Bat Yiftach - Jephthah's Daughter: Victim, Martyr, Scholar Student Rabbi Yael Tischler

Judges 11:30-40

(30) And Jephthah made the following vow to YHVH: "If you deliver the Ammonites into my hands, (31) then whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me on my safe return from the Ammonites shall be YHVH's and shall be offered by me as a burnt offering." (32) Jephthah crossed over to the Ammonites and attacked them, and YHVH delivered them into his hands. (33) He utterly routed them-from Aroer as far as Minnith, twenty towns—all the way to Abel-cheramim. So the Ammonites submitted to the Israelites. (34) When Jephthah arrived at his home in Mizpah, there was his daughter coming out to meet him, with timbrel and dance! She was an only child; he had no other son or daughter. (35) On seeing her, he rent his clothes and said, "Alas, daughter! You have brought me low; you have become my troubler! For I have uttered a vow to YHVH and I cannot retract." (36) "Father," she said, "you have uttered a vow to YHVH; do to me as you have vowed, seeing that YHVH has vindicated you against your enemies, the Ammonites." (37) She further said to her father, "Let this be done for me: let me be for two months, and I will go with my companions and lament upon the hills and there **bewail my maidenhood**." (38) "Go," he replied. He let her go for two months, and she and her companions went and bewailed her maidenhood upon the hills. (39) After two months' time, she returned to her father, and he did to her as he had vowed. She had never known a man. So it became a custom in Israel (40) for the maidens of Israel to go every year, for four days in the year, and chant dirges for the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite.

(ל) וַיִּדַּר יִפְהָח גָדָר לַיהָוָה וַיֹּאמָר (ל) אָם־נַתוֹן הַתֵּן אֶת־בָּנֵי עַמָּוֹן בִּיָדֵי: (לא) וְהַיָה הַיּוֹצֵׂא אֵשֶׁר יֵצֵׂא מִדַּלְתֵי בֵיתִי ּלְקָרַאתִי בִּשוּבִי בִשָּׁלְוֹם מִבְּנֵי עַמָּוֹן וִהַיָה לִיהוָה וְהַצַלִיתָהוּ עוֹלָה: (פ) (לב) וַיַּצַלִר יִפְּתֵח אֶל־בְּנֵי עַמְוֹן לְהָלֵחֵם בָּם וַיִתְנֵם יִהַוָה בִּיַדִוֹ: (לג) וַיַבָּם מֵעַרוֹעָר וְעַד-בּוֹאָדָ מִנִּית עֵשָׂרִים עִיר וִעַד אָבָל כִּרָמִים מַכָּה גִּדוֹלֵה מָאָד וַיְבָּנְעוּ בָּנֵי עַמוֹן מִפָּנֵי בָּנֵי יִשְׁרָאֵל: (פ) (לד) וַיָּבֹא יִפְתָח הַמָּצְפָּה` אַל־בִּיתוֹ וְהַנָּה בַתּוֹ יֹצֵאת לקָרָאתוֹ בָתָפִים וּבַמָחֹלָוֹת וְרֵק הֵיא יִחִידָה אָיוְ־לָוֹ מַמֵּנּוּ בֵּן אוֹ־בַת: (לה) וַיְהִי כִּרְאוֹתוֹ אוֹתָה וַיִּקָרָע אֵת־בָּגָדָיו וַיּאמֵר אָהָה בִּתִי הַכָרִעַ הכָרַעָּהְנִי וָאָהָ הַיֵית בָּעְכָרֵי וָאַנִכִי פַּצִיתִי־פִּיֹ אֶל־יְהוָה וְלָא אוּכַל לְשָׁוּב: (לו) וַהָּאמֶר אֵלַיו אַבִי פַּצִיתַה אֶת־פִּידָ אַל־יִהוֶה עַשֵׂה לִי כַּאַשִׁר יָצָא מִפֵּידָ אַחֵרִי אֲשֶׁר עַשָּׂה לְדָ' יְהָוָה נְקַמֶוֹת מֵאֹיְבֵידָ מִבְּנִי עַמִון: (לז) וַתֹּאמֵר אָל־אָבִיהַ יֵעָשָׂה לִי הַדְּבֵר הַזָּה הַרְפֵּה מִמֵּנִי שָׁנֵיָם חָדָשִׁים ואַלכָה ויַרַדְתִּי עַל־הָהָרִים ואָבִבָּה על־בּתוּלי אנכי ורעיתי [וָרעוֹתִי:] (לח) וּיִאמֶר לֵכִי וַיִּשְׁלַח אוֹתָה שְׁנֵי חֶדָשִׁים וַ וַתַּלֵך היא וַרִעוֹמֵיה וַתִּבְדָ עַל־בָּתוּלֵיה עַל־הֶהֶרִים: (לט) וַיְהֵי מִקֵּץ ו שְׁנֵיִם חַדַשִּׁים וַתַּשָּׁב אֵל־אַבִיהַ וַיָּצַשׂ לָה אָת־נַדְרָוֹ אֵשֵׁר נַדָר וָהיא לא־יַדְעָה איש וַהְהִי־חָק בְּיִשְׁרָאֵל: (מ) מִיָמִים ו יָמִימָה **הַלַכְנַה בְּנִוֹת יִשִׂרָאֶל לְתַנֵּוֹת** לְבַת־יִפְהַח הַגּלְעַדִי אַרְבֵּעַת יַמִים בַּשָׁנָה: (ס)

