

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHETS
SEFER SHOFTIM

Dedicated by Paul and Diana Appelbaum in honor of the first wedding
anniversary of Yoni and Emily Appelbaum

Chapter 11 Conclusion
Yiftach's Vow
By Rav Michael Hattin

INTRODUCTION

Last time, we considered the account of Yiftach's crushing victory against the Ammonites. Recall that the tribes of Israel, having strayed once again from God, were subjected to eighteen years of harsh oppression, this time at the hands of the Ammonites. These Ammonites, centered around their Transjordanian capital of Rabbat Benei Ammon, had not only terrorized the Israelite tribes east of the River Yarden but had also crossed the river and subjugated Yehuda, Binyamin, and Efraim.

Providence selected an unlikely hero to rescue a chastened Israel: Yiftach of Gil'ad, a well-liked local brigand – the son of a prostitute! – who had earlier been expelled by his legitimate half-brothers from the family homestead. As the war clouds gathered, the elders of Gil'ad unexpectedly approached Yiftach to lead the people, and he was summoned from the otherwise-unknown "land of Tov." This region, literally "the land of goodness," is surely more than a geographic location. It is also an ironic commentary on the curious reversal of fortunes: those who had earlier countenanced Yiftach's unfair expulsion with studied indifference or even active malice now found themselves in the land of dire straits, while the object of their scorn – whom they had forced to lead the life of an outlaw – had yet found a land of goodness for himself.

Yiftach secured a pledge from the elders that he would not be deposed after he had secured victory, thus exposing for all to see the venal and insincere nature of their well-timed request of him that he now return to lead the people. After all, prior to the Ammonite build-up, had any of the elders ever been troubled by Yiftach's unfair treatment at the hands of his brothers? Had any of them made even a minimal effort to restore him to his former life? But constrained by the exigencies of the hour, the elders agreed, and after he had rallied the people and sent reasonable entreaties to the Ammonite king that were rebuffed, Yiftach led the tribes into battle. Miraculously, his force of irregulars handily defeated the Ammonite hordes on the battlefield and went on to reduce twenty of their towns, and thus it was that Yiftach returned Israelite hegemony to the disputed lands.

A TIME FOR VOWING

On the eve of his departure to battle, Yiftach made a vow with the intent of securing Divine favor, namely, that he would offer sacrifice to God upon his triumphant return. Such conduct is itself unremarkable and should not necessarily be misconstrued as a mercenary attempt to "bribe" the Deity. In fact, there are a number of other Biblical episodes that employ the vow motif in a similar fashion. Recall, for instance, that after Ya'akov our forefather had fled from home and hearth into the uncertainty of exile because of the murderous wrath of his brother Esav, he eventually came to a place that he himself would later call Beit El. Resting his weary head within a protective cordon of stones, Ya'acov was soon awakened from his fitful sleep by a heavenly vision of Divine concern and care. On the morrow, Ya'acov took one of the larger stones and poured oil upon it, in order to set it up as a marker of the place where he had encountered God. Then, he pronounced a vow to be fulfilled if God would only preserve him on his journey, sustain him, and return him one day in peace to the land of Canaan: "...this very stone that I have set up as a marker shall be a place of worshipping God, and from all that You shall give me I will offer a tithe to You" (Bereishit 28:10-22).

Much later, and in a situation more similar to our context, the people of Israel collectively undertook a vow on the eve of their battle with the Canaanite king of Arad, as they neared the Promised Land at the conclusion of wilderness peregrinations:

The Canaanite King of Arad who dwelt in the Negev heard that Israel had traversed by the way of the Atarim. He made war with Israel and captured captives from them. Israel undertook a vow to

God and said: 'if You will allow me to wholly prevail against this people, then I shall utterly dedicate their cities (and the victory to You, by not taking from the spoils)'. God hearkened to the voice of Israel and gave over the Canaanite to them, so that Israel utterly destroyed them and their cities. They therefore called that place Chorma.
(Bemidbar 21:1-3)

In both of these situations, one taken from the world of worship and the other from the world of warfare, the vow is utilized as an incentive, spurring on the supplicant to undertake superhuman effort against an adversarial situation. Through exercising the vow, one's trust in God becomes the means by which resolve in the face of difficult odds is yet maintained and devastating despair is overcome. The vow becomes an expression of steadfast faith that God will not disappoint, even when the situation may seem less than sanguine. We may even go so far as to argue that a vow undertaken in such circumstances demonstrates humility on the part of the one who so affirms, as if they themselves recognize that they do not possess sufficient merit to deserve Divine favor, if not for the power of the pledge to "secure a loan."

