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Haftarah Chukas
by Julie Zhuk on 2022-07-30

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Haftarah Chukas from Midrash Says on Weekly Haftaros

From the Parsha Chukas we find the story of the Jewish People coming to the borders of Edom and asking the king to pass through his land so they could get to Israel. He didn't want to allow the Jewish people to do this and instead of the Jewish people attacking the Edomim people and forcing their way through, they did something else. G-d had another plan for them, they turned away from the Edomite people and began to travel northward through the desert.

In this week's haftara, the character Yiftach recounts these same events, that took place about three hundred years before and interestingly the haftara compliments the parsha. Yiftach sees that after his encounter with the Edom people, the Jewish people asked the king of Moav to allow them to go through the land that belonged to him. The king of Moav also refused to let the Jews go through and this was hinted at, but wasn't explicitly stated within the Torah. In the end of the parsha of Chukas, there was an idol that the Moav people worshiped named Kemosh. Yiftach cites it as a god of Amon and it is possible that this idol was respected by both nations.

The Midrash wants to draw a parallel between the characters of Moshe and Yiftach. In the parsha of Chukas, Moshe made a mistake in the waters of Meriva. His mistake was very subtle and because of that there are many different opinions about what he did. What he did made G-d call upon the decree that Moshe was going to die and be buried out in the wilderness. At the end of the haftara it alludes to a severe mistake that the character Yiftach made in consecrating to G-d that whatever would come out of his house would be given up as a sacrifice.

Yiftacha was misguided in his piety and made another mistake by insisting to uphold his own vow. Our Sages relate that he was punished right after with an ignoble death. He lost his limbs and his remains would not be buried in one place, instead each limb was interred where it had fallen off. Moses in this parsha and Yiftach in the Haftara found atonement for their mistakes by suffering a disgrace that was related to their burials. There were some things that preceded the Haftara.

The Jewish People did serve idols and at the same time were working their way to go back to G-d. In the book of Judges there is a continuous cycle of the Jewish people being lured into worshipping idols by the Canaanite people. The Canaanite people had an advantage to the Jewish people. The reason for this was because the Jewish people failed to drive the Canaanite people out of the land. In a way G-d was doing this to punish the Jewish people for not following through with His direct order. He caused one of the surrounding nations to oppress the Jewish people. The Jewish people would cry out to G-d and in a merciful way He would send a Judge who would rescue them from their enemy. The judge influenced the Jewish people to improve their behavior and get rid of their idea that it was okay to worship idols. When Yiftach died, Jews went back to worshipping idols.

The cycle just kept repeating itself, the Jewish people seemed to not be able to help themselves. The fact that G-d gave the Jewish people so many different options to repent over a period of almost three hundred years is important to remember. He had a lot of patience for the Jewish People and mercy as well. When the Haftara begins, G-d provides the judges named Asniel, Ehud, Shamgar, Devora, Gidon, Tola, and Yair. When Yair died, the Jewish People were indulging themselves in the idol worship of many different kinds of gods. These gods were Ba'al, the Ashtaros, the gods of Aram, Tzidon, Amon, and the Pelishtim. Every time they turned to idol worship, G-d was punishing them with having nations oppressing them.

For eighteen years, G-d caused the Jewish People to suffer miserably from one of the nations that surrounded them named Amon. They could only take so much pain from their oppressors before they cried out to G-d again. G-d didn't come to their rescue right away, He wasn't accepting their cries of hope not at first. He was referring to them to pray to the gods they were worshiping whatever/whomever these idols were. The Jewish People finally left their days of idol worship and G-d decided to take pity on them.

The new judge who was going to help them was Yiftach, he was not a leader in a spiritual way. The generation at the time didn't deserve and couldn't have someone who was of great elevation. The Jewish People did teshuva and the people of Amon, their army was stationed in Israel. That army withdrew from Israel to the east side of Jordan. The Amon army was now positioned in the city of Gilad and the land of Menashe. The Jewish soldiers were camping out in the neighborhood of Mitzpa. It was close by and there was an atmosphere of dejection and fear was prevalent in the Jewish camp. This was because they didn't have a commander who was equal to the task of fighting the people of Amon.

The haftara starts out explaining the life history of the upcoming leader named Yiftach. He was the firstborn from a man named Gilad. Gilad came from the tribe of Menashe, who lived on the east side of the Jordan River. Yiftach had a mother who was known as a "zona" It was later in Gilad's life that he had more children from a different woman who was distinguished. The term "zona" means to have inferior status, its exact meaning in this context has been debated.

