

Parashah Chukkat (Statute or Ordinance of)

Numbers 19:1-22:1, Judges 11:1-33, Hebrews 9:13,
John 3:10-21, 3:14-36, 12:32

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"This is the statute (Chukkat) of the law (Torah) which the Lord has commanded....bring tee a red heifer.." (Numbers 19:2)

Chukkat are ordinances that God has commanded, for which he gives us no rational explanation. It is somewhat like a father who says to his son, "You must do this only because I said so..." So it is with the laws of purification through the red heifer. The red heifer, in Hebrew parah adumah, was to be a young cow, faultless, without blemish. If even two hairs of another color were found on the red heifer's body, this would be sufficient to disqualify it for sacrificial purposes.



Because the state of ritual purity obtained through the ashes of a Red Heifer is a necessary prerequisite for participating in any Temple service, efforts have been made in modern times by Jews wanting to rebuild the Temple to locate a red heifer and recreate the ritual. However, multiple candidates have been disqualified.

The early Jewish explanation for this mysterious sacrifice is that it was meant to atone for the sin of the Golden Calf. It needed to be a 'virgin' animal – that is, never having been used for secular purposes. According to the Mishna (Book of Rabbinic Commentary), the ceremonial of the burning of a Red Heifer was enacted only seven times in history: once by Moses, once by Ezra, and five times after Ezra. It disappeared from Jewish life with the destruction of the Temple. So what may we now use to cleanse us from defilement?

The Red Heifer and the Laws of Purification (Numbers 19)

The traditional rabbinical commentary on this parashah ¹ admits that it seems a mystery – how can the ashes of a red heifer possibly cleanse a person from defilement? When we look ahead to the Messiah's atoning sacrifice, however, we can better understand this portion of Scripture. We know that Yeshua the Messiah was declared 'faultless' and 'without blemish'. Through the Messiah, we may be cleansed from all defilement, not with the blood of the red heifer, nor the blood of bulls and goats, but with a more perfect sacrifice. We not only receive cleansing from the defilement of this world, but also eternal redemption.

"He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption. The blood of goats and bulls and the ASHES OF A HEIFER sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of the Messiah, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!"

(Hebrews 9:13-14)

Very few Jewish people understand the necessity of a blood sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins; therefore it is difficult for a Jewish person to understand what Yeshua has done for us. Blood sacrifice has always been used to cleanse us and atone for our sins; it is God's way.

"For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life."(Leviticus 17:11)

This aspect of God's requirements of Man has been downplayed if not completely hidden by Rabbinical Judaism of today, since the temple no longer exists and we can no longer fulfill this 'mitzvah' (commandment). The sacrifices that the Cohen Hagadol (high priest) performed was a foreshadow of the sacrifice that Yeshua would make of his own sinless, unblemished life.

¹ Pentateuch & Haftorahs Hebrew Text English Translation & Commentary, Edited by Dr. J.H. Hertz, The Soncino Press

"But only the high priest entered the inner room, and that only once a year, (Yom Kippur) AND NEVER WITHOUT BLOOD, which he offered for himself and for the sins the people had committed in ignorance."(Heb. 9:7)

Isaiah prophesied, "Though your sins be crimson like scarlet they shall be white as snow,(Isaiah 1:18)

In the [Book of Daniel](#) is a reference to a Red Heifer. In Daniel 12:10, God tells Daniel that in the last days, "many shall be purified and made white"; a reference to the purification ritual of the Red Heifer, "Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow" (Isa 1:18, Num 19:6). The analogy appears to relate to a partner of the returning [End Time messiah](#) ²

No matter the seriousness of our sins, the extent of our defilement, these will all be washed away through the blood of the Messiah, Yeshua, and we will stand before God in pure, white robes of righteousness.

Thirty Eight Years of Silence

Chapter 20 of the Book of Numbers occurs in their 40th year of wandering in the wilderness. In the previous parashah, (Korach), the Israelites had been condemned to wander for 40 years in the wilderness until the entire generation died there. Only two – Joshua and Calev, would survive to enter the Promised Land with the new generation of Israelites who had not known slavery.