A QUESTION OF CONTENT

What is remarkable concerning Yiftach's vow, however, relates to its content, for while the warrior indicates that he will sacrifice to God upon his triumphant return from battle, he is (intentionally?) vague concerning the thing to be sacrificed:

Yiftach declared a vow to God and he said: 'if you will completely surrender Benei Amon into my hands, then that which (literally "he that") shall go forth from the portals of my house to greet me when I return in peace from Benei Amon will be for God, and I shall offer it (literally "him") as a burnt offering!' (Shoftim 11:29-31).

The Rabbis, in commenting upon this episode, declared:

Said Rabbi Shemuel bar Nachmani in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: Four Biblical figures initiated vows. Three of them asked inappropriately but God nevertheless responded appropriately, while the fourth asked inappropriately and God responded in kind. The first was Eli'ezer the servant of Avraham, for he stated that "the maiden to whom I shall say 'tilt please your pitcher so that I might drink' and she shall respond 'drink! And I

will also water your camels', You have proven her to be the one for Yitzchak..." (Bereishit 24:14). And what if she would have been a Canaanite maidservant or a prostitute? Nevertheless, God brought about that it was Rivka.

The second was Calev, for he stated that "I shall give my daughter Achsa in marriage to the one who shall capture Kiryat Sefer..." (Yehoshua 15:16). And what if he would have been a Canaanite or else a slave? Nevertheless, God brought about that it was Otniel.

The third was King Shaul, for he stated that "the one who strikes him (Goliath) down shall be given great wealth by the king and he (the king) shall also give him his daughter" (Shemuel 1:17:25). And what if he would have been an Ammonite, a Canaanite or a *mamzer* (the offspring of an adulterous or incestuous relationship)? Nevertheless, God brought about that it was David.

The fourth was Yiftach, for he stated "that which shall go forth from the portals of my house to greet me when I return in peace from Benei Amon will be for God, and I shall offer it as a burnt offering!." And what if it would have been a camel, a donkey or a dog? Would he still have offered it? This time, however, God responded by bringing about that it was his own daughter! (Cited with variations in Talmud Bavli Tractate Ta'anit 4a, Midrash Vayikra Rabbah 37:4, Yalkut Shim'oni Yehoshua 25)

EXERCISING CARE WITH ONE'S WORDS

In three of the pivotal examples quoted above, the protagonists in question made ambiguous commitments that related to marriage and that concerned the identity of potential mates or suitors. Eli'ezer the loyal steward of Avraham should have been more specific about the qualities of the woman that he was seeking as a match for Yitzchak, Avraham's son. Old Calev should have been more careful to indicate what other traits ought to characterize a potential suitor for his daughter, over and above valor and courage. Shaul, in attempting to encourage someone to step forward in order to battle the Philistine giant Goliath, should have stipulated more in his challenge to the people of Israel, so that mighty but otherwise inappropriate individuals would not apply to become sons-in-law. Nevertheless, in all these situations, Divine providence smiled upon these leaders and their rash words did not come back to haunt them. But Yiftach, alone among them all in dedicating his vow to

God's glory exclusively – "that which shall go forth from the portals of my house...will be for God, and I shall offer it as a burnt offering" – lived to regret his impulsive offer, for it was his own daughter that came out to greet him.

The Rabbis, truth be told, could not imagine that Yiftach intended anything other than to offer an animal as a sacrifice to God. When they wished to characterize the impetuosity of his vow, they stated that Yiftach should have exercised more caution, for instead of being met upon his return by an animal from the permitted species fit for sacrifice such as a sheep, goat or cow, he could just have easily been greeted by "a camel, a donkey or a dog." But why should this lack of specificity have aroused so much Divine displeasure? After all, didn't Yiftach undertake the vow in the best tradition of meeting adversity with a call to piety, and with God's glory alone in mind?

