A Nameless Bride of Death: Jephthah’s Daughter in American Jewish Women’s Poetry

Abstract: In the Hebrew Bible, Jephthah’s daughter has neither name nor heir. The biblical account (Judg. 11:30–40) is somber—a daughter due to be sacrificed because of her father’s rash vow. The theme has inspired numerous midrashim and over five hundred artistic works since the Renaissance. Traditionally barred from studying the Jewish canon as women, many Jewish feminists are now adopting the midrashic-poetry tradition as a way of vivifying the female characters in the Hebrew Bible. The five on which this article centers focus on Jephthah’s daughter, letting her tell her (side of the) story and imputing feelings and emotions to her. Although not giving her a name, they hereby commemorate her existence—and stake a claim for their own presence, autonomy, and active participation in tradition and society as Jewish women.

Keywords: Jephthah’s daughter, American Jewish women’s poetry, midrash, midrashic poetry, contemporary poetry

In the Hebrew Bible, Jephthah’s daughter has neither name nor heir. Even the statement that it became a custom in Israel “for the maidens of Israel to go every year, for four days in the year, and chant dirges for the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite” (Judg. 11:40) finds no trace in later Jewish halakhic tradition. The view that a nameless figure is not a full person evidently reaches far back into history. More recently, Adele Reinhartz has adduced four functions proper names play in the biblical text:

First, the proper name in itself may carry meaning. ... Second, as a peg on which the other traits and features of the character may be hung, the proper name unifies disparate bits of information under one rubric. Third, insofar as it unifies the character and labels the set of traits from which that character may be constructed, the proper name is a convenient way of referring to the character. Fourth, the proper name distinguishes one character from another.

A proper name thus individualizes a person, its absence making him or her less noticeable. Examining the biblical art of designation, John Revell observes that “an individual who was not named was not sufficiently prominent in the narrative, or in the history of the community to warrant a specific identification.” This insight is even more pronounced in regard to the unnamed women in the Hebrew Bible. As Athalya Brenner comments with respect to the unidentified women in Judges:

1 All biblical quotations are from the JPS (1985). The holiday does seem to have been celebrated in pre-exilic Israel, however: see Bearis, “A Daughter in Israel”, 11–25. According to Alicia Ostriker (“Performing Jephthah’s Daughter”, 25), as a special ceremony it “offers an opportunity to grieve the sacrifice of Jephthah’s daughter, and to ponder the meaning of her sacrifice to us today.” My focus herein lying on poems in which the daughter tells her own story, I shall not analyze Ostriker’s lament in this article.
2 See, for example, Feldman, “The Problem of Personal Names”, 237–250.
3 Reinhartz, “Why Ask My Name?”, 6.
4 Revell, The Designation of the Individual, 51.

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Naming lends substance to a character. ... The reverse ratio of nameless versus named female/male figures, must be a reflection of un/conscious social norms. Female figures, even when indispensable for a narrative framework or even when active within it, do not cease to be configurations of a certain extratextual ‘reality’; and that reality, given away by the namelessness of most these female figurations, is plainly androcentric.5

I would like to suggest that the modern feminist midrashic tradition seeks to give names, identities, and fills out the characters of the women in the Hebrew Bible as a way of asserting their own status within Judaism—a traditionally patriarchal and androcentric religion.6 In giving her a voice, feelings, emotions—an independent, autonomous identity—they do the same for themselves. Hereby, they embody the claim that the true essence of Judaism is not static tradition but the continual reinterpretation of Torah in response to changing social and political needs and realities.7 Reading with the “hermeneutics of suspicion,” they seek to uncover the implicit—often impalpable—patriarchal agenda of the text and thus a corrective to the androcentric perspective evident within the text.8 Laying bare its partialities and value systems, they hereby endeavor to recover women’s voices from the marginal positions to which they have been banished. In this way, they attempt to deconstruct the “politics of otherness” so frequently ascribed to gender relations within the text, in order to provide a fresh reading that opposes the misogynist and phallocentric value systems the author presents as “normative” or “universal.”9 This hermeneutics is thus dedicated to exploring the “liberating or oppressive values and visions inscribed in the text by identifying the androcentric-patriarchal character and dynamics of the text and its interpretations.”10

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Identifying four types of midrash—classical, theoretical, creative, and literary—Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg notes of the fourth:

In every generation, midrash has been a site for the investigation of the relationship between Jewish tradition and contemporary Jewish identity—particularly the question of how the contemporary Jew (of any era) stands in relation to Judaism (and particularly the text of ancient Judaism). This latter concern has been especially central in the Jewish American literature of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, which is often described as midrashic.11

