

Bringing the Prophets to Life

Weekly insights into the Haftara by Rabbi Nachman (Neil) Winkler

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**ZACHOR - 33 p'sukim
- Shmuel Alef 15:2-34**

Another View of Sha'ul's Sin

This week's haftara, a selection taken from Sefer Shmuel Alef, connects directly to the theme of this Shabbat Zachor, recording Sha'ul's mission to carry out Hashem's charge to destroy Amalek, as we read in the Maftir.

And yet, despite the powerful link that the haftara has to the theme of the Shabbat, the primary focus of the story is not of King Saul's success in warring against - and defeating - the Amalek hordes. Rather, the event, as described in Sefer Shmuel, centers about the failure of Sha'ul to follow G-d's (and Shmuel's) specific instructions to spare no one from - and nothing of - Amalek. The importance of the mitzva might well be understood as Hashem's insistence to have such an immoral force removed from society - something which Sha'ul's victory succeeded in doing. If so, we might well wonder why Sha'ul's failure becomes the core of the haftara's message rather than his fulfillment of the Divine will - despite

falling short of complete execution of his mission.

In attempting to uncover any approach that would explain why Hashem regarded Sha'ul's sin with such gravity, I came across a most interesting approach shared by Rav Moshe Lichtenstein. Rav Lichtenstein points to the events that preceded the battle against Amalek, events that clarify the military situation of Israel at that time and can help us better understand G-d's harsh reaction to Saul's sin.

During the era of the judges (Sho-f'tim) and the early years covered by Sefer Shmuel, the text describes Am Yisrael as a weak and struggling nation, oppressed by neighboring tribes and threatening by foreign powers. Most menacing to Israel was the Philistine nation that dwelled on the south-western corner of Eretz Yisrael. The Philistines spread beyond their borders, warred regularly against Israel and even imposed their control over parts of the land. Perhaps the most revealing depiction of Israel's sorry state is found in the thirteenth perek of Shmuel Alef where we read that the Philistines were able to ban the possession of any weapons from the Land of Israel - even prohibiting Israelites to own any tools to sharpen their farm utensils. The very final words of perek 13 portray the sad situation of Israel with the verse:

"On the day of war [against the Philistines], there was not to be found sword or spear in the possession of any of the men in the army of Sha'ul and Yonatan..."

And, despite Israel's miraculous victory over the Philistines in the ensuing battle, Rav Lichtenstein notes that the verse closing that military campaign and preceding the war against Amalek [v. 14:52], reveals that "The war against the Philistines remained intense throughout the days of Saul..."

The seemingly superfluous addition to the text is, in the view of R. Lichtenstein, quite vital, for it sheds light upon Israel's military and economic reality, and helps us better understand yet another impact of Sha'ul's sin - one we may have failed to realize:

G-d's charge to eradicate the Amalekite nation was not for the purpose of strengthening Israel, enriching her population or even retaliating for her dastardly attack. The mitzva of TIMCHEH ET ZEICHER AMALEK was commanded for one reason only: to have evil removed and ethical society survive. King Sha'ul's decision to spare the Amalekite king and partake of the spoils of war actually undermined the people's understanding of the war's very purpose.

Consider: the "superfluous" verse that closed the first war and preceded the second, revealed the seriousness of Saul's sin. It clarified the difficult military and economic situation Israel faced. Given that reality, it was quite possible that the people would regard Israel's attack against Amalek to be no more than an opportunity for Israel to overcome a smaller and weaker enemy and, thereby, improve her economic and military positions. As a result, the battle would not be seen as part of an ideological struggle or a fulfillment of a divine imperative... but simply as a ploy to uplift the honor of the Israel and her King.

Israel's attack on Amalek was meant to remove the evil in Hashem's world. Tragically, Sha'ul mistakenly chose to compromise with evil, in order to glorify Israel

It was a sin that, sadly, deserved the harsh punishment that was meted out to him. ✨