

Haftarat Chuqat חַקַּת

Torah: Numbers 19:1–22:1

Haftarah: Judges 11:1–33

Qualities of a Leader

General Overview

Haftarat Chuqat contains one of the strangest stories in the book of Judges. It is the account of the fall and rise of Jephtah, the son of Gilead. Being the son of a harlot, he was ostracized by his half brothers. He then took up residence away from them in another part of the country. However, he also had a reputation for being a great warrior. Accordingly, when the sons of Gilead found themselves threatened by the Ammonites, they went to attempt to secure his services in hopes that Jephtah would be their leader.

He agreed to do so — but only on his terms. His conditions were that if he were to secure a victory over the Ammonites, they would make him the leader of the Gileadites, thus reversing the shame that had surrounded his birth. His brothers and other elders of Gilead agreed. Consequently, Jephtah led their men in victory.

The part of the story that was the most unusual section is curiously left out of the haftarah. This is the part where Jephtah follows through on a vow he made to the Lord regarding the outcome of the war against the Ammonites. Jephtah promised the Lord that if He were to grant him the victory, Jephtah would then sacrifice the first thing that came out of his home upon his return from battle. That alone is not so unusual, except that the first thing that came out from his house to greet him was his own daughter, his only child. It is left up to the reader of the story to figure out whether or not he actually offered up his daughter as a burnt sacrifice.

Connection to the Parasha

As Jephtah presented his arguments to the Ammonites concerning the reason why he feels that they are wrong about their reason for the war that began against the Israelites, Jephtah embarked on a historical sketch of the events of the children of Israel as they were making their way from the wilderness to the Promised Land. This historical summary provides a perfect parallel to the events recorded in *Parashat Chuqat*, Numbers 19:1–22:1. It is to those events that Jephtah refers in his communication to the king of Ammon.

Exposition

It seems fairly clear that the “hero” of this episode is Jephtah. He is the one who, though rejected by his brothers, ends up delivering them from enemy oppression. Moreover, the conclusion of the haftarah focuses on him again and the vow he made to the Lord about the outcome of the war with the Ammonites.

Having said all of this, however, there are more lessons that we can glean from this haftarah, other than just focusing on the life of Jephtah. Specifically, we can learn much about international politics from Jephtah's interaction with the Ammonites. As we study this, we will be amazed how relevant this haftarah is to the political situation in our own day regarding the Israelis and the Arabs in the Land of Israel. Indeed, some things never change!

With all of that in mind, here is the outline governing how we will approach our study of this Haftarat Chuqat:

- I. The Probe
- II. The Propaganda
- III. The Polemic
- IV. The Problem

In this excerpt from Haftarat Chuqat, we will focus on the section 1, The Probe.

I. The Probe

A. The Qualities of The Leader

1. Courageous on the Battlefield

Jephtah is an interesting character. The text informs us in 11:1 that he is a valiant warrior. The Hebrew uses the phrase "*gibbor khayil*" (גִּבּוֹר חַיִּיל) to describe him. He appears crafty and shrewd. This is more than just "valiant." Valiant emphasizes one's courage. But a *gibbor khayil* is not only courageous; he is also one who possesses the strength and might to walk out his courage. He was one to be reckoned with on the battlefield.

2. Courageous in Life

Jephtah, however, displays his strength in other arenas besides on the battlefield. We see him, for example, overcoming the handicap of his dishonourable birth and the resulting rejection because of it to become Israel's man of the hour. Why did we say that his birth was dishonourable? It is because, unlike his brothers, Jephtah was born from a harlot. The Hebrew word for harlot is *zonah* – זֹנָה, or in this case, *ben ishah zonah*, בֶּן-זֹנָה אִשָּׁה. The word *zonah* could mean innkeeper (as it may have been used to describe Rahav of Jericho). However, it seems that from the reaction of Jephtah's brothers to him, a harlot is meant by the text. Since this is the case, then we see from this story something that Rabbi Hertz aptly observes,

Here it [the Bible] teaches that a man of low, nay infamous, origin, whom his brothers despised, may yet be the destined instrument of deliverance for his people.¹

¹ J. H. Hertz, *Pentateuch and Haftarahs*, p. 654.

3. Courageous in Politics

Jephtah's strength and courage therefore, also paid dividends for him in the social arena, in addition to his prowess as a soldier. But it did not stop there. In 11:6–10 we see Jephtah depicted as having natural political skills. We are told that after his brothers rejected him, he moved away and lived in the land of Tov.

The Hebrew phrasing, *eretz tov* (תוב ארץ) tempts us to not translate this as a proper noun, but merely as a description of the place in which Jephtah chose to reside, i.e. “a good land.” However, we also know from other Scriptures that there was, indeed, a location called “Tov.” (See 2 Samuel 10:6–8).²

Since he was rejected, he was under no obligation to his brothers or other kinsmen. On the contrary, they owed him an apology for what they did to him, especially for disinheriting him (verse 2). When they came to him seeking a favour from him he, therefore, took complete advantage of that opportunity to extract from them whatever he wanted — and he succeeded! He sought the leadership of the people of Gilead. In verse 6 they asked him to be their *qatsin* (קצין). This word is usually a military word for “officer.” However, although

Jephtah was offered the distinguished title of קצין for his participation in the war effort...he was not conferred with the title of leader. Therefore he did not accept this gesture as a true sign of conciliation and friendship.”³

Consequently, he finally agreed to help them when they not only wanted him to be their *qatsin*, but also their head, *rosh* (ראש) in verse 9. Rabbi Hirsch

suggests that קצין refers to the position of military head of war, whereas ראש mentioned here designates the permanent head of the state.”⁴

Although “this offer astonished Jephtah ... he was convinced by their willingness to take an oath,”⁵ which they did before the Holy One in verse 10.

Thus, we see that Jephtah uses considerable political skill in handling those who were at one time his enemies. In doing so, he demonstrated the same kind of political craftiness that he would soon put to good use in dealing with their common enemy, the Ammonites.

Hence, we find that as we begin to explore how Jephtah handled the Ammonites, we find a man who had military, social, and political abilities that commanded the complete respect of friend and foe alike.

B. The Forthrightness of the Leader

One of his first tasks as their leader was to plea their complaint to the Ammonites. Notice two characteristics of godly leadership presented here in verse 12.

² According to the *Macmillan Bible Atlas*, the Land of Tov was somewhat north and east of Ramot Gilead. *The Macmillan Bible Atlas*, p. 65.

³ Avrohom Fishelis and Shmuel Fishelis, *The Book of Judges*, p. 96.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 96.

⁵ Herbert Wolf, “Judges” in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (“EBC”), vol. 3, p. 451.

First, there is the use of diplomacy before action. Jephtah, being their undisputed leader, could have simply led Israel's armies into battle with the Ammonites and no one would have questioned him because the Ammonites had already proven to be the aggressors. But this leader chose to do things differently. Instead of military action, he chose direct diplomacy in order to attempt to avoid bloodshed. His wisdom taught him that it is always necessary to attempt to talk things out first before pursuing more drastic measures.

The second thing Jephtah did that was good was that his first act of diplomacy was one of fact-finding, not accusation. This is an important art of communication that many of us seem to have forgotten, especially those of us who lead. All too often, we accuse and blame one another before we let the other side explain their motives for their actions. While it may have seemed obvious to some, Jephtah did not want to take a chance and assume something that may not have been true. Instead, he took the time to ask his opponent what their motives were. That is a lesson in personal relationships that is valuable for everyone, especially for leaders. It is always correct to *ask*, rather than *assume* that we know other people's reasons or motives.