

Sacrificing Daughters: Shoftim's Fathers and Society's Collapse

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1. Ernest Renan, "What Is a Nation?" (1882 lecture at the Sorbonne)

A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things which, properly speaking, are really one and the same constitute this soul, this spiritual principle. One is the past, the other is the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present consent, the desire to live together, the desire to continue to invest in the heritage that we have jointly received... These are the essential conditions of being a people: having common glories in the past and a will to continue them in the present; having made great things together and wishing to make them again. One loves in proportion to the sacrifices that one has committed and the troubles that one has suffered. One loves the house that one has built and that one passes on... A people shares a glorious heritage as well, regrets, and a common program to realize. Having suffered, rejoiced, and hoped together is worth more than common taxes or frontiers that conform to strategic ideas and is independent of racial or linguistic considerations. "Suffered together", I said, for shared suffering unites more than does joy. In fact, periods of mourning are worth more to national memory than triumphs because they impose duties and require a common effort.

A nation is therefore **a great solidarity constituted by the feeling of sacrifices made and those that one is still disposed to make**. It presupposes a past but is reiterated in the present by a tangible fact: consent, the clearly expressed desire to **continue** a common life.

2. Vayikra Rabbah 37:4

Four opened with vows; three made unreasonable requests but the Holy One blessed be He responded favorably, and one made an unreasonable request and the Omnipresent responded to him unfavorably. These are they: Eliezer, servant of Abraham; Saul; Yiftah; and Caleb...

Caleb made an unreasonable request, as it is stated: "Caleb said: To whoever smites Kiryat Sefer and captures it, I will give Akhsa my daughter to him as a wife" (Joshua 15:16). The Holy One blessed be He responded to him: Had a Canaanite, a *mamzer*, or a slave captured it, would you have given him your daughter? What did the Holy One blessed be He do? He arranged for his brother to capture it, as it is stated: "Otniel ben Kenaz, [brother of Caleb,] captured it" (Joshua 15:17)...

Yiftah made an unreasonable request, as it is stated: "It will be, that whatever emerges from the doors of my house [...I will offer it up as a burnt offering]" (Judges 11:31). The Holy One blessed be He said: Had a camel, a donkey, or a

אֶרְבֶּעָה פָּתְחוּ בְנִדְרֵיהֶם, שְׁלֹשָׁה שָׁאֲלוּ
שְׁלֹא כְהֵגֹן וְהַשִּׁיבָם הַקְדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא
כְהֵגֹן, וְאַחַד שָׁאֵל שְׁלֹא כְהֵגֹן וְהַשִּׁיבָו
הַמָּקוֹם שְׁלֹא כְהֵגֹן, וְאֵלּוּ הֵם: אֱלִיעֶזֶר
עֶבֶד אֲבִרָהָם, וְשָׁאוּל וַיִּפְתָּח וְכָלֵב...

כָּלֵב שָׁאֵל שְׁלֹא כְהֵגֹן, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (יהושע
טו, טז): וַיֹּאמֶר כָּלֵב אֲשֶׁר יִכָּה אֶת
קִרְיַת סֶפֶר וְלָכְדָהּ וְנָתַתִּי לָהּ אֶת עַכְסָה
בְּתִי לְאִשָּׁה, הַשִּׁיבָו הַקְדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא
אֵלּוּ לָכְדָהּ כְּנַעֲנִי אוֹ מַמְזֵר אוֹ עֶבֶד
הִייתָ נוֹתֵן לָהּ בְּתֻלָּה, מָה עָשָׂה הַקְדוֹשׁ
בְּרוּךְ הוּא זָמֵן לוֹ אֶת אֶחָיו וְלָכְדָהּ,
שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (יהושע טו, טז): וַיִּלְכְּדָהּ
עֹתְנִיָּאל בֶּן קִנְז...

יִפְתָּח שָׁאֵל שְׁלֹא כְהֵגֹן, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר
(שופטים יא, לא): וְהָיָה הַיּוֹצֵא אֲשֶׁר
יֵצֵא מִדֹּלְתִי בֵיתִי, אֲמַר הַקְדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ

dog emerged, would you have presented it as a burnt offering? The Holy One blessed be He responded to him unfavorably and arranged for his daughter [to emerge] for him.

“It was upon his seeing her that he rent his garments” (Judges 11:35) – he could have had his vow dissolved and gone to Pinhas. He said: I am a king; shall I go to Pinhas? Pinhas said: I am the High Priest and the son of a High Priest; shall I go to this ignoramus? In the meanwhile, that miserable one died, and both of them were liable for her blood. Pinhas, the Divine Spirit left him. That is what is written: “Pinhas son of Elazar had been the chief official over them in the past; the Lord was with him” (I Chronicles 9:20). Yiftah’s limbs fell off one by one and were buried. That is what is written: “He was buried in the cities of Gilead” (Judges 12:7). It is not written, “In the city of Gilead,” but rather, “in the cities [of Gilead].” It teaches that his limbs fell off one by one, and he was buried in many places..