There is a suggested explanation that Yiftach's mother may have been a "harlot" in the plain sense of the word. In that case, the words "Gilad begot Yiftach" are meant to emphasize that Yiftach's paternal lineage was unblemished. Yiftach is also introduced as HaGiladi, the letters Hai and Yud represent the Divine Name at the beginning and end of his name. This is meant to hint that G-d testified that Gilad was his father. There is another explanation that the woman who was Gilad's mother was a "pilegish" that means a concubine.

Some sources see her as a relative to the main wife, since she was not married with a kiddushin and kesuba. The last explanation of what a "zona" meant was that her marriage to Gilad wasn't a proper one. She had insisted on marrying him even though they came from different tribes. Since they came from different tribes some of her property was transferred elsewhere. It would have complicated things if she had sons, they would have inherited that land from her even if they would belong to their father's tribe and not to hers. This kind of a marriage was not considered appropriate. Yiftach's father didn't have any difficulties, Yiftach inherited his father's pure and elevated soul and he conducted himself just like a tzaddik throughout his life. Yiftach's brothers matured and resented the presence of a firstborn from a woman who was in a lower rank than themselves.

Yiftach's brothers threatened him that he didn't deserve to be called by their father's name because he was the son of a woman who didn't have the proper type of Jewish wedding like others did. The brothers didn't want to share any of their father's land with Yiftach. Yiftach was very strong and he was a daring man. He could have fought back with his brothers, but his brothers were acting against the Torah law. Yiftach was aware that he was entitled to a double share in his father's land, no matter what the status his mother had.

This included if it was the case that she was a harlot. Yiftach didn't want to fight with his brothers because he was a tzaddik. All Yiftach wanted was peace and he realized his brothers hated him and wanted nothing to do with him. They felt they were the majority and the elders of Gilad had failed to support him. The elders didn't fight back and wouldn't have solved the problem. The brothers did drive Yiftach away and he didn't protest, he just ran away. He went to Israel to a region called Tov. Tov in Hebrew means good, this place was located north of Israel and it got its name from the ruler called Tov.

Our Sages tell us that it was good since it was outside the Holy Land and there was an obligation to separate the priestly gifts of the terumos and ma'asros from the harvest. Our Sages tell us that the opportunity to fulfill a mitzva was a cause for rejoicing and exemption from it regrettable. At the time a lot of Jews weren't listening or following the Torah and many of them would transgress the mitzva of terumos and ma'asros. This forbade eating or drinking anything without previously separating the dues of the kohanim and leviyim. Those people who were outside of Israel didn't fall into this trap, they were considered to be living in a land that was "good" for them.

Yiftach wanted to leave Israel and one of his reasons for this was to avoid meeting with his brothers. In Israel he would be obligated to visit the Bais Mamidkash at least three times a year. This would be on yom tov, and he would need to bring there his bikurim, his first fruits, and to eat his ma'aser shaini in Jerusalem. His brothers were in Jerusalem and because of his humility and love of peace, he wanted to avoid any kind of confrontation with his brothers. There in the land of Tov, Yiftach was joined by a group of Jews that were known as Anashim raikim.

They were empty-headed people, they lacked Torah wisdom and became their chief and sustained themselves from the booty taken from raids on the Jewish People's enemies. Yiftach was famous for being a strong and courageous officer of war and that news about him spread like wildfire. Our Sages say that it is a principle found in every section of the Tanach that people of a similar nature will come together. The proof from the Prophets is in the verse of this Haftara. That verse states that, "Empty people gathered around Yiftach and went out with him in public to fight. They joined him because he too was empty of Torah wisdom.

When Yiftach was a young man he was qualified to be a leader. This was due to his excellent ability of being a tzaddik, he was a man of upright character and faithful conduct. He was a strong and determined man. The Jewish people became very aware of his fine qualities from his heroic deeds in the region of Tov. The time had finally come for Yiftach to be appointed as a leader and G-d always seeks out those who were persecuted and helped them. This was exactly what G-d was doing now. He was going to compensate Yiftach for the unjust harassment he had suffered by elevating him to a much higher position. There was a delegation of zekainim from the tribe of Menashe that was set out to invite Yiftach to become their head

leader. As the tribe of Menashe got to the land of Tov, they asked Yiftach to join them and they would make him be the captain of their army and fight against the people of Amonim.

