YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Understanding the haftarot**

**By Harav Yaakov Medan**

**SHABBAT ZAKHOR**

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Dedicated in memory of Zvi Kassel *z"l*,   
whose *yahrzeit* is the 10th of Adar  
by Patrice and Danielle Rueff and Family Kassel

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In memory of Rabbi Dr. Joseph I. Singer *z"l*, Rabbi Emeritus of Manhattan Beach Jewish Center, and son-in-law of Dr. Chaim Heller *z"l*, whose *yahrzeit* falls on 12 Adar, by his daughter, Vivian Singer

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According to the Sefardi rite, the *haftara* for *Parashat Zakhor* begins with I *Shmuel* 15:1:

Shmuel said to Shaul, "It was I whom the Lord sent to anoint you as king over His people, over Israel; now, heed the words of the Lord.

According to the Ashkenazi rite, the *haftara* begins at the next verse:

Thus says the Lord of Hosts: I have taken note of what Amalek did to Israel; how they set upon them on the way as they came out of Egypt. Now, go and strike down Amalek; you must utterly destroy all that is theirs – spare nothing. You must slay man and woman; child and infant; ox and sheep; camel and donkey." Shaul summoned the men and mustered them at Telaim; two hundred thousand infantrymen and ten thousand men from Yehuda. Shaul reached the city of Amalek and lay in wait in the wadi. And Shaul said to the Kenites, "Leave; turn and withdraw from among the Amalekites lest I destroy you together with them; you dealt loyally with all the Israelites when they left Egypt," and the Kenites departed from Amalek. Then Shaul struck down Amalek from Chavila up to Shur, which is east of Egypt. He captured King Agag of Amalek alive and utterly destroyed the entire people by the sword. But Shaul and the men spared Agag and the best of the sheep, cattle, fat calves, and lambs – the very best of everything; they were not willing to destroy them. As for all the spurned, worthless property – that, they utterly destroyed. Then the word of the Lord reached Shmuel: "I regret that I crowned Shaul as king, for he has turned away from following Me and he has failed to fulfill My words." This enraged Shmuel, and he cried out to the Lord all night long. And Shmuel set out early in the morning toward Shaul, and Shmuel was told, "Shaul has gone to Carmel, where he set up a monument for himself; then he turned off and made his way down to Gilgal." When Shmuel reached Shaul, Shaul said to him, "Blessed are you to the Lord! I have fulfilled the Lord's word." "Then what is this bleating of sheep in my ears," said Shmuel, "and the lowing of cattle that I hear?" "They brought them from the Amalekites," said Shaul, "for the men spared the best of the sheep and cattle for sacrificing to the Lord, your God – but we utterly destroyed the rest." "Stop," said Shmuel, "and let me tell you what the Lord told me last night." "Speak," he said to him. And Shmuel said, "Though you may seem small in your own eyes, you are the head of the tribes of Israel, and the Lord anointed you as king over Israel. The Lord sent you on a mission, bidding, 'Go and utterly destroy the offenders – Amalek – and fight them until you have destroyed them.' But why did you fail to heed the voice of the Lord, pouncing on the spoil and doing evil in the eyes of the Lord?" "But I did heed the voice of the Lord," Shaul said to Shmuel. "I set out on the mission the Lord assigned me, and I brought Agag, king of Amalek, and utterly destroyed Amalek. And the men took of the spoil – the choicest sheep and cattle from what was banned – to sacrifice to the Lord, your God, at Gilgal." And Shmuel said, "Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as obedience to the Lord's voice? Behold – obedience is better than sacrifice, and compliance than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as bad as the sin of divination, and presumption as corruption and idolatry. Because you rejected the word of the Lord, He has rejected you as king." "I have sinned," Shaul said to Shmuel, "for I violated the Lord's command and your word, because I feared the people and heeded their voice. But now, please forgive my sin and return with me, so I may worship before the Lord." "I will not return with you," Shmuel said to Shaul, "for you have rejected the word of the Lord – and the Lord has rejected you from being king over Israel." And Shmuel turned to go, and he grabbed the corner of his robe, and it tore. "The Lord has torn the kingship of Israel away from you today," Shmuel said to him, "and has granted it to your peer, who is better than you. What is more, Israel's Eternal will not betray or waver, for He is not a mere wavering human." "I have sinned," he said. "Now please honor me in front of the elders of my people and in front of Israel; return with me and I will worship the Lord your God." So Shmuel followed Shaul back, and Shaul worshipped the Lord. Shmuel then gave the order, "Bring Agag, king of Amalek, to me." Agag walked up to him with stately steps. "So," said Agag, "the bitterness of death is upon me." And Shmuel said, "As your sword has made women childless, so your mother shall be childless among women!" And Shmuel hacked Agag to pieces before the Lord at Gilgal. Then Shmuel went to Rama while Shaul made his way up to his home in Givat Shaul. (I *Shmuel* 15:1-34)[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Introduction**

