is the continuation of the Haftorah but not read on Shabbat)*

And Jephthah came to Mizpah to his house, and, behold, his daughter came out to meet him with tambourines and with dances; and she was his only child; beside her he had neither son nor daughter. And it came to pass, when he saw her, that he tore his clothes, and said, "Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low, and you have become the cause of trouble to me; for I have opened my mouth to the Lord, and cannot go back." And she said to him, "My father, if you have opened your mouth to the Lord, do to me according to that which has come from your mouth; seeing that the Lord has taken vengeance for you of your enemies, of the Ammonites." She said to her father, "Let this thing be done for me; let me alone two months, that I may go up and down upon the mountains, and bewail my virginity, I and my friends." And he said, "Go." And he sent her away for two months; and she went with her companions, and wept for her virginity upon the mountains. And it came to pass at the end of two months that she returned to her father, who did with her according to his vow which he had vowed; and she knew no man. And it was a custom in Israel, that the daughters of Israel went yearly to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite four days in a year.

Numbers 30:2

If a man makes a vow to the Lord or takes an oath imposing an obligation upon himself, he shall not break his pledge. He must carry out all that crossed his lips.

Babylonian Talmud Ta'anit 4b

Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachmani said in the name of Rabbi Jonathan: Three people made requests of God in an inappropriate way. Two of them were nevertheless answered affirmatively by God while the third's prayers were rejected: Eliezer, the servant of Abraham; Saul, the son of Kish; and Jephtah the Giladi. Eliezer, the servant of Abraham, as it is written: 'So it came to pass, that the woman to whom I say, 'Let down your pitcher etc.' She might have been blind or lame, but he was fortunate in the answer given to him [by God] in that Rebecca chanced to meet him. Saul, the son of Kish, as it is written, 'And it shall be, the man who kills Goliath, the king will make him rich and will give him his daughter.' He might have been a slave or a mamzer but he was fortunate that it happened to be David. Jephtah, [on the other hand], about whom it is written, 'Then it shall be that whatever comes through the doors of my house...' It might have been an unclean animal. He, however, had the misfortune that that his daughter was the first to come to meet him.' (Adapted and abridged by Rabbi M. Silverstein)

Babylonian Talmud Rosh Hashanah 25a-b

Scripture says, "And Samuel said to the people, 'It is the Lord that appointed Moses and Aaron'" (1 Sam. 12:6), and [in the same passage], "And the Lord sent Jerubaal, and Bedan, and Jephtah, and Samuel" (1 Sam. 12:11). Thus Scripture places three less-worthy chiefs on the same level as three of Israel's most estimable leaders, to teach you that in his generation Jerubaal is to be considered as Moses was in his generation; Bedan in his generation is to be considered as Aaron was in his generation; Jephtah in his generation is to be considered as Samuel was in his generation. To teach you also that the least worthy, once appointed leader of a community, is to be esteemed as the most eminent among the eminent.

Ecclesiastes Rabbah 10:15

Another interpretation of "A fools exertions tire him out (Ecclesiastes 10:15)" This refers to Jephtah, "he doesn't know how to get to the city (Ecc.10:15)" should he not have gone to Pinchas* to annul his vow for him? But Jephtah remarked, ' Shall I, a chieftain and ruler in Israel, go to Pinchas!' and Pinchas remarked, ' Shall I, the High Priest and the son of a High Priest, go to an ignorant person!' Between the two of them the poor girl perished and they were both condemned for her blood. Jephtah punishment was that limb after limb fell away from his body and was buried; as it is written, He was buried in the cities of Gilead (Judges 12:7). In how many places, then, was he buried that it is stated, 'He was buried in the cities of Gilead'? It teaches that each limb fell away from his body separately and was buried in its place [where it dropped off]. What loss did Pinchas sustain [as a punishment]? The Holy Spirit departed from him for two hundred years; for it is not written here 'And Pinchas the son of Eleazar was ruler over them,' but And Pinchas the son of Eleazar was ruler over them in time past, the Lord being with him (I Chron. 11: 20). (This implies that God ceased to be with him in the time of Jephtah as he had been in the past.) **Pinchas as a priest had the authority to annul an oath.*

The Five Books of Miriam, by Ellen Frankel, Page 238

Our Mothers offer: Perhaps we might revive this custom in our own day, to lament those of our daughters who die young, never knowing a women's full joy.