5 Brenner, “Introduction”, 11, 13.
6 Feminism/feminist are, of course, loaded, complex terms. Following Trible, I understand feminism as “a critique of culture in light of misogyny” (God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality, 7)—i.e., a personal and political reaction to the cultural prioritization of patriarchy and the sexism, inequality, and injustice women suffer in consequence of socially-constructed gender differentiation. Feminist criticism, in turn, may serve as a useful “umbrella term” for the essence of feminist biblical interpretation: “All the feminist is asserting, then, is her own equivalent right to liberate new (and perhaps different) significances from these same texts; and at the same time, her right to choose which features of a text she takes as relevant because she is, after all, asking new and different questions of it. In the process, she claims neither definitiveness nor structural completeness for her different readings and reading systems, but only their usefulness’ (183). See Blyth, “Terrible Silence”; McKay, “On the Future of Feminist Biblical Criticism”, 62; van Dijk-Hemmes, “Reading the Bible ‘as a Woman’”; Bird, “What Makes a Feminist Reading Feminist?”; Thimmes, “What Makes a Feminist Reading Feminist?”; Morris, Literature and Feminism; Davies, The Dissenting Reader, 17–54. The literature on modern/feminist midrashists and midrash is likewise extensive: see, for example, Myers, “The Midrashic Enterprise”; Cushing Stahlberg, Sustaining Fictions; eadem, “Midrash in Twentieth-Century Jewish American Literature”; Fuchs, Feminist Theory and the Bible; eadem, Jewish Feminism; Kahn-Harris, “Midrash for the Masses”; Ostriker, Feminist Revision; eadem, “Back to the Garden”; eadem, “A Triple Hermeneutic”; eadem, The Nakedness of the Fathers; Brenner and Fontaine, A Feminist Companion to Reading the Bible; Plaskow, Standing Again at Sinai; Rich, “When We Dead Awaken”; Schneider, “Poetry, Midrash, and Feminism”; Selinger, Midrashic Poetry and Ribboni Poetics”; Fiorenza, Bread, Not Stone; eadem, But She Said; Doob Sakenfeld, “Feminist Uses of Biblical Materials”; Lubich, Creative Feminist Midrash.
7 Ostriker, “Back to the Garden”, 73.
8 For the “hermeneutics of suspicion,” see Ricoeur, Freud and Philosophy; Ostriker, “A Triple Hermeneutic.”
9 Blyth, “Terrible Silence”, 8.
10 Fiorenza, But She Said, 57.
11 Cushing Stahlberg, “Midrash in Twentieth-Century”, 321. For midrashic prose, see, for example, Brenner, I Am; Diamant, The Red Tent. For midrashic verse, see, for example, Shreiber, “A Flair for Deviation.” For midrashic drama, see, for example, Yerushalmi, “The Bible Project” (Va-Yomer/Va-Yelech, 1996; Va-Yishthahu/Va-Ye’ar, 1998)—an eight-hour epic performance based on selected edited excerpts from the Hebrew Bible performed in biblical Hebrew. For biblically-inspired poetry in general, see, for example, Curzon, Modern Poems on the Bible.
Tracing the history of the “midrashic enterprise of contemporary Jewish women,” Jody Myers similarly observes:

Women, excluded from the conversation in the houses of Torah study for so many centuries, are no longer waiting for an invitation to participate. They have added their voices to the ongoing dialogue, adding new breadth and depth to the ancient story… Women composing midrash negotiate carefully through the openings provided. They recognize that the biblical text is privileged, meriting a regular public recitation in its unadorned, exact form. Yet the myriad interpretive readings from the past also compete to be heard. A person who crafts a new midrash is contesting or augmenting the existing renditions of the text. This is a creative act, but it is also an aggressive one that involves determination and willingness to face opposition.12

Adrienne Rich speaks of this feminist reading and reworking of the Bible as a form of “re-visioning”: “We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us.”13 While modern midrash maintains much of the plot and characterization on which it is based, it takes “great liberty in adding and subtracting aspects of narratives’ content and imaginatively retells the narratives in a more contemporary style.”14 Taking the form of short stories, novels, plays, ballads, and lyric–poetry, it frequently shares more in common with works belonging to related genres written by modern Western writers than the traditional narratives on which they are based in aesthetic terms.15

Perhaps most significantly, modern midrashists approach the biblical text from a very different perspective than their predecessors.16 As James Kugel observes, the Sages viewed both Scripture and their interpretation of it as divinely revealed: “Those who were to do the interpreting were very much the successors of the prophets—the new bearers of the divine word—and like prophets depended on something like divine inspiration in order to receive God’s words.”17 Modern proponents of the genre, in contrast, espouse precisely the opposite stance, taking all hermeneutic and exegetical authority into their own hands.18 The divergence is elegantly summed up in Ari Elon’s distinction between the rabbanī and ribbonī—the rabbinic exegete and independent thinker/writer. While the former “sees Israel’s Torah as a source of authority,” the latter “cannot relate to this Torah as a source of authority, for that person is the source of authority [ribbon] for himself or herself.”19

As Alicia Ostriker notes, midrash functioning as a method for resolving crises and reaffirming continuity with the past, it serves as a particularly apt vehicle for Jewish feminists seeking to reform the patriarchal system rather than abandon or destroy it.20 Hereby, the reclaiming of the ancient rabbinic genre serves as a means of asserting authenticity for their reworking of biblical texts and embedding themselves within Jewish tradition.21 Questioning the biblical androcentric text, they also challenge its time-honored phallocentric interpretation. Although, like traditional midrash, they seek to fill in the gaps in the biblical text, they do so through contemporary feminine and feminist eyes, imputing emotions and thoughts to the biblical women.

