

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

Themes and Ideas in the Haftara
Yeshivat Har Etzion

**This haftara series is dedicated in memory
of our beloved Chaya Leah bat Efrayim Yitzchak
(Mrs. Claire Reinitz), zichronah livracha,
by her family.**

PARASHAT ZAKHOR

Shaul and Amalek

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The *haftara* for *Parashat Zakhor* deals with two issues: first, the *mitzva* of wiping out Amalek and our attitude toward it; and second, the personal tragedy of Shaul, king of Israel, and his failure of leadership.

The difference between the *haftara* according to the Ashkenazi rite (I *Shemuel* 15:2-34) and the *haftara* according to the Sefardi rite (I *Shemuel* 15:1-34) – a difference of one verse at the beginning – seems to reflect a difference in approach regarding the focus of the *haftara*. Whereas the Ashkenazi *haftara* begins with the actual *mitzva* of wiping out Amalek – "Thus says the Lord of hosts, I remember that

which Amalek did to Israel" (v. 2) – the Sefardi *haftara* begins with the previous verse that deals with Shaul's standing as a leader: "And Shemuel said to Shaul, The Lord sent me to anoint you to be king over His people, over Israel; now therefore hearken to the voice of the words of the Lord" (v. 1). We see then that the one focuses on the matter of Amalek, and therefore omits the first verse which sets the matter into the framework of the stories regarding Shaul, whereas the other leaves the first verse in place, thus drawing a connection between the *mitzva* of wiping out Amalek and the nature of Shaul's leadership.

THE *MITZVA* OF WIPING OUT AMALEK

Let us open with the first point. From an emotional perspective, the *mitzva* of wiping out Amalek is one of the most difficult *mitzvot*. It demands of man that he overcome his natural feelings of compassion, in favor of the Divine command that he must obey. In this context, it is important to emphasize that not only does the *mitzva* necessitate that a person conquer his mercy and fulfill the will of his Maker, but obedience to the Divine command is the only reason that can possibly justify the killing of the people of Amalek. If the deed is executed not out of pure obedience, but with alien motivations – or even a trace of such motivations – intermingled in the act, it constitutes not a *mitzva*, but murder. This point casts a heavy responsibility on man and demands that he examine his actions with extreme care as he stands before an opportunity to fulfill this *mitzva*.

Many different forces operate together in the soul of man. Alongside the mercy and compassion implanted within him, there are also darker forces, which harbor unrestrained aggressiveness and egoism. The Torah was very concerned about giving expression to man's darker and instinctual side when it is activated against his fellow, and therefore warned against actions that are liable to be driven by impulsive violence, even when the objective for the sake of which they are performed can, as it were, be justified. In other words, there are values that Judaism views as justified on the fundamental level, but nevertheless forbids the actions that lead to them, because of the problems connected to their application in the human world.

Thus, for example, revenge. The concept itself is perceived as legitimate, it being an expression of justice and judgment. The Torah, however, was very concerned about its use, because a person cannot always know whether his actions are grounded on the values of righteousness and justice, in which case they give expression to an exalted value, or perhaps they are an emotional response of a hurt soul and instinctual rage, which responds with violence against personal injury, drawing on the darkest sides of the human soul. When revenge is based on the first motive, it brings salvation to the world; but when it results from the second cause, it brings it destruction. As opposed to the Creator, a person cannot truly judge whether his actions are pure and holy, and therefore we are commanded to distance ourselves from revenge.[\[1\]](#)

The Torah did not prohibit the wiping out of Amalek, despite the fact that the *mitzva* demands of man that he invoke his natural cruelty. It is, therefore, essential that he ascertain that he is driven by nothing else but the Divine command, and that no other consideration became intermingled with it. Now, if Shaul shows compassion to the sheep and cattle, and fails to destroy them as he had been commanded, he casts a heavy shadow on all his actions in his fighting against Amalek. From the very moment that he refrains from killing the animals, it becomes clear that his actions are dictated not only by the Divine command. And it is for this reason that he becomes subject to such heavy criticism. The killing of an entire nation cannot be justified unless it follows from a Divine command.[\[2\]](#)