Yiftach didn't want to be the leader of their army, he didn't want to help with that. He argued with the men from the tribe of Menashe saying they never protested when Yiftach's brothers drove him out of his father's home. By not protesting against his brothers it made Yiftach feel the men from the tribe of Menashe hated him. He told them their attitude never changed and they were only coming to him now because they were in dire need of help.

These zekainim people admitted to what happened and what they did. They told Yiftach it was right for him to reproach them. They came to the realization what a mistake they made and to demonstrate they no longer felt that way about him, they were asking his sincere forgiveness. They told Yiftach, they didn't send a messenger as it was their usual custom to do so. They traveled to where Yiftach was personally to be able to speak to him. They were convinced he had great merits and was a humble person who had experienced many injustices done to him.

The zekainim believed G-d would perform many miracles for Yiftach. They were asking Yiftach to forgive them now and G-d would forgive them as well and give the people of Amonim into the hands of Yiftach. They asked Yiftach to please return with them to the land of Israel. They wanted Yiftach to be the leader of the people living in Gilad. Yiftach let them know that if he was their leader, they were not doing him any kind of a favor at least not at this time when they were about to go to war. Yiftach told them if they went to war and won, he would become their leader right away.

He asked them if they really wanted to prove they had changed their behavior and attitude towards him, they should proclaim him to be the permanent leader for all of the Jewish people. They agreed to do this and they said that G-d was going to be their witness. It was a well known fact that only one of reputable lineage is appointed as a head, once he would be their leader no one would hate him anymore. They told him it was possible that as part of this agreement the elders would make sure that Yiftach would get a double portion of the land that once belonged to his father. Yiftach agreed to their terms and came back to the city of Gilad with them and the zekainim people had kept their promise of having him be their permanent leader not just in charge of the military.

With the people of Gilad, their new leader Yiftach went to an area called Mitzpa in the portion of the tribe of Binyamin. There the Jewish people had once gathered in the time when the prophet Joshua was alive. In the area of Mitzpa it was confirmed that Yiftach was the new leader of the Jewish people. Yiftach was praying to G-d thanking Him for rescuing him from the lowly situation he was in and giving him this high position.

He begged G-d to deal with him measure for measure. For it to be the same as when Yiftach overlooked the injustice other people had committed against him. He was asking G-d to ignore the transgressions the Jewish people made and give the people of Amonim into the hands of Yiftach. From the beginning of this war with the people of Amonim, Yiftach does try to make a peaceful settlement with the king of Amon. Before going into the land where the Amonim people lived, Yiftach sent delegates to the king of Amon to try and avoid battle. He wanted to settle with

him peacefully instead. There are some contemporary secular commentators who praise Yiftach for being skilled in the art of diplomacy in biblical times.

Yiftach was merely just following the approach the Torah gave when people were in dangerous situations. This was originally established by our forefather, Yaakov. Yaakov came up with this plan when he was threatened by Aisav. Yaakov had prepared himself through prayer, appeasement of his enemy. There was one last resort he had to prepare for battle. Yiftach followed in the same footsteps as Yaakov had and then finally attacked his enemy. Yiftach tried to settle a peace agreement with Amon originally because that was what G-d wanted him to do.

Yiftach was trying to find out what the Jews did that was so wrong in the eyes of king Amon. Yiftach was an upright leader and noticed that the enemies were always venting their waratah specifically on the inhabitants of Gilad for the enemy army was stationed in that area and oppressed its residents. The residents of that region were afraid they had done something against the people of Amonim and if that was the case, G-d wouldn't come to the Jewish People's aid. Yiftach sent out messengers to find out whether the Jewish People might indeed be guilty of some sins against Amon and that could be sorted out. The Jewish delegates challenged the king of Amon, they asked him what reason he had for coming into their land and fighting them.

The Jewish delegates said they had always been at peace with them because the Torah forbid them to attack their nation. The king of Amon had a response for that, he claimed the Jews had robbed him of his territory. He was speaking of the area between the Arnon River in the south, the Yabok River located in the north, and the Jordan River located in the west. King Amon was talking about the southern part of Gilad that belonged to the tribe of Menashe. This area bordered the kingdom of the Amonim people. The king of Amon claimed that the Jews took the land from him and his people after they came out of Egypt. The king of Amon ended this conversation by saying, if the Jews want peace, they need to return the territory in a peaceful way.

