



AMALEK, THE KINGSHIP OF SAUL AND THE KINGSHIP OF GOD*

The Haftarah read in synagogue on Shabbat Zahor, prior to Purim, Shmuel 1: Ch. 15 details the Divine command to King Shaul to wage total war against the Amalekites in the area, with the explicit command to eradicate them all, from young to old,¹ as well as destroy all the cattle and spoils of war. To emphasize the point, God (through Shmuel) commands him *lo tahmol alav* — *Do not show any mercy on (Amalek)* (verse 3). Shaul engages in battle and defeats the Amalekites decisively. However, in violation of the Divine command, he spares the life of Agag, King of the Amalekites, and both he and the people spare a portion of the cattle:



“Va-Yahmol Shaul ve-ha-Am al Agag ve-al meitav ha-tzon ve-habakar . . . ve-Al kol ha-tov, ve-khol ha-Melakha ha-nimveza ve-nameis otah heherimu — Shaul and the people showed mercy upon Agag and on the best of the sheep and cattle . . . and on all the

best animals, but they destroyed the weak and bad quality livestock” (verse 9). God decides to strip Shaul of the kingship and sends the prophet Shmuel to inform him of this decision. Shmuel is told that Shaul had gone to the Carmel region and had built a monument to himself — *“ve-henei matziv lo yad”* (verse 12) and has now returned to Gilgal. Shmuel goes down to Gilgal and informs him of the Divine decision, and the rest of the chapter presents the unfolding of the dialogue between Shmuel and Shaul concluding with the rupture between them that would never be repaired, as well as the loss of the kingship by Shaul.

As many have noted, this narrative

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plays off the previous stories relating to Amalek in the Torah. For example, the text in Sefer Shmuel Ch. 14 *just prior* to the command to destroy Amalek in Ch. 15, summarizes Shaul's reign by stating:

"Ve-Shaul lakhad et ha-melukha, va-yilahem saviv be-khol oyvav be-Moav, be-Amon — Shaul consolidated the kingship under his control and fought against all of the surrounding enemies."

This verse is an echo of the verse in the Torah (read as part of Parshat Zakhor):

"Ve-Haya be-haniah lekha Hashem Eloekha mikol oyvekha . . . timheh et zeikher Amalek — When the Lord Your God will give you peace from all your surrounding enemies . . . you shall blot out Amalek." Shaul and the Israelites have reached the historical point that the fulfillment of God's command to destroy Amalek can now be put into action.

Let us briefly examine the reasons the Torah hints at to explain why Amalek is treated in this unique manner, and not like all other enemies of Israel. Through this we will gain a better understanding of Shaul's fateful errors. If we look at the passage in Parshat Beshalah in Sefer Shmot Ch. 17, the timing of the attack and its framing is critically important.

The Israelites have just left Egypt and crossed Yam Suf. As the Song at the Sea makes clear, the rest of the world was profoundly shaken by the events of the Exodus. The entire world was overcome with awe and the nations in the Land of Israel were gripped with fear. Into this reality comes Amalek, with no territorial ax to grind, nor political or religious grievance against Israel, and he engages in an unprovoked attack. It is literally an attack on God's people for no human, rational reason. Moreover, it undermined the aura around Israel and God's plan. Hazal, in their vivid fashion, captured it in a famous midrash (cited by Rashi in Parashat Ki Tetzei Ch. 25:18):

לשון קר וחם, ציננך והפשירך מרתיחתך, שהיו כל האומות יריאים להלחם בכם, ובא זה והתחיל והראה מקום לאחרים. משל לאמבטי רותחת שאין כל בריאה יכולה לירד לתוכה, בא בן בליעל אחד קפץ וירד לתוכה, ואף על פי שנכווה, הקרהו בפני אחרים.

For all the nations were afraid to war against you and this one came and began to point out the way to others. A parable! It may be compared to a boiling hot bath into which no living creature could descend. A good-for-nothing came, and sprang down into it; although he scalded himself, he made it appear cold to others.

