

Elie Wiesel In the Bible: Jephthah and His Daughter

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Elie Wiesel:

(applause) So, let us study. The story I'm about to tell you is frightening. It is so frightening that not only do I feel that it ought to have no place in scripture, I wish it could be erased from our collective memory. Its brutality is almost unsurpassed. Imagine the *Akedah*, the Binding of Isaac, with a different -- a cruel ending, and you will have [00:01:00] the story of *Yiftach*, or Jephthah, and his daughter. A story fraught with fear, and inescapable despair.

Yiftach, a judge of the people of Israel -- what kind of a judge is a man who agrees to kill? To kill his only daughter? What kind of leader is a man whose life is an outcry to his people, not to follow his example? What moral message did he leave to future generations? Yiftach. A story of cruelty and remorse, a name that evokes both fear and repulsion. A tale of solitude. A tale of malediction. Yiftach, a chapter we wish to relegate to darkness [00:02:00] and bury in the past.

It has been called an accident in Jewish history. An accident? Well, a misunderstanding, perhaps, in the sense that all

tragedies contain some part of misunderstanding. Let us read the text. I quote, "And Yiftach from Gilead was a brave, courageous warrior," unquote. That is how the Book of Judges marks his appearance on the stage. He was the man of the hour. The man the children of Israel needed. The chapters preceding this quotation describe their plight. They suffered for many reasons, they suffered on every level. External threats were matched [00:03:00] by internal decline. More than one enemy assaulted their borders. At home, more than one leader abused his position to obtain personal benefits. Their fight seemed devoid of nobility, just as their goals seemed lacking in majesty.

They all take on the character of petty quarrels, rather than spiritual contests. Deceit, falsehood, corruption, were the currency of those who had the power, and those who craved it. You remember -- Abimelech killed his 70 brothers, for no reason. Then, he killed the thousand men and women in the town of Shechem. Then, he conquered the fortress of Thebez and made preparations to set it on fire, [00:04:00] when a woman threw a sword at him. Mortally wounded, he summoned his arms-bearer and said, "Take your sword and kill me, for I do not want people to say that I was slain by a woman."

The next ruler was his cousin Tola, son of Puah, who in turn was succeeded by Yair. Both of them must have been insignificant, for scripture says nothing about them. All we learn about Yair is that he had 30 sons and rode on 30 donkeys. And I quote again, "And the children of Israel continued to do evil in the eyes of God. And they worshipped the idols of Baal and Astarte, and the gods of Ammon, and the gods of *Pelishtim*, and they had abandoned [00:05:00] God instead of serving Him. In His anger, God handed them over to the *Pelishtim* and the *Ammonim*, who oppressed and tormented them for 18 years. And the children of Israel shouted to God, 'We have sinned in abandoning You for the idols.'" Unquote.

Whoever reads these chapters, whoever reads these stories, must realize that that period must have been one of the lowest in Jewish history. No doubt, there were sound reasons. Like that of individuals, the mood of nations goes up and down. When they climb too high, the fall is inevitable. Moses and Joshua made history. Their successors couldn't but suffer in comparison. The times, too, were different, for everybody. Under Moses, the Jewish people had found its national identity. [00:06:00] Under Joshua, it had conquered its homeland. It would seem it then felt totally spent, exhausted.

The Book of Ruth opens with the line, *Vay'hi bimei sh'fot hashoftim*, it came to pass that in the days when the Judges were judging. Asks the Midrash, why the repetition? *Sh'fot* and *shoftim*. And the answer is, to show us their degradation. Woe to a generation, says the Midrash. Woe to a generation that is judging its Judges. Woe to a generation whose Judges ought to be judged.

History itself was tired. And so, an age of mediocrity was ushered in. Petty-minded leaders took [00:07:00] charge of the nation's affairs, its politics, economy, and warfare with total disregard for any possible metaphysical implications. Idols were constantly being built, and destroyed. Territories were constantly being evacuated or taken back. There were countless minor border incidents with hostile neighbors. Intrigues. Scenes of envy and jealousy.

One gets an impression of collective delinquency, and decay. Could this be the people chosen by God to formulate His law, and bring it to other nations? Was it all a natural consequence of the terrible and terrifying bloodshed that had occurred earlier, under Joshua, during the conquest of the land? Was it a punishment for so many injustices, [00:08:00] perhaps necessary,

perhaps inevitable, but still, painful injustices, done to its inhabitants? Before being conquered by the people of Israel?

Whatever the reasons, the outcome was depressing. Gone was the greatness that had marked the extraordinary moment in history when the children of Israel had their glorious encounter with God. Gone were the days when they had committed themselves to remember Him, and had transformed their memory into a covenant. Everything about them had become cheap. Their ambitions, their desires, their dreams seemed to be to cheat one another, and even to cheat God, who at times lost patience. When that happened, they repented. Until the next time.

And so came Yiftach onstage. Now, in those days, in those days, [00:09:00] the Judges ruling the Jewish people were of different nature. Some were good, others less good. Deborah, the only woman to reach that position, was better than most, not only as Judge, but also as military commander, strategist, and even as a poet. Her poetry occupies the page of glory in Biblical literature. In general, Judges were chosen not for their ethical virtues, but for their political and military skills, like Gideon, or Samson, for instance. Few of them were really charismatic figures. They were there because they were needed. They were there only when they were needed. Unlike kings,

priests, and prophets, they operated only in the present. They were not God's messengers to His people, [00:10:00] nor were they the people's messengers to God. They were the people's spokesmen to other people.