According to Ostriker, modern women poets engage in three, frequently overlapping, hermeneutics of biblical revisionism—suspicion, desire, and indeterminacy:

With the first of these we are … quite familiar; sceptical critique is the feminist’s stock in trade. Its opposite, the hermeneutic of desire—the discovery in a text of what we need to discover, the citing of what we love and wish to find sacred, the

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12 Myers, “The Midrashic Enterprise”, 135.
13 Rich, “When We Dead Awaken”, 19.
14 Jacobson, Modern Midrash, 8.
15 Ibid.
16 As the references in n. 6 demonstrate, the question of whether modern and/or feminist midrashists are heirs to the rabbinic tradition is disputed: see also Govrin, Reading the Generations; Abdalla, “Reconstructing the Jewish Woman”; Pardes, Countertraditions in the Bible; Brenner, “Introduction.”
17 Kugel, “Two Introductions to Midrash”, 83.
18 Cushing Stahlberg, Sustaining Fictions, 99.
19 Elon, From Jerusalem, 36. See also Selinger, “Midrashic Poetry”, 137.
20 Ostriker, “Back to the Garden”, 73. See also Holtz, “Midrash”, 179; Walton, “Lilith’s Daughters”, 116.
21 Kahn-Harris, “Midrash for the Masses”, 295–296.
bending [of] a text to our own will—is equally important for the woman writer. ... Lastly, the hermeneutic of indeterminacy depends on the recognition that, as the rabbis say, “there is always another interpretation.”

Although at first glance the three principles appear to be independent, they all in fact blend into one another in most of the poems discussed in this essay. I thus suggest that the “hermeneutics of indeterminacy”—which Ostriker herself regards as “most significant for the future”—already contain the other two, allowing other interpretations and/or ways of reading. Some are nevertheless more prominent than others.

In Ostriker’s view, (female) re-readings of Scripture do not contravene the biblical text, the Jewish Sages asserting that God intended “all the meanings that He has made us capable of discovering.” Female truths are thus present in this text as both sacred comedy and sacred tragedy. Judith Plaskow similarly notes in relation to modern women midrashists that, when they elaborate on the stories of Eve or Dinah, for example, “we know the text is partly an occasion for our own projections, that our imaginative reconstructions are a reflection of our own beliefs and experiences.”

Marge Piercy follows the same tradition:

Midrash is the entrance into the canon through the back door. In the patriarchal world of the texts, we miss the voices and ideas of women. So we put them back in. ... We women who write midrashim are putting our truths into the ongoing oral Torah that is remade, reinterpreted, and added to generations after generation so that Judaism remains alive, and not fossil or relic.

As Jody Myers observes, the “oral Torah” promoted by women midrashists thus revolves primarily around feminist issues rather than theology or halakhah:

First and foremost, all authors present a perspective drawn from their experiences as women. ... Second, women midrashists generally ignore theology and are unconcerned with establishing a rationale for the commandments—matters that preoccupied premodern midrashists. Instead, they focus on articulating the dynamics of social relationships. ... Finally, while the writers employ different strategies and manifest diverse and competing ideals of womanhood, they all use midrash to raise the self-esteem of contemporary Jewish women.

In this article, I focus on Jewish American women’s midrashic poems treating Jephthah’s daughter, one of the nameless female characters that populate the biblical text. Anonymity is a particularly apt theme for both midrashists and feminists, calling for the “filling in of the gaps” left by the absence of a name and character and redressing the veiling and violation of personal identity. Due to spatial constraints, herein I examine only those poets who make Jephthah’s daughter the narrator, thereby maximizing her self-expressed autonomy. They also exemplify my argument that, in “incarnating” anonymous biblical women, modern Jewish American midrashic poets lay claim to their own independence and identity—as women within the Jewish tradition. Reading the biblical text with anti-patriarchal eyes empowers both the biblical woman and the contemporary woman poet. Although each poet lets the daughter tell her own story, some appeal to traditional midrashim and commentators, others do not. Here, too, they make a plea for re(-)forming Jewish values by rewriting both the biblical text and the rabbinic midrashim, questioning
the father, the narrator, God, ancient Israelite culture, and the biblical narrative discourse.30 Perhaps most significantly, Jephthah’s unnamed daughter serves as an apt theme in light of the question it raises regarding commemoration: is this anonymous girl to die and disappear from history or can she be saved from her fate as a male-offered sacrifice by women determined to give her—and themselves as her heirs—a voice and identity?

Jephthah’s daughter is the focus of numerous ancient midrashim, also inspiring more than five hundred artistic works since the Renaissance.31 In the twentieth century alone, several novels have taken her as their subject.32 Several modern-Hebrew writers have also addressed her character in poems, novels, plays, etc.33 The Bible plays a different role in Hebrew poetry than in Jewish American women’s poetry. Its use in the service of ‘revisionist mythmaking’ by women (and male) Hebrew writers forming part of the Zionist ethos and restoration of the Hebrew language, the scriptural canon functions herein as a cultural source. As Gershon Shaked notes: “Hebrew literature ... needed the canonical text, and by means of it attempted to give the present legitimacy derived from the past and to lay out a path to a national future.”34 Jewish American women in contrast, tend to engage in a more extensive revision of the Jewish canon, opening up the sacred texts to women—a form of access that had been banned for centuries. Their revisioning of the biblical text thus forms a part of Jewish American feminism.