Korach also described their unauthorized attempt to enter the Land of Canaan which proved to be unsuccessful, as God was not 'with them' in this battle. So we are left with 38 years of silence. Thirty eight years of apparently uneventful, aimless, purposeless wandering until they died – their carcasses lay scattered all over the wilderness. And with most of them God was not pleased because of their lack of faith. How depressing!

And yet when we see the next generation preparing to enter the Promised Land, we may note that much spiritual growth took place in those thirty eight years. It may seem as if nothing of consequence happened; no progress worthy of mention in the Bible. But those 38 years transformed a beaten down, victimized generation of slaves into

² Wikipedia, Red Heifer

parents who raised children fit to possess the Land and to live free of slavery and the terrible victim mentality of their parents.

IF we are first generation Believers, as many Messianic Jews are, we have much to overcome. It can, at times, feel overwhelming and cause depression or self hatred. Like these Israelites, we may also look at our life journey from a perspective of victimization, oppression and abuse and think, *"I have not made any progress; all I'm doing is wandering around the same mountain one more time, one more year and I'll probably do this until I die."* No goals reached, no dreams come to pass, no longings fulfilled or promises inherited. But it is possible that we are growing and changing inside, in the inner man, so that we don't pass on these traits that caused us to be enslaved to the next generation – so that our children may live free of this victim mentality, refuse to tolerate abuse, fit to inherit the promises. Let us not lose heart when it seems that we are not making progress in our journey. Much significant transformation occurs in hidden places.

By patience and faith we receive the promises

In the Wilderness of Zin, in the first month of the year, Miriam died and was buried. The congregation of Israel again complains about lack of water. They wish that they had died with the others who perished before the Lord (Korach) rather than face the prospect of dying of thirst in the wilderness. It seems that they still have not learned their lessons. Rather than speaking words of faith and hope, they prophecy the worst possible outcome – **"we're all going to die here – we and our cattle..."** (Numbers 20:4)

We too can fall into this same trap of failing to learn from our mistakes and the destructive example of others. We also can continue to 'react' out of emotional habit, rather than 'respond' in a righteous way. I found out the hard way that I am allergic to penicillin– I 'reacted' with a full body rash and shortness of breath. However, someone else with a serious infection may 'respond' to the anti-biotic and get well.

There exists a crucial difference between 'reacting' and 'responding'. Usually, our first reactions are of the flesh' but if we can take a moment to regain our balance, and respond out of a place of peace, we will usually be spirit- led, and therefore achieve much better results.

The Israelites 'strove' with Moses, blaming him for taking them out of Egypt and for bringing them into what they called "this evil place". The accused Moses of failing to fulfill his promises to bring them into a

better place – a place of abundance. They heard of figs, grape vines, and pomegranates – all symbols of abundance – but they did not see it with their eyes.

They said, **“And wherefore have you made us to come up out of Egypt, to bring us unto this evil place? It is no place of seed, or of figs, or of vines, or of pomegranates; neither is there any water to drink.”** (Numbers 20:5)

In their spiritual immaturity, however, they lacked the patience and faith to see the promises come to pass in their lives. It was by patience and faith, that Abraham inherited the promises! This is the requirement of faith – that we continue to hope for those things that we do not yet see with our eyes.

We are to live by faith and not by sight. Just because we don’t see something yet with our eyes, doesn’t mean it’s not on its way – IF we will have patience to wait with an attitude of faith and a positive expectancy.

It’s easy to lose heart when we don’t see God’s promises come to pass in our lives. We have heard of the Promised Land; we know that Yeshua came to give us life and life more abundantly. But perhaps we have yet to see these promises fulfilled in our lives. This doesn’t mean that Yeshua has failed us or let us down. It means that we need to continue to wait with patience, and to press on in faith, hope and love. It doesn’t matter if it has taken a long time. God’s promises are true and they will come to pass in our lives – IF we will stay in an attitude of faith. This calls for maturity.

We can learn lessons from the Israelites and be careful not to charge Yeshua with wrong if we feel the promises are slow in coming. Sometimes he waits until something (or someone) has died and been sealed up in a tomb, like Lazarus, for four days until it stinks before He makes an appearance. We can trust Him to show up and even bring life from the dead! He makes all things beautiful – in His time (not ours). For everything there is a season, there is an appointed time for every purpose under the sun.

