

# Book of Judges

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*“From so much self-thinking, I’m now my thoughts and not I.”*  
– Bernardo Soares, *Disquietude*

*“We are all just trying to be holy.”*  
–Richard Siken, *“Snow and Dirty Rain”*

i.

A vow is a promise to G-d, and, if spoken, becomes binding.

Judaism forbids wasting time. Therefore, one must always be thinking.

Judaism encourages the act of questioning. For example:

If G-d is omniscient, what is the difference between a thought and an action?

If a vow is inevitable, why does G-d not simply possess our bodies and make us carry out his will?

If G-d is omnipotent and omnipresent, is there no divide between G-d and our thoughts?

If G-d is thinking us, are our actions his thoughts? Can we ever belong to ourselves?

Judaism forbids wasting time. Therefore, one must always be thinking or allowing oneself to be thought.

ii.

Intrusive thoughts are thoughts that become trapped in a mind,  
circling like flies. They bite, repeat, contradict  
what a person wants to be or believe.

(Scrupulosity: an obsessive moral guilt,  
from the Latin word  
for a small, sharp stone.)

Intrusive thoughts are violent, sexual, sacrilegious,  
an annullment  
of oneself.

Priests shake with thoughts  
of worshipping the devil.  
Pacifists dream their hands marked with blood.

These thoughts are not a problem  
unless one becomes distressed by them.  
Thinking about thinking the thoughts  
causes them to multiply.

iii.

Before the world, G-d was called EinS of:  
the absence of an ending.  
Or he would have been called that  
had there been anyone  
to call him anything.

Before the world, the universe  
was a bowl of infinite light.  
Being made by an omnipotent Being, the light was limitless.  
Its particles vibrated with infinite speed.  
Its brightness would have burned away the senses  
had anyone existed to perceive it.

With no end, the light left no space  
for the world to exist.

So G-d created the void,

using his omnipotence  
to dim his omnipotence.

This was called tsimtsum, reduction.  
Or more accurately: tsimtsumim,  
these reductions being plural.

Through tsimtsumim,  
G-d quieted his divine energy  
until it was almost imperceptible.  
The infinite world  
cooled into something  
our human minds could touch.

One tsimtsum more  
and nothing at all could exist.

iv.

Those with obsessive-compulsive disorder  
cannot distinguish between thought and action:  
an image-flash of harm violences the mind, identical  
to memory of murder.

How does one stopper a thought?  
And how to silence a fear  
of one's own possibilities?  
The misaimed knife, the unsnuffed candle;

certainty a room  
already burning.

The disorder appears to correlate  
with abnormalities in the medulla oblongata,  
the brain region which signals the call  
for shame, danger, fear, guilt, dread, and panic.  
If the medulla oblongata ceases to regulate itself,  
when an action is taken to alleviate distress,  
stress hormones will continue to flow.

Unable to find relief, a person becomes trapped  
repeating actions that promise safety  
or closure. They pray obsessively.  
They sanitize their hands until they crack.  
They avoid crossing streets. They avoid speaking.  
They go to their homes and lock themselves in  
again. Again. Again.

They withdraw from the world  
until they are almost imperceptible.

The disorder is not in action but in thought.  
Or not in the thought, but in thinking  
about the thought, allowing the thought,  
or avoidance of the thought,  
to control one's actions,  
unable to tolerate life  
with uncertainty.

Likewise, agoraphobia is not the fear of open spaces,  
but the fear of losing control  
in front of people in these spaces. Of spilling out  
of routine, and being seen  
for what one is.

v.

The right-wing Rabbi Wein says shame is essential  
to Jewish identity. "The only question that truly arises  
is what one should be ashamed about."

He cites the need for humility, Jewish prayers for forgiveness,  
David's desperate repentance before G-d.  
The Jewish philosopher Howard Adelman argues

that guilt and shame are opposites.  
That guilt calls for change, and shame  
for avoidance.

While guilt is attached to an action,  
shame affixes to the essence of a person:  
being rather than doing wrong.

