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*In Memory of Rabbi Abraham Leibtag*  
**Shiurim in Chumash & Navi by Menachem Leibtag**  
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**for PARSHAT ZACHOR** - SHAUL & AMALEK

[I Shmuel chapter 15]

What was so terrible about Shaul's sin with Amalek?

Did Shaul lose his kingdom simply because he:

- \* listened to the people's suggestion to offer some of the best sheep from Amalek (as korbanot)?
- \* kept Agag alive for an extra day or two, instead of killing him immediately?
- \* didn't admit his guilt immediately, but instead had the nerve to make up excuses?

For either one (or even a mixture) of these above reasons, it doesn't seem fair that Shaul must lose his kingdom, especially in comparison to David whose sin appears to have been much more severe!

In the following shiur, we take a closer look at the details of Shmuel chapter 15 (the Haftara for Shabbat Zachor), while considering its context within Sefer Shmuel - in an attempt to arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of Shaul's sin.

### BACKGROUND

The Haftara for Shabbat Zachor describes the tragic story of how Shaul failed God's commandment to destroy Amalek.

Even though the details of Amalek's first attack against Am Yisrael are recorded in Sefer Shmot (see Shmot 17:8-16), the official mitzva is defined more explicitly in Sefer Devarim 25:17-19, better known as Parshat Zachor. That commandment implies that it must be fulfilled once Bnei Yisrael are firmly established in their land, and have achieved rest from their enemies. [See "ve-haya be-haniach..." / 25:19.]

Accordingly, the Rambam claims that it becomes the responsibility of the King of Israel to destroy Amalek. See Rambam, the first halacha of Hilchot Melachim.

Several hundred years pass from the time of Yehoshua until a monarchy was finally established - with the coronation of Shaul (see I Shmuel chapter 12). After his initial success against Israel's other enemies (see I Shmuel 14:47-48), God delivers an explicit command that Shaul must destroy Amalek (i.e. this week's Haftara - see I Shmuel 15:1-3).

To understand how and why Shaul failed to properly fulfill this command, we begin our shiur with a discussion of the dilemma created by the institution of a Jewish monarchy.

### A FINE BALANCE

Every country needs a strong central government to guarantee its security and economic prosperity - and in ancient times, a monarchy was the best method to achieve this goal. From this perspective, there is a positive value in the establishment of a Jewish kingdom, as God wants His nation to become a 'respected' nation among its neighbors (see I Shmuel 12:22). However, there is also a 'down side', for should a king become too successful, the people may tend to fear and adore their King more than God Himself. Subsequently, the nation will become famous for its monarch, and not for their God and His laws (see Devarim 4:5-8).

Ideally, the king, as the nation's political leader, would facilitate Am Yisrael's growth as God's 'model' Nation; but realistically - that monarch would more often 'replace' God rather than 'represent' Him. [See Melachim Aleph 10:1, for an example of how Shlomo ha'melech perfectly struck this critical balance.]

For this reason, it became the task of the 'navi' [prophet] to address this problem. By advising the king in all matters of state, it was the navi's responsibility to assure the proper development of an ideal relationship between God, the King, and the people.

This was precisely the relationship between Shmuel and Shaul, (and later between Natan & David, Yeshayahu &

Chizkiyahu, etc.). Shmuel, the navi, was to make sure that Shaul's kingdom would develop in a manner that would bring the nation closer to God. Even though Shaul could take whatever initiatives he found necessary to build the nation, periodically the navi would make certain demands to assure that Bnei Yisrael would attribute their success to God, and not only to the king. [See for example I Shmuel 13:1-14, see also 10:6-9.]

### SHAUL HAS A 'GOOD' IDEA

This background can explain the importance of God's special command to Shaul to destroy Amalek, and not to take the booty - as it constituted a critical test for this delicate relationship.

Due to the special nature of the battle against Amalek (and its biblical background), God commands Shaul 'lehachrim' [to eradicate] everything belonging to Amalek (see 15:2-3). The simplest understanding of this command - lehachrim - would be 'totally destroy', as was the case in the law of 'ir ha-nidachat' [an entire city that follows idol worship] - where the Torah demands lehachrim - to gather all of its booty together and burn it! [See Devarim 13:16-18.]