So what is Yiftach's place among them? Was he better than most? More successful? Less cunning, perhaps? The Talmud pays him a compliment: "*Yiftach b'doro ki Shmuel b'doro*," Yiftach, to his generation, was like Samuel to his. Strange compliment. Was it intended to downgrade Yiftach's contemporaries? What would Yiftach have been to Samuel's generation?

We shall naturally try to explore these puzzling questions and some others, as well. We always do. But first, a few preliminary remarks. One. A Talmudic law advises any speaker to always begin *b'shvach ha-achsaniah*, with praise for his host. So, let me follow this advice and praise the Y. (laughter) It is time. Twenty years having been here, the time has come to praise the place where I have been 20 years. (laughter)

The Y has become a kind of *cheder* for me, the best. It forces me to study. There is no other place like it in this country. The respect for learning and music one finds here is matched only by the thirst for knowledge one brings when one comes here.

I have taught at many schools, and lectured in many cities, and I must say that the Y is special. But it is special mainly because of the audience. [00:12:00]

Your standards are high, your expectations even higher. You span across ages and disciplines, religions and nationalities, affinities and priorities. What you all -- what we all have in common is an inner conviction that the past offers vital clues to the future. And so we are here to learn. And to turn our learning into living links. When we see words become walls, we know that something is wrong with those who use them, for they can and must be used to abolish walls.

In the 20 years that I have been here, many things happened. First, I got married. (laughter) I had a son -- we had a son. Furthermore, I discovered baseball. [00:13:00] (laughter) (applause) I cannot resist telling you a story, so -- (laughter) -- it is, God knows, the only baseball story I know. (laughter) It so happens that -- I don't know, two or three days after a certain announcement came to surprise us, I got a telephone call from the commissioner of baseball, and, you know -- (laughter) -- and I thought that he meant my son -- (laughter) -- and he simply said, you know, we want to give you a very great honor, which is -- (laughter)

For a moment, [00:14:00] I thought, maybe there is a second other prize there coming. (laughter) He said I should throw the first ball. (laughter) (applause) Since I didn't know anything about it, I said, "What does that mean?" (laughter) And there was strange silence on the other side. (laughter) And he said, "Don't worry, we'll show you, it's not difficult." I said -- (laughter) And I was only wondering, how can I get out of this, you know, without insulting him? (laughter) I said, "When is it?" He said, "Don't you know, it's for the opening of the World Series." (laughter) Oh. Well. (laughter)

I still didn't know when it was, so I said -- (laughter)  
[00:15:00] (applause) So I asked him, and he said, it's Saturday. So I -- I said, thank God, I have a good excuse. (laughter) I said, "Sir, I am terribly sorry, it's Shabbat, I cannot do it on Shabbat." (laughter) He said, "Why can't you do it on Shabbat?" Well, I wasn't going to give a new lecture -- I was going to give a lecture here, but (laughter) I explained, it's impossible. Very disappointed, he called back an hour later. He said, "How about the second?" (laughter)

I said, "The second is Sukkot." (laughter) Very disappointed, but my son was even more disappointed. (laughter) Finally, he



called back a third time. He said, "I checked with Orthodox rabbis." (laughter) [00:16:00] (applause) "That after sundown, you can throw the first ball." (laughter) "Not only that, we also checked about how far it is. We will even wait. You will come in time," and so forth. At that time, I had no more choice. (laughter) And that's how my career in baseball began. (laughter) (applause)

I'm also going to talk to you, but maybe later, about a second event -- to me, more important -- my visit -- our visit to Russia, on Simchat Torah, because that has to do with learning, and in learning, I'm a little bit more familiar than in baseball. (laughter) We are here to learn. We are here to learn even before we learn, and it is gratifying to know that [00:17:00] hundreds of students of all ages have already studied the story of Yiftach, or Jephthah, and his daughter this afternoon, with Rabbi Lavey Darby. He has done it also for many years, and it is a great, great pleasure to come after him, and simply continue what he had begun.

Has he, perhaps, answered the questions I haven't asked yet? Of course, not all questions will be answered. Not all questions can be answered. But then, our task is to question the answers. It is said of Kierkegaard that he saw a poster in a window:

"Laundry." So he brought his shirts, and the owner smiled, and he said, "Mr. Kierkegaard, we do not deal with laundry. We deal with posters." (laughter) [00:18:00]

Well, we deal with questions. Often, I wonder what you will remember best: the questions or the answers. Both are here in the words left to us by our teachers and theirs. A question that is not in the text belongs to another text, and our work is to bring them together. In so doing, we are called upon to abolish distances, ignore frontiers, penetrate secrets, and of course, open doors. (laughter) (pause)

Let us read the Talmud. [00:19:00] Said Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachmani in the name of Rabbi Yonatan: "Three men made improper vows. Only two were answered generously." The first was Eliezer, Abraham's servant. When he was sent by his master to find a girl for Isaac, Eliezer said, "The girl who will offer water, not to me alone, but also to my camels, she will become Isaac's wife." Said the Talmud, "How could he gamble with Isaac's life like that?" (laughter) "And what if he had met a young woman who was charitable, but physically (laughs) not so pretty? Or an invalid?" (laughter) Still, God sent him Rebecca.

The second was King Saul, who said "he who would defeat Goliath would be given lots of money, [00:20:00] and the king's daughter." "What?" wondered the Talmud. "How could a king be so frivolous and lighthearted about his own daughter, and what if the heroic warrior had been a bastard? Or someone unfit for marriage?" Still, God sent him David to defeat Goliath.