The biblical account of Jephthah’s daughter (Judg 11:30–40) is somber, comprised, as Moshe Reiss notes, of “elements of drama, tragedy, anguish, despair, heroism, all constructing a family drama.”35 Although she remains nameless in the biblical text, the Biblical Antiquities attributed to Philo (40) refer to her as Seila—most likely derived from the Hebrew word še-i-la “asked for.” As Barbara Miller notes, “Upon seeing her come from the house, Jephthah says that she was rightly named since she asked to be a sacrifice. This explanation seeks to justify her fate by the name given her at birth.”36 Most of the poets whose poems are analyzed in this article are content to leave her nameless, however.

The biblical text raises three principal issues: a) why Jephthah’s daughter accepted her fate; b) why she went into the mountains for two months; and c) was she actually sacrificed? All these questions have been discussed at length by traditional and modern commentators and exegetes alike. In his article “Jephthah’s Daughter,” Moshe Reiss argues that, “The text does not state explicitly that Jephthah sacrificed his daughter, but only that he did to her as he had vowed (Judg. 11:39). This ambiguity allows for debate.”37 Phyllis Silverman Kramer notes that commentators have followed two primary directions throughout the generations. Early Jewish midrashists tend to maintain that Jephthah sacrificed his daughter as a burnt offering in accordance with his vow (e.g., Josephus; b. Ta’an. 4a; Gen. Rab. 70:3). Mediaeval Jewish commentators, in contrast, more frequently assert that she secluded herself for the rest of her life, remaining a virgin (Rambam, Radak, Ralbag, Abarbanel).38 Reiss further observes that this approach was probably influenced by Christianity, since “the ideal of perpetual virginity and asceticism had never previously appeared in Jewish texts as an objective and in fact

30 Fuchs, Feminist Theory, 71. I have addressed the issue of how modern Jewish American women poets treat the ancient midrashic tradition in another article analyzing poems relating to another anonymous biblical women—Lot’s wife (the article is under review). For rabbinic midrashic treatments of biblical women, see Hyman, Biblical Women; Baskin, Midrashic Women; Lerner, Eternally Eve; Bronner, From Eve to Esther; Cohn Eskenazi, “Out from the Shadows.” For inner-biblical exegesis, see, for example, Zakovitch, “Inner-Biblical Interpretation.” Kahn-Harris, “Midrash for the Masses”, 303.
31 Sypherd, Jephthah and His Daughter; Bayer, “Jephthah: In the Arts.”
32 E.g., Watson, A Mighty Man of Valour; Feuchtwanger, Jephthah and His Daughter; Regen, Jephте’s Daughter. See Sjöberg, Wrestling with Textual; idem, “Jephthah’s Daughter as Object”, 377–394.
33 E.g., Oz, “Upon This Evil Earth”; Rina Yerushalmi, “Bat Yifthach,” in Va-Yomer, Va-Yelech, Bible Project, Part 1 (1996); HaEfrati, “Bat Yiṭḥach: A Play with Songs.” Chavah Yaakover (1989), Nechama Navon (2005), Liat Ben David (2008), Leah Snir (2016) and Meshe Shafrir (2003) and Shalom Benatiya (2017) have also devoted numerous poems and pieces to the subject.
34 Shaked, “Modern Midrash”, 47.
35 Reiss, “The Sacrifice of Jephthah’s Daughter”, 321–336.
36 Miller, Tell it on the Mountain, 66.
37 Reiss, “Jephthah’s Daughter”, 59.
38 Silverman Kramer, “Jephthah’s Daughter”, 74.
lay outside the Jewish belief system and cultural milieu.” Examining Christian perspectives on this issue, he contends that most exegetes argued in favor of the first reading, the sacrificed daughter foreshadowing Jesus’ crucifixion or serving as an archetype of the Virgin Mary. The thirteenth-century exegete Nicholas of Lyra—the only Christian exegete to hold the later view—was probably influenced by Jewish commentators. These two directions are still espoused today.

In addressing the two other questions, contemporary feminist exegetes adopt diverse views. Most regard the biblical text as preeminently androcentric and patriarchal. Cheryl Exum, for example, asserts that:

The phallocentric message of the story of Jephthah’s daughter is, I suggest, submit to paternal authority. You may have to sacrifice your autonomy; you may lose your life, and even your name, but your sacrifice will be remembered, indeed celebrated, for generations to come. Herein lies, I believe, the reason Jephthah’s daughter’s name is not preserved: because she is commemorated not for herself but as a daughter.

