**A-ki-shah[[1]](#footnote-1)**

A-ki-shah was at the mercy of daughterhood.

God had promised Israel victory in Canaan.

But Caleb swore, “My daughter to the victor!”

Her uncle Oth-niel won this faithless bid.

She knew what to do with her moment.

Her donkey’s hooves had not settled

before she planted her hand on the soil.

She refused to be swept into obscurity,

the mere dust of a fate we find abhorrent.

How did she grow to be so bold,

a willing instrument of Yahweh’s plenty?

We don’t know who her mother was,

did she have sisters or aunts, or co-wives?

Were the promises made to her people,

doubted on the precipice of a battlefield,

circumcised into her determined heart?

Did Caleb fear that without her body to tantalize,

there would be no land flowing with milk and honey,

scraped clean by the bloody scythes of war?

God had promised Israel victory in Canaan.

Did Oth-niel justify that without her fertile body,

there would be no blessing of copious generations,

enough to fill Canaan like stars in the sky?

A-ki-shah demanded her inheritance,

promises made to Abraham and Sarah.

She demanded a blessing. A blessing

that would give her what was needed.

Needed for her to be a blessing to others.

“Give waterholes for my dry Southlands!”

Blessing others in a thirsty land. Watered

by raindrops that could leap into her cisterns

until they were overflowing. Overflowing.

**Mothers of Qishon[[2]](#footnote-2)**

Again, Israel did what was bad in Yahweh’s eyes

and Yahweh surrendered them to King Yabin,

whose army officer was Sisera of the Iron Chariots.

The Israelites cried out, “Sisera afflicts pain on us!”

until Yahweh gave them a spirit mother, Deborah.

She sent for Baraq, “YHWH orders you to war

in Wadi Qishon, there you will be handed Sisera.”

Baraq, Warrior General, pled, “Only if you go, I’ll go.”

“You will have no glory; a woman’s hand will win.”

Deborah, spirit mother of Israel, accompanied him

into battle. He was like a schoolboy facing a first master.

Yahweh guided her to sit on hills, under cool palms

and prophesy from visions to exercise her authority.

She would issue orders, surveying the boy-soldier

battlefield from above the stars, as her heart foretold

for her each soul to be fed into the mouth of a sword.

As Israelites pierced the flesh of other mother’s sons,

fountains of blood gushed into the Wadi Qishon.

Yahweh emboldened a warrior mother

to betray her husband’s ally. As clanking chariots

and the mortal groans of his wounded horde faded,

Ya’el heard shouts of the victors, in pursuit of a coward.

As the slap of his sandals preceded him, she softly

sang her lullaby, ‘don’t be afraid, turn aside to me.’

She lured Sisera like a baby. With a blanket’s warmth

and succor from the breast, she soothed him to sleep.

Her heart braced to kill, her hand gripped a peg-

fountains of blood gushed from his temple.

Yahweh was revealed to Sisera’s mother.

Shadowed by her latticed window, she presumed victory.

But her son’s chariots of iron were no match for Yahweh,

and the false words of her ladies were no match for truth,

no match for holy commands. Spoils of war, beauties

with fine cloth on their necks, were no match

against the heart of Yahweh for the people of Yahweh.

Mothers and Yahweh both wait for their children.

But the mothers of any who go against Yahweh,

gush fountains of tears.

**Seventy-One Dead Sons**[[3]](#footnote-3)

Did Yahweh weep when Israel did what was evil?

After Israel was crushed by Midyan, Yahweh waited,

listened for Israel to cry out, “Have mercy on us!”

The Lord whispered, “Deliver Israel from their fist.”

Many wives lay with Gideon after he delivered Israel.

Did Yahweh weep when they bowed to false masters?

They bore seventy sons, and Gideon’s next wife

bore him one more, Abimelek. When Gideon died,

Abimelek bashed his brothers to death on one stone.

A woman’s hand threw a millstone from a tower

onto Abimelek’s skull. Disgraced, he hurried death.

The breaking of a mother’s heart is not the same

as the crushing of her son’s skull against a stone.

It is not the same as the breaking of her back

by all the things she’s gladly taken up and borne.