Yiftach listened to the king vent about what he thought was rightfully his. Yiftach turned to the king and told him that his claim is completely unfounded for a number of reasons, starting with the fact that the Jewish People never wronged the king of Amon or any other country. In fact, that land the king of Amon was claiming to be his, had originally been won by the Jewish people when they fought against Sichon who was the king of the Emorim people. The Emorim people had originally fought against the king of Amon and they overcame him. After the battle with Sichon, the Jews still did nothing wrong and they had no choice.

Yiftach told the king of Amon what happened with the Jews once they left Egypt. The Jews went northward in the desert and finally got to an area called Kadesh Barnea, which was located west of the land of Edom. The Jews wanted to cross through Edom by traveling on a direct route to the land of Canaan and sent messengers to the Edomite king asking to allow them to do so. The Jews told the king of Edomite that he nor his people would suffer any damage, but he still didn't allow it. The Jews forefathers sent the same message to Moav, a neighboring country to the north of Edom. Moav also refused to allow the Jews to travel through there.

As this was happening, the Jewish People were waiting passively in Kadesh Barnea. They weren't allowed to go through either of those two countries and they still never attacked. G-d didn't allow them to attack Moav or their relatives from Avraham or Edom or Aisav's descendants. The Jews followed the orders coming from G-d and it was their ancestors who advanced further north through the desert on a roundabout route and were careful to avoid any territory to which they didn't have a right to be in. They had many experiences that were not convenient and they traveled through a barren wilderness and they suffered in dangerous places. They went pretty far north and the Jewish People found the entrance to the land of Canaan and it was blocked by the Emorite nation.

They sent messengers to the capital, Cheshbon. There the king of Sichon resided and the Jews asked if they could go through that piece of land to get to their destination.

The king of Sichon refused them entry and the Jews promised to not attack or harm anyone while they would cross over, but king Sichon still didn't allow or believe them, this wicked man decided to use his army and advance to Yohatz and attacked the Jews who didn't do anything wrong to him. Yiftach went on to prove his case to the king of Amon, that the Jews didn't ever robbed him of his land. The Jewish People never took any land directly from him, it was G-d of Israel who gave Sichon into the hands of the Jewish People and they became the owners of the territory.

Part of the territory once belonged to the king of Amon and Sichon had conquered it from him, but the Jews never took any land straight from the king of Amon. Yiftach was trying to conclude his history lesson to the king of Amon. He pointed out to the king of Amon, all of the nations at the time were aware that the Jewish People's battles are fought with the command coming from G-d and whomever He wishes to be part of it. Yiftach used the example of one of the gods that king Amon followed, Kemosh and if it were to give the king of Amon some territory, he would claim ownership to it. Yiftach was speaking to the king of Amon in terms understandable to him.

However, saying the land that Kemosh could give him an inheritance so as not to ascribe any power to the idol. Yiftach's statement was designed to mock the practice of any idol worship because it alluded to the fact that Kemosh wasn't able to prevent Sichon's conquest of getting the land of Moav. Yiftach was still not finished, he went on to argue against the king of Amon saying that the Amonite claim to the Jewish territory had been out of date.

Yiftach went on with historical facts, the Jewish People immediately settled in the new area they called Gilad. Gilad became Moav. There was a powerful king back then who was named Balak and he ruled the area of Moav. If this king had believed that he was entitled to any part of the property that once belonged to Amon or Moav he would have for sure protested and taken it for himself. King Balak never demanded his property back, because he knew that it didn't belong to him, he knew very well it belonged to a different king who had wrestled from him and he had subsequently fallen into the hands of the Jewish People.

There were many other kings who ruled over Amon and Moav during the last three hundred years and none of them ever demanded the return of their former territory or attacked the nation of the Jews over this matter. The reason for this is because such a claim didn't make any sense. All of a sudden, three hundred years later, you come into the picture and think you can insist that your nation has been cheated. This is completely inappropriate according to the accepted code of conduct among the nations. Yiftach wasn't quite done, but getting close to it. He told the

king of Amon, if he was going to continue to argue that the land always belonged to the very first owner and that was the forefather of the Jews, Avraham.