On this reading, Jephthah’s daughter exemplifies obedience, thus making her memory preservable through women’s celebrations. Other feminist commentators, however, such as Phyllis Tamarkin Reiss, contend that she rebels and is not sacrificed: preferring to stay unmarried and free, she thereby escapes her fate. Surveying feminist contributors to the debate, Juliana Claassens concludes that, in focusing on the traces of female resistance in this text, they “join the women who have gathered themselves around the daughter of Jephthah in an act of resisting injustice: commemorating the young woman’s life and lamenting the circumstances that have led to her death.” Her defiance is perhaps first noted in an early midrash (Tanh. Behukotai 5). As Shulamith Valler demonstrates, however, in adducing a confrontation between father and daughter this tradition presents the latter as a foil to reinforce Jephthah’s negative image. As we shall see, rather than addressing Jephthah’s daughter, the five Jewish women poets discussed herein give her a voice, letting her tell her story from a contemporary feminine/feminist perspective. Sarah Singer (1915–2011) published her poem “Jephthah’s Daughter” in Judaism in 1995. The poem’s epitaph summarizes the biblical story, informing us that, having vowed “to sacrifice whatever greeted him first out of his house if he were victorious,” Jephthah was mortified that “Instead of lamb or a goat, it was his only daughter who was first to approach him.” Like the poem, the epitaph does not recount the end of the story.

The poem’s narrator is Jephthah’s daughter. In the first strophe, she recounts how she awaited her father’s arrival, unaware of his vow. Tensely anticipating his victorious return, she dresses like a bride anticipating her groom:

Garlanded,
Clad in gossamer
Laced with filligree,
I have waited all night
In the still weather.

Comparing the account of Jephthah’s daughter with the story of Rebbecca’s betrothel, Yael Shemesh remarks that “There are also anthropological and sociological expressions of the link between a young person’s premature death and wedding festivities.” Her attire may thus presage her fate. The calm possibly serves a metaphor for the “still” waiting that permeates the stanza. This contrasts with the point at which she

39 Reiss, “The Sacrifice of Jephthah’s Daughter”, 329.
40 Ibid, 99, 332–333.
41 See, for example, Fuchs, “Marginalization, Ambiguity”, 116–130; Exum, “On Judges 11”, 131–143.
42 Exum, “Murder They Wrote”, 32.
43 Tamarkin Reiss, “Spoiled Child”, 279–298.
44 Claassens, “Female Resistance”, 611.
45 Valler, “Strong Women”, 236–254.
46 Singer, “Jephthah’s Daughter”, 219.
47 Shemesh, “The Sacrifice of Jephthah’s Daughter.”
“Come[s] forth to be/ The first in Gilead/ To greet my father”—a noisy time filled with “dance and timbrel,/ And songs of praise/ Upon my lips.” The serenity that symbolizes the waiting is broken when the good news of victory breaks.

The process is reversed in the second strophe, however, which opens with a war-like scene:

... the herald’s cry,
The sudden drum,
The clank of shield and spear!
I would make claim ...

The battle won, Jephthah’s daughter looks forwards to celebrating his victorious return. Instead of the festivities she has envisioned, however, her father “weeps,/ And rails against the sky” as he approaches. The poem ends on this bewildered note, the silence symbolizing her obliviousness: “And priest and warrior/ Are dumbed.” The reference to the priest may be drawn from a midrashic tradition according to which Jephthah keeps the vow because he and Phinehas, the high priest—who has the authority to revoke it—are too arrogant to go to meet one another.48

Singer portrays both father and priest as “dumb,” possibly in allusion to this midrash, their self-importance prompting them into the foolish act of remaining silent, thereby sealing Jephthah’s daughter’s fate. The poem thus opens with her silent waiting, then moves to her planning of the joyful victory celebration—which leads into the noisy announcement of the return of the victorious warriors— and concludes in a muteness she does not understand but is all too clear to her father and the (high) priest. Herein, the biblical tragedy, depicted through the eyes of the unknowing daughter, becomes a tension framed in the shift from silence to sound and back again. In its movement between silence and sound, the poem mimics the very essence of the biblical Jephthah’s daughter, giving voice to a figure doomed to remain mute.

Patty Seyburn’s (b. 1962) poem “Jephthah’s Daughter Signs Her Name” was published her in her book Diasporadic in 1998.49 Consisting of fourteen strophes of seven lines each, many of which are connected grammatically, with enjambments between, it engages in constant intertextual play with ancient midrashic traditions and comentators. Its epitaph is a quotation of Jephthah’s vow from Judges 11. Narrated by Jephthah’s daughter, it follows the tradition that Jephthah’s daughter was only symbolically sacrificed, remaining a virginal hermit. In the opening lines, she thus owns the vow adduced in the epitaph: “That would be me—my reward for faith in the filial.”