This *haftara* is read on the Shabbat before Purim, when we fulfill the *mitzva* of remembering Amalek's evil actions and the obligation to wipe them out by reading the Torah’s account of Amalek as *maftir*. According to the Gemara,the book of *Esther* entered the Biblical canon, apparently after it had already been sealed, because of the war against Haman and his ten sons, who were of the seed of Amalek, and because reading it fulfilled the Torah's commandment to wipe out the memory of Amalek:

Esther sent to the Sages: Write an account of me for posterity. They sent back: "Have I not written for you three times" (*Mishlei* 22:20) — three times, and not four. [And they refused] until they found a verse written in the Torah: "Write this for a memorial in a book" (*Shemot* 17:14) [which they expounded as follows]: "Write this," namely, what is written here and in *Devarim*; "for a memorial," namely, what is written in the Prophets; "in a book," namely, what is written in the *Megilla*.

This echoes [a disagreement between two] *Tannaim*. "Write this," what is written here; "for a memorial," namely, what is written in *Devarim*; "in a book," namely, what is written in the Prophets – these are the words of Rabbi Yehoshua. Rabbi Eliezer ha-Moda’i says: "Write this," namely, what is written here and in *Devarim*; "for a memorial," namely, what is written in the Prophets; "in a book," namely, what is written in the *Megilla*.

Rav Yehuda said in the name of Shmuel: [The scroll] of *Esther* does not make the hands unclean. Are we to infer from this that Shmuel was of the opinion that *Esther* was not composed under the inspiration of the holy spirit? How can this be, seeing that Shmuel has said that *Esther* was composed under the inspiration of the holy spirit? It was composed to be recited [by heart], but not to be written. (*Megilla* 7a)

The three parts of the Bible – Torah, Prophets, and Writings – were already sealed by the days of Esther.[[2]](#footnote-2) The sages of the generation (perhaps members of the Great Assembly) replied to Esther that they could not add a fourth part to the Bible with her story. Ultimately, however, they found support in a midrashic exposition with respect to God's command in the aftermath of Yehoshua's war against Amalek: the words "Write this for a memorial in a book" allude to a later recording of the continuation of the war against Amalek – the war of Mordechai and Esther. This is how Rabbi Eliezer ha-Moda’i understood the verse, and common practice follows him. Rabbi Yehoshua interpreted the verse as referring only to the continuation of the war against Amalek in our *haftara*, "in the Prophets." Shmuel, as well, cited by Rav Yehuda, argued that the book of *Esther* should not be written among the Holy Scriptures, even though there is a *mitzva* to read it in public. In practice, we try to fulfill the two conflicting opinions: we read the *Megilla* in public as a "letter," entirely unrolled and folded over itself, rather than as a book of the Holy Scriptures, i.e., as a rolled-up scroll. We do, however, recite a blessing over the *Megilla* at the end of its reading after we roll it back up as a book of the Holy Scriptures. We also read it with cantillation notes as one of the books of Scripture.