הוא אלו יצא גמל או חמור או כלב
היית מנעלהו עולה, השיבו הקדוש
ברוך הוא שלא כהגן וזמן לו את בתו
(שופטים יא, לה): ויהי כראותו אותה
ויקרע את בגדיו, היה יכול להפר את
נדרו ולילך אצל פנחס, אמר אני מלך
ואלף אצל פנחס, ופנחס אמר אני כהן
גדול וכן כהן גדול ואלף אצל עם
הארץ זה. בין דין לדין נספת ההיא
עלובתא ושניהם נתחייבו בדםיה,
פנחס נסתלקה ממנו רוח הקדש, הדא
הוא דקתיב (דברי הימים א ט, כ):
ופינחס בן אלעזר נגיד היה עליהם
לפנים יהוה עמו. ופתח נשול אבר
אבר, ונקבר, הדא הוא דקתיב
(שופטים יב, ז): ויקבר בערי גלעד,
בעיר גלעד לא נאמר אלא בערי,
מלמד שיהיה נשול ממנו אבר אבר
ונקבר במקומות הרבה...

3. Christopher Booker, *The Seven Basic Plots*:

What we thus see in Jane Eyre is a fundamental structure to the story strikingly similar to that of Aladdin: the process whereby a young central figure emerges step by step from an initial state of dependent, unformed childhood to a final state of complete self-realisation and wholeness. Obviously one of the most significant features of this type of story is the way it divides into two ‘halves’, punctuated by the ‘central crisis’. In the first half we see the hero or heroine emerging from childhood to a state where they may seem outwardly successful, except that they are by no means yet fully mature. They then encounter a crisis which leads them on to the harder task of becoming much more fully-developed and self-reliant. This leads up to the ordeal which provides the story’s climax, where they have a final confrontation with the dark figures and powers who, in one way or another, have overshadowed them through the story. Only when they have come through this test are they finally liberated to enjoy the state of wholeness and fulfilment which marks the conclusion of the tale. (64-65)

At the beginning of a full five-stage Tragedy, the central figure is always part of a community, a network of relationships, linked to other people by ties of loyalty, friendship, family or marriage. And one of the most important things which happens to such heroes and heroines as they embark on their tragic course is that they begin to break those bonds of loyalty, friendship and love... It is the very essence of Tragedy that the hero should become, step by step, separated from other people. (177)

The point about the heroes and heroines of Tragedy is that they end up utterly alone... completely cut off from the rest of society. They have been drawn by some part of themselves into a course of action

which is fundamentally selfish, putting some egocentric desire above every other consideration, isolating them both from reality and from other people. (179-180)

4. Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*:

WIVES ARE IMPORTANT to men: they run the household and they raise the children. The combination of their economic importance and the power of pair-bonding was usually enough to protect wives from the more extreme types of husbandly abuse. But children did not have these advantages. The biblical father could marry them to whomever he pleased and could sell them into slavery to cover his debts. In the early days of Israel, he may have been able to sell them as ordinary slaves or make his daughter a prostitute. There was even a time when a man could kill his children, as Abraham almost killed Isaac.

All children everywhere are vulnerable to the actions of their parents, and girls are even more so than boys. The most vulnerable people in a patriarchal society are daughters. In all families there comes a time when the children are stronger than their parents. At that time, the sons will be at home, working with the father and expected to take care of the parents in their old age, and even to continue to provide for them after their death with funerary services and offerings. The son is the name and remembrance of the father, the father's ticket to immortality and the future of the family. Because of this, sons who are not well treated as children will have their chance at "payback time," and the knowledge that this could happen may have served as a built-in check on excesses of parental behavior. But a daughter has no such check. Ancient agrarian societies expected that a girl would leave her family soon after puberty and join her husband's household. Once married, she was expected to be loyal to her husband and his family, even over her parents. As a result, a daughter was only a temporary member of her family, and would not be with her own parents at the peak of her strength and economic power. The temporary nature of a girl's daughterhood meant there could be no payback time for her and contributed to her vulnerability within the family. (99)

By contrast, the book of Judges is not about thriving. It depicts the same system of family relationships, but in the process of dissolution and decay. It understands Israel's political life as a progressive deterioration from the time of the conquest until the total collapse that preceded the creation of a monarchic state. The book's episodes have a cyclical form: the people stray, God brings an enemy to conquer them, their suffering makes them repent and return to God, God sends a deliverer who rescues them and judges till he dies; then the people stray again and the process repeats. The cycles head downward in a continuing spiral of disintegration. The judges are increasingly ineffectual, civil wars break out, and above all, the most vulnerable members of society become victims. The three stories about daughters in the book of Judges are spaced at strategic points, one at the beginning, one at the middle, and one at the end, and they dramatize this downward spiral. Through the progression of these stories, the book of Judges increasingly horrifies its readers. As a result, the people of Israel (and the readers) put aside their reservations and come to want a strong king to bring an end to these terrible events. (100)