YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Understanding the haftarot**

**By Harav Yaakov Medan**

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Dedicated in memory of Elisa bat Tsirelé *z”l*
whose *yahrzeit* is 1 Tammuz
By Family Rueff

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**The Haftara for Parashat Chukat**

**Yiftach**

Yiftach the Gileadite was a valiant warrior. He was the son of a harlot; Gilad sired Yiftach, but Gilad's wife bore him sons as well. When the wife's sons grew up, they drove Yiftach away, telling him, "You shall have no share in our father's estate, for you are the son of another woman." So Yiftach fled from his brothers; he settled in the land of Tov. Worthless men were drawn to him and went out raiding with him. Time passed, and the Amonites waged war upon Israel. When the Amonites attacked Israel, the elders of Gilad set out to bring Yiftach back from the land of Tov. "Come with us," they said to Yiftach, "and be our commander, so that we can fight against the Amonites." "But you despised me," Yiftach said to the elders of Gilad, "and drove me away from my father's house. Why do you come to me now, when you are in trouble?" "For that reason we ourselves have come back to you now," the elders of Gilad said to Yiftach. "You shall march out with us and fight the Amonites, and you shall be the leader of all the people of Gilad." "If you bring me back to fight against the Amonites," Yiftach replied to the elders of Gilad, "and the Lord delivers them to me, then I shall be your leader." The elders of Gilad said to Yiftach, "The Lord shall bear witness between us if we do not comply with your words." So Yiftach went with the elders of Gilad, and the people made him their head and commander. Yiftach repeated all his terms before the Lord at Mitzpa. Yiftach sent messengers to the king of the Amonites: "What do you have against us, that you came to attack our land?" The king of the Amonites replied to Yiftach's messengers, "Israel seized my lands when they came out of Egypt – from the Arnon to the Yabok and up to the Jordan. Now hand them back peacefully." Once again Yiftach sent messengers to the king of the Amonites. "Thus says Yiftach," they said. "Israel did not seize the land of Moav nor the land of the Amonites. For when they came out of Egypt, Israel trekked through the wilderness to the Sea of Reeds, then they arrived at Kadesh. And Israel sent messengers to the king of Edom, saying, 'Please let us pass through your land,' but the king of Edom would not listen; they also reached out to the king of Moav, but he would not comply. So Israel remained in Kadesh. They trekked through the wilderness, making their way around the land of Edom and the land of Moav until they reached the eastern side of the land of Moav, where they encamped across the Arnon. They did not enter Moabite territory, for the Arnon is the Moabite border. Then Israel sent messengers to Sichon, king of the Amorites, the king of Cheshbon. Israel said to him, 'Please, let us pass through your land to our own place.' But Sichon did not trust Israel to pass through his territory. And Sichon assembled all his troops, encamped at Yahtza, and attacked Israel. The Lord, God of Israel, delivered Sichon and all of his people into Israel's hands; they defeated them, and the Israelites took possession of the entire land of the Amorites, who lived in that land. They took possession of all the Amorite territory from Arnon to the Yabok, and from the wilderness to the Jordan. Now, the Lord, God of Israel, dispossessed the Amorites before His people, Israel – why should you possess it? You take possession of what Kemosh, your god, grants you, and we will take possession of everything the Lord, our God, grants us. Now, are you any better than Balak son of Tzipor, king of Moav? Did he pick a quarrel with Israel? Did he wage war against them? Israel has been dwelling in Cheshbon and its boroughs, Aroer and its boroughs, and in all the towns near Arnon, for three hundred years – why have you not reclaimed them all this time? I have never offended you, yet you do me wrong by fighting against me. May the Lord, who judges, judge between the Israelites and the Amonites today." But the king of the Amonites did not listen to the words Yiftach delivered to him. The spirit of the Lord settled upon Yiftach, and he crossed through Gilad and Menashe; he crossed Mitzpeh Gilad; and from Mitzpeh Gilad he crossed over to the Amonites. Then Yiftach swore a vow to the Lord. He said, "If You deliver the Amonites into my hand, then whatever comes out of the doors of my home to meet me when I return safely from the Amonites shall be for the Lord, and I shall offer it up as a burnt offering." Yiftach crossed over to the Amonites and attacked them, and the Lord delivered them into his hand. He defeated them from Aroer to Minit, twenty towns, all the way to Avel Keramim – a crushing defeat – and the Amonites were conquered by the Israelites. (*Shoftim* 11:1-33)[[1]](#footnote-1)

**I. The Connection Between the *Haftara* and the *Parasha***

In our *haftara*, Yiftach relates Israel's journey from Kadesh, in the wilderness of Tzin, to the conquest of the east bank of the Jordan from Sichon; our *parasha* deals with this journey in detail. Yiftach’s telling introduces three important details:

1. Israel asked to pass northward not only through the land of Edom, but also through the land of the king of Moav, and he too refused to let them come through.

