By no means was Jephthah’s life easy. The people in his community mocked his mother and basically called her a whore and eventually, he was pushed out of his hometown to live among a group of thugs in the city of Tob so that his brothers could claim their father’s inheritance. Because his mother was labeled a prostitute and because of the patrilineal conditions of his present day; Jephthah, was not considered worthy of his rightful inheritance. As a result of this banishment, he picked up a life of scheming and crime and was forced to the outskirts of society.

Now if this was not enough, the same elders in the community who didn’t defend his honor and right to his inheritance; the same people, who pushed him into life on the streets, came to him when they were in trouble seeking his help to overcome the Ammonite’s army. Now Jephthah agreed to help them out after seeking the will of the Lord. To fast-forward the story a bit, before going into battle, Jephthah makes a vow to the Lord that would ultimately impact the life of an innocent civilian—his daughter, who is nameless in the text.

Jephthah promises the Lord, “If you give me a clear victory over the Ammonites, then I’ll give to you whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in one piece from among the Ammonites—I’ll offer it up in a sacrificial burnt offering.”

Keep in mind, Jephthah is making deals with the Lord to come back whole and in “one piece” while at the same time, committing to taking the life of something or someone without even considering the weight of this fatal covenant.

Jephthah, in his haste, committed an act that is just as detrimental as those elders in his community who marginalized him because of his social status and forced him to the outskirts of society. He now has committed to the murder of his daughter who is not even acknowledged with a name, thus further adding to the marginalization and oppression of women. And how can he do this anyway, considering the life his mother had to live as a single mother, trying to raise her son alone, rejected and she herself labeled as a Scarlet.

Jephthah, a son of a woman of lower economic and social class is neither oblivious to the oppressive state of the poor and the attachments of labels as methodical tools to further perpetuate a systemic model of elitism through gender, wealth, race, class, and power. So what the heck was he thinking? Why bring about such a fate on someone who is striving to overcome and rise above the same conditions you have fought to overcome? Jephthah even protested war at one point and tried to talk the king of the Ammonites out of it. Now, here he stands promising God to take someone out if God helps him take out the Ammonites. Now, here is the
predicament of an innocent and nameless daughter, caught in the crossfire of someone else’s foolish choices and left to lament a life she will not get to see.

When we contemplate the oppressive nature of war, we must not forget the innocent victims who are caught up in the crossfire of those who are in position to lead, protect, serve, and even protest war. Instead, these leaders make poor choices to pursue weapons of mass destruction that are nonexistent. These representatives of power and state insist on invading countries that have nothing to do with the attack on their own country and are adamant about placing the pursuit of wealth, power and oil over the value of human dignity and life. Innocent lives are placed on the front line to sacrifice their future hopes and dreams because of pride and greed and a hungry desire to win. And then, to add insult to injury, an artificial proclamation of “Mission Accomplished” blindly promotes victory. Where is the victory in the death of innocent lives?

Jephthah wanted to win and he got this so-called victory over the Ammonites, but his success was bitter sweet and short lived as his innocent daughter paid the ultimate price. In the end, she became one of the many un-named victims who are left scarred, mentally traumatized, impoverished, and suffering in some form, albeit physically, mentally, financially, and spiritually because of the imprints and the injustices of war. Jephthah, who lived the life of what Howard Thurman, would call a “disinherited,” succeeded in disinheriting his daughter.

How many people’s lives have been uprooted because of war? How many people have been disinherited because of war? People have been forced to leave their homes, abandon their personal wealth and livelihood to live a life of exile, as refugees, and seeking asylum in order to survive. How many people had to leave the land flowing with milk and honey to crawl in the scorching heat of the desert thirsting for any source of life to survive? We see this in Darfur, where modern day genocide continues to take place. Has anyone made a vow to save lives instead of taking it?

How many people continue to be oppressed because of embargos imposed upon their nation by a prideful empire state trying to force the hand of leadership to submit to their ideals of democracy? Just ask the Cuban people. War causes nations to suffer all around when greatly needed resources that could build schools, provide food, and offer medical care in Haiti goes unaddressed while billions are pumped into occupying an Iraqi nation that has made it clear by vocalizing “We don’t want you here!”