THE FAILURE TO KILL THE ANIMALS

Shaul's failure to kill the animals was problematic on two counts. First, the very disobedience regarding God's command and the deviation from the prophet's instructions mean that it cannot be said about him that his actions were driven by God's command, for he fails to fulfill it as he had received it. It is not by chance that over and over again the *haftara* emphasizes the principle of obeying God's word. Already in the verse that introduces the story of the war against Amalek, Shemuel focuses his words to Shaul on this principle: "And Shemuel said to Shaul, The Lord sent me to anoint you to be king over His people, over Israel; now therefore hearken to the voice of the words of the Lord" (v. 1), and in the continuation of the chapter, this idea is repeated at length.[\[3\]](#) The moment that Shaul fails to fulfill the order as received, it cannot be said that his actions are dictated by his submission, against his

will, to the word of the King, King of kings, for had he seen himself obligated to Divine authority, he would not have left out a single detail. When he ignores those aspects of the command with which he is uneasy, it becomes clear that those elements that he in fact fulfilled did not disturb his sleep, and that he performed them with his consent and not as one who was forced by the command against his will and against his natural inclination. Had he seen the prophet's command as something that was forced upon him from above, he certainly would have fulfilled it in its entirety, for the prophet's authority in his command to kill the animals is no different than his authority in his command to kill human beings. However, the moment he filters out the parts that he is uncomfortable with, we have no choice but to conclude that the parts that he performed were done willingly and not under duress. In other words, had Shaul killed the animals, we would have related to this as an act of God, Shaul serving as God's agent. But the moment that he shows mercy to the sheep, his actions turn into acts of man, and Shaul is viewed as our agent. Killing Amalek as an act of man, rather than as an act of God, has no justification.[\[4\]](#)

Moreover, aside from the severity of disregarding the command in and of itself, Shaul's action testifies to another serious problem. Shaul did not refrain from killing the sheep because of scorn for the command in and of itself. He was driven by the economic gain that this would yield. As he himself admits, the people longed for the sheep, and he allowed them to keep the plunder. This aggravates his offense, for in this light, we can see the entirety of his actions as driven by considerations of profit and loss. An observer would say that Shaul killed the Amalekis not because of "God's war with Amalek from generation to generation," but because of greed and lust for Amalek's assets. It makes no difference whether this is true or false, for it is enough that the neighboring nations should perceive what happened in this light, in order to create a terrible desecration of God's name.

For the sake of contrast, let us examine the book of Esther, which emphasizes that "they did not lay their hands on the plunder" (*Esther* 9:16). Had the Jews taken the spoils, they would have been seen as acting out of that same principle of greed that motivated Achashverosh. Haman bribed the king to destroy the Jewish people in exchange for ten thousand talents of silver, and they killed their enemies in order to acquire the plunder. The only difference that would have been perceived between Haman and Mordechai would have been the Jews' success and Haman's failure. It was therefore critically important that the Jews not lay their hands on the plunder, so that the difference between them and their enemies be as clear as day. With hindsight, we

might say that in this manner Mordechai, a Binyaminite and descendant of Shaul, repaired the mistake of his ancestor who had failed in this regard.

The significance of the compassion shown to the sheep lies then not only in the fact that it was a deviation from the Divine command, but that it opened the door to seeing the war against Amalek as a military assault driven by economic factors. This point is strengthened when we view it against the backdrop of the security situation in the days of Shaul. Israel is found in a constant struggle with the Pelishtim who rule over large expanses of Eretz Israel. The Pelishtim continue to deepen their penetration into and hold over the country. Having started out along the southern coast, they have now advanced to the heart of the land. The battles described in the previous chapter take place in the territory of Binyamin, and Israel's situation is very serious. The bleak situation at the beginning of Shaul's career is described in the previous chapters:

Now there was no smith found throughout all the land of Israel; for the Pelishtim said, Lest the Hebrews make them swords or spears: but all Israel went down to the Pelishtim, to sharpen every man his share, and his spade, and his ax, and his mattock. And there was a charge for filing the mattocks, and the spades, and the three-pronged forks, and the axes, and for setting the goads. So it came to pass on the day of battle, that there was neither sword nor spear to be found in the hand of any of the people that were with Shaul and Yonatan. (I *Shemuel* 13:19-22)

Despite Shaul's successes, the security problem was not resolved, and a strong and exhausting tension accompanied the entire course of his kingdom. The verse immediately preceding our *haftara* informs us of the constant fight against the Pelishti forces that were threatening Israel, and how Israelite society was a mobilized society: "And there was hard warfare against the Pelishtim all the days of Shaul; and when Shaul saw any strong man, or any valiant man, he took him to himself" (I *Shemuel* 14:52).

Against this background, it is very easy to understand Shaul's war against Amalek as a bullying of the weak by the strong. The stronger Pelishtim vex Israel, and Israel – weaker than the Pelishtim but stronger than Amalek – turn to fight against

Amalek, because they are able to defeat them. This is not an ideological war driven by a religious command, but rather an additional expression of the real-political food chain, in which Israel is found above Amalek. The issue of plunder is, therefore, of critical importance. The taking of the sheep and cattle was a sign of the war's objective: Was the war meant to take advantage of a weaker nation in order to feed the people, and as part of the regional wars, or perhaps its goal was "God's war against Amalek from generation to generation"? In this context, it should be remembered that Shaul consciously introduced a policy of plunder against the Pelishtim,^[5] such that the plunder of Amalek fits this war into the framework of "regular" wars, and removes it from its unique status as a holy war.