2. Three hundred years passed from the day of the Israelites' conquest of the land of the Amorites until the days of Yiftach. This detail also has no other source, and Yiftach’s account is the basis for establishing the chronology of the days of the judges.[[2]](#footnote-2)

3. Yiftach is the first to establish the legal principle that "Amon and Moav purified Sichon," which would later be stated by Rav Pappa (*Gittin* 38a). This principle means that, although the Israelites were prohibited from conquering the lands of Amon and Moav, because God had given them to the descendants of Lot, they were permitted to conquer from the hands of Sichon the lands that he had previously conquered from Amon and Moav. There is an allusion to this in the *parasha*, in the Torah's expanded discussion of Sichon's conquests in the land of Moav, but it is stated more explicitly by Yiftach. We will discuss this further below.

**II. Background**

After the period of the great judges (Otniel, Ehud, Devora, and Gidon), there was a spiritual decline that reached its peak in the days of Yiftach, the days of subjugation to the Amonites:

The Israelites resumed doing evil in the eyes of the Lord; they worshipped the Be'alim, the Ashtarot, the gods of Aram, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moav, the gods of the Amonites, and the gods of the Philistines. They abandoned the Lord and did not worship Him. (*Shoftim* 10:6)

We do not find such a harsh description of idolatry anywhere else in the book of *Shoftim.* The verse before us lists seven different types of idolatry, and emphasizes that they were not worshiped in addition to God, but that God was abandoned; the Israelites no longer worshiped Him at all. Certainly not every Israelite worshipped seven different types of idolatry. It seems that in every district in Israel, the people worshiped the nearest god: in the northwest, they worshiped the god of Sidon; in the northeast, the god of Aram; in the east, the god of Amon; in the southeast, the god of Moav; and in the southwest, they worshiped the god of the Philistines. This indicates a worrisome split, which may have consequences on a day of reckoning, and here – in the Israelites' subjugation to the Amonites. The Amonites were a small nation, and there was no reason for them to succeed in subjugating Israel and fighting the tribes on the west side of the Jordan, as happens here:

Then the Amonites crossed the Jordan to attack Yehuda, Binyamin, and the House of Efrayim as well; Israel was in desperate straits. (*Shoftim* 10:9)

The concurrent Philistine subjugation and the great split among the tribes of Israel contributed to the shameful submission to the king of the Amonites, who was not particularly strong.

In contrast to the split among the tribes of Israel, the tribes of Amon and Moav were unified. The king of the Amonites in our *haftara* also rules over Moav,[[3]](#footnote-3) as indicated by his demand to receive all the land from the Arnon northward. This area is the land of Moav, not the original land of the Amonites, as we see in our *parasha*:

Cheshbon was the city of Sichon, king of the Amorites, who had fought against the former king of Moav and had taken all his land from him as far as the Arnon. (*Bamidbar* 21:26)

Below, Yiftach will mention Cheshbon and Aroer, which are fundamentally Moabite cities.

Later in his message, Yiftach compares the king of the Amonites to Balak son of Tzipor, king of Moav, and refers to the god of Amon as Kemosh – even though Kemosh was the god of Moav, while the god of Amon was Malkum, or Molekh, as we see in the book of *Melakhim*: "It was then that Shlomo built a high shrine to Kemosh, the abomination of Moav, on the hill overlooking Jerusalem, and to Molekh, the abomination of the Amonites" (I *Melakhim* 11:7).

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As alluded to above, it is related in the chapter preceding our *haftara* that the Amonites, after subjugating the Israelites on the east bank of the Jordan for eighteen years, crossed over to fight the tribes of Efrayim, Binyamin, and Yehuda, on the west bank of the Jordan, as well. Their cruelty is known to us from the later demand of Nachash the Amonite, when he wanted to subjugate the inhabitants of Yavesh Gilad in the days of Shaul, to gouge out the right eye of all its inhabitants (see I *Shmuel* 11).