In any event, we read about the obliteration of Amalek before Purim because the war against Amalek found expression in the struggle against Haman the Agagite and his sons. Our *haftara*, which is the story of the wiping out of Amalek in the Prophets, reminds us that Agag, ancestor of Haman son of Hamdata, was indeed the king of Amalek.

In Jerusalem, this *haftara* is also read when Purim Jerusalem (called in the vernacular "Purim Shushan," or in an incorrect translation from the Yiddish – "Shushan Purim") falls out on Shabbat. In such a year, the *haftara* is read in Jerusalem on two consecutive *Shabbatot* – a week before Purim and on the day of Purim itself.

**II. Amalek’s Sin**

Thus says the Lord of Hosts: I have taken note of what Amalek did to Israel; how they set upon them on the way as they came out of Egypt. (15:2)

It is commonly understood that Amalek's sin against Israel lies in the Torah’s account (*Shemot* 17) of the war in Refidim. But was Amalek's sin in this war so serious, to the point that it necessitated a *mitzva* to remember their iniquity for all generations? Many nations (e.g., Egypt) behaved terribly to us before Amalek, and many other nations did so afterwards; what made Amalek stand out?

The two passages describing Amalek's attack seemingly lead to contradictory conclusions. In *Shemot*, we read:

Then, at Refidim, Amalek came and attacked Israel. Moshe said to Yehoshua, "Choose men for us, and go out and do battle against Amalek. Tomorrow I will stand on top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand." Yehoshua fought the Amalekites as Moshe had directed him, while Moshe, Aharon, and Chur climbed to the top of the hill. Whenever Moshe held his hand high, the Israelites prevailed, but whenever he let his hand drop, the Amalekites prevailed. But Moshe's hands grew heavy. So they took a stone and placed it under him and he sat, while Aharon and Chur held up his hands, one on each side, so that his hands held true until sunset. And Yehoshua overcame Amalek and his people at the sword. (*Shemot* 17:9-13)

This passage reflects Israel's victory in the war against Amalek – but the passage in *Devarim* conveys Israel's defeat and their quest for revenge once it becomes possible:

Remember what Amalek did to you on your way as you left Egypt, how he attacked you on the way, when you were tired and exhausted, striking down all the stragglers in your rear, with no fear of God. And so, when the Lord your God gives you rest from all the enemies around you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from beneath the sky. Do not forget. (*Devarim* 25:17-19)

Did the war with Amalek end with Israel's victory or defeat?

The contradiction is so serious that we may doubt whether these two passages refer to the same war. My inclination is to say (unlike the classical commentaries) that the book of *Devarim* is referring to a war that began at the time of the "*ma'apilim*," in the wake of the sin of the spies.

Defiantly, they went up to the heights of the hill country. Neither the Ark of the Lord's Covenant nor Moshe left the camp. And the Amalekites and Canaanites who lived in that hill country came down, and fought them, and crushed them, all the way to Chorma. (*Bamidbar* 14:44-45)

It is not clear how many Israelites went up. The Torah notes that Moshe and the Ark did not go up, and this allows us to understand that the number of those who did go up was very large. This is not far-fetched, since the declaration that they would wander in the wilderness for forty years and die there was unbearable news. All those who went up died in the Negev mountains[[3]](#footnote-3) above Kadesh Barnea, from where they had gone up. They were killed by both Amalekites and Canaanites, but it is reasonable to assume that the killing was carried out mainly by Amalek, who lived in the area. According to the account in *Devarim*, it is likely that Amalek, from the heights of the Negev mountains, tormented Israel during their entire stay in Kadesh Barnea and its environs at the foot of the mountains. With the advantage of height, they could monitor the movements of every man or woman who left the camp of Israel to graze their sheep or draw water in the vicinity, to ambush and kidnap them.[[4]](#footnote-4) Forty years later, the Torah commands us to take our revenge on them for the many years of trouble they caused.[[5]](#footnote-5)

**III. “*Pakaditi*,” “I Have Taken Note” – “Holding Descendants to Account [“*Poked Avon*”] for Sins of the Fathers”**

About four hundred years passed between Amalek's action toward the Israelites in the wilderness and Shmuel’s command to Shaul about holding them to account. Can punishment be inflicted on a nation whose ancestors had sinned against Israel so long ago? What justice is there in that? This question arises in the wake of our *haftara*, as well as in the very commandment to wipe out the memory of Amalek one day – with no time limit for avenging Amalek's actions.