In light of this, it makes perfect sense that in Parashat Beshalah the war against Amalek is seen as



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a unique cosmic battle between God and the Amalekites, and not simply another battle. This is made explicit by Moshe, who upon conclusion of the battle is told by God that God will “blot out Amalek.” Moshe then builds an altar called “God is my banner,” which he explains to mean: “*Ki yad al keis Y-ah milhama LaHashem mi-dor dor — For God’s hand is upon God’s Throne, The Lord will wage war against Amalek from generation to generation.*” The Torah hints at this idea of war against Amalek being a *milhemet Hashem* earlier in this section, informing us that when Moshe would raise his hands, “*yadav*,” the Israelites would be successful in battle. As the rabbis noted, in Moshe raising his hands, the people would turn heavenward and recognize God as the real author of their success.

In our chapter in Shmuel, part of Shaul’s mistake in leaving King Agag and parts of the cattle alive, is that it shows that he is treating the battle as a standard one. He has not internalized it as a fulfillment of a unique Divine struggle — a *milhama la-Hashem*. It is only in the context of such a unique war that a command to kill everyone could ever be justified. Instead, Shaul leaves Agag alive, possibly reflecting some real-politik approach of professional courtesy or some plan to use Agag for some other purpose. Similarly, in leaving alive the best cattle, he has treated the battle as a regular war in which booty is captured, given out to curry favor or to keep the people satisfied.

I believe this is also hinted at in the curious piece of information that the text shares with us, which is that when Shaul was returning from the battle, he erected a monument — a *yad* — to himself (15:12). Shaul transformed a battle that was supposed to represent a Divine conflict against absolute evil into another notch in his belt as a regular king fighting off his enemies. In place of *yad al keis Y-ah* it is replaced by a *yad* to himself!

In Devarim Ch. 25 the Torah focuses on a different element of the unique evil of Amalek:

זְכוֹר אֶת אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה לְךָ עַמְלֵק בְּדֶרֶךְ בְּצֵאתְךָ מִמִּצְרָיִם.
אֲשֶׁר קָרָךְ בְּדֶרֶךְ וַיִּזְנֶב בְּךָ כָּל הַנֶּחֱשָׁלִים אַחֲרֶיךָ וְאַתָּה עָיִף וְיָגַע וְלֹא יָרָא אֱלֹקִים.

“Remember what Amalek did to you . . . how, undeterred by fear of God, he surprised you on the march, when you were famished and weary, and cut down all the stragglers in your rear.” Amalek must be destroyed because they are a foe who attacks the weak and the hungry, those most vulnerable and at risk. They represent the exploitation of the most fragile members of society, the opposite of the compassionate and merciful message of God to the world, of *derekh Hashem la’asot tzedakah u-mishpat*.

In fighting against Amalek, Shaul spares Agag, the king, the highest and most powerful member of the society, while killing out the simple people, the Amalekite peasants and citizens. Moreover, the text emphasizes that Shaul spared the “best of the flock

— *meitav hatzon*” while destroying the lower quality animals. Shaul, in fighting the battle has, in effect, adopted an Amalekite ethos. He has become, to an extent, the very thing he was supposed to fight and eradicate.

Endnotes

*Some of the ideas in this essay are based on ideas I have heard from my dear friend and teacher, Rabbi David Silber, one of the master scholars and teachers of Tanakh in our generation.

1. It is worthwhile to note that in the *peshat* reading of the Torah itself there is no explicit command to destroy every last one of the Amalekite people. The Torah in Shmot Ch. 17 speaks of God’s unending battle against Amalek from generation to generation where he will “erase” the Amalekites, while the passage in Devarim Ch. 25 speaks of a human obligation to “erase” Amalek. It is only in the book of Samuel that there appears an explicit command to kill each and every member of the Amalekites, from young to old. The weighty moral and ethical challenges that this issue posed (and continues to pose) to rabbinic thinkers throughout the ages is beyond the scope of our essay. For some contemporary treatments of the issue see: R. Yaacov Medan, “Amalek” in *Al Derekh Ha-Avot* (Michlelet Herzog, 2001), pp. 319-397; R. Shalom Carmy, “The Origin of the Nations and the Shadow of Violence: Theological Perspectives on Canaan and Amalek” in *War and Peace in the Jewish Tradition* (Ktav/Yeshiva University, 2007) pp. 163-200; R. Norman Lamm z”l, “Amalek and the Seven Nations: A Case of Law vs. Morality,” *ibid*, pp. 201-238; R. Nathaniel Helfgot, “Amalek, Ethics and Halakhic Development” in *The YCT Rabbinical School Companion to the Book of Samuel* (Ben Yehuda Press, 2006) pp. 79-96.



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