The people of Israel cried out to God, but He did not want to hear them when each time He saved them, they then returned to their idolatry. This time, they purged the alien gods from their midst and cried out once again to God. They accepted upon themselves any punishment that God would inflict upon them, provided that He save them from the Amonites. Here we find an unusual expression in relation to God: "And He could not bear Israel's misery any longer" (10:16). But there was not yet a leader found who would agree to lead the people of Israel to war against the Amonites. This is where our *haftara* begins.

**III. Yiftach**

Yiftach the Gileadite was a valiant warrior. He was the son of a harlot; Gilad sired Yiftach, but Gilad's wife bore him sons as well. When the wife's sons grew up, they drove Yiftach away, telling him, "You shall have no share in our father's estate, for you are the son of another woman." So Yiftach fled from his brothers; he settled in the land of Tov. Worthless men were drawn to him and went out raiding with him. (11:1-3)

The narrative does not tell us from which tribe Yiftach came. Gilad was divided between the tribe of Gad and the half-tribe of Menashe. It seems from Yiftach's war against the people of Efrayim (chapter 12) that he came from the eastern half-tribe of Menashe. His problematic relationship with his brothers stems from the family structure: it appears from the verses that Yiftach was the eldest son, and that he was the son of another woman, who is not referred to as "Gilad's wife" – that is to say, his main wife, the lady of the house. We might assume that Gilad had married his main wife but she was barren for many years, and then Gilad fathered a son from another woman, who perhaps served as his concubine for the purpose of giving him a child.[[4]](#footnote-4) After Yiftach was born – and perhaps in the wake of his birth, owing to her jealousy of the concubine – Gilad's wife also conceived and gave birth.[[5]](#footnote-5) There was no longer any need for a concubine, and she apparently left the house. When the sons of the main wife grew up, they, with the help of the elders of Gilad, the judges and the legislators, expelled Yiftach, the son of the concubine, applying to him the idea of: "Drive out the slave woman and her son, for the son of that slave woman must not share the inheritance with my son" (*Bereishit* 21:10), as Sara had demanded of Avraham when her son Yitzchak was born.

The Torah relates to a similar case in its commandments:

If a man has two wives, and loves one but not the other, and if both the loved and the unloved bear him sons, but the firstborn is the son of the one unloved, then on the day he bequeaths his possessions to his sons, he may not give the rights of the firstborn to the son of the loved in preference to the son of the unloved, the true firstborn. He must acknowledge the son of his unloved wife as the firstborn, giving him a double portion of all that he has. He is the first fruit of his manhood; the right of the firstborn belongs to him. (*Devarim* 21:15-17)

It may be assumed that in a typical case, the beloved wife is the first wife, and since she did not bear him sons, her husband married another wife so that she would bear him a son. The other woman, the "unloved" one, whom the husband married not out of love but for the purpose of giving him a son, gave birth to the first son, and because of him, the "loved" one afterwards also gave birth to sons. The Torah establishes that the son of the unloved wife may not be denied his basic right of inheritance nor his place as the eldest. The elders of Gilad and Yiftach's brothers behaved contrary to the Torah – and in a generation so steeped in idolatry, there is nothing puzzling about that.

Yiftach was forced to flee from his brothers to the land of Tov in the north, apparently in the vicinity of Tel Susita, above the east side of the Kineret.[[6]](#footnote-6) There, "worthless people," i.e., people without property, were drawn to him, and together with him they formed a band of warriors, with Yiftach at their head. The band lived on the defense they provided to various settlements, escorting convoys or serving as mercenaries in various wars, similar to the band of warriors that gathered around David when he was fleeing from Shaul:

And everyone who was distressed, and everyone in debt, and every wretched, bitter soul gathered to him, and he became their leader; about four hundred men were with him. (I *Shmuel* 22:2)

**IV. Yiftach's Appointment as Head and Commander**

Time passed, and the Amonites waged war upon Israel. When the Amonites attacked Israel, the elders of Gilad set out to bring Yiftach back from the land of Tov. "Come with us," they said to Yiftach, "and be our commander, so that we can fight against the Amonites." "But you despised me," Yiftach said to the elders of Gilad, "and drove me away from my father's house. Why do you come to me now, when you are in trouble?" (11:4-7)

The initial feeling from reading this passage may give rise to a critical attitude toward Yiftach, who finds the time when his people are in such great distress to make a reckoning with them about the past, as well as a reckoning about the future, demanding to be the head of the people of Gilad after his victory.