The Israelites also refused to take responsibility for the part they had played in their own destruction. The hard reality is that it was their own bad attitudes and lack of trust in God that had caused them to become ‘stuck’ in this place of scarcity and desperation. They kept speaking the worst of their fears and God gave them what they spoke.

May it be possible that we do the same? Could it be that the answer to our current difficulties can be found 'right under our nose' ?

In response to their complaints, Moses and Aaron left the assembly and fell on their faces before the Lord to plead for the people. Perhaps rather than continuing to strive with negative, complaining people, we should turn to the Lord in prayer. I personally, have a real problem with this issue. I really can't stand listening to what we call in Yiddish, "kvetchers" – people who continually complain about everything.

I tend to become either angry with them, giving them my all too familiar (even if always ignored) lecture on why we shouldn't complain; or I walk away and ignore the problem person. Neither of these approaches is effective. It seems to me that Moses and Aaron give us the key – to fall on our faces before the Lord and plead for mercy.

"... and the glory of the Lord appeared to them." (Numbers 20:6)

The glory of God in Hebrew is kavod. This comes from the word kaved, which means weighty or heavy. The glory of the Lord is 'weighty', a felt presence. When the glory (kavod) of God filled the Tabernacle, the priests could not even continue to minister. Kavod is also the Hebrew word used for 'honor', as in 'Honor your mother and father'. When we honor someone, we don't brush them off lightly, as if they are inconsequential or insignificant. Honor means we are to treat this person as someone of precious substance, of great value, worthy of deep respect and preferential treatment.

Forget the Former Things...

The prevailing sin of the Israelites was their inability to keep a forward, hopeful, trusting, faith-filled focus. Every time a challenge presented itself to them, they looked back to the past. We all have a past to look back at. When God brings us out of something we must resist the temptation to want to go back into it when things get hard.

Paul exhorted us to **'forget the things that lie behind and press on to the future...'** (Phil 3:12-14).

We are so prone to dwell on the past instead of staying forward focused. We need to speak this word to ourselves often – I do not look to the past, to where I have been but I look forward in faith, hope and trust to the glorious future that God has planned for me. (Jer.

29:11) Can we truly believe that God has a good plan for our lives?
Yes we can.

Believe me, I need this word just as much, if not more so, than you do. I left behind a very difficult, oppressive situation in Canada. God made a way where there was no way in order to bring me and my children back to the Land of Israel. I came with His promises to plant us securely in this land, never to be uprooted again from the Land He has given us.³

I clutched in my hand, God's promises to gather us back to the Land and to bless us here, to give us double for our former shame, and that we would rejoice in our inheritance.⁴ I carried in my heart His word that He would feed us in rich pastures on the mountains of Israel, that we would increase and be fruitful⁵; that God would restore health and healing, turn our mourning into joy; that we would eat and be satisfied, dwell securely without fear from our enemies, and not be in want.⁶

But it is in times of scarcity, the times when my eyes do not yet see the fulfillment of His promises coming to pass in my life, that my faith is sometimes sorely tested. It is when I am searching the children's change purses for a coin for bus fare to school, putting my bread and milk on credit at the makolet (little grocery store); it is when squeezing my son's feet into too small shoes and being unable to take my dog, Pepper, to the vet when he is ill because of lack, that I am tempted to think, *"Maybe I'm not going to make it here. .. Maybe I made a mistake in coming. .. Maybe God is not really going to come through for us. Maybe it will always be this way.... Maybe I should just go back...."*

It is when I am feeling weary and lonely and have pain in my body; when sirens go off all over the country, warning us that we need to be prepared for enemy attack, that I just want to go' home'. Even though this is now home, a part of me just wants to go back to what was familiar, even if oppressive and soul destroying.

This is the way the carnal mind of the flesh thinks, and I am just as prone as anyone else to fall into this kind of fearful, negative thinking. That is why we need to stay in the Word, studying it together,

³ Jer. 32:41

⁴ Isaiah 61:7

⁵ Jer. 23:3

⁶ Jer. 31:10-14

encouraging one another to press on in faith and never give up or surrender to the voices of fear and doubt!