The accepted rule about holding descendants to account was formulated by *Chazal* as follows:

For one verse states: "Holding descendants to account for the sins of the fathers" (*Shemot* 34:7), and another verse states: "Neither shall the children be put to death for the fathers" (*Devarim* 24:16). A contradiction was pointed out between these two verses, and the answer was given that there is no contradiction: one verse deals with children who continue in the same course as their fathers, and the other verse with children who do not continue in the course of their fathers. (*Berakhot* 7a; *Sanhedrin* 27b)

Children are held responsible for their fathers’ evil deeds only when they continue in their ways. Amalek's actions in the book of *Shmuel*, such as the destruction they brought upon Tziklag (I *Shmuel* 30), the city of David and his people, demonstrate adherence to their ancestors’ evil path. Amalek takes advantage of the fact that the soldiers of Tziklag went out to war in Gilboa: they capture all the stragglers – the entire non-combatant population, the women and children – and cross Nachal ha-Besor with them, probably heading to the Egyptian slave markets in order to sell them there. This is likely what Amalek did to the stragglers in the wilderness as well, watching the Israelites from the heights of the Negev mountains and kidnapping them to sell them as slaves. The Amalekites made their living through the generations by trading slaves in the markets of Egypt, after raiding quiet and innocent communities and taking their "stragglers." Haman the Agagite also demonstrated a similar approach – to destroy all the Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day.

The conquest of Tziklag by the Amalekites took place in the last days of Shaul, after the war against Amalek described in our *haftara*. It does not explain why God would hold Amalek to account specifically at that time. However, an initial archaeological survey conducted years ago in the Negev plateau discovered the remains of about a hundred settlements that went up in fire or were otherwise destroyed during Iron Age II, at the end of the 11th century BCE – that is to say, in the days of Shaul. It seems that these were Jewish settlements that Amalek destroyed in order to expand their boundaries. It was then that Shmuel, at God's command, held Amalek to account for sins dating back to the early days of the people of Israel in the wilderness. Shmuel commanded Shaul to punish Amalek for their iniquities and beat them to the end, knowing that there would be no peace for the settlements of Israel in the south until Amalek was destroyed.

**IV. “Ox and Sheep” [[6]](#footnote-6)**

Now, go and strike down Amalek; you must utterly destroy all that is theirs – spare nothing. You must slay man and woman; child and infant; ox and sheep; camel and donkey. (15:3-4)

The cattle certainly did not participate in Amalek's sin, and there is no reason to hold them accountable for it. Furthermore, according to its plain sense, "you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from beneath the sky" need not be understood as a call to destroy their animals. Neither the Rambam nor the *Sefer ha-Chinukh* mention destruction of Amalek's animals as part of the mitzva. Moreover, when David waged war against Amalek after they destroyed his city, Tziklag, he took much booty from Amalek, including many animals, and Scripture praises his conduct with regard to the booty and his fair distribution of it – among the warriors who participated in the war and those sitting far from the front, and among his own people and the people of the southern settlements of Yehuda, who had suffered under Amalek's provocations.