The third one was Jephthah -- Yiftach. His vow, too, was improper. But in his case, God refused to interfere. The tragic team of Yiftach and his daughter exists in other literary traditions as well. Ancient Greek legends tell us of a river named Lophis, in the land of Haliartus, a barren land. One of its governors came to Delphi and asked a priestess for advice. And her advice was, [00:21:00] "Go home and kill the first person you meet." He met his son Lophis, and hit him with his sword. Mortally wounded, Lophis attempted to escape, and wherever his blood touched the soil, a well opened in the earth and all the wells together formed a river. It was named after Lophis, the governor's unfortunate son.

A similar legend exists about the king of Crete, who after the destruction of Troy, killed his son or daughter -- depending on which sources you believe. Cicero said of Agamemnon, that he had pledged to the goddess Diana that he would sacrifice to her

the most beautiful creature to be born in his kingdom that year. Since no one was more beautiful than his daughter Iphigenia, he felt compelled to sacrifice her. [00:22:00] Yet, says Cicero, he could have refused to honor his vow rather than commit such a serious crime. Why didn't he? The honor of the king was more important to him than the love and the life of his daughter. Also, he was afraid of losing the war, and that would mean, according to Euripides, and I quote, "The enemy army will close in a circle of blood. There will be heads forced back, throats cut, streets stripped, every building gutted and clashed." Close quotes.

Now, here, too, like a Greek tragedy, Yiftach's story moves inexorably towards death. The moment he said the words, it was done. Sealed. Though the tale has a happy end of sorts -- the enemy was beaten and the Jews were happy. But the victory left a bitter aftertaste, a taste of mourning. [00:23:00] Because of Yiftach.

Now, who was Yiftach? He was a Judge in Israel. He fought for Israel. He saved Israel. And therefore, his name normally, logically, ought to evoke relief and gratitude. Yet, it resonates in the darkest recesses of our recorded history, like a disturbing warning. A Judge is supposed to be compassionate,

or at least compassionate also. A Judge is supposed to hold high the value, the sanctity, of human life. How could such a man, such a Judge, commit murder?

When we pray, we speak to God, we appeal to Him to be not only our judge but also our father. Yiftach was both father and judge, and a father normally loves his children. And a judge sometimes [00:24:00] forgives his children. Yiftach, after all, was supposed to obey the law. And the law is, do not kill. How could a father slay his daughter? And what about the people around them? The leaders? The elders? Why didn't they intervene? Why didn't they step into the picture and prevent the murder of an innocent girl?

And of course, one more question, as always, painful. And God in all that? Why didn't He make His voice heard? True, He didn't ask for the girl's death, unlike in the case of Isaac. But still, the father was going to sacrifice her for God's sake. Why didn't God stop him? Oh yes, a strange, disquieting story it is. It involves [00:25:00] jurisprudence and theology, history and strategy, and geography, and sin and punishment. Though the event occurred approximately 1100 years before the Common Era, it still weighs on us. It conjures anguish. Not faith.

And we shall analyze it and we shall see, how this exaggeration of faith could bring tragedy. But first, let us see the characters in the cast, and we shall analyze the first, the principal one. And the principal character, of course, is Yiftach, after whom the story is named, and he will lead us through the drama from beginning to the end. He is there. Let us read, and I quote, "And the leaders of Gilead and the people, too, said to one another, 'Who is this man who could fight the children of Ammon? He shall be the head of all the inhabitants of Gilead,'" unquote. [00:26:00]

Now, who was that man? Yiftach. But who was Yiftach? Did they know him? Yes, they did. Otherwise, they would not have called upon him to become the national leader. And since they know him, we know him, too. In fact, there is much information in his personal file, both in the text and in the Midrashic commentaries. Some elements, I must say, are not too flattering. His father Gilead, we are told, had an affair with a woman of ill repute. They had a son, and the son was our hero, Yiftach.

Now, Gilead, who must have loved to be a womanizer, wasn't satisfied to have an affair with a woman of ill repute alone.

He also had a wife, and with whom he also had children.

[00:27:00] And from the text it is clear that all the children, including Yiftach, lived in their father's house. Later, as they grew up, the legitimate children turned against Yiftach, and chased him away, and they said, "You shall not inherit from our father, for you were born unto another woman."

And so, Yiftach fled to a land named Tob, and soon gathered around him a band of outlaws and mercenaries, and they were tough. The kind of people, you know, have sword, will travel. He must have married in the meantime, for all of a sudden, we hear that he has a daughter. But no sooner do we hear the news, than it is already too late. She has barely appeared onstage, and she's already sentenced to die. And who is responsible for her death? Her father. [00:28:00] Who carries out the terrible sentence? Her father. Some father.

Still, on the surface, Yiftach is a simple man. Not given to doubts, to hesitations. He does what he says, and what he says, he does. Unhappy at home, he runs away, and somehow manages to survive. The nation needs a fighter, he fights and wins. He made a mistake when he uttered a silly vow -- never mind, he will keep it. Even if it hurts. He is a man, after all, and isn't that what a man is supposed to do?

Yet, as we go on scrutinizing the text, we change our mind. Yiftach is much more complex than he appears. He seems to function on more than one level. He knows life. He has acquired much knowledge through suffering. His childhood must have been miserable. [00:29:00] We can imagine how his brothers treated him, how they humiliated the illegitimate son in their midst. Still, one question. Where was his mother? Had he ever seen her? Had she ever come to visit him? And what about Gilead, the father? Had he been a good father to Yiftach? We know the answer. Had Gilead been a good father, would he have allowed his children to mistreat Yiftach and shame him? Would he have sent him to live among strangers?