However, in the battle of Yericho, we find a slightly different definition. Even though God's command to Yehoshua to make the city 'cherem' (see Yehoshua 6:16-18) forbids looting for personal use, Yehoshua is instructed to dedicate the gold and silver for God's House (see 6:24)!

If God's command for Shaul 'lehachrim et Amalek' follows the model from Yehoshua's battle, then we can understand in a more positive light just about everything that Shaul does. In fact, one could understand that Shaul himself is convinced that he has acted in an honorable manner. Let's explain why:

In the aftermath of their victory over Amalek, Shaul (and the people) decide to take some of the best sheep and cattle from the cherem in order to offer korbanot to God (see 15:9 & 15:15). This can be considered no different than the cherem of Yericho, which was taken for God's sake. But if we 'read between the lines', we will find a very 'useful' purpose of all these korbanot.

### "YAD SHAUL"

Even though this detail is often overlooked when studying this chapter, if you read carefully, you'll realize that Shaul has invited the entire nation to the city of Gilgal for a public celebration of the victory over Amalek. To verify this, carefully read 15:12:

"Aand it was told Samuel, saying: 'Shaul (and his army) have come to the Carmel (in contrast to the Negev where they had been fighting), and, behold, he is setting him up a monument [or memorial], and has passed on and gone down to Gilgal.'

In this pasuk, note the phrase "hinei matziv lo **yad**". A "yad" in this context implies a monument or 'memorial' (like "yad v'shem" or "yad Avshalom"). Later in the shiur, we will prove (from 15:30) that the entire nation had indeed gathered at this memorial site.

Gilgal was chosen as the gathering site, probably due to its historic connection to Yehoshua's conquest of Israel and central location. Note as well that it was also the site of where Shaul was officially anointed as king (see 11:14).

As the nation is gathering to thank God for this victory, it makes sense that they should offer thanksgiving sacrifices. But everyone also needs to eat, so most probably these korbanot (from the booty of Amalek) were offered as "shlamim" [i.e., 'zevachim', which can be eaten /see 15:15, 'lema'an zvoach'].

We can also assume that the highlight of this celebration will be when Shaul will slay Agag - the archenemy of Israel - in public. This would explain why Shaul and the people took animal from the booty and kept Agag alive (see 15:9).

Therefore, when Shaul first encounters Shmuel at Gilgal he proudly announces: "I have fulfilled God's commandment" (15:13). Even after Shmuel inquires regarding the sheep and cattle (15:14), Shaul promptly responds:

"From the Amalekites they were taken... **in order** to offer korbanot to **Hashem**, your God, and the rest was totally destroyed [hecheramnu]" (15:15).

In fact, Shaul most probably considered this the most proper form of celebration. Had not Moshe Rabeinu himself built a **mizbeich** (to offer korbanot) and made a memorial in the aftermath of Bnei Yisrael's victory over Amalek! [See Shmot 17:15-16, note "ki **yad** kes Kah...!"]

Therefore, when Shmuel counters, charging Shaul that he had not been meticulous in following God's command (see 15:16-19), Shaul insists once again that:

"I have listened to God's command, and I have followed the path upon which God sent me, and the people took from the sheep and cattle solely **to offer** korbanot to Hashem in **Gilgal**" (see 15:20-21).

### PLEADING GUILTY

Shmuel is not convinced. Once again he censures Shaul, claiming that he had not listened to God (see 15:22-23). In response to this censure, Shaul finally 'admits' his sin:

"And Shaul said to Shmuel, I have sinned, for I have transgressed God's command, for I feared the people and listened to them..." (see 15:24).

This admission of guilt by Shaul is usually understood as sincere, but simply too late. However, if Shaul is indeed sincere, why is he punished so severely? After all, he had good intentions, and now admits his guilt and hopefully has learned his lesson. Is his sin simply because he 'listened to the people', simply because a king must be more firm with his subjects? Is this trait so critical in the definition of 'melech Yisrael'?