Therefore, it seems that there is no fundamental prohibition to take Amalek's booty and animals; destruction of the animals was a one-time order of the prophet, not a commandment for future generations. I will suggest three possible reasons for this temporary order:

1. Amalek's cattle and spoils had been obtained through acts of robbery and plunder carried out by Amalekite tribes against peaceful settlements in the south, mostly Israelites with a minority of Philistines and other peoples. Shmuel did not approve of turning the Israelite army into looters of this plunder, fruit of others’ labor; he preferred that it be destroyed. It was impossible to demand of the soldiers to release the animals and not kill them, for then the fruit of their labor would have passed to other peoples, and this is a test that a soldier is not meant to stand. David, however, took the plunder from the outset in order to distribute it among the Israelite settlements that were adversely affected by Amalek, and there was no reason to oppose this.

2. The command to destroy Amalek is a particularly cruel order, which should only be given when truly necessary – because of the need to ensure the safety of Israelite settlements in the south. Allowing looting in such a war would turn the soldier into an exploiter of brutal killing. Perhaps Shmuel wanted to clarify that such a cruel war was being waged only for the positive purpose of carrying out God's order and ensuring the peace of the southern settlements for an extended period of time, without any admixture of greed and looting. It is possible that this is how we are to understand the Torah's commandment concerning a condemned city (*ir ha-nidachat*), which forbids taking its spoils. Woe to us if a civil war, like that waged against a condemned city, turns into a war of greed and plunder. In David's war against Amalek, it was clear as day to all the soldiers that they were fighting for the lives of their wives and children who had been captured by Amalek; therefore, they were not forbidden to take the spoils at the conclusion of the war.

3. I learned the primary reason for the prohibition of looting Amalek's possessions from my revered teacher, Rabbi Yoel Bin-Nun[[7]](#footnote-7): the prohibition applied specifically during the war itself, because nothing hinders continued aggressive fighting like the taking of booty, as each soldier deals with his own booty instead of continuing to pursue the enemy. David took the booty only at the end of the great war against the Amalekite tribe that destroyed Tziklag. Again, from a practical point of view, there is no difference between the prohibition to take booty and the order to kill the animals so that they not be taken. This is also why the Jews did not take booty in the war led by Mordechai and Esther on the eve of Purim – because the need to kill as many of Israel's enemies as possible on their one day of fighting dictated that they refrain from looting.

Everything remains a temporary ruling of the prophet and not part of the mitzvaapplying for all generations.

**V. “Child and Infant”**

The command to kill young children of Amalek is both puzzling and infuriating. According to what we said above about the animals, it is possible that the need to kill "child and infant" was a temporary order issued by Shmuel. The Torah says only "you shall blot out the memory of Amalek," and the plain meaning of the verse allows for the possibility of blotting out their memory as a people by way of an overwhelming victory on the battlefield, without killing them as individuals who do not group themselves together as a defined Amalekite tribe. Why then did Shmuel order Shaul to do this?

It is difficult to understand such an unequivocal order of destruction if it does not involve a deep, harsh cry for revenge for the destruction of dozens of Israelite settlements and the sale or extermination of their inhabitants. But even the cry for revenge does not in itself justify this order, and it is possible that Shmuel's harsh order was also given for the purpose of deterring other tribes from repeating what Amalek had done in the Israelite settlements.

Moreover, it seems we should take into account that allowing the women and children to live means taking them as booty (or abandoning them to other peoples and tribes in the area, an act that could not be considered from the point of view of Shaul's soldiers, who had risked their lives in this war). To take them as booty meant bringing them into their homes as slaves, as maidservants, as concubines, as a "beautiful captive of war" – fostering intimate relationships and mutual cultural assimilation, a situation Shmuel could not allow to occur.

Furthermore, taking the women and children as booty would hinder continued fighting, as noted above. Shmuel felt an urgent need to destroy all the Amalekite tribes scattered in the south and in Sinai, or at least to uproot them as a fighting force, in order to enable Jewish settlements to exist in the southern part of the country. His resolute words about the massive killing express the need for a war without compromise, a quick war that allows for speedy re-organization for continued fighting at a distance of dozens of kilometers against other Amalekite tribes. None of this allows for discriminate killing, which would require the individual examination of each person.[[8]](#footnote-8) According to this perspective, it is still possible not to pursue every child or woman who escapes alone from the battlefield.