As for the community at large, we see that Yiftach was not well-liked by its leaders. In fact, he says so with brutal clarity. When they come to him to solicit his help, and leadership, he snaps back at them, "Why me? You hated me," he said. "You helped my brothers throw me [00:30:00] out of my father's house, and now, when you need me, you appear at my tent, just like that?" The argument is strong. The leaders of Gilead bowed their head. "We come to you," they say, "because, yes, we need you. Lead us into battle. Fight for us, and you will rule over all the inhabitants of Gilead. Fight for us."



Yiftach plays hard to get. He wants a clear agreement, a covenant, a contract, and he lays down specific rules. And he says, "If I go into battle and win, I want to remain your leader." And they agree. "Good," says Yiftach. "Let us announce the terms of our pact to the entire population, gathered at Mitzpah" -- Mitzpah was the place where always, the populations gathered for festivities or for political rallies.

[00:31:00] So they are gathered, he gave them his conditions, they accepted, everything was clear. At that point, Yiftach, the leader, the commanding officer, makes a move which strikes us as strange. The fighter turns diplomat. Instead of attacking the enemy -- and after all, he was hired to do that -- he dispatches emissaries to engage in peace negotiations. He argues that actually, there are no real differences between them. "Why do you want to attack my country?" he asked the Ammonite king. And the king answers, "When Israel left Egypt, it took my land from the Arnon River to the Yabok, to the Jordan. Give me back the territories, and we shall live in peace."

So Yiftach sends more emissaries to open another round of negotiations, [00:32:00] and he responds, "Israel has taken no

Ammonite land. Although it could have taken Moav, it chose to bypass it." And Yiftach's message was long and well-documented. It showed his excellent education and erudition. He knew geography, history, and political science. "If you had claims over Arnon," he says, "why did you wait 300 years? What made you remember your claim now?" He instructed his messengers to speak to the Ammonite king as follows.

"Please, sire, I did nothing against you, whereas you planned to do something bad to me, by forcing me to do battle. May God judge between the children of Israel and the children of Ammon." But the Ammonite king refused to heed Yiftach's words, and he wanted battle. And suddenly, [00:33:00] the image of Yiftach as outlaw recedes, and what we see now is rather a supreme politician. Better yet, an extraordinary statesman. A warrior who hates war. A fighter who prefers peace. How can one not feel sympathy for him at that stage? Here is a victim of society, a victim of his own family, who nevertheless agrees to save them from humiliation and death, at the hands of an enemy. How can one not admire him?

God himself likes him. The text says so, and I quote, "And God's spirit rested upon Yiftach, who left *Mitzpah Gilead*, his dwelling place, and crossed the River Yabok to do battle with

the Ammonite army." And he made a vow to God. [00:34:00] "If You deliver the children of Ammon into my hands, whoever will emerge from my house to greet me will be Yours, and I shall bring him as an offering to You."

Now, again, what does this passage tell us? It tells us, first of all, that Yiftach, the leader, the commander, was not certain of the outcome of the battle. He says, "if." The strong man had doubts. The commander was unsure of himself. The man of violence, who sought to avoid violence, questioning its usefulness, now turned not to his soldiers, but to God. He wanted Him on his side. But wait a minute. Why such uncertainty? Wasn't God's spirit resting on him? [00:35:00] Didn't he trust God? Clearly, this is not a simple case of prophecy and warfare.

Our hero is no less mysterious than his story. Talmudic sages describe Yiftach as an ignorant man, without spiritual substance or intellectual background. The Bible is more lenient towards him. Read his two diplomatic messages to the king of the Ammonites, as recorded in the text. And they are masterpieces. They combine knowledge of history, theology, and I even think they display an exquisite sense of humor. Not only does he offer the king a summary of events that occurred 300 years

earlier, when Moses led his people out of Egypt, Yiftach actually quotes the Bible, proving that Moses had occupied [00:36:00] territories that belonged to Shichon, king of the Amorites, and not those that were part of Ammon or Moav.

But what he cleverly omits from his quote is a line or two saying, in the Bible, that part of the Amorite territories had been conquered from Moav. And therefore, the enemy had an argument. And this entire debate about territories, of course, renders a strange, realistic sound these days. What belongs to whom? Since when? Who was there first? When does memory begin? Political or philosophical, or religious memory? All these points are handled by Yiftach masterfully, in his communiqués to the Ammonite king.

First, he teaches him history. Not only Jewish history, [00:37:00] but also Ammonite history, and Moabite history. He says, "We have been here 300 years. You, only 200." Second, he said, "You need territory? So do what we do. What did we do when we needed territory? We asked God to help us. Ask God. Maybe God will help you." He even mentions which god could help the Ammonites. And his name, he says, is Chemosh. "Ask your god Chemosh," he says. "Let him give you territory."

But, when you study the text carefully, you ask yourself, isn't the Ammonite god called Milcom, not Chemosh? Chemosh is the Moabite god. (laughter) In other words, "Admit it," says Yiftach. "This territory was never yours. It was Moav's. [00:38:00] Now, are you the heirs to Moav? In that case, let me teach you another chapter in history," he says. "Israel and Moav had their differences long ago. This is not the first time, you know, when we had differences. You remember?" he said. "Remember Balak, son of Zippor? What did he do?"

Balak, the prophet, did not fight. Balak, the king, had his prophet Bil'am making him to curse us. "You know what," says Yiftach, "do the same. Ask a prophet of yours to curse us. We can take care of that." (laughter) "In any event," he said, "propaganda doesn't frighten us. Curses don't frighten us. And you don't frighten us. We will not give you our territories, for they are ours." And the whole way, how he describes the argument, [00:39:00] with history, and he follows from event to event, sequentially, reminds us of the marvelous Sholem Aleichem story, the woman who came running to her neighbor demanding that she return the huge silver pot she had borrowed.