Clay wrapped in damp linen, pots of water

and stew, grinding stones and seasons of flour,

sheepskins and looms, fruit and fig-cakes,

firewood and rugs, mandrakes and the neglect

of a faithless man, for which there is no balm.

Must she take up gleaning in another’s fields,

her grieving not eased by another’s millstone,

the empty space in her arms never to be filled?

Late at night, too weary to rest, she must undo,

one-by-one, the threads of the blanket she wove

for an unborn grandchild.

**The Lamps of the Virgins**[[4]](#footnote-4)

At dawn, weaving through hills,

go daughters of Jerusalem in white,

faces illumed by the flames

of their lamps.

They sing a song about lovers,

become a string of dancing lights.

At dawn, before babes awakened

 and bawled to take suckle,

their mothers lit fires

and filled the girl’s lamps.

 “Where are you going?”

asks a sister too young for a lamp.

“To remember, to remember,

the daughter of Jep-thah.”

 “Why are you crying?”

“The daughter of Jep-thah

ran dancing,

shaking her tambourine.

She was the first

to greet her father,

returning victorious in battle.”

“But why are you weeping?”

“We go to the hills like she did,

with our friends.

We go for one who is soon

to kiss her father goodbye

and leave to be married.”

Jep-thah, whose mother

was without blessing,

had not trusted Yahweh

to hand to him his victory.

He had sworn an oath:

in return for this battle a win,

I will give Yahweh a gift-

the first soul

who runs out from my house-

as a burnt offering, whole.

The daughter of Jep-thah

ran dancing,

shaking her tambourine.

She was the first

to greet her father,

returning victorious in battle.

Jep-thah tore his cloak

and fell to the ground.

“I love you, my daughter.”

She knelt,

put a kiss on his forehead,

“I love you, my Abba.”

On hearing what Yahweh

was promised,

Jep-thah’s daughter did not run.

She avowed,

“Here I am, Yahweh, I’m yours!”

But first, with her friends,

she climbed up the hills

to grieve her solemn sacrifice,

singing, “My love will not perish

in flames.”

She would never know the tug

in the cry of a babe.

At dawn, a soldier’s widow weeps,

looks out her latticed window.

She sees the flickering lamps dance

on the hill and remembers.

She puts a kiss on her babe’s

waking warm cheek

and sings to her daughter

of Yahweh.

 **Love Me, Love My Donkey**[[5]](#footnote-5)

After the son of Dodo

was buried in Shamir,

Yair the deliverer arose,

he had thirty towns in Gilead,

and he had thirty sons

riding on thirty donkey colts.

Thirty times thirty

his chanting sons rode around

in the peace provided by Yahweh.

Ibzan of Bethlehem

later judged Israel,

blessed with thirty sons.

He traded his thirty daughters

outside his tribe,

and brought thirty young brides

on donkeys to his thirty sons.

Thirty donkeys

carried meat and wine,

provided by Yahweh,

to sixty weddings.

When Abdon son of Hillel

judged in Israel,

he sent forth forty sons,

they had thirty grandsons,

who rode on seventy donkeys,

provided by Yahweh.

The hooves of the donkeys

clattered on stones,

their haunches strained

up hills and down valleys.

Brays of greeting

were heard in the high places.

The men raised their voices

for Ba-al and Astarte,

gods of Aram

and gods of Sidon

and gods of Moab

and gods of the Ammonites

and gods of the Philistines.

But no voices were heard for Yahweh.

When donkeys were heard,

daughters fetched from the wells

skins dripping with water

and sons brought stalks

from the fields,

colts soon grew fat and feisty.

The wives,

weary of flies

and stoking hospitable fires,

untied the donkeys

and fled.

**Waging War I**

The rustling of wheat in the wind

is not the same as its bending by hand.

**Samson’s Mother**[[6]](#footnote-6)

I am a wife in the tribe of Dan.

My womb had been

as empty as the sky

in the dry season.

The whole of my memory

our people had been

under the lash of our past

by the whip of the Philistines.

I tended the field of grain

again and again, waiting

for a change of season,

or for my husband

to take a second wife,

or for a snake to bite my heel.