CONSIDERING THE *AKEIDA*

The answer, I believe, is to be found in noting a striking series of parallels between this episode, that culminates in the sacrifice of Yiftach's daughter, and its only (almost only!) analog in all of Tanakh – the *Akeida* (see Bereishit Chapter 22). While it is beyond the scope of this essay to analyze the *Akeida*, we may nevertheless note the following similarities as well as some of the telling differences. In both situations, it is the relationship with God that is highlighted – Avraham is called upon to demonstrate his absolute loyalty, while Yiftach seeks to show his dedication and gratitude. In both episodes, the one singled out by God for immolation is an only child described in the original text as "*yachid*" (Bereishit 22:2) or "*yechida*" (Shoftim 11:34). In both passages, there is an anxious period of dreadful anticipation between the pronouncement and the fulfillment – three days journey separate God's command to Avraham from the building of the altar upon Mount Moriah, while two months pass between Yiftach's return from battle and the sacrifice of his daughter. In both circumstances, it is the parent-child bond that is so sorely tried, with the parent showing superhuman preparedness to carry out the terrible act and the child demonstrating Herculean resignation, staggering acceptance and extraordinary trust. At the same time, as the awful moment draws closer, there are words of affection that pass between the parent and the child, with the child invariably addressing the parent as "*avi*" or "my father" (Bereishit 22:7; Shoftim 11:36) while the father in turn refers to "my son" or "my daughter" (Bereishit 22:7; Shoftim 11:35).

There are, as well, a number of glaring differences. At the *Akeida*, it is God who demands the unthinkable of Avraham as a trial of faith, while in our chapter it is Yiftach who initiates the challenge in order to secure victory upon the battlefield. At the *Akeida*, God specifically selects Yitzchak as the intended sacrifice, while it is serendipity that apparently singles out Yiftach's daughter. At the *Akeida*, Yitzchak's words are not recorded (could his response have been anything other than awesome silence?), while in our passage, Yiftach's daughter not only fails to discourage her father from carrying out the act, but actually ENCOURAGES him to do so: "She said to him: 'Father, you have made a vow to God, therefore do to me what you did declare, since God has performed great vengeance upon your enemies, Benei Amon!'" (Shoftim 11:36). And, most tragically, at the *Akeida* God stays Avraham's hand at the last moment, while here there is no Divine intervention to save Yiftach's daughter from her father's fulfillment of his reckless vow.

AN INESCAPABLE CONCLUSION

The startling conclusion of the matter and the shocking explanation for all of the above *Akeida* analogs is therefore the following: Yiftach DID NOT intend at all to offer an animal as sacrifice to God upon his return, but rather another HUMAN BEING! When he states that 'if you will completely surrender Benei Amon into my hands, then that which (literally "he that") shall go forth from the portals of my house to greet me when I return in peace from Benei Amon will be for God, and I shall offer it (literally "him") as a burnt offering!' he is not referring to a lower creature, but rather to a person. The first person, says Yiftach, that shall come forth from my home, passing the threshold of the doorway, shall be dedicated to God as a burnt offering!

There is no reference in this passage to gates or to barns, to fields or to sheepfolds, but rather only to "the portals of my house." And animals, though in ancient times they may have lived in close quarters with their human masters, nevertheless did not share with them the actual living space implied by "house." The reference to "the portals of my house" may therefore be a poetic way of saying "the first member of my household that I encounter." That person whom Providence would fatefully select could conceivably be a servant or slave, a cousin or clan member, a loyal supporter or else a casual visitor, but Yiftach surely did not expect it to be "his only child"! His stunning surprise relates not the fact that a person has come forth to greet him (for that was his intent), but rather that it was, tragically, his own beloved daughter.

LEXICOGRAPHICAL EVIDENCE

The idiom used, both in Yiftach's vow as well as in its aftermath, to describe the act of going forth to greet – "*latzeit likrat*" (11:31,34) – occurs almost 40 times in the Tanakh. Sometimes it is used to describe a hostile encounter such as going forth to meet the enemy on the battlefield (for example in Bemidbar 20:18,20; Shoftim 20:31; Divrei Ha-yamim 2:35:20), often it is used in the more neutral sense of rendezvousing or else the friendly sense of greeting (for example in Shemot 18:7; Shoftim 4:18; Yeshayahu 7:5), but it is NEVER used to describe anything but an encounter between two or more human beings. In fact, the term "*likrat*" by itself, though it occurs well over 100 times, only once refers to a meeting with a non-human (see Shoftim 14:5, concerning Shimshon's unexpected encounter with the young lion).

The inescapable conclusion, therefore, is that Yiftach's vow was a repugnant and twisted act of piety that constituted an absolute antithesis to the *Akeida*. It was met by God's own ironic and thundering response of disapproval, in the guise of Yiftach's own daughter who unexpectedly (but not arbitrarily) went forth to meet him "with drums and with dances" (11:34). It is for this reason that Yiftach did not merit a Divinely orchestrated turn of events for the good, as did the other three impulsive avowers, for though God may be forgiving concerning imprecise language, He will not forego the monstrous crime of pledging murder in His name. There must be consequences for such villainy, and let them fall upon the head of the perpetrator in the most unexpected but forceful fashion! And in the larger context, what this episode corroborates is that which we have sorrowfully suspected: Israel and its leaders, in this horrible culmination of the insidious process that we have seen underway since the book began, have become indistinguishable from their Canaanite nemeses!