In my opinion, however, this passage should be read differently. Here are several points to consider:

1. The elders of Gilad had illegally expelled Yiftach from his ancestral land years before the war against the Amonites. Now, not only do they not repent from their wrongdoing, but they continue to stand by it. They themselves had promised that whoever would fight against the Amonites would be their leader:

The leaders of the men of Gilad said among themselves, "Whoever launches the first attack against the Amonites shall become the head of all the people of Gilad." (*Shoftim* 10:18)

To Yiftach, however, because they held him in contempt, they offer only the role of a temporary commander – "Come with us, and be our commander, so that we can fight against the Amonites." After the victory, they will be able to send him away again, as they had at the time of his conflict with his brothers. Yiftach reminds them of their hatred in the past only because of their contemptuous treatment in the present, even though the Amonites are already at their gates.

2. It is difficult to ignore the similarity between Yiftach's argument against the elders of Gilad, "But you despised me, and drove me away from my father's house. Why do you come to me now, when you are in trouble?" and God's response when they asked for His help against the Amonites:

The Israelites cried out to the Lord, wailing, "We have sinned against You, for we abandoned You our God and served the Be'alim." The Lord said to the Israelites, "Indeed, Egypt and the Amorites and the Amonites and the Philistines and the Sidonites and Amalek and Maon oppressed you; then you cried out to Me, and I saved you from their hands. But you abandoned Me and worshipped other gods – I will save you no longer. Go and cry out to the other gods you chose – let them save you in your times of trouble." (*Shoftim* 10:10-14)

3. In preparation for the war with the Amonites, Yiftach needed extensive recruiting powers. Yiftach would not be able to fight the Amonites without the authority of a leadership position, when they treat him from as a disdained person to whom they turn only out of lack of choice. This problem will be acutely expressed in the continuation of the story.

The negotiations between Yiftach and the elders of Gilad continue even after Yiftach rejects them:

"For that reason we ourselves have come back to you now," the elders of Gilad said to Yiftach. "You shall march out with us and fight the Amonites, and you shall be the leader of all the people of Gilad." "If you bring me back to fight against the Amonites," Yiftach replied to the elders of Gilad, "and the Lord delivers them to me, then I shall be your leader." The elders of Gilad said to Yiftach, "The Lord shall bear witness between us if we do not comply with your words." So Yiftach went with the elders of Gilad, and the people made him their head and commander. Yiftach repeated all his terms before the Lord at Mitzpa. (11:8-11)

Having no alternative, the elders of Gilad promise that following his victory, Yiftach will indeed be the head of the people of Gilad. Yiftach is not convinced, and asks again: "Then I shall be your leader?" Why does he ask a second time? It seems that he did not trust their promise, and therefore demanded an oath, and they did the same to him.

The Bible takes pains to emphasize that the negotiations were repeated at Mitzpa. Here is a clear example[[7]](#footnote-7) of our need to thank God that we have been privileged to study the Bible, and the chapters of the *haftara* in particular, when we live in His holy land and are familiar with the areas where the Biblical events took place. This is how the Radak and the Abravanel interpreted Yiftach's words in Mitzpa:

Because it is the Mitzpa where the kings gathered to fight against Yehoshua. Because of the great salvation that took place there, it was the custom in Israel to gather there, and there was an altar and a house of worship there. It was to that Mitzpa that the people of Gilad went with Yiftach to speak their words there before God in Mitzpa. (Radak 11:11)

It is true what Rabbi David Kimchi wrote, that because in Mitzpa God performed a great salvation for Yehoshua against the kings who had gathered against him, there was an ancient custom among them that in a time of need they would pray there and ask God for salvation, that He save them from their enemies, as did Yehoshua in that same place. Therefore the prophet Shmuel also rebuked Israel at Mitzpa, and there was there an altar and a house of prayer. Therefore, the officers of Gilad went there… And it says, "before the Lord," because Divine providence adhered there at all times. (Abravanel 11:11)

The name "Mitzpa" (from the Hebrew root *tz/f/h*, meaning watch)is suitable for any high place from which one has a good view of the surroundings. The Radak sends us to the land of Mitzpa below the Hermon (*Yehoshua* 11:3), and the Abravanel supports his words and adds the Mitzpa at which Shmuel rebuked Israel, which is identified today with Har Shmuel (Nebi Samuel), next to the city of Givon, north of Jerusalem. However, we today have been privileged to become familiar with the Land of Israel, and to know that the people of Gilad could not have gone there on the eve of the war with the Amonites. The Mitzpa that is mentioned in our chapter is the Mitzpa upon which Yaakov and Lavan stood, above the Yabok, on the border between Amon and the people of Israel, and entered into a covenant:

Lavan said, "This mound is a witness between me and you this day." That is why it is called Galed. It is also called Mitzpa because he said, "May the Lord keep watch between me and you when we are out of each other's sight." (*Bereishit* 31:48-49)

Lavan's deception of Yaakov and his treatment of him as a stranger without rights, even though Yaakov stood on guard day and night, risking his life to protect Lavan's flocks, is well reflected in the pillar that Yaakov erected there. The elders of Gilad treated Yiftach with similar deception, as a stranger with no rights, who has no other role but to risk his life in their defense. As Lavan swore to Yaakov, so the elders of Gilad swore to Yiftach on the eve of the war. Did they fulfill their promise, or continue to deceive him? We will discuss the matter below.

**V. Negotiations with the King of the Amonites**

Yiftach sent messengers to the king of the Amonites: "What do you have against us, that you came to attack our land?" The king of the Amonites replied to Yiftach's messengers, "Israel seized my lands when they came out of Egypt – from the Arnon to the Yabok and up to the Jordan. Now hand them back peacefully." (11:12-13)

Yiftach's entry into negotiations with the king of the Amonites is puzzling. Presumably, the elders of Gilad had candidates whom they would have thought were more appropriate than Yiftach for conducting negotiations. Yiftach was chosen as an accomplished fighter, to conduct war, not to negotiate, and it seems that Yiftach had also come to Gilad with the aim of conducting war. It is possible that a serious mishap that happened to him caused him to soften his political position and prefer negotiations (which presumably would not have granted him the position of head of the people of Gilad), even if he had to give up assets and principles that the elders of Gilad would have preferred to keep for themselves. We may learn from the continuation of the story what this mishap was:

The men of Efrayim mustered and crossed over, moving northward. They said to Yiftach, "Why did you cross over to attack the Amonites without calling us to march with you? We will burn down your house around you!" "My troops and I were in fierce combat with the Amonites," Yiftach said to them. "I summoned you, but you did not rescue me from their hands. I saw that you were not coming to my aid, so I took my life in my hands and crossed over to the Amonites, and the Lord delivered them into my hands. Why have you come up to fight me now?" (*Shoftim* 12:1-3)

This exchange, which follows our *haftara*, seems to indicate that a very large group of members of the tribe of Efrayim had settled on the east bank of Jordan, in Gilad, even though the tribe of Efrayim received its inheritance on the west bank of the Jordan. The book of *Yehoshua* relates that the descendants of Yosef complained that the inheritance they had received was insufficient for their needs, and this may explain why part of the tribe migrated eastward and took over territories in the eastern inheritance of Menashe, and perhaps even in the territory of Gad. The people of Efrayim are angry that Yiftach went out to war against the Amonites without asking for their permission, and they do not recognize his authority. Yiftach reminds them of the great distress on the eve of that war, when he stood at the head of a small army against a larger army and asked them to join him but they refused to do so.

Let us return to the negotiations that Yiftach conducted with the elders of Gilad. He asked to be leader so he would hold the authority to recruit soldiers against the Amonite enemy. The elders of Gilad swore to him about this, but when the matter was put to the test, a large number of the inhabitants of the Gilad, the people of Efrayim, and perhaps others with them, did not respond to the recruitment call and did not go out with Yiftach to war. Yiftach was left facing the king of the Amonites with an impossible disadvantage with respect to the size of their forces, and so he preferred to negotiate, despite all the humiliation this involved. The king of the Amonites did not enter into negotiations; he demanded to receive everything and turn the Israelites east of the Jordan into second-class subjects or into homeless and landless refugees on the west side of the Jordan. Yiftach could not agree to this, and so he risked his own life going to war against the much larger force of the Amonites – and subdued them through the power of God's spirit that rested upon him.

**VI. Yiftach's Arguments**

**The first argument**

But Sichon did not trust Israel to pass through his territory. And Sichon assembled all his troops, encamped at Yahtza, and attacked Israel. The Lord, God of Israel, delivered Sichon and all of his people into Israel's hands; they defeated them, and the Israelites took possession of the entire land of the Amorites, who lived in that land. They took possession of all the Amorite territory from Arnon to the Yabok, and from the wilderness to the Jordan. (11:20-22)

Israel’s war with Sichon was a defensive war. Sichon went out to fight them on his own initiative (the Torah adds that Moshe had made a peaceful overture to Sichon); he was defeated in a war for which he was to blame, and there is no need to take from Israel what they had inherited from him.