Smiting the Rock

Moses becomes frustrated with this rebellious bunch of 'kvetchers' and instead of speaking to the rock to bring forth water as God commanded, he struck the rock and out flowed the life-giving water. The Lord is called our 'rock'

"Yehovah is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation." (2 Samuel 22:1-3)

Yeshua is the 'cornerstone' of our faith, that which the people have rejected. **"The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone;"**(Psalm 118:22).

The ancient Hebrew prophet, Isaiah, tells us that whoever trusts in this precious cornerstone will never be dismayed or ashamed.

"See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation; the one who trusts will never be dismayed."(Isaiah 28:16)

Yeshua is called the 'living Stone'. **"As you come to him, the living Stone – rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him...See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trust in him will never be put to shame."** (1Peter 2:4-6)

Why is Yeshua called the living Stone? From this rock gushes forth water that we may freely drink of; this living water becomes a stream that gushes within us, welling up to eternal life. When Yeshua met a Samaritan woman at the well, he said to her,

"Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."(John 4:13-14)

It was to this Samaritan woman that Yeshua boldly declared himself to be the Messiah who brings living water – salvation – to Mankind. Not

understanding Yeshua's talk about salvation and worship and the Spirit, she dismissed him with a commonly heard expression today.

"When Mashiach (the Messiah) comes, he will explain everything to us." Yeshua declared, **"I who speak to you am he."**(John 4:25-6)

Yeshua makes another reference to the living water on the last day of the Feast of Sukkot (Tabernacles). **"If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him." By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive.**"(John 7:37-39)

Life without this living water is indeed a dry and thirsty existence. There is no comparison to living a life satisfied and refreshed by the Spirit of God. This is available to anyone who will ask and believe in faith. It is a free gift from God to us. I invite you to join with those who believe in this living Stone; to drink of the living water that flows from Him and to receive salvation in Yeshua. **"With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation."**(Isaiah 12:3)

God promises, with references to streams of water, that He will pour out His Spirit one day upon the land and the people of Israel. **"For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants."**(Isaiah 44:3)

Today, we can see the effects of inventive irrigation systems upon the land of Israel. The desert is truly blooming as a rose and portions of the once barren land resemble the Garden of Eden, exactly as God promised. Because of His faithfulness, we can rest assured that God will also fulfill His promise to pour out His Spirit upon the people. Let us join in praying for the will of the Father to be done in the land and people of Israel.



Why did Moses receive such a harsh punishment from God for striking the stone rather than just speaking to it as God had commanded. Surely this was not such a terrible deviation from God's instructions so as to justify his exclusion from entering the Promised Land? After everything Moses had endured from this unruly mixed multitude of former slaves, is this humble man not allowed a bit of slack? This question always troubled me, until I saw this picture of the living water gushing forth from the rock of our salvation.

Although this life-giving drink is freely available, it is by asking that we receive, not by demanding. We must appreciate this precious cornerstone – treat it with honor (kavod) and reverence, not 'strike' it to produce according to our demands. The Spirit of God is grieved by this kind of demanding, controlling attitude.

The Dangers of Strife

The waters where the Israelites argued with Moses are called the Waters of Merivah **מריבה** from the words 'riv' **ריב** which means to 'strive', argue, quarrel, bicker or fight and mar **מר** which mean 'bitter'. Bitterness and unforgiveness can produce a quarrelsome spirit.

The Torah has so much to say about the dangers of strife. Prov. 17:1 says **"Better is a dry morsel with quietness than a house full of feasting with strife (ריב)."**

How many great family meals have been ruined because of strife at the table? I'd rather eat a small salad in peace than a roast beef feast with arguing. We must avoid strife like the plague! This is not always easy when the people around us seem to love to argue and bicker. **"He who loves transgression loves strife."** (Prov. 17:19)

Fools love to quarrel or strive but wisdom pursues peace. **"The beginning of strife is like releasing water; therefore stop contention before a quarrel (riv) starts."** (Prov 17:14)

The Edomites (Numbers 20:14-20)

Edom refuses to allow the Israelites to pass through their territory on foot, therefore Israel turned away from them. We must understand who Edom is. The Edomites are the descendants of Esau, also called Edom (actually, it is Adom, which means 'red' in Hebrew, because he was born red and hairy).