In the garden of Eden, Adam named the animals,  
his ambitions G-d like: through speech he shaped the world  
through what could be thought.

Yet he could not name  
what went on inside him,  
nor look upon his wife, Chavah,  
as a complete being,  
another consciousness.  
Unaware of himself as discrete entity,  
he could not voice his loneliness.

When he bit into the fruit, he recognized  
the ache that had always existed:  
his position as fallible, embodied, separate,  
his inner world his alone.  
Chavah's world hers.

None of this is sin, says Adelman.  
Chavah and Adam were not punished for their acts  
but for hiding them.

In Adelman's view, sin is like shame: a negation  
of oneself.

vi.

In the Book of Judges, Yiptah vows to sacrifice his daughter.

In English, Yiptah is called Jephthah, though Hebrew has no sound for  
“j”  
and no sound for “th.”

Yiptah was a military leader from the tribe of Menasseh,  
a tribe whose descendants have since vanished  
into the diaspora.

Somewhere there are people related to him, though they do not know  
it.

Yiptah vowed to lead the Children of Israel in battle against the  
Children of Ammon.

He vowed that, if he returned victorious, he would sacrifice  
the first living thing to emerge from his house.

He led the Children of Israel in battle against the Children of Ammon.  
He returned victorious.

As he approached his home, his daughter ran out to greet him.

Yiptah tore his clothes and cried.

vii.

Judaism teaches that it is impossible  
for the devil to be G-d's enemy.  
After all, G-d is omnipotent.  
Therefore, the devil must be working for G-d.

viii.

Statistics about obsessive-compulsive disorder  
are filled with voids and contradictions.

There is no brain scan capable of diagnosing mental illness.  
Therefore, diagnosis can only be based  
on self-reported thoughts and behaviors.

No person can fully enter the mind of another,  
so diagnosis is an act of faith.  
Doctors must trust that patients mean what they say  
and are able to communicate it.

It does not account  
for how shame  
silences shame.

ix.

In battle, we are told G-d went before Yiptah,  
an invisible fire, obliterating  
all who rose before him.

If G-d did not approve of Yiptah's sacrifice,  
why did he lead him to victory?  
Why did he not immobilize his daughter in the doorway?  
Why did he not speak out, or speak out in a way

we could understand?

According to the Book of Judges, Yiptah's daughter does not protest.  
She asks for two months to spend with her friends and in nature.  
She is a good daughter. She does not argue with her father  
or with the G-d who does not speak in this story.

The Book of Judges never gives her name.

x.

Some doctors hypothesize that obsessive-compulsive disorder  
is no single condition, but a spectrum of illnesses  
involving fixation: on body image, morality,  
rules, goodness, safety, hygiene, achievement,  
exercise, organization—in short, any psychic distress  
that results from a thought  
that will not leave.

Where does the line lie  
between idea and obsession

faith and scrupulosity  
fixation and delusion  
our minds and ourselves?

At what point does a thought  
become an illness?

Diagnosis is made by the extent of distress  
as reported by the patient. Not the thought itself  
but its persistence.

Within the knots of a mind  
which threads can be pruned away as disorder  
and which knot the core we call soul  
or self or consciousness?

Without the thoughts we build our lives around  
what are we left with?  
xi.

The binding of Isaac is central to Jewish identity.  
The refusal to sacrifice a human life for divine honor.  
The message that giving up human life  
is not something that is asked of us.

A defining characteristic of Judaism  
is to value human life  
above unyielding moral code.

Human life is more holy than laws.  
This is why blood transfusions and surgeries are permitted,  
although it is forbidden to wound one's body.

In the story of Yiptah, G-d's voice does not roar.  
He does not turn the air stony  
or freeze Yiptah's raised hand.

G-d does not appear at all  
except in Yiptah's words, his daughter's loyalty.



In the story of Yiptah, G-d is both an absence  
and a thought that will not leave.

xii.

We do not know how Yiptah's daughter spent her last free days,  
why she asked for exactly two months,  
or who she spent them with.