Like a shadow trod underfoot,

hope was buried

for those not on my path-

but I clung to that promise

of shade from the Almighty-

and saw what the elders

only whispered about at dawn.

I was stunned

at the annunciation

brought by Yahweh’s envoy,

under the blazing sun

as I scythed and bundled,

“Sown into your womb

will be a child, consecrated

from birth, a Nazarite

to deliver Israel

from the hand of the Philistines.”

Awe-struck, I did not ask

the envoy, who shimmered

like the plains in summer,

a name or where angels dwell,

for I was rejoicing

in a son foretold,

and remembering I must follow

the commands of the holy one.

I believed in the envoy and saw

my sacrifice for what it was,

a gift. Yahweh’s holy plan

for my consecrated son

could not be defeated,

not even by the temptation

of beauty, or mercy, or death.

**Micah’s Mother**[[7]](#footnote-7)

I found my purse empty,

 and the fear of every old woman

arose in me- I would be

banished, to beg at a temple.

But remembering I also had a son,

who I had named Micah-

“One who is like the Lord.”

I uttered a curse

on the one who had stolen my silver.

When my son confessed-

he was the one who had stolen

and tainted my future-

I cried aloud to abolish my curse

and instead blessed my son,

“I consecrate my silver

to the lord from my hand-

for my son, to make a cast idol.”

My silver stood deaf

in the shrine of Micah.

Hidden away from the sun,

in lamplight it flickered,

but its stare was empty and blank.

It was unable to call up the dawn,

or pay regard to the blessed,

or to the cursed.

My son and my people dared

to do what was right

in their eyes only,

an eye-for-an-eye.

 **Waging War II[[8]](#footnote-8)**

**A Wife in Timnah**

We were warriors,

hoping for the favor of our gods.

We were divided-

into women of the dawn,

slaves of the noonday sun

and women of the night.

My beguiling sister

was destined for the dawn,

a wife rising from bed

to bake bread.

She practiced

averting her eyes,

and graceful weaving.

She shielded her face

from the sun,

her veil fluttered

in the breeze.

When the hero came

sauntering,

she lingered at the well.

He could not miss

her honeyed voice

and graceful hands.

How could she know

Samson was impaled

with the spirit of the Lord,

and longing for defeat

of her people?

But all women know

a hero can throw you off

at any moment,

you must be clever,

stay tightly woven

into the fabric

of your own people

where another husband

could always be pressed

by your father.

At my sister’s wedding festival,

all drank late into the night.

Samson saw his chance

to start a battle with a riddle.

Our people knew

my sister could coax from him

their victory,

she had practiced

her weeping.

For seven days,

she assailed

husband Samson.

Her honeyed voice

ran dry,

braying day and night,

“You do not love me,

but hate me,

you have asked a riddle

of my people

but not explained it to me.”

When he relented,

she whispered to our clan

the answer,

but Samson had

his answer too.

He slaughtered all Ashkalon

and gave the weaving

of their women’s bloody hands

to our people

as their prize.

He stomped away

to his father’s house,

until he lusted

for my sister again.

In my sister’s stead,

my father offered me to the hero,

for she, a victorious

woman of the dawn,

already pleased another lover.

Samson would not gaze

upon my downcast eyes

or regard my brown legs,

for I was a girl

of the noonday sun,

fetching water

and tending my vineyard.

Samson burned with lust and fury.

He caught foxes

and tied torches to their tails-

they thrashed away

like a storm of locusts,

devoured our grain, grapes,

and olives.

As our bellies growled,

all gazed towards my sister

for justice,

an eye-for-an-eye,

and burned our home,

my father,

and sister.

I am alone now, cast out.

The blessing of the mother

of Samson

could not be hindered by foxes,

so, I was made a beggar,

my tears dried forever

in the noonday sun.

**Midnight in Gaza**

We were warriors.

fighting for our place in the clan.

We were divided

into women of the dawn,

slaves of the noonday sun

and women of the night.

She would ambush on the street,

in the square, at the gates.

She lit lamps full of incense

by her ladder at night,

and called from her rooftop bed.

“Recline at my feast

for a coin or a fleece.”

But were her eyes sad?