Rather than constituting the “burnt offering,” however, she stays in the house as a recluse: “Never again/ will I run to meet anyone.” In contrast to medieval commentators, such as Ibn Ezra (quoted by Nachmanides), Kimhi, and Gersonides, who suggest that “Jephthah built a cell for his daughter”—who, according to Abarbanel, was only allowed to choose its location,—Seyburn suggests she secluded herself of her own free will: “Locked-in now/ of my own accord” (stanza 4).50 Knowing that she will meet her fate outside, however, this is not a real decision: “I can’t leave, won’t leave/ this house./ Outside lies death—thank you, I’ll stay in, confined/ by one who gave ‘his word’” (stanza 9). Jephthah already having died at this point (as intimated by the tenth strophe), the poem becomes the daughter’s pact with God for keeping her alive as a recluse, continuing the legacy of “cutting a deal, the art of base/ negotiation” (stanza 12). Covenants with God are notoriously unpredictable in Israelite history, however:

His capricious take on mercy
turns rain to tempest,
staff to serpent, whale to vessel. Who can predict?
One day you’re wheat,
the next, chaff;
today manna, tomorrow, unleavened bread, the taste and texture
of necessity:

48 Cf. Gen. Rab. 60:3; Lev. Rab. 37:3; Tanh. Hakadum 5:6. See Reiss, “The Sacrifice of Jephthah’s Daughter,” 327.
49 Seyburn, “Jephthah’s Daughter Signs Her Name”, 49–52.
50 Reiss, “The Sacrifice of Jephthah’s Daughter,” 331.
sun-speckled dough with no penchant for pleasure,  
only the dry fact  
of sustenance.

Jephthah’s daughter feels she has no choice, signing the treaty with God “whose name we don’t know/ how to say—can’t say—won’t say—from one/ who has no name to utter” (stanza 14). The contract is thus invalid because both sides are nameless.

The rain and bread metaphors symbolizing God’s unpredictability echo the midrashic tradition in Tanhuma Behukotai 5. This appeals to Prov. 28:3: “A poor man that oppresseth the weak is like a sweeping rain which leaveth no food (= bread)” in describing Jephthah’s character. Strophes 5–7 openly play on the dialogue between Jephthah and his daughter this adduces, wherein the latter seeks to convince her father that God does not accept human sacrifice—as clearly indicated in the Torah. Hereby, she applies all the learned means the Sages would have employed, intimating that Jephthah has misunderstood God’s will and ordinances.

Seyburn nonetheless reads Jephthah’s daughter’s request to go to the mountains in a different fashion to the biblical text and midrash alike. In her poem, the narrator declares:

If the story had its way,  
I should have gone nobly to the mountains, bemoaning  
my virginity  
...  
Instead, I retreated—fled—to anonymity: reclusive,  
redactive.  
I’ve gained no knowledge in exile, found no  
“good-faith clauses”  
on which to built my case. And the mountain has  
no secrets for a virgin  
that the town can’t answer in chorus. (stanzas 5, 7)

The daughter hints that the mountains are no place for a virgin, being far too dangerous for women. Nor do they provide any answers—in light of the midrash that understands her request to go thence as representing her appeal to the Sanhedrin to find a loophole to release her from her father’s vow. Instead, she flees death by becoming a recluse, this “sacrifice” being depicted as “wedding her fate/ not to another man’s fortune/ but to the Angel of Death!” (stanza 8). By staying at home, she fulfils her womanhood: “Like the women I was raised to become,/ my home is my world”; by remaining a virgin (“my body is mine”), she saves her life and signs a pact with God. Hereby, Seyburn portrays her as an independent woman who chooses life as a hermit over death.

Enid Dame (1943–2003) wrote a lot of midrashic poetry that, as Alicia Ostriker observes, can be perceived as a “tree of life sprouting through disasters.” In her article “Art as Midrash: Some Notes on the Way to a Discussion”—published posthumously in For Enid with Love (2011)—Dame observed that in her work “characters from Jewish mythology (particularly women) explain or reinterpret their experiences, often from a modern sensibility.” In “Jephthah’s Daughter,” published in 1999, Jephthah’s daughter tells her story, focusing on her relationship to her father. The poem is divided into two parts. In the first, the protagonist describes her life. It remains unclear, however, whether this relates to her pre- or post-vow state. In the first strophe, she details her family background: while her grandmother was a prostitute, her wealthy uncles were rulers of the city of Gilead; her father, in contrast, “is a fighter” who has nothing but her.

51 The midrash is quoted in full by Valler, “Strong Women”, 247–249.  
52 Friedland-Ben Arza, “Opening of Revolt”, 31–47.  
53 Ostriker, “Enid Dame”, 69.  
54 Dame, “Art as Midrash”, 152.  
55 Dame, “Jephthah’s Daughter”, 28–29.
In the second, she focuses on her own circumstances:

I had a name, once.
I had a mother,
I don’t remember them.
My father says
a young girl doesn’t need much.

She then elaborates on Jephthah’s statement, addressing the subject of God in the next two strophes. Although her father has a relation with the deity (“There is a god/ inside my father’s fury”), when she asks him for a similar figure “to talk to, when I’m older,” he again minimizes her existence:

He shouts, “Don’t be an ass!
You’ve got a father, girl.
That ought to be enough.”

Arguing that she should be content with her status, defined in his terms/terms of him, having no name or autonomy of her own, he stands in for God, constituting all she needs. Just as God’s relationship with Jephthah is “inside my father’s fury,” so is hers with him, as he “shouts” and “roars” and throws the rock she was given (by the woman: “But/ not the soft blue stone/ that flirted like an eye/ (she said it would protect me)” into the fire.