SHAUL'S LEADERSHIP

The second issue that arises in the *haftara* is that of leadership. Shaul presents himself to Shemuel as having shown mercy upon the animals as a result of pressure from the people. This implies that Shaul did in fact go out to war against Amalek because of the prophetic command, and not because of the national power struggles playing themselves out on the borders of Israel, or because he thought that he would reap economic gain.

Indeed, Shaul's advice to the Kenites, that they should remove themselves from among Amalek and flee from the war region, illustrates his goal. The justification for Shaul's desire to save the Kenites is his feelings of gratitude toward their nation, which acted with kindness toward Israel after they had left Egypt. In the context of the *mitzva* of wiping out Amalek, this is an expected step. For starters, there is no reason to catch another nation in the net of the war against Amalek. And second, the Kenites' actions in the aftermath of Israel's exodus from Egypt are the very antithesis of Amalek's action, and therefore the *mitzva* of wiping out Amalek necessitates acting favorably toward the Kenites and not to join them to the Amalekis. On the other hand, were Shaul looking for an economic war, the advice that he gave to the Kenites would be totally illogical: surely they are a weaker people; why not fight against them as well? Moreover, by turning to them, Shaul forfeits the element of surprise. If he is interested in conducting a moral and holy war, his forfeit of the surprise on account of religious and moral considerations is a reasonable step, which fits in with the objectives and inner logic of the war. If, however, we are dealing with

an aggressive war of the strong against the weak, his giving up on the surprise makes no sense at all.

The emphasis given to Shaul's turning to the Kenites is meant to clarify that indeed he saw the war as a religious, and not a political battle. This perspective necessitates fulfilling God's command to the last detail, as was explained above at length. In contrast, Shaul caved in to popular pressure and decided to pass on killing the sheep. It is easy to imagine the considerations that went into that decision: besides his weakness and inability to stand up to the masses, Shaul also thought that it would be right to display understanding toward the people, and especially to his soldiers, in light of the security situation. As we saw above, Israel was at the time engaged in ongoing fighting against a strong nation that threatened it, and it was forced to live as a mobilized society living in constant security tension. Let us cite once again the verse cited above, that immediately precedes our *haftara*: "And there was hard warfare against the Pelishtim all the days of Shaul; and when Shaul saw any strong man, or any valiant man, he took him to himself" (I *Shemuel* 14:52). In such circumstances, Shaul saw nothing wrong in giving a certain relief to his soldiers who were on constant alert, engaged in ceaseless skirmishes and incidents. Since the warfare was hard all the time, Shaul felt that he should accept the people's desire with understanding, and therefore he allowed them to take the plunder and did not confront them on the issue. Even if their behavior was unbecoming, Shaul did not consider it such a significant issue that justifies a frontal confrontation with his men. Surely he said to himself that fighting his soldiers on this matter would fall into the category of "a *mitzva* not to say that which will not be heard," and that it would be preferable to restrain himself in order to maintain good relations with his men further along the road. At this juncture of time, when the euphoria of victory over Amalek was still at full strength, it would have been a serious mistake to go out against them.

Indeed, the wisdom of leadership revolves around the ability to understand the people, and to know when it is appropriate to sound rebuke that will be heard and when it is better not say what won't be accepted. Therefore, had we been dealing with a minor issue, it is very possible that Shaul would have been right. Here, however, lies Shaul's tragic mistake. Killing the sheep and the prohibition to take plunder are not marginal details of the prophetic command, but matters of fundamental importance, for the reasons described above. Shaul apparently understood the prophet's words - "Slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass" (15:3) – as a command intended to create deterrence, and not a fundamental *mitzva*.^[6] In other words, killing the animals was meant to serve security needs, and therefore

Shaul decided on his own that maintaining his men's morale and establishing good relations with them are also legitimate military considerations, which can supersede the matter of deterrence. Shaul honestly thought that he had fulfilled the word of God, and he does not hesitate to proclaim to Shemuel: "Blessed be You of the Lord; I have performed the commandment of the Lord" (15:13). From his perspective, it was legitimate to give preference to the desires of the soldiers, and this could be reconciled with God's command. This was his mistake, and here he revealed that he didn't understand the profundity of the war against Amalek.[\[7\]](#)

It should be emphasized that it is certainly possible that Shaul did not think that it was right to plunder the sheep, but he did not want to stand up against the people. The verse that attests: "But Shaul and the people had pity on Agag, and on the best of the sheep, and of the oxen..." (15:9), does not necessarily indicate that Shaul initiated this process, and it may merely mean that he followed after the people's wishes (and since he was king, the action is attributed to him[\[8\]](#)). However, unwillingness to stand up to the people is a failure in leadership. Listening to the people stands in opposition to listening to God, as the prophet takes pains to stand the one against the other, and Shaul failed in this regard. The more that he insists on Shemuel that the people forced him to do what he did, the more he demonstrates his unsuitability to be "head of the tribes of Israel." In great measure, "his advocate becomes his accuser" – his attempt to clear himself of personal sin attests to his failure of leadership.

