

Message from the Haftara

*Rabbi Katriel (Kenneth) Brander
President and Rosh HalYeshiva
Ohr Torah Stone Institutions*

The Argument that Persists

CHUKAT

The haftara for Parshat Chukat (Sho-f'tim 11) opens with a scene that feels strikingly familiar. Yiftach, the judge and ad hoc military leader of Gilad, dispatches messengers to reason with the king of Ammon, asking: “What do you have against us [you terrorize us], that you came to attack our land?” (v. 12). The Ammonite reply is direct and bellicose, raising grievances from close to three hundred years before: “Israel seized my lands when they came out of Egypt, from the Arnon to the Yabok and up to the Jordan. Now hand them back peacefully” (v. 13).

The Ammonite’s claim centers on the disputed Transjordanian territory of Gilad, the shared backdrop of both our parsha and our haftara. It also reflects a familiar charge: that Israel holds land that does not rightly belong to us.

In Parshat Chukat, the Israelites navigate past the kingdoms of Edom and Moav, which both refuse entry to the Jewish people. Then the Israelites are forced into confrontation with

Sichon, king of the Amorites, after he refuses their request for safe passage through his land and attacks them. Israel defeats Sichon and takes possession of his land – the very land whose ownership lies at the heart of the Ammonite complaint centuries later, in the haftara.

Yiftach's response to that complaint is one of the most precise and legally rigorous arguments in all of Tanach.

He does not bluster or threaten, but marshals the facts. When Israel came out of Egypt, he reminds the Ammonite king, it sought peaceful transit through the region. When passage was refused, Israel went around; it did not seize a single inch of Moabite or Ammonite territory. It took instead the land of the Amorites: territory already conquered by Sichon, who then launched an unprovoked assault on the wandering and weary Israelites.

The conclusion is clear: A nation that attacks another in an attempt to annihilate it forfeits its claims to protection. Israel did not conquer out of ambition. It defended itself, and the land it now holds is the rightful fruit of that defense. Yiftach's message to Ammon is therefore not a threat; it is a warning. Tend to your own land. Do not press claims that history does not support. Leave us in peace, enjoy your land and let us live in safety in the land that is ours.

The Ammonites, of course, do not listen. War follows, and Israel prevails.

Reading these passages today, their contemporary resonance is hard to ignore. Today, accusations abound: that the Jewish presence in their own land is illegitimate; that the wars Israel has been forced to fight were wars of conquest rather than survival. These arguments are all made today before biased international forums and news media with the same confidence and the same disregard for historical fact that the Ammonite king brought to his confrontation with Yiftach.

There is a consistency across history in the way our enemies engage us. Our obligation, beyond all else, remains to seek the truth, and to ensure the safety of our families and communities.

But as we all know, the haftara does not end with Yiftach's victory. It ends with a tragedy that carries its own lesson, one that speaks not to Israel's enemies but to Israel itself.

When Yiftach returns home after the battle, he expects what any returning commander might reasonably expect: a grateful people, a jubilant reception, offerings brought in recognition of the victory. It seems to be precisely this expectation that drives him to vow to consecrate as a sacrifice the first thing to emerge

from his house upon his return. But when he arrives, there are no crowds. There is only his daughter, coming out alone to meet him. The people, it appears, have never left their homes, and have never paused to acknowledge the man who secured their safety.

The tragedy of Yiftach's daughter is well known and has been much discussed. See my comments:

[ots.org.il/parshat-chukat-the-power-of-words-to-break-or-build/](https://www.ots.org.il/parshat-chukat-the-power-of-words-to-break-or-build/)

But the tragedy of Yiftach's reception deserves equal attention. A warrior's bravery and sacrifice went unrecognized by those he had protected. A man who had given everything, grown up an outsider, defended his community was once again rejected and neglected.

We dare not make that same mistake. Our soldiers today return from battles no less deserving than Yiftach. They return carrying the physical and emotional weight of what they have seen and done in our defense. What they require is not symbolic gratitude, but sustained responsibility. Mental health care, financial assistance, recognition, and gratitude are not optional gestures we extend to the heroes of the IDF.

While it is God who protects Israel, He does so through the hands and hearts of these men and women. Our

obligation is to ensure that those hands are never left unsupported; that no one who defends our people returns to silence. And that support should not be just for a moment. It should last for as long as it is needed.