Avraham existed many years before the time of this king Amon. Yiftach concluded with, the Jews never wronged you in any way and it is completely unjust for you to attack us. May G-d the Judge of the entire world, judge between me and you, for you have acted maliciously and you have no justification for it. The king of Amon listened to Yiftach's words, but he didn't take it in wholeheartedly. He didn't accept Yiftach's well-founded arguments and refused to have his troops leave the area of Gilad. He was being stubborn and believed he was in the right and Yiftach along with the rest of the Jews were wrong.

Yiftach started to feel the spirit of G-d overcome him, he felt stronger and courageous. He started marching his troops over to the area of Mitzpa, he saw the Jews had an advantage on the Amonim people. The Jews withdrew westward to their own land, but Yiftach was aware that they would have to return unless he would defeat them decisively. This was where Yiftach made a huge mistake, he started bargaining with G-d. He swore an oath that if G-d gave the people of Amonim into his hands, Yiftach would give the first thing coming out of his house as a sacrifice after the war was over.

G-d knew this was a huge transgression that Yiftach made, but He didn't tell him. Yiftach advanced his army into the territory where the people of Amonim lived. The war between them and the Jews started and G-d granted Yiftach a very nice victory. G-d penetrated westward, going very deep into Amon and overcame at least twenty Amoni cities. The Amonim didn't want to admit that they lost the war. They submitted themselves over to the Jewish People. At this point we have reached the end of the story of the haftara. There were unfortunate events for Yiftach that came after this war. It was unfortunate because of the oath he made before the Jews went to war.

We are aware that G-d responded critically to the promise Yiftach made. G-d caused it to be Yiftach's daughter to be the first one to step outside of his house. She was a bystander, only wanting to welcome her father home after being away and fighting a battle at that matter! Yiftach was pretty careless, when he made his oath in front of G-d prior to starting the battle with the people of Amonim. G-d would have rather Yiftach sacrifice an animal, instead of his own daughter. According to the commentary of the Midrash, Yiftach's daughter was also partially guilty for what happened to her. By stepping outside of her own home, without her father actually present she was going against the laws of being modest. It was against the law of being modest, because she was going out alone in public, with drums and dancing. Having all that music must have brought other people's attention to her and G-d was not happy with her for that. Since Yiftach was careless, he made an even more tragic mistake by actually sacrificing her.

This was completely forbidden by Jewish law, but he thought he was a master of arguments and he presented to the king of Amon that it was clear he was by no means a simpleton or an ignoramus. Instead, Yiftach made a mistake because he wasn't quite familiar with the intricacies of the Jewish laws. Yiftach assumed that the vow of a leader during a time of war had to be upheld at all cost, so he thought he would get the capital punishment if he didn't follow through with his promise of sacrificing his own daughter. He was misguided and it was a pity, but he stayed true to his word.

There are some lessons, Jews learn from the experiences Yiftach had. He was on a very high level of studying the Torah and his observance was mandatory for Jewish leaders. The way he lived his life concerns not only rabbis or principals, but even presidents of synagogues, and also philanthropic organizations. The Midrash teaches us Jews, that we need to be G-d fearing and we have to be a Torah Scholar ourselves to follow the directives of leading Torah-authorities. There was a Rabbi named Elchanan Wasserman, he was very famous. He explained in the name of the Vilna Gaon that the verse in the parsha of Vayishlach, "He (Yaakov) put the maidservants and their children first located in (33:2). This hints to the pre-Messianic period in which non-Torah personalities will be leading the nation and that will be followed by the masses who are described as "Leah and her children."

At the end will be "Rachel and Yosef," talmidai chachaim, who will not be respected by the majority. This Rabbi Wasserman concludes that, "This prophecy is being fulfilled in our time. It is a test from Heaven to determine which Jews uphold true values. This Rabbi was a Sage, and he explains why Aisav's guardian angel attacked Yaakov instead of the one of the other two forefathers, Avraham or Yitzchak. "Avraham was the pillar of kindness and Yitzchak was the pillar of service of G-d and Yaakov represented the Jewish people's commitment to Torah. Aisav's guardian angel knew full well that the continued existence of our nation is guaranteed only by Torah study.

Asia's attack was therefore directed at the forefather who symbolized it and the angel dislocated Yaakov's thigh as a portent that in the period before the coming of Miasa would be a weakening of the support to Torah study. There are billions of people who donate to less worthy causes, the supreme urgency of rallying to support the yeshivos is important because it will educate the next generation's Jews and Torah scholars. That often gets neglected and it is the obligation of every Jew to make this a primary concern.