

Bringing the Prophets to Life

Weekly insights into the Haftara
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The Righteous Virtue of King Sha'ul

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

S'faradim begin one pasuk earlier

This week's haftara, a selection taken from Sefer Shmuel Alef, relates the well-known account of Israel's challenge to fulfill Hashem's demand TIMCHEH ET ZE(I)CHER AMALEK - to obliterate the very memory of Amalek. Chazal's decision to have this episode recited on the Shabbat before Purim, as was their choice for the Maftir reading, revolves around the Megila's revelation that the arch-enemy of Purim story, Haman, was a descendant of Agag, the leader of Amalek.

However, we might be perplexed by our Rabbis decision to have us read of the failure of Israel to fulfill Hashem's charge as commanded, i.e. to 'obliterate' Amalek and his memory. The text chronicles G-d's anger and Shmuel's disappointment over the army's reluctance to fully carry out Hashem's charge to destroy Amalek. Indeed, we need simply to turn to the

30th perek of Shmuel Alef, to find out how Amalek was not at all decimated and, to the contrary, remained an ongoing torment to Israel. It is there that we discover that the Amalekites attacked and kidnapped David's family and did the same to the families of David's army!

It is also true, however, that one can offer a number of logical reasons as to why this episode was meant to be read - despite our discomfort with it - but it is not my purpose to do so here. Rather, it is the following that perplexes me.

The navi makes it clear that the failure to fulfill Hashem's command lay upon the shoulders of the King, Sha'ul. Given that fact, the challenge that faces me at this time is in understanding why, after Sha'ul's failure as the King of Israel, after he disregarded Hashem's command and Shmuel's directive, after he gave in to the desires of his soldiers and then denied committing any sin - after all of this, we find that Chazal refer to him as righteous: "Sha'ul Hatzaddik"! The Talmud states [Yoma 22:] "Sha'ul was as innocent as a one-year-old child, never having "tasted" sin"; while the P'sikta Rabba [15:50] commends him as "a modest man who ate even non-sanctified food only in purity; who distributed his wealth to Israel, who gave honor to his servants as much as he gave to

himself. AND he was a "ben Torah"!

Unquestionably, there also are negative rabbinic statements about Sha'ul, but I am curious about these very positive depictions of one who lost his reign due to his surrender to the demands of his officers and those of G-d.

I do realize that the "righteousness" of Sha'ul that was seen by rabbinic scholars might have been based upon the earlier years of his reign. This was a time when the people recognized the deep modesty of the newly appointed King, when he was praised by his removal of the widespread sorcery of OV and YID'ONIM worship and was loved by the population for his great victories over their enemies.

All of these were, indeed, laudable accomplishments.

But I would submit that there was one success that surpassed all of his achievements. It was a "triumph" that changed the nation for centuries and yet, is often ignored. Consider this:

King Sha'ul built an army!

So what?

So, it became the first organized national military, the army of Israel, since the time of Yehoshua!

For over 300 years, Israel had no national army!

Throughout the era of the Sho-f'tim,

despite the many battles fought against the numerous enemies, ISRAEL COULD NEVER ORGANIZE ONE UNITED FORCE!

Not one SHOFEIT succeeded in organizing a national army:

- Not Ehud ben Gera
- Not Devora Ha'N'vi'a
- Nor Gideon
- Nor Yiftach
- Nor Shimshon

And, it is for this reason, that the effect of Sh'aul's act is unequalled! For the first time in over 300 years, the nation of Israel was UNITED!

Yes. It is true. He sinned, he was punished, he lost his throne.

But he united Israel, and made them realize that they were one nation.

And, I charge, there could be no greater accomplishment than that! ✨