"so Esau dwelt in Mount Seir. Esau is Edom." (Genesis 36:8)

Esau, the brother of Jacob, is one of the ancestors of today's Arabic people. Just as Esau harbored hatred for his brother, Jacob, many of the Arabic nations today are against Israel and the Jewish people. The word of God contains many as yet unfulfilled prophecies against Edom for its hatred of Israel.

In chapter 35 of Ezekiel, the Lord tells Edom that He is against them because...

- * They hated Israel since ancient times (v.5)
- They shed the blood of Israel (v.5)
- They want Israel's land (v.10)
- They spoke blasphemies (v.12)
- They boasted against the Lord (v.13)

Prohibition against Holding a Grudge

We can see that the ancient hatred of Israel, Edom's refusal to let Israel pass innocently through their land, contains relevance for us to understand the volatile situation in the Middle East today. Hundreds of years after the incident from this parashah, Edom, Ammon, and Moab, (three ancient ancestors of the Arabic people) still despise Israel.

The ancient hatred spoken of by God has continued to this very day. This hatred is taught to children in official Ministry of Education materials in Jordan, Syria, Egypt, and other Arabic countries. Children's programming on television entices these little ones to aspirations of killing Jews.

Whereas any North American child may say they want to be a singer, a doctor, or an astronaut when they grow up, an Arabic child, due to this Satanic indoctrination, when asked the question, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" may answer, 'A suicide bomber'.

Many sincere Christians feel sympathetic towards the plight of the Palestinian people in Israel, but we do no favors towards the Palestinians in their quest to establish a Palestinian state on Israel's land, and thereby ensure their destruction by God. We should not encourage Arabic people to oppose the will and purposes of God. Many do not have the Bible and therefore have no idea the danger they are in by continuing in their struggle against Israel and the Jews and by striving to take possession of Israel's land.

God says in the small prophetic book of Obadiah, **“will I not destroy the wise men of Edom, men of understanding in the mountains of Esau?...Because of the violence against your brother Jacob, you will be covered with shame; you will be destroyed forever.”**(v.8-10)

It is our responsibility to warn these people of the Truth; not assist them in their cursing of Israel. We must beware of holding a grudge against others since it can become a generational stronghold that can bring destruction. The torah warns us not to hold a grudge against anyone.

The Bronze Snake (Numbers 21:4-9) The cure for an impatient people

The incident of the bronze snake, lifted up on a pole in the wilderness is another example of how incidents in the Tanach may be incomprehensible without a prophetic understanding of the Messiah and the New Covenant. The Israelites, having to travel around Edom, grow impatient along the way.

They speak against God and Moses by complaining once again. They complain about the lack of water, the lack of food, and even the taste of the manna God had provided for their sustenance in the wilderness.

To complain is a common human tendency, but it reveals a doubting, ungrateful heart towards God. Not only do we express our doubts in God’s ability to provide for our needs, we also show a terrible lack of appreciation for what He has already graciously provided for us when we gripe and complain in this manner.

After a brief stay at a friend’s apartment in Netanya (by her generosity and grace), our family wandered for six months in the land of Israel before finally finding a place to live. For the first while, we did not even have a fridge, bathtub, or washing machine. We washed all our clothes by hand in the shower. Now we can laugh about it, but at the time, I was often tempted to complain.

We came to truly appreciate these basic things that we had formerly taken for granted as, not our right, but as wonderful blessings from a generous heavenly father who truly cares for the needs of His children.

God’s punishment upon the people fell both swiftly and severely. The Lord sent venomous snakes that bit the people and many Israelites

died. The people realized and confessed their sin against the Lord and Moses and so Moses prayed for the people. This is what the Lord replied to Moses,

“Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.”(v.8) “so Moses make a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived.”(v.9)

At first glance, this seems a strange method of healing indeed! How can a bronze snake, lifted up on a pole, heal people from the venom of the snake when they look at it? For the answer, we need to look into the New Covenant. Who, in fact, represents the snake? Throughout the Bible, the snake or serpent represents satan, the enemy of our souls.