We are told she was remembered in annual ceremonies  
but do not know the rituals  
or why they stopped.

We are told only she was a willing martyr.  
Centuries later, Christian scholars applaud her  
as a role model for nuns,  
praise her unflinching fidelity  
how she willingly extracted herself from the world

though it is Yiptah they bestow with sainthood.

xiii.

In experiences of obsessive-compulsive disorder,  
one fears that their fears are actually their fantasies.  
That one thinks of committing harm  
because of desire rather than anxiety.

One fear is that a person will act  
out the worst-case scenario  
to finally bring an end to the fear  
of the worst-case scenario.  
For example: hurting oneself  
to alleviate fear of hurting oneself.

The mind runs over and over  
its own sharp stones.

Punishing oneself  
is morally consistent  
with a fear of oneself:  
the danger contained  
by force if necessary.

To avoid contaminating others,  
people who fear themselves may cease  
to leave their homes.

They may cease speaking, touching  
or allowing themselves to be touched.

They quarantine themselves  
inside their thoughts.

They stop crossing the street.  
They stop holding their children.

It is a gradual narrowing of the world.

xiv.

In the beginning, G-d created the void  
to make space for the world.

In the beginning, G-d gave us his absence.

To those who believe in tsimtsum,  
an absence of apparent miracles  
is itself evidence

of G-d's greatest gift.

xv.

The Book of Judges tells the story of Yiptah's unnamed daughter  
in a strangely neutral tone:

*And it came to pass at the end of two months  
that she returned to her father, who did with her according  
to his vow which he had vowed*

The words so clear  
they bleach out detail:

a face turned directly  
into limitless light,

features obliterated.

xvi.

“Israel” means “those who wrestle with G-d.”  
Did anyone fight for the life of Yiptah’s daughter?  
The author remains taciturn.

Some scholars say G-d refused to stop Yiptah,  
so that Yiptah could be made an example  
against rash vows.

Some say this story is intended to depict  
the moral decline of the Israelites.  
To show they had lost their identity.

Some say he did not sacrifice his daughter.  
That the particle “ו” (*vav*) does not mean “and,” as in modern Hebrew,  
but “or.” That Yiptah had declared that whatever came to greet him  
would be either burnt as an offering *or* dedicated to G-d.

Today, Jewish scholars mostly agree  
that Yiptah’s daughter was permitted to live,  
though forbidden to marry,  
and that she was kept  
in solitary and perpetual confinement.  
This is agreed to be adequate loss of a life.

Rashi believes Yiptah was punished,  
afflicted with an illness which caused his limbs to rot  
and fall to the earth. No one knows  
where the pieces of him are buried

or when we walk over him.

xvii.

It is impossible to know the fatality rate of obsessive-compulsive disorder.

Not only do many cases go un- or mis-diagnosed,

it is usually comorbid with other mental health conditions.

One cannot ask the reasoning of a person who has ceased to exist.

According to some mental health advocates,

it is unethical to refer to a person as having “committed” suicide,

as this language implies both crime and choice. Instead,

one is supposed to say, “died by.”

xviii.

KolNidre is an Aramaic legal document

spoken once a year as a prayer.

KolNidre means “all vows.” It opens Yom Kippur,

the Day of Atonement, which begins at night

as Jewish days do.

KolNidre states: we renounce all vows we make

between this and the next Yom Kippur.

Let them all be relinquished and abandoned,

null and void.

Rabbis have gone on to clarify

that this invalidation of vows only applies

if one makes the vow without thinking of KolNidre.

If one makes a vow insincerely, the vow is considered genuine.

In the 12th century, Rabbi Meir ben Samuel added the words,

“We do repent of them all.” Both the vow and repentance

must be intentional.

KolNidre has been protested by both Jews and gentiles.

It has been held as evidence that Jews are untrustworthy.  
It has been viewed as a catalyst for reckless vows  
and impending corruption.

It continues to be sung.