And I know you have all studied Sholem Aleichem, so you know the story. The neighbor says, "What are you talking about? First

of all, the pot is not of silver but of copper. Second of all, it's not really huge, it's rather small. And thirdly, I never borrowed it." (laughter)

Let us turn now to the second character in the cast, the daughter. His only daughter. The text places special emphasis on this fact, *yechida eilo mimenu ben o bat*. Yiftach has no other son and no other daughter. Like Isaac, [00:40:00] she was meant to become *olah*, a burnt offering. And we imagine her beautiful. Kind, outgoing, enchanting, innocent. The apple of her father's eye. He has no one else in his life. His father had abandoned him, his brothers had betrayed him and rejected him. His wife? No mention is made of her. All the attention from now on is focused on the daughter.

And we do not know her name. Her presence, though, is felt even before she's introduced in the text. The moment Yiftach makes his vow, we know that his daughter is near, only a few lines away. From the moment she appears, she occupies center stage.

A happy and radiant girl, we see her singing and dancing.

[00:41:00] Joyfully greeting the returning warriors. And as you read on, you feel like warning her, "No, little girl. Don't -- don't run to your father. Go anywhere, but not to him. Go back home, stay home." But it is too late. Yiftach has already seen

her. He cries out, he tears his clothes, the victor has been vanquished.

Overwhelmed with pain, he puts the blame on her. He's unfair, but he needs to blame somebody, and she is there. Why did she have to come to greet him? But there was nothing he could do to undo what he had done. He's crushed, and you sense it from the text. And she? [00:42:00] She is superb. At this moment, she is stronger than he. She understands the situation, even though she does not know the whole story. He tells her of a vow he has made, but not the nature of the vow. Still, she understands. She sees him tearing his clothes, she sees his pain, she sees his agony, and she knows. Someone is going to die. She is going to die.

Her response? Dignified and courageous. She does not shed a tear, nor does she argue. She accepts the situation. She goes as far as to reassure her father, "You cannot go back on your word," she tells him. And with an extraordinary gift of understatement, [00:43:00] she says, *yay-aseh li ha-davar hazeh*. Let this thing be done unto me. She doesn't say, "Keep your pledge, kill me." The word "death" does not figure in her answer. It is replaced by "thing." Let this "thing" be done unto me. Not by you -- by anyone. By life, by God, by nature.

Is she afraid of the word "death"? I choose to think that she prefers not to upset her father even more. And her one request, then, is, "Give me two months, so I may go together with my girlfriends to the mountains and weep, weep over my youth and my innocence." Which, she did. And together with her friends, she went to the mountains, and there, she wept over the loss of her future. [00:44:00] The loss of the joy and pleasure and love that had been in store for her.

Upon her return to her father, quote, "He did unto her the vow that he had made," unquote. Again, the word "death" is not used. Yiftach could do it, and he did it. But he couldn't say it. Others did, and still do. Not he.

And since then, we are told, that there is a tradition in Israel. Young girls go to spend four days in the mountains, telling and retelling the tale of Yiftach and his daughter, and their common tragedy.

Now, this story has inspired many writers. Many playwrights, composers, and painters, especially during the Renaissance. Shakespeare quoted Yiftach in Hamlet. Lord Byron evokes him in a poem, [00:45:00] as does Alfred de Vigny. Handel's last



score, before he went totally blind, is about Yiftach and his daughter, and it was one of more than a hundred musical compositions devoted to the father and his unfortunate daughter.

The image of the two of them engaged in their last conversation, using simple and delicate words, fires our imagination. The scene of the young girl who refuses to weep in public, but chooses to cry in the mountains, is one that cannot but move us, very deeply. Still, some questions remain. Why didn't she cry when her tears might still have influenced her father? Why didn't she resist death? Doesn't her excessive passivity border on the inhuman? Why didn't she run away?

Our puzzlement [00:46:00] grows deeper as we consider her father's actions. Why didn't he change his mind? Why didn't he run away? Why didn't he tell his daughter to escape and never to return? Why didn't he say, "My daughter, I sinned in making that vow, and therefore, let me die in your place"?

Clearly, Yiftach is at the center of a mystery confronting us. Psychologists might explain to us that he did to his daughter what his father had done to him. She was innocent, so was he. He suffered, and therefore, she must suffer. [00:47:00] In identifying with her, he would illustrate his own impotence and

innocence. Could it have been a conscious decision on his part? Surely not. But after all, the subconscious existed long before Sigmund Freud.

The very language used in telling the story has other reverberations as well. They link it to an ancient, unforgettable event, which has been hounding us since we were a people. The *Akedah*, the Binding of Isaac. Isaac was *yahid*, alone. She, *yehida*, alone, the only one. Is it possible that this illegitimate offspring of a prostitute all of a sudden yearned to break away from his social sphere, and [00:48:00] rise to the level of the father of our nation, Abraham? Is it conceivable that his plan was to go beyond the patriarch by going to the end of the act, whereas Abraham had stopped before it was too late? Is the whole story meant as a repudiation of the *Akedah*?