Even in the Garden of Eden this fallen angel tempted Eve to sin against the Lord. Since this time, we have all been bitten and infected by the venom of this snake – we all have the inborn tendency to sin. It is this sin which separates us from God, since sin cannot dwell in His holy presence. Because of the serpent’s bite, we are all destined to die, eternally separated from God.

“But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you so that He will not hear.”(Isaiah 59:2)

The blood of bulls and goats could temporarily atone for our sins under the Old Covenant, but God planned an even better covenant, by which all peoples could find forgiveness of sin. Through the Messiah, Yeshua, lifted upon a pole, we may be healed and therefore not die but live.

“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”(John 3:14)

How did God solve this problem of sin, the serpent’s venom that causes death? **“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life...whoever believes in the son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him.”(John 3:16,36)**

Yeshua knew that in his death, he would be lifted up that all men could come to him for spiritual cleaning and healing. **"But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself. He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die."**(John 12:32).

Just as whoever looked to the bronze snake lifted up on the pole in the wilderness would live and not die, so will we live forever when we look to Yeshua lifted up on the pole. He, in fact, although sinless himself, took the sin upon himself, symbolically becoming the snake, in order that we may live.

"God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."(2Cor. 5:21)

I urge you to look to Yeshua lifted up on the pole and receive the gift of eternal life God so desperately wants you to have.

Anything good can become an idol

The Israelites eventually changed the pole with the bronze serpent into an idolatrous object of worship. We can do the same with the cross which was Yeshua's execution stake. Much is made in Christianity of the symbol of the cross, but it is, in fact, only the pole on which the Messiah was lifted up to die. It would be as if the Israelites who were healed by the bronze snake would wear a pole around their necks as a symbol of their faith. If a sword, dagger, whip, or other method had been used to execute the Messiah besides the cruel, Roman method of crucifixion, would those who follow Yeshua wear these instruments of torture and death as pieces of jewelry?

The symbol of the cross, which in actuality has pagan roots, has been used throughout history as a symbol of hatred towards the Jewish people by agents of that serpent Satan. The Crusaders locked Jews in their synagogues and burned them alive while marching around with a cross singing, *'O Christ, we adore Thee'*. Therefore, even sincere Christians who wear or display a 'cross' often cause offense to Jewish people without meaning to. Although a precious symbol to many Christians, Paul tells the Roman congregations that if anything we eat causes a brother or sister distress, then we are no longer acting in love. (Rom. 14:15) Might this not also apply to what we wear?

I recently toured Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem and was struck by the number of photos showing the cross used in

association with this inhuman attempt to annihilate the entire population of European Jewry. Archival photos even reveal SS Nazi soldiers wearing the cross on their uniform. Upon exiting the museum, I ran into a woman wearing a cross and was surprised that this little piece of jewelry seemed so out of place and offensive in this place. Many Christians are unaware of these unfortunate historical facts. The important thing to remember, however, is that it is Yeshua, the Messiah, not an image or a symbol, which is to be honored and revered. It is in his death that we receive forgiveness of our sins, and cleansing from all defilement. It is in his resurrection from the dead that we also have hope of overcoming the finality of death and living eternally with our God.

Haftorah:

The prophetic study portion for this parashah is about a man named Yiftach **יִפְתָּח** (Jephtah in English), whose name in Hebrew means 'He will open'. Ironically, it is by opening his mouth to utter a vow that he ends up destroying his only daughter who was the first to 'open' the door and come out to meet him when he returned from battle.

Our mouth can get us into a whole heap of trouble if we're not careful. The word warns us that "**He who guards his mouth preserves his life, but he who opens wide his lips shall have destruction.**" (Prov. 13:3) and "**A fool's mouth is his destruction.**" (Prov. 18:7)

Yiftach was son of Gilead but mother of a harlot. The other sons of Gilead send Yiftach away but later call him back and ask him to lead them in battle against Ammon. They strike a deal with Yiftach that if he leads them in military victory, he will become the head over them. The spirit of God came upon Yiftach and Israel did win the battle. For one thing, this shows that our background or lineage does not have to keep us from success. Many have arisen out of humble beginnings and questionable backgrounds to become successful people. Yiftach should have quit while he was ahead. Instead, he opened his mouth and made an unnecessary vow to God.