**The second argument**

Now, the Lord, God of Israel, dispossessed the Amorites before His people, Israel – why should you possess it? You take possession of what Kemosh, your god, grants you, and we will take possession of everything the Lord, our God, grants us. (11:23-24)

It is God, the creator of the heavens and the earth, who distributes lands to the nations. This is not in the authority of flesh and blood. Sichon was unequivocally beaten, through the miracles performed at the Arnon stream (which were spelled out in the book of the Wars of the Lord; see *Bamidbar* 21:14-16), and God's hand in this was clear. God gave the land of Sichon to Israel, not to the children of Amon and Moav. In Yiftach's argument, God becomes the Chief Justice of the International Court of Justice, which determines the legal boundaries of the peoples of the world.

**The third argument**

Now, are you any better than Balak son of Tzipor, king of Moav? Did he pick a quarrel with Israel? Did he wage war against them? (11:25)

Balak did not fight against Israel. He chose to bring Bilam, the prophet of the nations, so that he would negate Israel's right to what they had captured from Sichon. But Bilam, the prophet of the nations, recognized Israel's right to their conquests:

A people – see – rises like a lioness, lifts itself up like a lion. It will not lie down until it eats its meat and drinks the blood of the slain. (*Bamidbar* 23:24)

God, who freed him from Egypt, is the oryx's proud horn to him. He will devour enemy nations, break their bones, pierce them with arrows. Like a lion he crouches, lies down, like a lioness; who dares to rouse him? (*Bamidbar* 24:8-9)

Thus the fate of Sichon's land was decided – that it belongs to Israel.

**The fourth argument**

Israel has been dwelling in Cheshbon and its boroughs, Aroer and its boroughs, and in all the towns near Arnon, for three hundred years – why have you not reclaimed them all this time? (11:26)

After so many years, it is impossible to challenge a people's settlement in a land they had conquered and to demand that they uproot their settlement, their enterprises, and the landscapes of their childhood because of a distant history, which politically has already become pre-history that has ceased to be relevant. In Halakha, the "right of conquest" is established after sixty years (Rashba, *Gittin* 38a).

**The overall claim**

Above all of Yiftach's arguments hovers an overall argument: Israel did not conquer anything from Amon and Moav themselves; they only took the land of Sichon, who had captured some of that land from Amon and Moav. They themselves could not remove their land from Sichon's hands, and thus Israel did them no wrong. In the words of *Chazal*, this is the argument of: "Amon and Moav were purified by Sichon" (*Gittin* 38a). That is, even though the territories of the descendants of Lot were forbidden to Israel, these tracts of land were "purified," and permitted to be conquered by Israel, once Sichon took them from Amon and Moav.

We will try to understand this claim both from a legal-halakhic point of view as well as from a moral point of view. From a legal point of view, the Torah maintains that "land cannot be stolen": A thief takes a stolen object and brings it into his possession, but land remains where it is and a thief cannot change that. Therefore, the law in general is that land cannot be acquired through the modes of acquisition that apply to theft, nor even through despair on the part of the previous owner with a change in holding and a transfer of possession to a third party. However, land does enter into the possession of a thief through war, which is regarded as absolute despair, like an object that sank to the bottom of a river such that there is no reasonable chance of recovering it. Absolute despair effects acquisition even where ordinary despair does not. In the same way, military conquest effects acquisition – as stated, after sixty years.

Let us also consider the issue from a moral perspective. Is it moral to take a part of a nation's territory by conquering it from another nation, which had conquered it from the first nation? An argument can be made in both directions. On the one hand, we hear the cries of the oppressed people, the original people whose land had been violently taken from them. On the other hand, the people who take the land from the violent conqueror cause no injustice to the first nation, seeing that they had been unable to recover their land from the hands of the violent conqueror.

It seems that in such a situation, we should examine the behavior of the people whose land had been taken from them toward the final conqueror, who conquered the land from the hands of the first conqueror. In the present case, we would morally decide the fate of the land of Sichon according to the behavior of the Amonites towards their family members, the people of Israel, who had just recently left a life of slavery in Egypt and long wanderings in the wilderness. The people of Amon and Moav behaved ungratefully towards the people of Israel, even though they freed them from subjugation to Sichon and freed their refugee sons and captive daughters. They did not greet them with bread and water, but instead hired Bilam to curse them. In this situation, it would have been correct to relate to them according to the strict measure of justice, rather than with mercy, and not return to them the land conquered from Sichon.