Furthermore, if he has truly accepted his guilt, why doesn't Shaul transfer his rule to someone more worthy, as Shmuel seems to suggest that he do (see 15:28-29).

Based on the above background, one could offer an alternate interpretation which can explain not only why Shaul is punished, but also why he doesn't 'give up' his kingdom, and why he continues to fight David until the day (before) he dies.

We posit that Shaul's admission of guilt in 15:24 was not sincere; rather an attempt to appease Shmuel. Let's explain why:

### HONOR OR TESHUVA?

As we explained, Shaul himself truly believes that he has done nothing wrong at all. He is sure that he has followed God's command properly. In his opinion, his planned celebration at Gilgal will make God's Name even greater. Even though Shmuel has challenged the 'kashrut' of this gathering, Shaul is sure that his actions have been flawless, as he himself explained twice to Shmuel (see 15:13 & 15:20).

However, after his first two confrontations with Shmuel, Shaul realizes that it's a 'lost cause' to convince Shmuel of his sincerity. Instead, Shaul concludes that Shmuel, even though he had once been his mentor ['rebbe'], has 'lost it'. Possibly due to his 'old age' (see I Shmuel 8:1,5 & 12:2), Shaul concludes that Shmuel has become too demanding. [As happens so often (to this very day), the successful 'talmid' (student) concludes that he now understands the world much better than his old 'rebbe' does.]

Even though Shaul may still respect Shmuel, and remains thankful for his many years of guidance, he now feels that he understands the situation much better. Especially now, as his own honor is at stake, it is not so easy for Shaul to accept Shmuel's rebuke. At this point of their dispute, Shaul now adopts a new approach - to outwardly admit his guilt to appease Shmuel, even though he really doesn't agree that he has done anything wrong.

As everything was going well until Shmuel's sudden appearance, Shaul now fears that Shmuel may publicly condemn this gathering and hence ruin this celebration. Therefore, Shaul first tries to explain to Shmuel that everything is 'kosher'. But after two attempts, he realizes that Shmuel is not convinced; so he tries another avenue to ensure that the celebration will continue - he admits his guilt! Not that he truly thinks that he is guilty, rather he'll say anything necessary, just to make sure that the celebration continues.

To prove this, note how Shaul immediately begs for expiation, and begs that Shmuel join him in the ceremony.

Carefully note Shaul's entire statement of admission:

"And Shaul said to Shmuel - I have sinned... **now** atone my sin and **return** with me [to the celebration, so that] I can **bow down** to Hashem" (see 15:24-25).

However, Shmuel remains adamant. He refuses to 'return' with Shaul to the celebration, and instead, he turns to leave. In a desperate attempt to prevent Shmuel from leaving, Shaul reaches for Shmuel's cloak, begging him to stay (see 15:26-27).

Tragically, the cloak rips. Realizing the symbolism of this action, Shmuel informs Shaul that God has 'ripped away' his kingdom and will give it to someone else more worthy (see 15:28-29).

But Shaul refuses to give up! Once again, instead of arguing with Shmuel, he [insincerely] reiterates his guilt in a desperate attempt to prevent Shmuel's departure. Once again, carefully note Shaul's request, and how he is worried about his honor:

"And Shaul said - I have sinned, but **now** please **honor** me, in the eyes of the elders and **all of the people** [who have gathered for the ceremony at Gilgal], and return with me so that I can **bow down** to **Hashem**, your God" (see 15:30).

### SHMUEL CONCEDES!

This pasuk not only provides us with conclusive proof that there is a national celebration going on, but also that Shaul's very honor is at stake. To our total surprise, this time Shmuel agrees to return with Shaul. Again, read carefully:

"Va-yshav Shmuel acharei Shaul..." -

"and Shmuel **returned** after [with] Shaul, and Shaul bowed down to God" (see 15:31).

Furthermore, Shmuel himself actually participates in the ceremony. Even though he doesn't appear to join in the korbanot [he doesn't trust the 'hashgacha'], he does insist that he kill Agag instead of Shaul. In this manner, Shmuel attempt to attribute the glory of Agag's death to God and not to Shaul. Therefore, he prefers to perform the mitzva himself. [See 15:32-33.]