War spoils resources that could be dedicated to education and research for the cure for AIDS and to helping provide medication and health care for developing nations that suffer disproportionately from the HIV/AIDS virus. War creates a blockade of funds that could be used for the common good, but instead it is used to fund the School of Americas or the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation, which dedicates itself to training military forces that use that training to oppress its citizens.
When will we vow to save lives instead of taking lives? When will we vow to give our children a future and hope instead of forcing them to cry out with lament for the life they will not get to see? When will we hear the cries of women who are raped and violated if they dare to step outside of tent cities to seek food and sustenance for their families?

Jephthah’s daughter saw an opportunity to use her inevitable demise as a way to address these societal injustices. She was about to die because of the foolish and rash choices brought on by war, but she was also about to turn her lament into a liberating one.

She didn’t just accept death as her final epitaph. Oh no, death would not have the last word. Erykah Badu once sang, “No you won’t be naming no building after me, to go down dilapidated.” And Jephthah’s daughter was singing the same tune when she said to her father, “Check this out. I am going to set the time and date for when this thing is going down. And on top of that, I need some time to think about this situation you’ve placed me in. So I am going to step out for awhile with some of my sister friends—say, 2 months, and once I get back, then we can go from there.”

Jephthah’s daughter became a trailblazer for future generations and is hailed as a heroine for her courage in taking control of her own death. The story of this young woman’s bravery, sacrifice, and suffering continues to be told from generation to generation. Her story serves as a reminder that even the most painful and challenging stories we behold can guide us on our path for healing and allow others to find their paths too, even when we are no longer able to speak our stories for ourselves.

Her death was not in vain, and while she has no name in this text, this innocent victim rejected becoming another statistic or victim of war. She carved her own path—today she tells her own story. In honoring other civilian causalities of war, we honor her by calling out their names. We pour libation to her by calling out their names. When we speak their stories—the stories of the Congo; the stories of the wars right here in the streets of America—drug torn, gun-torn, gang-torn streets; we tell her story of self-empowerment, self-affirmation, communal upliftment, liberation and victory.

This young woman lamented her death, but in doing so, she offered hope and liberation to others. She rewrote her story and we must do the same. Let us rewrite the stories for children forced into child labor—help them gain access to an education, safe and free from exploitation. Let us rewrite the story for people living with AIDS by working to reduce the number of new HIV infections locally and globally. Let us work together to face the ugly remnants of war and turn our acts of lament into a liberating lament—a liberating prayer—and liberating walk that backs up the talk!

Bob Marley once asked us, “Won’t you help to sing; these songs of freedom…redemption songs.” Together, let us lift up our voices and tell Jesus all about our troubles and may our
prayers unto God be transformed into a liberating lament—songs of freedom. The song of Jephthah’s daughter is our song—won’t you help me sing?

*Judges 11:29-40*

"29-31 GOD’s Spirit came upon Jephthah. He went across Gilead and Manasseh, went through Mizpah of Gilead, and from there approached the Ammonites. Jephthah made a vow before GOD: "If you give me a clear victory over the Ammonites, then I'll give to GOD whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in one piece from among the Ammonites—I'll offer it up in a sacrificial burnt offering."

32-33 Then Jephthah was off to fight the Ammonites. And GOD gave them to him. He beat them soundly, all the way from Aroer to the area around Minnith as far as Abel Keramim—twenty cities! A massacre! Ammonites brought to their knees by the People of Israel.

34-35 Jephthah came home to Mizpah. His daughter ran from the house to welcome him home—dancing to tambourines! She was his only child. He had no son or daughter except her. When he realized who it was, he ripped his clothes, saying, "Ah, dearest daughter—I'm dirt. I'm despicable. My heart is torn to shreds. I made a vow to GOD and I can't take it back!"

36 She said, "Dear father, if you made a vow to GOD, do to me what you vowed; GOD did his part and saved you from your Ammonite enemies."

37 And then she said to her father, "But let this one thing be done for me. Give me two months to wander through the hills and lament my virginity since I will never marry, I and my dear friends."

38-39 "Oh yes, go," he said. He sent her off for two months. She and her dear girlfriends went among the hills, lamenting that she would never marry. At the end of the two months, she came back to her father. He fulfilled the vow with her that he had made. She had never slept with a man.

39-40 It became a custom in Israel that for four days every year the young women of Israel went out to mourn for the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite." (Scripture compiled from www.biblegateway.com)