Book of Biblical Antiquities - XL: 2-7 (1-2nd Cent. CE)

And She'ilah his daughter said to him, "Who is it that can be sorrowful in their death when they see the people delivered? Do you not remember that which was in the days of our ancestors, when the father set his son for a burnt offering and he did not gainsay him, but consented to him, rejoicing? And he that was offered was ready, and he that offered was glad. Now therefore do not annul anything of what you have vowed, but grant me one prayer. I ask of you before I die a small request: I beseech you that before I give up my soul, I may go into the mountains and wander 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 does it grieve me that I give up my soul" ...

"Hearken, O mountains, to my lamentation, and look, O hills, upon the tears of my 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 [...] 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, let it wither, and the coverlet which she wove of violet and purple for my virginity, let the worm spoil it [...] 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."

Midrash Tanchuma Bechukotai 5 (c. 5th century CE)

At that time [when Jephthah made his vow], the Holy Blessed One was angry with him. The Holy Blessed One, said, "If there had come out from his house a dog, a pig, or a camel, he would have offered it to Me." Hence YVHH summoned his daughter to him. And why so much? So that all those that vow will learn the laws of vows and abnegations. ...

But was not Phinehas there? And still he said, "and I cannot retract?" However, Phinehas had said, "I am a high priest and the son of a high priest. Shall I humble myself and go to an ignoramus (*am ha'aretz*)?" [And] Jephthah

בְּאוֹתָה שֶׁעָה הָיָה עֶלָיו כַּעַס מָן הַקָּדוֹשׁ
בָרוּך הוּא. אָמַר, אִלּוּ יָצָא מִבֵּיתוֹ כֶּלֶב
אוֹ חַזִיר אוֹ גָּמָל, הָיָה מַקְרִיב אוֹתוֹ
לְפָנַי. לְכָך זִמֵן לוֹ בִּתּוֹ. כָּל כָּך לָמָה.
כְּדֵי שֶׁיָּלְמְדוּ כָּל הַנּוֹדְרִים, הִלְכוֹת
נְדָרִים וְקוֹנָמוֹת, שֶׁלֹּא לְנְהֹג טָעוּת
בַּנְדָרִים. וְהַנֵּה בִּתּוֹ יוֹצֵאת לְקָרָאתוֹ,
וַיְהִי כִּרְאוֹתוֹ אוֹתָהּ וְיִקְרַע אֶת בְּגָדַיו
וַיֹּאמֶר אֲדָהּ בִתִּי וְגוֹ', וְאָנֹכִי פָּצִיתִי פִי
אֶל ה' וְלֹא אוּכַל לְשׁוּב (שם פסוק
לד-לה). וַהֲלֹא פּנְחָס הָיָה שֶׁם, וְהוּא
אוֹמֵר לא אוּכַל לְשׁוּב. אֶלָּא פּנְחָס
אָמַר, אַנִי כּהֵן גָּדוֹל בֶּן כּהֵן גָּדוֹל וָאֵיך
אֵלֵך אֵצֶל עַם הָאָרֶץ. יִפְתָּח אָמַר, אֲנִי

said, "I am head of the tribes of Israel and head of the magistrates. Shall I humble myself and go to a commoner?" Between the two of them that poor woman perished from the world; so the two of them were liable for her blood. In the case of Phinehas, the holy spirit left him. In the case of Jephthah, his bones were scattered, as stated (in Jud. 12:7), "and he was buried in the cities of Gilead."