If this were the case, we would understand why the Talmud does not rank Yiftach among its favorite characters. One Midrash states, and I quote, "Yiftach was a just man, but he lived among bad neighbors of the tribe of Ephraim. He saw them burn their sons and daughters as offerings to the gods of Baal, and so he was influenced by them. He became like them." Another source calls him *am ha'aretz*, ignorant. Had he known the law, he would

have found a way to spare his daughter's life. After all, a *neder*, a vow, can be revoked through sacrifice, and repentance, and prayer. [00:49:00]

God was angry with him, says still another Midrash. Why?

Because his words were irresponsible. What did Yiftach say?

"The first to emerge from my door to greet me will be brought as an offering to God." Says the Talmud, "And what if it had been a dog? Or a pig? Or a cat? Would he have brought them as offerings? That is why God, to punish him, made his daughter go outside to welcome him. And I am not satisfied with this explanation. I can, perhaps, understand why the father was to be punished. But why should his daughter pay the price? The father sinned, and his daughter died? Is that justice?"

Yiftach sinned in other ways, too. According to Talmudic sages [00:50:00] -- I told you, they don't like him -- firstly, because they never liked military heroes. Secondly, they blamed him, and only him, for the death of his daughter. All sages agree that he could have exchanged her for money. That is the opinion of Rav Yohanan. Certain offerings could be covered by their monetary value. We know that. Reish Lakish maintains that Yiftach didn't even need to pay anything. He simply could have gone to the high priest, and the high priest had the

authority to release him from his vow. Was there a high priest in those days? Yes, there was. We even know his name.

Pinchas, son of Eleazar.

But then, the question is, why didn't the high priest invoke his authority to help Yiftach, [00:51:00] and release him from his vow? Well, the Talmud tells us, it probably had to do with something very common among influential people. It had to do with his vanity. The high priest said to himself, "After all, I am the high priest, and he needs me. Why doesn't he come to me? Why should I go to him?" Now, as for Yiftach, the Judge, the father, why didn't he go to see the high priest? And the Talmud says that Yiftach said to himself, "After all, I am the leader, the commander, the prince of Israel. It is improper for me, it's against protocol, to go to the high priest."

Comments the Midrash, with understandable melancholy, "While this war was going on between them, a poor innocent girl lost her life." [00:52:00] Mind you, both were punished for their vanity. The divine spirit left the high priest. As for Yiftach, his punishment was -- wait, not yet. He was punished more than once, in more than one way. Having killed his daughter, something in him must have died. Worse, his offering was not received. "You sacrificed a human being, a living soul,

for Me?" God scolded him. "I never asked you to do that. Never have I ordered anyone to give me human beings as offerings. So why did you do that?"

And so, it had all been for nothing. The anguish, and the pain. The agony, and the remorse. Having wanted to please God, [00:53:00] he had displeased Him. Having wanted to praise God, he had offended Him. And now, he had lost both his daughter and himself. And what follows in the text is a description of Yiftach's decline. He's no longer the same man. His next battle is not with an outside enemy, but with his own people, the tribe of Ephraim, whose leaders are angry at him for having gone to war with the Ammonites without them. "Why didn't you call upon us?" they tell him. "We shall burn your house down upon you."

And his answer is filled with anger. "For years and years I appealed for your help and received none. That is why I had to fight alone, without you." A civil war, a cruel war, the cruelest of all -- for all civil wars are the cruelest -- began, [00:54:00] brother against brother, Jew against Jew, Gilead against Ephraim. Gilead was stronger and Yiftach was still in full command of his troops. Was it due to his pain, to his frustrations? He fought better than ever. His victory over

Ephraim was swift and total. The enemy soldiers ran away, but Yiftach's men pursued them. Beaten and defeated, many Ephraim warriors hid among Yiftach's men, but the clandestine people were quickly unmasked.

The text tells us how. The Ephraim warriors were incapable of pronouncing the word "shibboleth." On their lips, it sounded like "sibboleth." And so it was easy. Suspects were asked to say "shibboleth." And believe it or not, [00:55:00] 42,000 failed the test. (laughter) It must have taken a long time. But at the end, we are told, that 42,000 men perished. And that was Yiftach's last victory. And that was his last battle.

All in all, he ruled over Israel six years, and nothing else is said about his reign. Did he remarry? Did he become pious? One gets the impression that after the battle with Ephraim, he went into seclusion. No friends, no enemies, nothing. Only memories. Painful memories, painful scars. Burning images, silent tears. He died, and was buried somewhere in his native province of Gilead. Listen carefully to the text. [00:56:00] It says, quote, "*B'arei Gilead*," unquote, which means, "He was buried in the cities of Gilead." Normally, this would mean in one of the cities of Gilead. The Midrash disagrees.

And in this case, the Midrash, which usually likes fantasy, imagination, to go away from the text -- in this case, the Midrash wants to stick to the text literally. And the Midrash says, "If the text says 'cities,' in plural, that means that Yiftach was buried in many cities." But how can one person be buried in more than one place? Says the Midrash, "Yiftach became ill. That was his punishment. His body disintegrated, limb by limb, and each was buried separately, one after the other, in different cities." [00:57:00]

Usually, in such cases, there is symbolism in the punishment. For instance, take Samson, a Judge like Yiftach, he, too, was punished. Remember Samson? He was blinded by the enemy. Comments the Midrash, "Samson rebelled against God with his eyes. As it is said, 'Get a Philistine woman for me, for she pleases my eyes.' Therefore, his eyes were put out by the Philistines." What is the symbolism in Yiftach's punishment? Since his martial qualities were linked to his physical strength, it was taken away from him. His strongest point became his weakest. And since he refused to go, to move, physically, from one place to another, from his place to the high priest's place -- though this might have saved his daughter -- he was mutilated, and, so to speak, disavowed by his own body, which left him, piece by piece. [00:58:00] He was

punished not only for fulfilling his pledge, he was also punished for his arrogance and for his vanity.