He tries to strike up a deal with God. "**If you give me the Ammonites in my hand, then whatever comes out of the door of my home to meet me when I return in peace from the Ammonites, then to God will I offer it as a sacrifice.**" (Judg. 11:30-31)

Yiftach did not really believe that God would just give him the victory. He thought that he needed to 'hedge his bet' by offering an additional sacrifice. We also sometimes try to plea bargain with God – "if you do this for me then I will do that for you..." whereas God may just want to do it for us as a free gift. We may think that we have to give God something for our salvation, but no, it is a free gift to us. A sorcerer wanted to 'buy' the salvation of God but Paul rebuked him. We can't bribe God!

Here's the really twisted part of the story: it was the custom at that time, for women to come out with timbrels and singing and dancing, to meet their men when they returned from a victorious battle. Therefore Yiftach's daughter was only doing what was the norm for their time and culture – she was being an honorable, loving daughter. Given this ancient Israelite custom, it would be reasonable to guess that Yiftach should have known his daughter would come out to greet him. Or did Yiftach think it would be his wife? We can't really know. What we do know, however, is that this portion of the story is omitted from the Haftorah.

In telling the end of the story - the terrible fate of Yiftach's daughter, we are bringing to light a terrible tragedy that is usually hidden in darkness, silence and secrecy from the synagogue reading. In the same way, the atoning death of Yeshua is hidden in darkness by omitting Isaiah chapter 53 from the synagogue readings.

The Word makes it clear that she was his only daughter, his one and only (y'chid) child. This brings to mind Isaac, who was called Abraham's only son in Gen. 22:2 whom God asked to sacrifice on the altar. **"Take your son, your only son..."** But Isaac's life was spared whereas Yiftach's daughter was not. God Himself sacrificed His son, His only son, so that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.

Judaism abhors human and especially child sacrifice. This proves to be one of the major objections that some Jewish people have to believing in Yeshua – that God, who hates human sacrifice, would never have authorized the sacrifice of a man to atone for people's sins. But the 53rd chapter of Isaiah tells us that it 'pleased the Lord to bruise him' and that this man did indeed, die (cut off from the land of the living), sacrificed like a lamb led to the slaughter to atone for our transgressions. But Yeshua was not just an ordinary man; He was also the son of God – fully human and fully divine – in a way our limited minds cannot comprehend.

God sacrificed Yeshua, His one and only son, with such terrible grief that the veil was torn at the moment of his death. It was torn from the top to the bottom, from heaven to earth. Only God, the Father could have torn the veil from His place in heaven. Why? Because of the Jewish mourning custom of tearing one's garment to express terrible grief at the loss. When Yiftach sees that it is his daughter who comes out to meet him, he tears his clothes and falls to his knees, ancient signs of mourning.

He says, **"Woe, my daughter,....for I have opened my mouth to God and I cannot go back."** (Judges 11:35).

Yiftach has condemned his own child to die and his own hands. Bat Yiftach (daughter of Yiftach) does not protest but goes away for two months to be with her friends and mourn. Thus we see the female passivity – she could have run away to safety but instead she returned only to be murdered by her own father. Makes us wonder, eh? Are we as women born to be victims or conditioned into such passivity. Why do women stay with men who abuse and mistreat them – sometimes even to their death? I don't have the full answer, but I know that God does.

In many Muslim countries, women are murdered by their husbands or fathers in a practice called 'honor killing'; if a woman is suspected of any kind of immorality or breach of Islamic law. In the case of Bat Yiftach, an unnamed woman, was murdered and no one came to her defense. Where were her so-called friends? Where was the community? Why did they stand by in silence while her father **"did to her as he vowed."** (Judges 11:39)

Why is this tragedy hidden from us in the synagogue? Is it too disturbing? How many more anonymous women are killed while the community stands by in silence? Their deaths are hidden from the public, but we must not stand by in silence – we must speak up against violence against women.