Although in the second strophe the daughter claims she does not “remember,” in strophes five and six she recounts the past, adducing the time when she had greater freedom to go to the market, play with her girlfriends, and meet “her”—an unnamed personage who may be presumed to serve as a sort of mother figure to the young woman/girl. In contrast to the stern father figure, the market square is depicted as a feminine place, full of noise, music, and dance:

I remember: a clean bright square   a market
where women argued over goat cheese   spices   earrings.
My girlfriends sucked on sweets   played tag   sang love songs
Shoshana’s sister taught me how to dance.

The mother figure in the sixth strophe (the mother or grandmother?) is depicted as giving and caring: “She’d wrap my fingers/ around a silver coin.” Hinting at the biblical story, it is precisely these two points—her dancing and the timbrel she buys with the coin (“That’s how I bought the timbrel”—that lead to her tragic end according the biblical text, however: “When Jephthah arrived at his home in Mizpah, there was his daughter coming out to meet him, with timbrel and dance!” (Judg 11:34). The fact that her father lets her keep the instrument but not the “soft blue stone” meant for protection again hints at tragedy. In contrast to the open, giving, feminine square she remembers, Jephthah is a taker:

The more I grew,
the more he took away:
words   music   girlfriends.
He made the house grow smaller.
It shrank down to a room.

Although it is unclear whether Jephthah’s confinement of his daughter is due to his vow, thus allowing for a possible alternative ending—of becoming a hermit rather being sacrificed—or forms part of his standard strict treatment of his daughter—it contrasts sharply with strophes five and six.

In the final strophe of the first part, Jephthah again resembles God:

He says he loves me just as
his god loves his possessions.
He says we’re fortunate
to be possessed by love.
The anaphora “He says” stresses the pun “possession.” Jepththah’s/God’s love is “possessive”: treating her like property, he/He does with her/it as he/He pleases. The final line can be read in two ways: “to be possessed by love” may hint at Jepththah’s unhealthy (“possessed”) love that seeks to shut his daughter away from the world to make her his alone. Or it may intimate that both father and daughter lie in God’s hands. Although Judaism does not speak of God as the embodiment of love as much as Christianity (cf. “God is love” [1 John 4:8, 16]), such references do exist. In this section of the poem, Dame thus appears to follow the commentators who conclude that Jepththah’s daughter became a recluse rather than being sacrificed.

The second part presents the other option—her death:

This is
the last night on the mountain.
He let me breathe the air
for two months before he’ll cut it off
forever.

The daughter senses that something is off in the whole affair (“Something’s wrong here,/ but I can’t name it”). Her perplexity is enhanced by Jepththah’s in the anaphora “He says” in the second strophe. His bewilderm ent—he accuses his daughter, tells her he loves her, but insists that nothing can “be changed”—highlights his unwillingness to accept the situation. In the third strophe, however, the “he” is replaced by “his god.” This leads both daughter and reader back to the biblical story of the vow as an explanation of the situation. Not only the vow itself—not mentioned in the poem—but also its consequences are responsible for the daughter’s sacrifice, however: “because he killed two thousand men,/ in twenty cities.” Is God invoking the principle of “an eye for an eye”?

The final strophe is in parentheses, perhaps in order to blur the narrator’s identity—the daughter, who does not have a God because her father has denied her request for one (Part I, strophe 4), or the poet? Either way, the strophe continues the accusation against God for letting the daughter be sacrificed:

(I never claimed a god
but if I had one,
my god would have no country,
need no armies,
and any promise
would be negotiable.)

The poem appears to end with a question already asked by the traditional midrashists—namely, what role does God play in the story? In contrast to the midrash, however, which ultimately lays the blame at human feet—Jepththah, Phinehas, the Sanhedrin—the poem holds God directly responsible. As the first part of the poem indicates, at this point the lines between God and Jepththah become blurred, his daughter speaking about God in the form of her father—i.e., as a warrior leading the country with whom it is impossible to negotiate. In desiring a different God, she thus wishes for a different father or life—or in fact life itself.

In contrast to many of the poets who address the daughter’s end, either adducing her death or asserting that she became a hermit, Dame portrays both. In presenting these options as two sides of the same coin she (and the daughter herself?) suggests that seclusion is tantamount to death.

Janet Ruth Heller published her poem “Yiftach’s Daughter” in her 2014 book *Exodus*. In a short post following a radio interview with Zinta Aistars, the latter summarized the history of the volume prior to its publication:

Because *Exodus* spans about 40 years of work, there are poems that empathize with different characters in different stages of their lives. Heller says she was drawn to many female characters in the Bible. She would try to imagine what their lives were like, but also what they would be like today.

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56 See, for example, Liebes, “Of God’s Love.”
57 Heller, “Yiftach’s Daughter”, 43.
58 Aistars, “What Biblical Characters were Thinking.”
Heller’s Jephthah’s daughter also tells her own story. The first two of the five five-lined strophes depict the biblical scene: the daughter awaits her father’s return, greets him with singing and dancing, and causes him to weep because of the vow he has taken. The third strophe then shifts to the midrashic tradition. In contrast to Seyburn’s play with this ancient reading, Heller follows it. Jephthah’s daughter argues with her father, reminding him “that the Bible attacks/pagan rites like child sacrifice.” The example she cites—Jacob and Hannah—is precisely that adduced in the midrash. In the fourth strophe, the narrator again follows the midrash in asserting that “Yiftach was no scholar.”

