

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Sir,

The key words for understanding the shocking episode of the tragedy of Jephthah, dealt with by Lippman Bodoff ("The Tragedy of Jephthah," *JBQ* 28:4, 2000; Oct.-Dec. 2000) and previously by Israel Mehlman ("Jephthah's Daughter," *JBQ* 25:2, Apr.-June 1997), seem to me והיה לה' והעליתיהו עולה [usually rendered as *and it (or he) shall be the Lord's, and I will offer it (or him) as a burnt offering*].

The first two words 'לה יהיה [and it shall be the Lord's] indicate strongly that Jephthah did not have it in mind to kill anyone. The people of Israel were surely aware then that the Lord does not require human sacrifices, nor would they please Him. The last two words of Jephthah's utterance support this: they are a literal quotation from Genesis 22:2, wherein Abraham is commanded: 'העלהו שם לעלה' [usually translated *and offer him there as a burnt offering*]. While the word עולה can mean a burnt offering (as in Lev. 1:10), it simply means "ascent," "elevate," and in modern language "immigrate" -- that is, one who "comes up" to the land of Israel. Apparently, Jephthah, taken in *by the spirit of the Lord* (v. 29), felt urged to imitate Abraham, and when his daughter came out first from the house, he consecrated her to the Lord.

Everyone knew (and knows) that the *akedah* ["sacrifice" of Isaac] did not result in his death. Likewise here, the consecration of Jephthah's daughter could well have meant for him and his daughter (and for us readers) that she was to remain a virgin dedicated to some service in the sanctuary, somewhat similar to the dedication of Samuel by his mother Hannah; or to the dedication of Samson. In neither of these cases was the one to be dedicated asked for his consent -- in contrast to Jephthah's daughter: she bewailed that she had to remain virgin, but agreed.

The Midrash, based upon the supposition that the daughter, there called Shielah, had actually been killed, was probably developed to discourage people from hastily making vows, and for that matter, from unnecessary ones.

Asher Eder

Ashkelon