KolNidre is sung three times, first almost a whisper. Then louder. Then  
louder.

Some sing it more than three times.

The congregation sings it over and over, again and again, to include  
anyone  
who arrives late.

xix.

According to Rabbi Moshe Leiv of Sassov  
disbelief can itself shape virtue;  
if we cannot turn to G-d for aid  
we become responsible for each other.

xx.

In religious communities, obsessive-compulsive disorder  
may present as perfectionism in prayer.  
Worshippers labour over hymns for hours,  
out of fear they have added, subtracted, or misspoken a word,  
fear they have slipped into indecent thoughts,  
fear they have lapsed into silence,  
fear they have ceased to concentrate,  
fear at that moment they do not believe in G-d.

Even in a group setting, prayer is private,  
less spoken than thought.  
Locked in a person, this compulsion  
is extremely difficult to treat.

Asked about this problem,

the ultra-orthodox Rabbi Kanievski  
says one should simply read the prayer  
continuing on through possible errors.  
That this act is sufficient. Imperfection

a form of faith.

xxi.

Yiptah's daughter may have been named Seila or she may have been  
named Adah.

She may have been named something else entirely.

We do not know where she is buried, either.

xxii.

Judaism promises neither heaven nor hell.  
Biblical Jews spoke sometimes of Sheol,  
a holding realm for the dead,  
in which souls lose identity  
deep in the ground, regardless

of how they lived on earth.  
Through witchcraft, the dead  
can converse with the living

but this practice is forbidden.

Modern Jews reject these views.  
Some believe at the end of days  
eternal life will fill our bodies:

muscle and flesh will awaken our bones,  
and our veins will twine like vines  
to bind us back to our lifeblood.

The earth will open,

and our loved ones pour forth  
back into our arms.

The ancient temple priests denied this.

The Kabbala speaks of reincarnation,  
Maimonides of souls as particles of G-d.  
After thousands of years, scholars continue  
to argue over heaven, hell, and nonexistence,

but Jews rarely prioritize these discussions.  
Ethical debates center on action over belief,  
this life over the next. The questions of how

we can live in this world  
as though it is enough.

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The book of Judges helps us to understand the development of the house of Israel after the settlement in Canaan. During the period that the book covers, the Israelites formed a confederation of tribes rather than a compact nation. The tribes were united by their recognition of a common descent and still more by their common worship of Jehovah; but, except when the approach of a formidable enemy compelled them to act together, their unity seldom found practical expression and was often overborne by local jealousies.

Judges Bible study outline—contents by chapter and verse. Gideon, Samson, Ehud, Jephthah; how Jehovah used Deborah and Barak in Israel.Â Genesis Exodus Leviticus Numbers Deuteronomy Joshua Judges Ruth 1 Samuel 2 Samuel 1 Kings 2 Kings 1 Chronicles 2 Chronicles Ezra The Book of Judges (Hebrew: Sefer Shofetim שְׁפֹטִים) refers to one of the books of the Hebrew Bible that is also included in the Christian Old Testament. It contains the history of the Biblical heroes known as "judges" (shofetim—chiefs—not to be confused with modern judges), and of their times. It includes the stories of the famous heroes Samson and Gideon, as well as that of Deborah, one of the Bible's great women. It also tells the tragic tale of Jephthah, the warrior who sacrificed his only daughter.

Book of Judges, a book of the Old Testament (Hebrew Bible) that, along with Deuteronomy, Joshua, I and II Samuel, and I and II Kings, belongs to a specific historical tradition (Deuteronomic history) that was first committed to writing about 550 BCE, during the Babylonian Exile. The book of Judges highlights six judges during this time and shows their increasing corruption. These judges start off fairly well (Othniel, Ehud, Deborah) but become increasingly worse (Gideon, Jephthah, Samson). The book ends with two very disturbing stories that show how incredibly lawless the people have become. The central verse that summarizes this says, "In those days Israel had no king, and everyone did what was right in their own eyes." Milestones. Failure to Drive Out.