 She would welcome him

into her comfort,

covered by a mantle of stars,

but at dawn, they all scorned

the woman of the night.

When the hero came sauntering

searching for prey,

his eyes roaming around in lust,

she was ready,

her ankles exposed,

her bangles flashing in the sun.

All knew her trade

and all knew the hero

who was sought

for the slaughter

of her people.

Did she know his name

was Samson?

Did her heart quicken with fear

at his strength?

They spied him leaping

onto her ladder

and she became their weapon.

As he lay with her,

they laid their ambush.

They hoped to gain

an-eye-for-an-eye,

repay Samson,

who used a jagged jawbone,

to strike down their thousand.

They would surprise him

at dawn,

pierce his neck with a dagger

and cut out his tongue.

But Samson was covered

by the blessing of his mother

and the will of Yahweh.

No trap nor sweet weapon

could stop him.

When he fled at midnight,

before dawn could catch him,

were her eyes sad?

**Delilah of Wadi Soreq**

We were warriors,

praying for fate to deliver us.

We were divided

into women of the dawn,

slaves of the noonday sun

and women of the night.

Samson loved Delilah,

he would linger in her lap

until daybreak.

She too became a weapon,

implored by the lords

of her people,

asked to uncover the secret

of his heroic might,

 a vigor that seized

every eye-for-an-eye.

She became a woman

of the dawn-

she brayed and nagged

and whimpered.

He would mutter a secret

to sooth her.

She would use it to bind him,

“My Philistines are on you!”

But he would laugh.

He was not weakened by words.

But she was a woman

of the dawn,

braying and nagging

and whimpering,

until he was so worn down

that he blurted the truth.

She used this knowledge

to shear him.

“The Philistines are on you!”

He laughed.

They gouged out his eyes.

Delilah had relied

on vicious persuasion,

but Samson was consecrated

for Yahweh,

covered by the blessing

of his mother.

Her people held him captive,

but his power,

subdued with Delilah’s sheers

could not be hindered for long-

seven braids snaked

from his crown.

The women of our tribe

crowded in,

to delight

in an eye-for-an-eye,

in the sad lover Samson-

forced to perform,

for our pleasure.

He was blind as night,

but cried out,

for Yahweh’s strength

to impale him.

He pulled down the pillars

of our temple,

the sacred place

where we begged in old age,

and squabbled

for our bread.

His mother’s blessing fulfilled,

his bones and our bones

broken together,

bake in the noonday sun.

 **Waging War III**[[9]](#footnote-9)

A land ravaged by war is bereft.

Torn linen is strewn on her shores,

and her valleys are emptied of song.

Her high places turn windswept

and lonely, the worshipers

struggling to lift severed hands.

Her wine and wells go sour,

fields are shorn of their wheat.

Her figs, dates, and olive fruit

rot in the moonlight.

Even in bright rosy dawn,

her pomegranates burst

and are darkened with anger.

Her barleycorn’s blackened,

starving her kids, colts, and calves.

The sleek leg of a leaping gazelle

is trapped in the rocks of the rift.

Writhing free, only cold stone

greets her joyless fall. Once desired,

the shattered spine of a bride

no longer sways gently.

“Let me in,”

her hands grasp at the threshold.

But now spoiled by war,

her last breath in the heat only

draws dust and the stinging of bees.

After the ravage of war,

she is cut limb-by-limb,

strewn all over the land by her Master

who roars: “Has such abomination

ever occurred since the day

the Israelites were freed out of Egypt?

Consider it, take counsel, speak out.”

The lions of Judah roared,

and meted out justice for their own eyes,

an eye-for-an-eye.

Attempts to win wars never cease

with the ravage of brides-

Bethlehem, Darfur, Yazidi, Chabok,

Shiloh, Jabesh-Gilead, Daesh.

Cry out.

The fathers of brides

are meant to be dancing.

 Cry out.

Only Yahweh can knit

severed hands back together.

Cry out.

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1. Judges 1:12-15 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Judges 4-5 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Judges 6:1-9:56 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Judges 11 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Judges 10:1-3, 12:6, 12:8-10, 12:13 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Judges 13 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Judges 17 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Judges 14-16 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Judges 19-21 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)