RECALLING THE INFAMY OF THE CANAANITES

Now the Canaanites, it will be recalled from our earlier studies, were technologically more advanced, politically more astute, and culturally more aware than their Israelite neighbors, but none of that "enlightenment" seems to have been translated into a heightened moral sensitivity (is it ever?). Over and over again, the Torah wages a war of words against the Canaanite infatuation with idolatry, sexual immorality, magic, and cruelty, but the most serious indictment against their societies is stated in the following passage, and it concerns, of all things, the act of worship:

When God your Lord extirpates from before you these nations (whose land) you go in to possess, and you shall drive them out and dwell in their land, then be very careful lest you be ensnared by them after they have been destroyed from before you. Do not inquire after their gods saying: "just as these nations served their gods, so too shall I"! Do not do so to God your Lord, FOR ALL THE ABOMINATIONS THAT GOD HATES THEY PERFORM FOR THEIR GODS, FOR EVEN THEIR SONS AND DAUGHTERS THEY BURN IN THE FIRE TO THEIR GODS! (Rather) you shall observe all of the things that I command you, do not add to it nor take away from it...(Devarim 12:29-13:1)

The above text from Sefer Devarim clearly links devotion to the gods with human or child sacrifice, while making it abundantly clear that the God of Israel abhors such conduct. The *Akeida*/Yiftach matrix is thus reinforced: to Avraham, God demonstrates that what He truly desires is utter devotion and trust but He WILL NOT countenance the sacrifice of Yitzchak. The drama is not only an exploration of the makings of profound faith, but also, simultaneously, a harsh polemic against prevailing Canaanite practice. And as for Yiftach, though he is a self-styled leader of Israelite tribes and a seeming servant of all that is just and holy, he is at the same time a product of the terrible effects of corrosive Canaanite culture that seeks to guarantee victory upon the battlefield by vowing to immolate an innocent human being!

ANOTHER EXAMPLE

Lest the reader object to this reading by disagreeing with the fundamental premise that Canaanites were capable of such things, consider the following episode from the second Book of Kings, Chapter 3. While the historical specifics are not relevant to our discussion, the context concerns a battle that takes place between a confederacy composed of the King of Yehuda, the king of Yisrael and the king of Edom, against the king of Moav. While the Moavites prepare to resolutely defend their border, they are routed and overrun, prompting their king to do a desperate (but not unthinkable) act:

He took his firstborn son, who would have ruled after him, and he offered him as a burnt offering upon the ramparts, so that there might be great fury upon Israel...(2:3:27).

There is more than a passing similarity here to our own passage, for in both situations it is defeat on the battlefield that is meant to be averted. Could not Yiftach, who preceded this king of Moav by some three centuries, not have been thinking similar thoughts, that God desires desperate acts in order to provide solutions to desperate situations? Could Yiftach not have believed that he would secure Divine favor by offering that which is most precious and dear to the Deity, namely inviolable human life?

THE RESPONSE OF YIFTACH'S DAUGHTER

Perhaps the most telling indication that our reading is inescapably correct is provided by Yiftach's own daughter, for her response to the turn of events is unexpected to say the least. Should she not cry out against her father's monstrous vow, should she not engage God Himself in heated and desperate debate? Her explicit approval of her father's pledge and willingness to become his sacrifice (11:36) can only mean one thing: she herself regarded his vow of killing another human being for the sake of God as a pious pronouncement that (unfortunately?) had found her as its unintended target. Like her own father as well as the morally corrupt Israelite society around her, she had imbibed only too deeply cherished Canaanite beliefs, at first making those twisted practices "fit for consumption" and then transforming them into acts of blind and utter devotion by grotesquely transposing them from molten fetishes and gods of fertility to the God of Israel Himself! What else could one of the later prophets have meant when he solemnly declared:

With what shall I approach God and show deference to the Lord of heaven? Shall I approach Him with burnt offerings or with one-year-old calves? Shall God desire thousands of rams or tens of thousands of rivers of oil, SHALL I OFFER MY FIRSTBORN FOR MY TRANSGRESSION, THE FRUIT OF MY WOMB TO ATONE FOR THE SIN OF MY SOUL? Man may have declared to you what he thinks is good, but what does God require of you, except to perform justice, to love compassion and to walk humbly with your Lord! (Mikha 6:6-8, 8th century BCE)

So vile was the notion that Yiftach could have been initially considering such an act that the Rabbis, in their endless and noble capacity for exoneration of the culpable, refused to entertain the possibility. Thus Yiftach was instead charged with the much less serious indiscretion of rash and impulsive language. If so, however, one has to wonder mightily about the severity of the Divine response. In similar fashion, so evil was

the deed of immolating his own daughter in the final fulfillment of the vow, that the Biblical text itself refused to state the words, choosing instead to describe the deed with a polite but unmistakable circumlocution: "...he did to her in accordance with the vow that he had made" (11:39). In the end, though, the Rabbis certainly had little positive to say concerning Yiftach, and he is not remembered as a role model in any sense of the term. Quite the contrary. When the Rabbis wanted to teach us that every generation suffers the leaders that it deserves, they said: "Yiftach in his generation is like Shemuel in his generation...even a man who is the least of men but who has been appointed as an overseer of the community, must be accorded due respect" (see Talmud Bavli Tractate Rosh Hashanah 25a-25b). The former became a paradigm for poor leadership, the life and career of the latter constituted an ideal.

REVISING OUR (MIS)CONCEPTIONS

We must accordingly revise our mental image of the episode. Now we see in our mind's eye brave Yiftach preparing to go out to battle, anxious and uncertain but brimming with the confidence inspired by his vindication. As he prepares to take leave of the elders of Gil'ad who had come to fetch him, and from the assembly of the people who had apprehensively witnessed his investiture at Mitzpah, Yiftach casts one last long look towards the verdant hills that stretch out in the direction of his own home. His mind races with a thousand desperate thoughts and plans, his heart pounds with the enormity of the task that lies before him. But Yiftach, after all, though a brigand by trade, is a servant of God in spirit. How will he appease this Deity and cause His blessing to shower him with victory?

Taking a cue from his cultural surroundings, and still possessed by the thought of the home and family that he fears he may never see again, Yiftach pronounces his fateful vow: "Oh mighty God, if You will but grant me triumph, then I will present You with the most valuable offering of all, a member of my own household, perhaps a relative or a dear friend! He will understand our desperate situation, He will not protest this act of extreme devotion perpetrated upon His being, for such has been the sanctioned and indeed hallowed practice among the peoples of this land from time immemorial!"

Remarkably, God grants Yiftach unexpected victory and he returns home flushed with excitement. The accolades of the people are still ringing in his ears as he expectantly retraces his path towards his beloved

homestead. In the distance he can hear the rhythmic beating of the drum and the sound of song, and he absentmindedly wonders who might it be that has come forth. "God was pleased with my vow", he remarks, as he draws closer, "and now I must repay Him with joy!" But soon the figure is recognizable, her sweet voice suddenly familiar, and Yiftach falls to the ground, doubled over in grief. How unexpected was the victory against the Ammonites, but how unexpectedly has merriment turned to tragic and indescribable mourning! His only daughter (how innocent her smile was but a moment ago) attempts to raise him up, his other family members rush to his side, but no one can make out the incoherent cries that issue forth, now punctuated by heartbreaking sobs.

Slowly, he regains his composure and then he solemnly declares the ineffable: the vow to God (cursed be the day that it was ever pronounced! Cursed be the people who could countenance such things!) must be fulfilled. Silence falls upon the family now, swelled in number by all of the concerned onlookers who have hurriedly come in response to the commotion. All eyes are upon Yiftach's daughter, his only child and truly his most beloved thing in the entire world. Her drum lies in the dust where it had fallen when she had run to greet her father as he collapsed, and her young and shapely shoulders, still draped in the brightly colored robe that she had specially donned for her father's return, now seem stooped and hollow. Though her eyes brim with tears, her voice is soft and comforting: "Father, you have made a vow to God, therefore do to me what you did declare, since God has performed great vengeance upon your enemies, Benei Amon!"