Rabbi Yosef Wosk suggests: The proper season for observing these, "Fours days of Jephtah's daughter" ... would be early summer. For we can hear in the story recounted in Judges precise verbal echoes of Miriam's similar victory celebration centuries earlier at the Sea of Reeds. Both women are described as going out to dance with "drums and cymbals." Since Miriam, and by analogy, *She'ilah*, sang their songs on their twenty-first of Nisan, we should then add two months to cover the period when *She'ilah* prepared for her death, bringing us to the twenty first of *Sivan* as the period of her tragic sacrifice...To commemorate this event, women might choose to study and observe new rituals, to visit and bring comfort to modern-day victims of violence or to take some time for retreat or meditation. In this way we might "act in some small measure in partnership with the Creator *letakain et haolam* – to repair a wounded world.

Questions to Consider

1. How does Parshat Hukat serve as a basis for the diplomatic negotiations that took place between Jephthah and the nations of Ammon and Moab? Was there any basis for their claim to the lands of Gilead? On what basis does Jephthah refute their claims?
2. What do you think Jephthah had in mind when he made the promise to make an offering of “whatever came out the door of my house” when he returned victoriously from battle? Should a person be bound by an oath even if it is unreasonable? How can we reconcile our attitudes towards oaths with the verse in Numbers, “Everything that crosses his lips he shall do?” Why was God willing to forgive Jacob’s and Saul’s pledges (in the Midrash) but not Jephthah’s oath?
3. What are we to make of Jephthah’s flawed leadership? Why does the Bible even bother recounting his story considering the dark and tragic conclusion it reaches? What other connections might there be between this Haftarah and the death of Miriam which also appears in this week’s Torah portion? Do these women have anything in common?
4. The Sages blamed the death of *She’ilah* not only on Jephthah but also on Pinchas, the high priest. In what ways do the personal agendas and egos of leaders get in the way of their leadership? How could this conflict be reconciled and solved? Do you think *She’ilah* was responsible for being so passive in this situation?
5. Was *She’ilah* a victim of domestic violence, as Yosef Wosk suggests? If so how do we explain the fact that Jephthah’s daughter seems to go along with her father’s demands so readily? Compare *She’ilah* with Isaac in the Akeda. In what ways is her response a common pattern of domestic violence?
6. We often think that domestic violence is not a Jewish problem – sadly it far too common in the Jewish community today. How can we, as a community, address this problem both at home and in the larger community? Given the Midrash about Pinchas, in what ways is the Jewish community responsible for domestic violence within its own ranks? In what ways does our community suffer when we pretend that such problems do not exist or are not specifically Jewish problems?

Post Script: She’ilah, a Forgotten Tradition

The name She’ilah is not some modern invention but a very old reference from the first century that has been revived by modern feminists. I started looking around for the original reference to this name and discovered that it can be found in Louis Ginsberg’s great work, *The Legends of the Jews*. Apparently the original reference to She’ila comes from an obscure work called Pseudo-Philo. Here is a reference to the work I found on-line:

This book, dating from the late first century C.E. (after the destruction of the second temple, 70 C.E.) is attributed to the Jewish writer Philo. However, most scholars agree that it was not written by Philo, and it is hence sometimes called 'Pseuophilo'. Consisting of a retelling of the Hebrew Bible from Genesis to the end of 1 Samuel, *Biblical Antiquities* embellishes and often departs from the narrative as we know it today in small and large details. A little early to be called Midrash, *Biblical Antiquities* is one of the 'pseudepigrapha', writings on traditional Biblical subjects which were never canonized.