Since his vanity was the cause of his daughter's death, for he could have prevented it by going to the high priest, he was made to die what was called in ancient Greece, I quote, "a death of mice," unquote. Losing one's limbs before dying. It was widely held -- and it was, as a belief, generally accepted -- that Antiochus the wicked also died this way. Having conquered many sites, he, too, was buried in many sites.

Now, is Yiftach's story worthy of the *Akedah*? I believe that Yiftach's story is more tragic than the *Akedah*. Abraham was rewarded. [00:59:00] Yiftach was not. Isaac was saved.

Yiftach's daughter was not. Her sacrifice had been willed by her father. She died, and we don't really know why, nor did she. And we don't even know her name.

Her pleas to her father, as imagined or recorded by the Midrash, again find strange echoes in ancient Greece. And in Euripides' play, *Iphigenia*, we are told that Iphigenia tries to move her father, Agamemnon, to compassion, and she says, "Please, don't kill me so young. It is good to see the light. I was the first who called you Father, and the first whom you called child. The



first who sat upon your knee, caressed you lovingly, and was caressed in turn. [01:00:00] Have pity on my life." And Iphigenia accuses her father of making the wrong choice, of choosing violence and murder and betrayal instead of love and justice. But for her, too, it was too late. For victims everywhere, in every language and in every country and in every tradition, it is always too late.

And now, we are about to reach the end of a tragic destiny. Yiftach, Judge and hero in Israel, was punished both in his life and his death. And another page is turned in the Book of Judges. Not yet. I remain troubled and I refuse to turn the page. I am troubled by Yiftach, of course. But I am also troubled by his daughter. [01:01:00] Why did she have to die? Her love for her father was so profound that she accepted her fate with grace. So as to make it easier for him, she went into hiding, so as to spare him the sight of her weeping. Why, then, was there no miracle? Why was there no heavenly intervention, as with the case -- in the case of Isaac?

There is only one commentator, the RaDaK, who believes -- who claims that she didn't die, that at the last moment, Yiftach, the father, couldn't do it, and all he was ready to do was to put her into seclusion, to force her to live her life alone in a

convent. But the Biblical text gives us a different ending, and it is heartbreaking enough in its crisp, [01:02:00] poetic description, but the Midrash goes farther, and moves you to tears.

At which point, let me keep my promise I made earlier. I speak about tears, and the tears bring me back to Russia. (pause) I owe it to truth, and to a friend of mine who is here, that my visit to Russia was his idea. Months and months ago, he said, "You should go back to Russia and see what is happening, and write something." So I began preparing the trip. And, what I really wanted was, therefore, to go back in the time of the High Holidays, because I had been during the High Holidays in Moscow, in 1965, much before some of you were born [01:03:00] (laughs), and I went back in '66, and then in '79, but in '79, it was not during the High Holidays, it was Shabbat *Nachamu*, after *Tish'a B'Av*.

But I felt like going back during the High Holidays. My wife came with me, and I am going to write about it, because I have to bear witness. But what we have lived through during these days of *Sukkot and Simchat Torah* will remain with us as long as we live. I have rediscovered a community that is so vibrant, and so special, and so singular, that one cannot not feel pride,

simply by being part of it. Imagine refuseniks, imagine a  
[01:04:00] Volodya Slepak, who is, I believe, probably the most  
important of them all, as a human being, as a scholar, his human  
density. He is the father of the movement, just like Ida Nudel  
is the mother of the movement.

And the fearlessness of the man -- the man who, together with  
his wife, have waited 17 years -- 17 years -- for permission to  
leave and be with his sons and his people in Israel. Now, how  
could he go on -- how can he go on waiting? Never knowing  
whether the waiting will be another year, or another ten years,  
or not at all ending. And yet, this man can be joyous, and when  
he speaks [01:05:00] of the Jewish people, he smiles. And when  
he sings Jewish songs, all you want to do is simply embrace him  
and dance with him.

I met -- we met the wife of Yosef Begun. Now, Yosef Begun was  
condemned, I think, to 12 years' imprisonment for one reason  
alone, and it is in the act of prosecution. For having taught  
Hebrew. For teaching Hebrew, he got 12 years, and he is already  
four years in jail. Mind you, she told me -- his wife told me  
that, being a teacher, and although he is in jail with common  
criminals, he couldn't help it. [01:06:00] He began teaching  
them Hebrew. (laughter) They are not even Jewish. (laughter)

We met the wife of Zonshein, who is in Riga. He, Zakhar Zonshein, has been also sentenced to several years, and she is alone -- a young woman, I think, 23, 24 -- and to tell you how (pause) how clever and nasty the authorities can be -- you know, but what do we do with those Jews? Whenever a person goes there, we send a message. At least they should know that we haven't forgotten them. So there was a delegation going to Riga, and I spoke to the members of the delegation, giving the address and asking them to go and see Tanya Zonshein.

Now, of course, the authorities knew about it -- [01:07:00] they have their good ways of finding out things. So, what they did is, they came to see her a week before, and they told her she could go and see her husband, hundreds of miles away, precisely that day. So when the delegation came, the delegation couldn't see her. Now, why are they going to such extremes to persecute a few people? I don't know. I asked them. Why are you doing it? What do you get out of it? Of persecuting Jews? What is it good? It's not even good for Russia, doing that.