The remainder of the poem deviates from both the biblical text and the midrashic tradition, turning the aqedah on its head. Rather than God calling upon Abraham to offer the ram in place of Isaac, Jephthah’s daughter convinces her father to do the same: “But I persuaded him to offer/ rams to God instead.” As in Seyburn’s poem, she chooses to “devote my life to prayer” as a recluse. Following the medieval commentators, who suggest that this was her true fate, Heller’s daughter exiles herself from this world “in a room with no windows,/ unable to see the mountain sunrise.” This is equivalent to the midrashic “cell.”

Although no mention is made of her virginity, it may be hinted at by the white linen clothes she wears at the beginning of the poem and her assertion: “I never married, never had children.” In providing us with her perspective on the events, Heller thus gives her her independence.

Singer/songwriter Jan Seides’ CD album Unsung: Tales from the Bible That No One Ever Got to Hear came out in 2018/2019. Herein, she sings songs about what she calls “My long awaited encounters with biblical anti-heroes.” The poem “No Name” stars Jephthah’s daughter, who serves as its narrator. Although the first two strophes closely follow the biblical text, in the third and fifth strophes the daughter speaks of her fate—in both future and past tense:

| Strophe 3                  | Strophe 5                  |
|----------------------------|---------------------------|
| And I would have no name   | Because I had no name     |
| ’Cause I would have no life | ‘Cause I had no life      |
| ’Cause I would never be a mother | ‘Cause I never was a mother |
| I’d be no man’s wife       | I was no man’s wife       |
| And I would have no heirs  | And I had no heirs        |
| And he would have the same | Despite my father’s fame  |
| But more important         | But more important        |
| I’d have no name.          | I had no name.            |

She nonetheless does not blame her father for her situation—even though he is a a “gambler” who has “made a deal with God.” At the end of the poem, where she does appear to accuse him, she also merely wishes: “Let that be my father’s shame.” In contrast to the other poems discussed above, her fate is unclear: was she actually sacrificed, as per her father’s original intention in his “deal with God,” or was she “only” left heirless and nameless? Ultimately, this question becomes insignificant: either way, she vanishes with neither posterity nor name. This forms the principal point of the poem. Her pain at being nameless is underscored by the six times it is adduced in the text (five times “I have no name” and once “her forgotten name”). To have no name is to be forgotten. Even the women who in the biblical text lament her memory “four days in the year” (Judg. 11:40) only “sometimes” mourn her pain (stanza 4) in the poem. The fact that the biblical text only refers to her as Jephthah’s daughter makes her disappearance complete.

* * *

Jephthah’s daughter is one of the myriad anonymous figures that populate the Hebrew Bible. While she appears in the biblical text, she essentially remains an unseen, nameless victim. Traditional midrashists
and exegetes dispute her fate. As such, she serves as an apt vehicle for Jewish American feminist women poets seeking to establish their place within Judaism as living, autonomous, named, and “identified” actors. Three of those discussed herein speak of her as a “bride of death” of sorts—clad in bridal clothes (Singer and Heller) and betrothed to death by her father (Seyburn). Seides, in contrast, makes more of her namelessness than her death. Interestingly, many focus on the way in which the biblical text treats her as a “marionette” in her father’s hands. Rather than focusing on Jephthah’s vow, they thus invoke her feelings and emotions. Hereby, they transfer her from the periphery to the center. In Singer’s poem, the ignorant daughter is oblivious to her imminent fate, the tension between unawareness and awareness being represented by the transition from silence to sound and back to silence as the stanzas progress.

In her contribution, Patty Seyburn engages in an intertextual game with ancient midrashic traditions. Rather than suggesting that Jephthah condemned his daughter to a life of celibacy, however, she makes it her daughter’s own choice to become a recluse in order to escape death. Nameless, she seeks to sign a pact with an equally anonymous God in order to save herself. Enid Dame consciously covers both possibilities relating to the daughter’s fate. Centering her poem around father-daughter relations, she suggests that, having no God but only a father, Jephthah’s act (whether to sacrifice her or make her a recluse) remains his own alone. Hereby, she implies that the two outcomes—sacrifice or seclusion—are in fact indistinguishable. Recalling midrashic traditions, Heller follows them in the main, her daughter appealing to the same arguments as the midrash. Here, too, the narrator chooses to exile herself from the world. Although Seides leaves the daughter’s end obscure, the consequences are the same: whether or not she is actually sacrificed, as a nameless person she feels she has no life.

All five poets thus elect to tell Jephthah’s daughter’s story from her own point of view, making us privy to her emotions. Although not giving her a name, they commemorate her existence. By imputing thoughts and emotions to her and granting her a voice to tell her own story, they continue the midrashic tradition by filling in “missing details.” Hereby, they write feminine midrashim that allow them to stake a claim for themselves in Jewish tradition, insisting that women can and should speak, do have names, and will be commemorated. Jephthah’s daughter thus symbolizes the Jewish American women’s/feminist endeavor to speak out and be heard and earn a place in religious tradition and human society.

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