In truth, this is not the first time that Shaul does not lead, but rather is led by the people or his fears of them, and thus gives up on his plans. Already in Gilgal (I *Shemuel* 13:8-14), Shemuel and Shaul disagreed on this issue, and so too in the incident involving the honeycomb, he released Yehonatan from the ban as a result of popular pressure.

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Let us go back once again to our starting point and examine the question that we posed at the beginning of this *shiur*: Is the real focus of the *haftara* on the issue of leadership or on the *mitzva* of wiping out Amalek?

It is possible to offer a combined answer. Shaul's problem lies in the fact that he did not stand up against the people, and that he preferred to listen to them rather than to listen to God and fulfill His command to the letter.

His actions, however, were not merely a particular violation of a specific command, but rather they changed the entire meaning and morality of the war, and thus turned the war against Amalek upside down. Shaul did not understand this point, and viewed it as a marginal detail, and therefore did not think it right to confront the nation on this matter. Had he properly understood the *mitzva*, he would have insisted on fulfilling it as commanded. His failure, then, in his leadership of the nation is connected to and follows from his misunderstanding of the war against Amalek.

Let us conclude by noting that Shaul's error will eventually be corrected by Mordechai the Jew, the Binyaminite. Mordechai's style of leadership does not take the views of the community around him into account, and he is afraid of no man, and when the day of war under his command will arrive, there will be full compliance with the principle that "they did not lay their hands on the plunder" (*Esther* 9:16).

(Translated by David Strauss)

[1] Our objective here is not to engage in a comprehensive analysis of the prohibition to taking revenge and treat it independently, but only to use it to illustrate by way of analogy the problematic aspects of the *mitzva* of wiping out Amalek. We have, therefore, refrained from discussing other possible

understandings of the prohibition. In truth, we do not have to argue that this is the explanation of the prohibition to take revenge, and it would suffice to argue that for this reason a person should distance himself and be vigilant about acts of revenge, even if this does not explain the prohibition.

[2] In this framework, we shall not deal with the command itself, but with the way it was executed by Shaul, but it should be noted that the commandment is not directed at Amalekites who made peace with Israel and accepted the seven Noachide laws. See Rambam, *Hilkhot Melakhim* 6:4, and Ra'avad, ad loc.

[3] See verses 11, 13, 19, 20, 22, and 26.

[4] My revered father, *shelita*, has often voiced a similar idea regarding the prohibition of "lest he exceed and beat him" (*Devarim* 25:3), which applies to an officer of the court who executes the punishment of flogging. If the court officer adds even a single lash, our claim against him is not about the extra lash, but rather it becomes clear retroactively that even the first thirty-nine lashes were inflicted out of cruelty and sadism, and not because of his office. Thus, he can be accused of having inflicted all the lashes improperly, and not just the final lash. See also Ramban, *Bereishit* 15:14.

[5] "And Shaul said, Let us go down after the Pelishtim by night, and spoil them until the morning light" (I *Shemuel* 14:36). It is interesting to note that the action was set aside because of the ban that Shaul had placed on Yonatan, and Scripture does not clarify whether or not following the resolution of the problem, Shaul returned to his original plan and plundered, or perhaps once it was set aside, it was set aside permanently.

[6] Indeed, it is not clear that the killing of the animals is included in the Torah obligation to wipe out Amalek – see *Minchat Chinukh, mitzva*, no. 604 – and therefore Shaul could have seen this as a temporary measure and understood it as he understood it.

[7] Another person who misunderstood the *mitzva* of wiping out Amalek, according to *Chazal*, was Yoav ben Tzeruya. According to the Gemara in *Bava Batra* 21, Yoav killed all the males of Edom because he understood the command to wipe out "zekher" Amalek as referring exclusively to their male members, based on his reading of the word as "zakhar." The guiding principle in killing only the males lies in the assumption that the *mitzva* of wiping out Amalek is based on security needs, and therefore it is possible to suffice with the killing of the males, for only they pose a threat.

[8] It may even be suggested that the verse be divided up and understood to mean that Shaul had pity on Agag and the people had pity on the sheep and the cattle. In that case, however, we must deal with Shaul's sparing of Agag, and not just his plunder of the animals. Owing to the limitations of time and space, we have chosen to focus on the animals, the matter about which Shemuel rebukes Shaul, and the reader is invited to fill in the picture regarding Agag.