When he sought to sacrifice her, she cried in front of him. His daughter said to him, "My father, I came out to greet you in joy, and [now] you slaughter me? Is it perhaps that the Holy Blessed One wrote in the Torah that Israel offer the lives of people in front of the Holy Blessed One? And is it not written (in Lev. 1:2), 'When one of you presents an offering to YHVH from the beasts.' 'From the beasts' and not from people?" He said to her, "My daughter, I made a vow... Is it possible that anyone who makes a vow does not have to fulfil his vow?" She said to him, "Behold, when our father Jacob made a vow (in Gen. 28:22), 'and of all that You give me, I will surely set aside a tithe for You'; when the Holy Blessed One, gave him twelve sons, did he ever offer up one of them as a sacrifice? Moreover, does not Hannah [do likewise], when she makes a vow and says (in I Sam. 1:11), 'And she made a vow and said, "YHVH of hosts, if You will surely see... [then I will give him to YHVH all the days of his life]."" Did she ever offer up her son as a sacrifice to the Holy One Blessed One?" All these things she said to him, but he did not heed her.

When she saw that he did not heed her, she said to him, "Let me go to a court of law. Perhaps one of them will find a loophole for your words." Thus it is stated (in Jud. 11:37), "leave me alone for two months, so that I may go and come down to the mountains." R. Zechariah said, "Is there anyone who comes down to the mountains? Does not one go up to the mountains? So what is the meaning of

ראש שופטי ישראל ראש הַקּצִינִים, אַשִׁפּיל עַצָמִי וְאֵלֵך אָצֵל הָדִיוֹט. מְבֵּין תַרְוֵיהוֹן אַבְדַת הַהֵיא עֵלוּבְתַא מַן עַלְמַא. וּשְׁנֵיהֶם נְתִחַיָּבוּ בְּדַמֵיהָ. פִּנְחֵס, נְסָתַּלְקָה מִמֵּנוּ רוּחַ הַקְדֵשׁ, יִפָּתָח, נִתִפַּזְרוּ עַצִמוֹתַיו, שֵׁכֵּן כִּתִיב: וַיָּקֵבָר בּעַרֵי גִּלְעַד (שם יב, ז). כֵּיוַן שֵׁבְקֵשׁ לְקַרְבַהּ, הַיִתַה בּוֹכַה לְפַנַיו. אַמְרָה לוֹ בּתּוֹ, אַבִי, יַצַאתי לקָרַאתָדְ בְּשׂמָחָה וְאַתָּה שׁוֹחֵט אוֹתִי. שֶׁמָא כָּתַב הַקָּדוֹש בַּרוּדָ הוּא בַּתּוֹרַה שֵׁיָהוּ יִשָּׂרַאָל מַקָּרִיבִין לפְנֵי הַקָּדוֹשׁ בַּרוּךָ הוּא נַפִּשׁוֹת אַדָם. אֵין כָּתִיב בַּתּוֹרָה, אַדָם כִּי יַקָרִיב מִכֶּם קָרְבָּן לַה' מָן הַבְּהֵמָה (ויקרא א, ב), מָן הַבָּהֵמָה וִלֹא מָן בָּנֵי אַדָם. אַמַר לַה: בִּתִּי, נַדַרְתִּי, וְהָיָה הַיּוֹצֵא אֲשֶׁר יֵצֵא וְהַעַלִיתִיהוּ עוֹלַה. שֶׁמָא כָּל הַנּוֹדֵר יָכֹל הוּא שֶׁלֹא לְשַׁלֵּם נִדְרוֹ. אַמְרָה לֵיה, וַהָרִי יַאַקֹב אַבִינוּ שַנדר ואמר, כּל אַשֵׁר תּתן לי עשר וָגוֹ' (בראשית כח, כב), וְנָתַן לוֹ הַקַּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּך הוּא שָׁנֵים עַשָׂר בָּנִים, שַׁמֵא הקָריב לְהַקֵּדוֹשׁ בַּרוּךָ הוּא אָחַד מֶהֶם. וִלֹא עוֹד אֶלַּא חַנַּה, שֵׁאַמְרָה, וַתִּדֹר נֵדֵר וַתֹּאמַר, ה' צָּבָאוֹת אָם רָאֹה תּרָאָה וָגוֹ' (ש״א א, יא), שֵׁמַא הָקָרִיבָה אֶת כִּנַה לִפְנֵי הַקֵּדוֹשׁ בַּרוּדְ הוּא. כַּל הַדְּבָרִים הַאֵלֶה אַמְרָה לוֹ: וָלֹא שַׁמַע לַה. כֵּיוָן שֵׁרַאַתָה שֵׁלֹא שָׁמַע לַה, אָמָרָה לוֹ: הַנִּיחֵנִי וְאֵרֵד אֵצֶל בֵּית דִּין, שַׁמַא יִמְצָאוּ פַּתַח לְנִדְרְדָ. שֵׁנָאֵמַר: הַרְפֶּה מִמֵּנִּי שָׁנַיִם חָדַשִׁים וָאֵלְכָה וְיָרַדְתִּי עַל הֶהָרִים וְגוֹ' (שופטים יא, לז). אַמַר רַבִּי זְכַרְיָה, וְכִי יֵשׁ אַדַם יוֹרָד עַל הֶהַרִים, וְהָלֹא בְּנֵי אָדַם עוֹלִים לֶהָרִים. מַהוּ וְיַרַדְתִּי עַל הֶהָרִים. אֶלוּ סַנְהֵדְרִין, כְּמַה שֶׁנְאֵמַר: שָׁמָעוּ הַרִים אֶת רִיב ה' (מיכה ו, ב). הַלְכָה אֶצְלַם ולא מַצאוּ פַּתַח לִיִפָּתָח לְהַתִּיר לוֹ אֵת נִדְרוֹ, בַּצַוֹן אוֹתָן שֵׁשָׁחֵט מִשֵּׁבֵט אָפְרַיִם. וְעַלַיו הוּא אוֹמֵר, גֶּבֶר רַשׁ ועשק דַּלִים מַטַר סוֹחֵף ואֵין לַחֵם (משלי כח, ג). גָּבֶר רַשׁ וְעַשֵׁק דַּלִים, זֶה יִפְתָּח, שֶׁהָיָה רָשׁ בַּתּוֹרָה כִּגְרוּפוֹ שֶׁל שִׁקְמָה, שֶׁהָיָה עֹשֵׁק אֶת הַדַּלִּים, שַׁנָאַמַר: וַיֹּאמָרוּ לוֹ אָמֹר נַא שׁבּלֵת