Why did Yiftach make such a dangerous vow? And why did he keep it? The rabbis join in condemning Yiftach's vow; they agree that he should have annulled his vow. Yom Kippur (the day of Atonement) always begins with a famous service called Kol Nidre – All vows. It is an annulment of vows made during the past year that we may be unable to keep. I have heard that it came out of Spain when so many Jewish people were forced to 'convert' to Christianity or face death. Some of

the Jews chose to take the vow publicly but in their hearts, they remained Jewish. Kol Nidre gave them opportunity to repudiate their vow. A thousand years later after the story of Yiftach and his daughter, Dante wrote:

'Be strong to keep your vow; yet be not perverse – As Yifatch once, blindly to execute a rash resolve. Better a man should say, "I have done wrong," Than keeping an ill vow, he should do worse."

We may, at times, make a rash vow that later proves to be a mistake, even a disaster. Better to humble ourselves and admit we have made a terrible mistake than to go on to keep the vow and be destroyed or destroy others.

"If you have shaken hands in pledge (vow) for a stranger, you are snared by the words of your mouth;... so do this, my son, and deliver yourself; for you have come into the hand of your friend; go and humble yourself, pleased with your friend give no sleep to your eyes nor slumber to your eyelids. Deliver yourself like a gazelle from the hand of the hunter and like a bird from the hand of the fowler." (Prov. 6:1-5)

This verse applies to the danger of co-signing for another person's debt but can be applied to other situations as well where we have made an unwise promise. I heard a testimony of a woman married to a man who actually tried to destroy her (they found arsenic in her juice). A counselor advised her that sometimes in a difficult marriage, God will tell us to stay; sometimes He will tell us to leave; and sometimes He will tell us to run as fast as we can without even grabbing a coat! She chose to run without a coat. Surely we should do everything in our power to keep our word – Yeshua said to see that our yes be yes and our no be no. But may we also have the wisdom and grace to be released from any rash vows we have made that we should have never made in the first place.

Both Abraham and Yiftach were willing to sacrifice their only child to prove their loyalty to God. The same word is used - yechid (masculine for the son) and yechidah (feminine for the daughter.) May we remember that God sacrificed His only son for our salvation as a free gift, to prove His eternal loyalty to us, His people.

May the Lord bless you and keep you. May He make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. May the Lord turn His face towards you and give you peace.

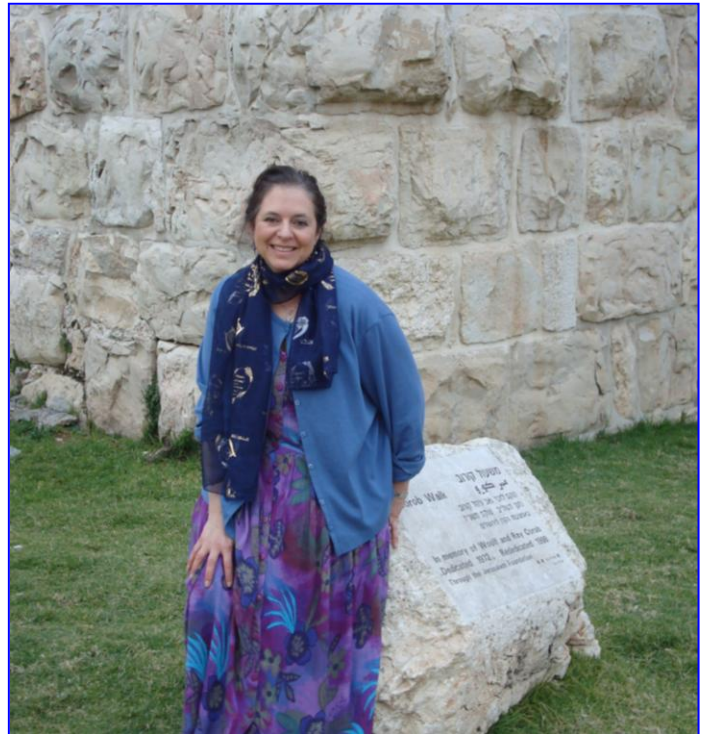
Shabbat shalom!

Love in Yeshua,

Hannah

About the Author:

Hannah Nesher grew up in an Orthodox Jewish home and received her education in a religious Hebrew school in Canada. During a crisis pregnancy, she came to know Jesus (Yeshua) as her Messiah and Savior. She now lives in Israel with her children and grandchildren, teaching Christians about the Jewish roots of their faith.



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