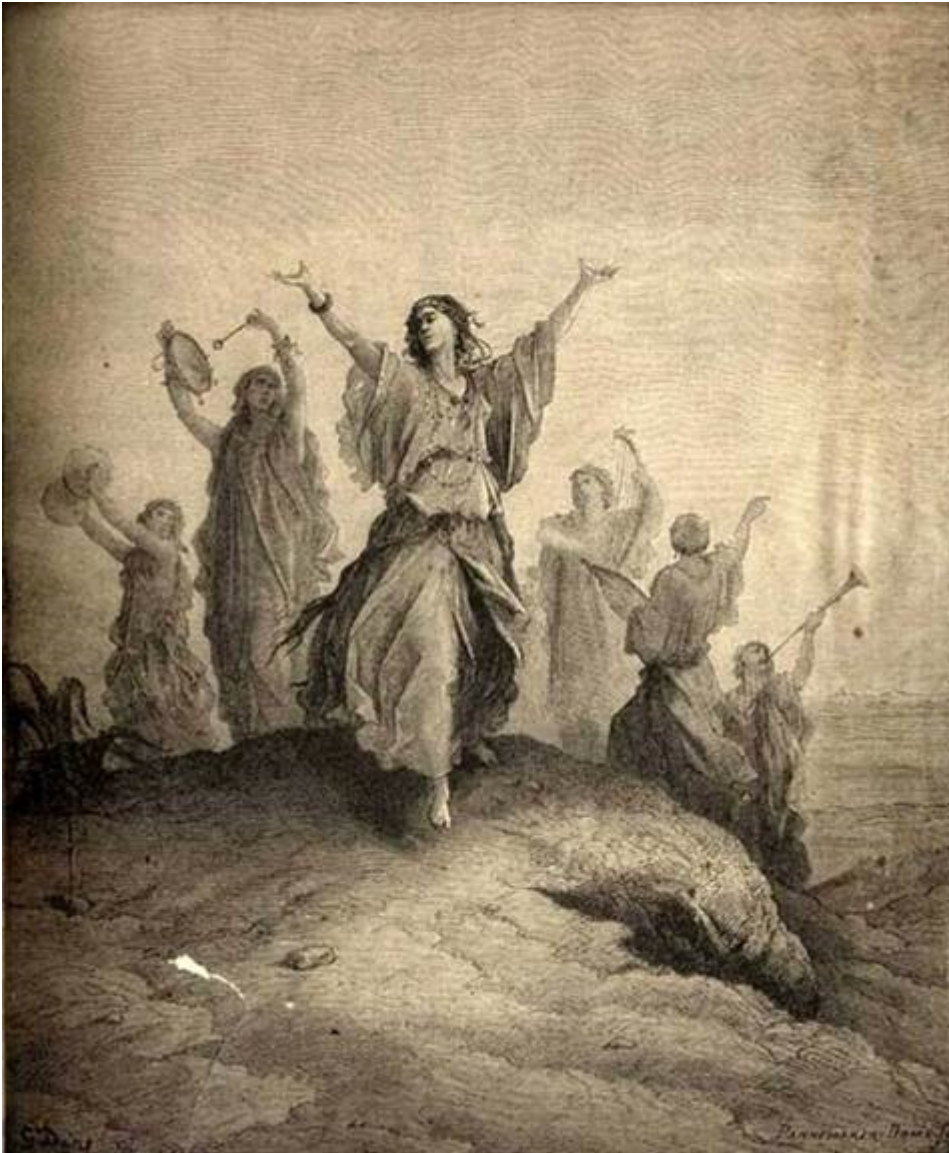


Shabbat Matot-Masei Shalom



“Jepthath’s Daughter Coming to Meet Her Father” by Gustave Dore

by Phyllis Chesler

We’ve been told that antisemites once seized upon our Yom Kippur liturgy—in which we annul our vows—as proof that Jews cannot be trusted. We’ve also learned that we must be very careful about making a vow (a “neder”) or an oath (“shvooah”) to God lest we default on our promise and pay a terrible price.

Based on this parsha alone, we can understand why Jewish girls

and women also came to be viewed with suspicion. If a woman makes a vow, our father or husband can annul it, but only if he does so on the very same day, not thereafter, assuming that he heard us make the vow or was quickly told about it. With some exceptions, since women were not allowed to own property or to keep their own wages, they could be trusted to make a simple purchase without their father's or husband's permission.

The Tanach is filled with vows which have happy endings. For example, Hannah's vow to God led to her giving birth to the prophet Shmuel—whom she did not slaughter but instead brought to the High Priest to serve God. In Shoftim, our poor Yiftach, a disinherited outcast, becomes a mighty warrior. His daughter, who remains nameless, is his only child. Yiftach's name means that "he has opened." He vows to sacrifice "the one who comes out of the doors of my house." His strange and uncalled for vow results in tragedy; he must sacrifice his daughter. And yet—we have no details of her slaughter. Two rabbinic versions exist. One, that Yiftach sacrificed her, the other, that he built a house in which she would live a life of seclusion—except for four days every year when the "daughters of Israel" would visit her. The same existence-but-aborrence to daughter-sacrifice exists in the ancient world, for example, in terms of King Agamemnon and his 12 year-old daughter Iphighenia

In researching this parsha, I found that neither the late, great Nehama Laibowitz nor the late great Jonathan Sacks address the issue of women and vows. However, Nachmanides, Torah Temimah, Ellen Frankel, and the late, great Tikva Frymer-Kensky (*Reading the Women of the Bible*) do. I am indebted to them all.

Have a wonderful Shabbos!