'and come down to the mountains?' These represent the Sanhedrin, as in the usage (of Micah 6:2), 'Hear, O mountains, the lawsuit of	וַיֹּאמֶר סִבּּלֶת וְלֹא יָכִין לְדַבֵּר כֵּן (שופטים יב, ו), וְהָיָה שׁוֹחֲטָן. לְפִיכָדָ, מֶטָר סוֹחֵף וְאֵין לֶחֶם, שֶׁהָיָה לוֹ מִי
YHVH." She went to them, but they did not	שֶׁיַּתִּיר אֶת נִדְרוֹ, אֶלָּא וְאֵין לֶחֶם,
find a loophole for undoing his vow, because	שֶׁהֶעֲלִים הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּך הוּא מֵהֶם אֶת
of the sin of those [42,000 people!] that he	הַהַלָכָה, שֶׁלֹּא יִמְצְאוּ פִּתְחוֹ לְהַתִּיר לוֹ
slaughtered from the tribe of Ephraim [who	אֶת נִדְרוֹ. עָלָה וּשְׁחָטָה. וְרוּחַ הַקֹּדֶשׁ
didn't want to participate in the war against	צׂוַחַת, נְפָשׁוֹת הָיִיתִי רוֹצָה שֶׁתַּקְרִיב
the Ammonites] When they did not find [a	ְלְפָנַי אֲשֶׁר לֹא צִוּיתִי וְלֹא דִּבַּרְתִּי וְלֹא
loophole] for undoing his vow, he went up and	עֶלְתָה עַל לְבִּי
slaughtered her before the Holy Blessed One.	
Then the holy spirit proclaimed, "Did I desire	
you to sacrifice lives to Me, (according to Jer.	
19:5), 'which I never commanded, never spoke	
for, and which never entered My mind."	

Rivkah Lubitch, "Tanot, Jephthah's Daughter" in *Dirshuni*, ed. Tamar Biala (2022)