GOD'S RESPONSE

All are struck by her sincerity and by Yiftach's steely resolve, the people nod approvingly, and even the blue skies above seem pleased by the outcome. But there is much consternation in heaven as God disappointingly looks on, not at all indifferent to what has transpired but determined to let human beings exercise their dismal choices. Later, His thoughts will be articulated by Yirmiyahu, the Late First Temple prophet who lived to see Yiftach's evil decision played out a thousand times around the outskirts of Jerusalem and in the verdant valley of Hinnom just to the west of the city wall:

...thus says God of hosts the Lord of Israel, behold I will bring evil upon this place, so that all that hear of it their ears shall ring. This is because they have abandoned me and have made this place unrecognizable, they have offered incense there to other gods that

neither they, nor the kings of Yehuda, nor their ancestors knew, and they have filled this place with the blood of the innocent. They have built high places to Ba'al upon which to burn their children by fire as sacrifices to Ba'al. These are things that I did not command, nor did I say, nor did I ever contemplate! (Yirmiyahu 19:3-5).

Our conception of the episode must therefore be altered. Far from being an innocent victim of Divine capriciousness and cruelty, a casualty of Kafkaesque circumstances that have conspired to destroy him, Yiftach himself has chosen the course that has brought him to this terrible moment. It was not an innocent or ill-considered slip of the tongue that condemned him to losing his own beloved daughter, but rather a conscious and deliberate pronouncement of iniquitous malevolence. And rather than being cast as an innocent and pure sufferer for her only sin of loving and trusting her father too much, his daughter ought to be regarded as an accomplice to his act of infamy.

And as for all of Israel that stood by their side in the aftermath of that terrible moment, we ought to compare their acquiescence to another and later instance of a rash vow pronounced in battle, this time by King Shaul who battled the Philistines (See Shemuel 1:14:20-45). King Shaul forbade his army, on pain of death, to partake of any food or drink until the discomfited Philistines had been completely routed. Shaul's own son Yonatan, however, had not been present when the vow was uttered, and tasted from the wild honey that he found during the course of the pursuit of the enemy. Though Shaul felt compelled to stand by his vow, "the people redeemed Yonatan so that he did not die." But in our passage, Israel did nothing to avert the decree, thus indicting themselves of having succumbed to the very Canaanite evil that God had repeatedly called upon them to extirpate so that they might avoid being consumed by it in turn.

CONCLUSION

And what of God in all of this? What was His role? As is most often the case, God remained silent, allowing people the opportunity to make their evil choices and to live (or die) by the consequences. It is a basic premise of Biblical theology that human beings are free to make decisions of destiny. Though we recoil from human acts of violence and cruelty, we simultaneously champion our freedom to choose. The latter is truly only possible if we are willing to accept the possibility of the former. But God's silence in the arena of human history should not be

misconstrued as absence. Patiently, He waits, hoping that we will choose the good. And relentlessly, He makes His expectations of us clear, through the study of the very books of Tanakh that constitute His message to Israel and to mankind. God is therefore never silent, for His words reverberate across the cosmos and down through the generations until the end of time.

As we leave this chilling chapter behind, we recognize once again the basic progress of the book: with each passing generation, with each unfolding era of oppression, with each new leader that arises to save, the tribes of Israel slip farther and farther away from their goal and from the lofty challenge that God has placed before them. How well placed now seems the rites of mourning yearly practiced by the daughters of Israel in commemoration of the young girl's demise (Shoftim 11:40), for truly there is much to mourn as this chapter concludes. And as for us, a nagging and uncomfortable question now surfaces: how will the tribes of Israel ever succeed in changing the course?

Next time, we will briefly consider the end of Yiftach's public career as outlined in Chapter 12, before moving on to introduce Shimshon the Nazirite in Chapter 13. Readers are invited to prepare.

Shabbat Shalom

Post script: the above analysis must of course assume that Yiftach's intention in pronouncing his vow was to carry out an act of burnt sacrifice upon an altar, and this he did in due course to his own daughter. Certainly the straightforward reading of the relevant verses implies this. Some of the medieval commentaries, however, unable to countenance such an abomination in ancient Israel, preferred to understand the actual offering of the daughter as more of a dedication to a monastic life, so that she led a life of hermitage and isolation, barred from marriage and separated from society. The ancient Rabbis, however, while not willing to explain that Yiftach all along intended an act of human sacrifice, nevertheless rejected this possibility and taught that Yiftach's daughter suffered the terrible fate of immolation in the name of God that is implied by the text. My analysis has gone one shocking step further by suggesting that Yiftach's vow was from the outset much more sinister than we had imagined. In pronouncing his words, he demonstrated that he had essentially adopted the worldview of the Canaanites for whom human sacrifice was, if not commonplace, at least acceptable under dire circumstances such as the fear of imminent defeat in battle.