Philo, by the way, was a Jewish Philosopher in the first century who lived in North Africa – in Alexandria – and wrote entirely in Greek. Pseudo-Philo, though not one of his works, was originally written in Hebrew, later translated into Greek and only survived in Latin. There is an English translation of the work on line by M.R. James completed in 1917. There have also been a number of contemporary scholarly writings about this work including Cynthia Baker who wrote: "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).’ Here is the relevant chapter from the work:

1. XL. And Jephthah came and fought against the children of Ammon, and the Lord delivered them into his hand, and he smote threescore of their cities. And Jephthah returned in peace. And the women came out to meet him with dances. And he had an only begotten daughter; the same came out first in the dances to meet her father. And when Jephthah saw her he fainted and said: Rightly is thy name called Sheila, that thou shouldst be offered for a sacrifice. And now who will put my heart in the balance and weigh my soul? and I will stand

and see whether one will outweigh the other, the rejoicing that is come or the affliction which cometh upon me? For in that I have opened my mouth unto my Lord in the song of my vows, I cannot call it back again.

2. And Sheila his daughter said unto him: And who is it that can be sorrowful in their death when they see the people delivered? Rememberest thou not that which was in the days of our fathers, when the father set his son for a burnt offering and he gainsaid him not, but consented unto him rejoicing? And he that was offered was ready, and he that offered was glad.
3. Now therefore annul not anything of that thou has vowed, but grant unto me one prayer. I ask of thee before I die a small request: I beseech thee that before I give up my soul, I may go into the mountains and wander (or abide) among the hills and walk about among the rocks, I and the virgins that are my fellows, and pour out my tears there and tell the affliction of my youth; and the trees of the field shall bewail me and the beasts of the field shall lament for me; for I am not sorrowful for that I die, neither doth it grieve me that I give up my soul: but whereas my father was overtaken in his vow, [and] if I offer not myself willingly for a sacrifice, I fear lest my death be not acceptable, and that I shall lose my life to no purpose. These things will I tell unto the mountains, and after that I will return. And her father said: Go.
4. And Sheila the daughter of Jephthan went forth, she and the virgins that were her fellows, and came and told it to the wise men of the people. And no man could answer her words. And after that she went into the mount Stelac, and by night the Lord thought upon her, and said: Lo, now have I shut up the tongue of the wise among my people before this generation, that they could not answer the word of the daughter of Jephthan, that my word might be fulfilled, and my counsel not destroyed which I had devised: and I have seen that she is more wise than her father, and a maiden of understanding more than all the wise which are here. And now let her life be given her at her request, and her death shall be precious in my sight at all times.
5. And when the daughter of Jephthan came unto the mount Stelac, she began to lament. And this is her lamentation wherewith she mourned and bewailed herself before she departed, and she said: Hearken, O mountains, to my lamentation, and look, O hills, upon the tears of mine eyes, and be witness, O rocks, in the bewailing of my soul. Behold how I am accused, but my soul shall not be taken away in vain. Let my words go forth into the heavens, and let my tears be written before the face of the firmament, that the father overcome not (or fight not against) his daughter whom he hath vowed to offer up, that her ruler may hear that his only begotten daughter is promised for a sacrifice.
6. Yet I have not been satisfied with my bed of marriage, neither filled with the garlands of my wedding. For I have not been arrayed with brightness, sitting in my maidenhood; I have not used my precious ointment, neither hath my soul enjoyed the oil of anointing which was prepared for me. O my mother, to no purpose hast thou borne thine only begotten, and begotten her upon the earth, for hell is become my marriage chamber. Let all the mingling of oil which thou hast prepared for me be poured out, and the white robe which my mother wove for me, let the moth eat it, and the crown of flowers which my nurse plaited for me aforetime, let it wither, and the coverlet which she wove of violet and purple for my virginity, let the worm spoil it; and when the virgins, my fellows, tell of me, let them bewail me with groaning for many days.
7. Bow down your branches, O ye trees, and lament my youth. Come, ye beasts of the forest, and trample upon my virginity. For my years are cut off, and the days of my life are waxen old in darkness.
8. And when she had so said, Seila returned unto her father, and he did all that he had vowed, and offered burnt offerings. Then all the maidens of Israel gathered together and buried the daughter of Jephthan and bewailed her. And the children of Israel made a great lamentation and appointed in that month, on the 14th day of the month, that they should come together every year and lament for the daughter of Jephthan four days. And they called the name of her sepulchre according to her own name Seila.
9. And Jephthan judged the children of Israel ten years, and died, and was buried with his fathers

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and a desire to grow a Jewish soul.”*