Most likely, this argument between Shmuel and Shaul took place 'back stage', i.e. not in the public eye. The people may notice that there is some tension between their two leaders, but they do not overhear Shmuel's prophecy that Shaul will lose his kingdom. Shmuel goes home, and we are told that they never see each other again. Tragically, Shmuel mourns his 'talmid' who has gone astray. Shaul, upset that his 'rebbe' no longer understands him, continues to lead Am Yisrael in the manner that he feels is correct.

Shaul continues to believe that his actions were correct and that Shmuel had exaggerated in his condemnation. Therefore, Shaul doesn't accept Shmuel's prophecy that he shall lose his kingdom to someone more worthy. Many years later, as David rises to power, this prophecy may 'haunt' him (see chapters 24 & 26), but Shaul remains staunch in his belief that he is the King of Israel, just as Shmuel (in his younger days) had promised (see 10:1,7 & 12:1-2). It is only on the day before his death when Shaul finally realizes his mistake (see chapter 28, 've-akmal!').

[Note how this interpretation explains Shaul's behavior in the remainder of Sefer Shmuel I - David is a 'mored be-malchut', and hence deserving of death.]

Now that we have explained the positive nature of Shaul's actions, why is he punished so severely?

To answer this difficult question, we must return to our discussion of the inherent danger in the institution of a monarchy.

Even though Shaul's intention for making this public ceremony may have been noble, its result was exactly the opposite of what God had intended. Let's explain why.

God's commandment not to take any booty from Amalek would have left a lasting impression upon the entire nation. Usually, when victorious soldiers return from battle, they are laden with the spoils of war. However, imagine the impression when hundreds of thousands of soldiers return home from victory - but empty handed! Everyone at home would ask what had

happened, and the soldiers would all need to explain to their families and friends at home how the war with Amalek is different, etc. This would have left a lasting impression upon the nation, and helped them recognize its religious significance.

Despite his good intentions, Shaul's decision to celebrate the victory with a public ceremony would definitely impress upon the people that Shaul had defeated Amalek - but it would not be so clear that this war was special, and the level of God's involvement.

Because this proper balance between the King and God is so crucial, the critical trait of the Jewish royal family must be their ability (and understanding) to forfeit their own honor in favor of the honor of God. Instead, Shaul becomes obsessed with his own glory, as reflected by his statement '**kabdeinu na**' - honor me. Even if his intentions were pure, he missed the point. Shaul loses his kingdom less so because of a specific sin, but more so because he lacked the necessary trait.

Not listening to God's specific command (here and in chapter 13) could be understood as the 'symptom' of why he lost his kingdom, and necessarily the 'reason'.

### **MALCHUT DAVID**

Shaul may understand that the Kingdom of Israel in itself is equivalent to the honor of God, but God does not agree. Therefore, God must choose a different royal family, the House of David, who will find the proper balance between the Kingdom of Man and the Kingdom of Heaven.

This distinction between David and Shaul is reflected in David's rebuttal of his wife's criticism of his dancing in front of the **aron**, when it was brought to Yerushalayim. Recall the words of Michal bat **Shaul's** rebuke:

"And Michal said: What **honor** is there today in the King of Israel... and David answered: [I have danced] in front of God who has chosen **me over your father**... and I have made myself humble, and it is with those mothers that I have shown **honor**" (II Shmuel 6:20-22).

For this reason, Michal will never have a child from David, who surely would have been heir to the throne. God could not allow this negative trait of Shaul to 'infiltrate' the seed of David.

When David becomes king, he dedicates his life towards the preparation of Jerusalem to be the city of God, and prepares the materials to build a House of God - that will symbolize the more ideal relationship between God, the King, and His people.

As David ha'melech consistently makes every effort to show his nation that he is merely a vassal king before God - the King of kings; he and his offspring are chosen to become the eternal royal family of the Jewish nation.

shabbat shalom  
menachem