**The final argument**

I have never offended you, yet you do me wrong by fighting against me. May the Lord, who judges, judge between the Israelites and the Amonites today. (11:27)

 Yiftach claims that he cannot now bear the heavy burden of history, a burden of three hundred years. His acquiescence to the demand of the king of the Amonites would mean uprooting tens of thousands of people from their ancestral land and turning them, along with all the members of their families, into homeless refugees. This is an immoral demand that will obligate the inhabitants of Gilad to fight with their backs against the wall, with no other alternative. God will judge those who force war on a peace-loving population.

**VII. The Vow**

Then Yiftach swore a vow to the Lord. He said, "If You deliver the Amonites into my hand, then whatever comes out of the doors of my home to meet me when I return safely from the Amonites shall be for the Lord, and I shall offer it up as a burnt offering." (11:30-31)

In this section, we will address the most painful element in the story of Yiftach – the vow. For this, we must continue reading beyond the *haftara*:

Yiftach arrived home in Mitzpa and there was his daughter, coming out to meet him, drumming and dancing! She was his one and only – he had no son or daughter besides her. When he saw her, he rent his clothes. "O, O, my daughter," he said, "you have brought me down low – you have become my scourge! I have gone and opened up my mouth to the Lord, and I cannot go back." "O, Father" she said to him, "If you opened your mouth up to the Lord, do to me whatever it was that came out of your mouth – after what the Lord has done for you, defeating your enemies the Amonites. Only grant me this one thing," she said to her father. "Let me go for two months so that I may roam the hills and weep for my maidenhood, my friends and I." "Go," he said to her, and sent her off for two months; she and her friends went and wept for her maidenhood upon the hills. At the end of two months, she returned to her father. He did to her what he had vowed to do. She never knew a man. It became a custom in Israel: every year, the daughters of Israel would go and lament the daughter of Yiftach the Gileadite for four days a year. (*Shoftim* 11:34-40)

1. What was Yiftach thinking when he took his vow? What was more likely than that his daughter would go out to greet and welcome him?! Why is he so disappointed when this is indeed what happened in reality?

A *midrash* raises the possibility that he meant an animal:

"Then Yiftach swore a vow to the Lord… then whatever comes out." At that time, the Holy One, blessed be He, was angry with him: If a dog or a pig or a camel came out of his house, would he sacrifice it to Me? The Holy One, blessed be He, prepared his daughter for him. (*Tanchuma Bechukotai* 7)

But Yiftach did not speak of a random going out, but of going out to welcome him. This can be done only by a person, not by an animal. Furthermore, a pig or a camel would not come out from the doors of his house, but from its quarters in the courtyard.

It seems that Yiftach was sure that all of the daughters of Gilad would wait to greet him at the door to his house, like the women who came out to greet David and Shaul following their victory over Golyat. Yiftach saw himself choosing the best and most beautiful among them and offering her as a burnt-offering to God. In reality, no young women went out to greet him after his victory. The ungrateful men of Gilad were not interested in him, and kept their promise to make him their leader under coercion, in accordance with the oath of the elders. The only one who loved and wished to honor him was his daughter, and she went out to meet him with drums and dancing. Yiftach's disappointment was therefore twofold: he realized both that the people of Gilad were not interested in him and that he was losing his daughter, the only person who loved him.

2. Under the assumption that the vow was directed at a person who would come out to greet him, what is the meaning of Yiftach's vow to offer that person as a burnt-offering to God?

The vow can be understood based on a *midrash* relating to the binding of Yitzchak:

The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: Avraham, I will not break my covenant – "But I will establish My covenant with Yitzchak," when I said to you: "Take your son." "I will not violate My covenant" – Is this what I said to you: Slaughter him? No! Offer him. (*Bereishit Rabba* 56)

An animal that is brought as an offering must be slaughtered and its blood must be sprinkled on the altar. But a person who is brought as an offering is consecrated to God for the purpose of His service. From this perspective, Yiftach's vow is similar to that of Channa, the mother of Shmuel:

She then swore a vow: "Lord of Hosts, if You look down with sympathy on the misery of Your handmaid and recognize me; if You do not forget Your handmaid and grant Your handmaid a son, I will then give him to the Lord all the days of his life, and a razor will never pass over his head. (I *Shmuel* 1:11)

This is how several commentators understood the meaning of Yiftach's vow, that he vowed to dedicate his daughter to the service of God:

Whatever comes out of the doors of his house must be a living thing. And if it will be of the human race, he will be dedicated to God and designated exclusively for His service. And if he will be male, he will not have to abstain from women, because he will already be designated for the service of God without that, as we find with the priests and the Levites. And we find this wording also with Shmuel, even though he took a wife and fathered sons with her. But if she will be a woman, she will have to abstain from men, for if she has a husband, she cannot be designated for God's service. It is for this reason that Yiftach rent his garments when he saw his daughter coming out to greet him, because the oath will obligate her not to be with a man. (Ralbag, *Shoftim* 11:31)[[8]](#footnote-8)

According to *Chazal,* Rashi, and the Ramban, however, Yiftach literally offered his daughter as a sacrifice, like the Amonites his neighbors, who offered their children to the Molekh. He did not know that the Torah absolutely forbade this.[[9]](#footnote-9) *Chazal* expounded the verse: "They built altars for the Baal, to burn their children in fire as burnt-offerings to the Baal – something I never commanded or spoke about and that never entered My mind" (*Yirmeyahu* 19:5):

"Something I never commanded" – this refers to the son of Mesha king of Moav… "or spoke about" – this is Yiftach, "and that never entered My mind" – this refers to Yitzchak." (*Ta'anit* 4a)

3. *Chazal* ask why Yiftach didn't annul his vow:

Was not Pinchas there? And yet he said: "And I cannot go back"? Rather, Pinchas said: I am the High Priest, son of the High Priest; shall I humble myself and go to an ignoramus? Yiftach said: I am the leader of the tribes of Israel, head of the officers; shall I humble myself and go to a commoner?! Between the two of them, this unfortunate girl was lost from the world, and both of them were held accountable for her death. (*Tanchuma Bechukotai* 7)

This is a very broad issue, beyond the scope of this forum.[[10]](#footnote-10)

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. a. My remarks on this *haftara* are very long; I recommend that the reader study them over two or three years, upon reaching this *parasha*.

b. Unless otherwise specified, all references are to the book of *Shoftim.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I will not deal here with the details of this calculation. The interested reader is invited to read the essay "*Yiftach be-Doro*" in my book, *Ha-Mikra'ot ha-Mitchadshim*, Alon Shevut 5775, pp. 69-70. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. These tribes were also united in the days of Eglon, king of Moav, but under Eglon: "And the Lord inspired Eglon, king of Moav, to overcome Israel… He rallied the Amonites and Amalek to him, and they launched an attack on Israel and seized the City of Palms" (*Shoftim* 3:12-13). In the days of Amos, the prophet mentions (chapters 1-2) that the people of Amon have a king, whereas the people of Moav have only a judge; this implies that at that time, Moav and Amon were both ruled by the king of the Amonites. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The suggestion that she was a concubine is a compromise between the expressions found in our *haftara*. On the one hand, she is referred to as a "harlot," while on the other hand, Yiftach is "the son of another woman/wife." The commentators propose other possibilities as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Like Sara, who gave birth to Yitzchak after her handmaiden gave birth to Yishmael, and like Rachel, who gave birth to Yosef after Bilha, her handmaiden, gave birth to Dan and Naftali. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See *Yerushalmi Shevi'it* 6:1. There are also other opinions. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See also my study of the *haftara* of *Parashat Ki Tisa*, regarding Rashi's identification of the Carmel and what we know today. [Editor’s note: That *shiur* is available [here](https://etzion.org.il/he/tanakh/torah/sefer-shemot/parashat-ki-tisa/Hashem-hu-ha-e-lohim) in Hebrew (see note 3) but has not yet been translated into English.] [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The Radak interpreted the same way in the name of his father and was inclined to agree with him. The Ramban in his commentary to *Vayikra* (27:29) cites this interpretation in the name of the Ibn Ezra and rejects it. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. This may be by chance, or it may have significance. According to my calculation, Yiftach lived at the beginning of the 12th century BCE. The Trojan War also took place in the first years of that century. According to Homer's *Iliad*, the commander of the Achaean Greek armies, Agamemnon, sacrificed his daughter Iphigenia to Artemis, the goddess of the hunt, for his success in the war, and she cooperated with him. In another version of this myth, she was replaced at the last minute with a deer for the purpose of his sacrifice, in which case there is a strange similarity to the story of the binding of Yitzchak. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The interested reader is referred to my essay, "*Ma Chori ha-Af ha-Gadol ha-Zeh*," in *Ha-Mikra'ot ha-Mitchadshot*, pp. 72-128. For these purposes, see especially pp. 106-114. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)