

# Haftorah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Chukkat

- Gidon Rothstein

Haftarah No. 6: Parshat Chukkat-- Judges 11:1-33

## Why Are The Sages So Down on Jephthah?

We ordinarily delve into *haftarot* trying to understand the connection to the Torah reading or by noting that it starts or ends at an odd place. This week, I want to come at those questions by analyzing tradition's negativity towards Jephthah.

In last week's *haftarah*, when Samuel rebukes the Jews for rejecting God's leadership in favor of a king, he lists six leaders who had saved the Jews. The Sages think the list is divided by great and mediocre leaders, and put Jephthah in the latter group. So, too, Rosh haShanah 25b phrases our obligation to listen to the leaders of our generation by saying, "Jephthah in his generation is like Samuel in his." Tracking how the Sages came to be so negative about Jephthah will also answer our usual questions about the connection between the Torah reading and haftarah.

## A Problematic Family Background

The text describes Jephthah as the son of a *zonah*; like with Rahab, there is some question as to the meaning of the word. Targum Jonathan assumes it means innkeeper (rather than prostitute), while Radak assumes she was a concubine, a quasi-marital relationship which does not involve the full protection of Jewish marriage, particularly a *ketubbah*.

A *ketubbah*, let us recall, protects the woman from capricious divorce, since it would cost the husband money. (In the Sages's time, we should note, people either lived together or got divorced; there was no tolerance for men refusing to live with their wives and yet also withholding a divorce). In a relationship without a *ketubbah*, the woman's security depended wholly on her ability to constantly please her husband. Phrased that way, we see the element of prostitution, since a prostitute as well is only kept around for as long as her services are required.

When Jephthah's brothers deny him an inheritance because he is the son of a different woman—a meaningless statement in legal terms, since all of a man's sons inherit, regardless of mother—Radak quotes an opinion that that they objected to her having been from a different tribe. This only adds to the evidence that Jephthah was raised with a poor or absent sense of familial belonging.

Jephthah leaves, and goes to the land of Tov, where the verse tells us that empty people gathered to him. Baba Kama 92a cites that as an example of the popular saying that bad trees grow near bad trees. At first glance, it is not clear why the Talmud is so negative; when King David flees Saul, he is also joined by people who have problems, owe money, or are bitter of heart, descriptions that do not sound significantly better than "empty people."

## The Oath and Its Aftermath

The Sages also lay into Jephthah for the oath he made, in which he promised to offer God

whatever came out of his house first, should he return successfully from war. We know that that ended up being his daughter, but Taanit 4a notes that Saul and Eliezer made similarly inappropriate requests. Each could have produced problematic outcomes, such as an inappropriate wife for Isaac or a poor husband for Michal. Yet only Jephthah faces the consequences of his poorly phrased oath, and bears it in terms of losing a member of his family.

One final example clinches our view of Jephthah as flawed in family connections. One group of Midrashim assumes his daughter was actually killed (shocking for several reasons, among them that halachah does not allow this), and blames Jephthah and Pinchas, who each refused to go to the other to annul the vow. In that reading, both men were too arrogant to forego their honor, but we recoil even more from Jephthah, since he allowed his sense of himself to get in the way of saving his own daughter!

### **Jephthah's Sense of History**

Jephthah drives a hard bargain with the elders who seek his assistance. We see that his brothers' mistreatment—and the local elders' failure to protect him from them—irks him still. Once he secures their agreement that he will be their leader, he sends messengers to the Ammonites, who claim the Jews took their land on the way up from Egypt.

Jephthah, despite his upbringing, knows the details of a history that happened three hundred years before. His knowledge is, I think, a central point of the *haftarah*, that these events were so well known, even he knew them.

Aside from denying that the Jews had taken Ammonite land, Jephthah tells them they should be happy with what their god gave them, as the Jews would be happy with what God gave us. The implication that Kemosh might actually be the source of any military success seems so beyond the pale of acceptability we can only wonder how it got into Scripture.

### **A Lost Opportunity**

Especially galling is that Jephthah does not speak of the Land having been given by God, Creator of Heaven and Earth, making original ownership irrelevant. Had he done so, instead of the ensuing war being a test of whether God would answer Jephthah's prayers, it would have been a reconfirmation of the truths of the Exodus.

His failure stands out more when we consider the familial aspect I mentioned earlier. Nachmanides understands the Torah's decision to prohibit Ammonite and Moabite men from marrying into the Jewish people as a result of their failure to return the hospitality Abraham had given Lot.

If so, Jephthah was poised to deliver a lesson for all times. A man of flawed and difficult familial background has been put into the crucial position of leading a segment of the Jewish people when they must confront "cousins" who refused to honor their family connections. He succeeds partially, but had he been able to respond to the elders' request magnanimously, had he been able to see the good of family even without a personal experience of it, he might have delivered the kinds of messages about God that Samuel delivered, where God's centrality would become clear not only to Jews but to non-Jews as well.

He fails in that he only does ok, when he stood on the threshold of greatness. Unable to transcend himself, he goes into history as a leader (as he demanded), but not one who leaves the legacy he might have.

Shabbat Shalom