And yet, there is so much hope in this desperate people, that you become their brother, whether you know it or not. And they study, and they learn, [01:08:00] and they do whatever they can

to remain what they are. I met a nine-year-old girl in shul, and this nine-year-old girl spoke a perfect Hebrew. They have their classes. Clandestine, and they study history and Hebrew and literature. I even saw a class -- I attended a class of Talmud, in Moscow. I wish I could do the same in New York.

(laughter)

There is something extraordinary going on, and yet at the same time, of course, they are all watched. On *Shemini Atzeret* and Simchat Torah, I must tell you, at one point I felt very sorry only for the KGB men who were following me all the time, without knowing it. Because to go from, the hotel, [01:09:00] let's say, to the embassy, I walked, and they, too, had to walk.

(laughter) So they walked three hours. Well, sometimes, you must feel sorry for them.

Another time, maybe, we shall come back to this event, to this story, which is a glorious story, and maybe if the opportunity arises, I will tell you more about projects and so forth. And so, why tears? On Simchat Torah, we came to the synagogue. Outside, there must have been between 30 and 50,000 people. Filling all the squares, all the streets. Inside, 5,000, 6,000, you couldn't move, you couldn't breathe. And then, came the *hakafot*, when we went around with the Torah. [01:10:00] And I

walked with the Torah among a sea of tears, on both sides, men and women, together. They were simply crying. Probably tears of sadness, tears of solitude, tears of pride, perhaps, of being together. And there were so many tears that I, who don't cry, not in public, surely -- even I broke down, and I couldn't not join my tears with theirs.

Let's go back to Yiftach, and end the story for tonight. The Midrash imagines the last scene between the father and the daughter. It's the last encounter. And the Midrash, with literary [01:11:00] skill and genius, tells us that something is missing in the Bible. The Midrash tells us that the story ended differently. As Yiftach is about to fulfill his vow and in silence and kill his daughter, his daughter suddenly bursts into sobs, and she says, "Father, Father. I came to welcome you with joy and pride, and you slaughter me? Tell me, Father," she continues, "is it written in the Torah that Jews should sacrifice their children on the altar? Isn't it written, on the contrary, that animals ought to be sacrificed? Animals, my father, animals, not human beings."

And Yiftach lets her talk, and then answers, "My daughter, it is too late. [01:12:00] I have already made my vow." And she says, "Our ancestor Jacob also made a vow. He pledged to God to

offer Him a tenth of whatever he would have. Didn't he have 12 sons? Did he sacrifice but one of them to God?" Yiftach listens, but does not answer. And she continues, "When Hannah promised that if she had a son, she would give him to God, did she sacrifice her son to God?" Yiftach listens, and says nothing.

And she goes on, "You say you made a vow. Let me go to a tribunal. It may well release you from your vow." But it was too late. And so, what are the lessons that could be learned from this story? First of all, we learn that [01:13:00] one must be careful with words. Yiftach was not. A sentence that meant nothing when he said it came back to haunt him for the rest of his life. A few words, thrown into the wind, caused tragedy, or more precisely, a chain of tragedies. What else?

Yiftach's principal mistake was that he did not confide in his daughter. He should have told her about his vow before he went to battle, not after. Why didn't he? Probably because he considered the entire affair as frivolous, unimportant. A few words that had just come to his mind. Why bother his beloved daughter? Why tell her of his uncertainty with regard to the outcome of the battle? Better keep it to himself. That is why he didn't speak to her. And that was his mistake.

Still, as harsh as the Talmudic judgment of Yiftach may be -- and it is -- [01:14:00] the judgment of Pinchas, the high priest, is much more severe. That Yiftach was wrong in putting protocol before saving a life is clear. But Yiftach was no spiritual leader. Pinchas, the high priest, was. Yiftach didn't have to know the law. Pinchas did. That is why the onus is placed on Pinchas. He should have made the first step. He should have gone far and farther, to the end of the world, to help Yiftach save his daughter, and because he did not, he's held responsible not only for Yiftach's daughter's death, but also for the 42,000 men of Ephraim who fell in battle.

The *Yalkut Shimoni* links the two events in a cause-effect relationship. Had Pinchas released Yiftach from his vow, the war with Ephraim would not have taken place. And therefore, the high priest is criticized [01:15:00] both for not having helped Yiftach with his daughter, and for not having stepped into the crisis with Ephraim. When the warriors of Ephraim came to quarrel with Yiftach, this is what Pinchas, according to the Midrashic scenario, should have told them. "You did not come to free him from his vow, nor did you come to his aid when he needed you. Now you come, to create problems?"



Had he been on the side of Yiftach, the war would not have taken place. But he said nothing, and therefore it is he, according to Midrash, who bears the responsibility for all the 40,000 victims. And the Midrashic language is beautiful and incisive, and I quote it, "Because he could have protested and chose not to, he is the one who killed the victims."

[01:16:00] I would not go that far. But we all learn from the Midrash the essential lesson of human and social responsibility. Granted, we are often too weak to stop injustices, but the least we can do is to protest against them. Granted, we are too poor to eliminate hunger, but in feeding one child, we protest against hunger. Granted, we are too timid and powerless to take on all the guards of all the prisons in the world, but in offering our solidarity to one prisoner, we denounce all the tormentors. Granted, we are powerless against death. But as long as we help one man, one woman, one child, live one hour longer in safety and dignity, we affirm the sanctity and the beauty of life.

Oh, granted, so many words are being wasted. But not all, not always. Some do become tales, [01:17:00] and some tales do become prayers. And some prayers do become bridges between

Heaven and Earth, and man and God, and better yet, for it is more difficult, between one human being and another. (applause)

**M:**

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