**V. The Count of the People**

Shaul summoned the men and mustered them at Telaim; two hundred thousand infantrymen and ten thousand men from Yehuda. (15:4)

War against all the tribes of Amalek up to Shur, which is east of Egypt, would be quite large and strenuous, requiring a large army. Yet, the number of combatants in the war against Amalek was less than two-thirds the number of combatants recruited for the war against Amon (three hundred and thirty thousand; see I *Shmuel* chap. 11). Does this support *Chazal*’sclaim that Shaul embarked on this war half-heartedly, with little zeal to mobilize the people?

The greatest and most surprising decrease was in the mobilization of the people of Yehuda – only ten thousand soldiers for a war fought on their front line, as a tribe bordering on Amalek, compared to thirty thousand who were mobilized for the war against Amon. Did the people of Yehuda tire of upholding Shaul's kingdom after the many wars in their territory against the Philistines and the desert tribes (Amalek) in the years that passed before this war?

**VI. The City of Amalek and the Kenites**

Shaul reached the city of Amalek and lay in wait in the wadi. (15:5)

There are various hypotheses as to what was the capital of Amalek and the city of Agag their king.[[9]](#footnote-9) I have chosen one of them: Sharuchen, which towers over the Besor Wadi (or Avarish, which is identified with el-Arish).[[10]](#footnote-10) Thus, the expression "and they lay in wait in the wadi" relates to an ambush set up in the tangled vegetation of the Besor Wadi at the foot of Sharuchen (or in Wadi el-Arish at the foot of el-Arish[[11]](#footnote-11)).

And Shaul said to the Kenites, "Leave; turn and withdraw from among the Amalekites lest I destroy you together with them; you dealt loyally with all the Israelites when they left Egypt," and the Kenites departed from Amalek. (15:6)

The Kenites are descendants of Yitro, as it is stated:

Now, the descendants of the Kenite, Moshe's father-in-law, ascended from the City of Palms with the Judahites to the Wilderness of Yehuda in the Negev region near Arad; they came and settled among the people. (*Shoftim* 1:16)

We have not heard of acts of kindness performed by Yitro on behalf of the people of Israel, apart from his wise advice regarding the appointment of judges. The kindness for the people of Israel was performed by Chovav, apparently a son of Yitro,[[12]](#footnote-12) who accompanied the people of Israel during all their forty years of wandering in the desert. As a reward, he received the "fat pasture ground of Yericho," the City of Palms, but his descendants were forced to move when the place was conquered by Eglon, king of Moav. The house of Chever the Kenite moved to the lower Galilee and the valley of Kinarot,[[13]](#footnote-13) and the rest of the Kenite tribe returned to the Negev and lived there with the Amalekite tribes – until Shaul brought them up to protect them during the war. The Kenites separated from Amalek following Shaul's demand – which brings to mind the *midrash* that says the Kenite tribe also lived among Amalek at the time of Israel's exodus from Egypt, but joined the people of Israel in the wake of Israel's war against Amalek:

Rabbi Yehuda bar Simon said: Yitro was recorded in Amalek's list of officers, but once it fell, he came and converted. (*Midrash Shmuel* 12, 2)

**VII. The War Front and the Capture of Agag[[14]](#footnote-14)**

Then Shaul struck down Amalek from Chavila up to Shur, which is east of Egypt. He captured King Agag of Amalek alive and utterly destroyed the entire people by the sword. But Shaul and the men spared Agag and the best of the sheep, cattle, fat calves, and lambs – the very best of everything; they were not willing to destroy them. As for all the spurned, worthless property – that, they utterly destroyed. (15:7-9)

My revered teacher, Rabbi Yoel Bin-Nun explains that "from Chavila up to Shur, which is east of Egypt" – the mention of the entire Sinai Peninsula – refers not to Shaul's campaign, but to the place where the tribes of Amalek lived.[[15]](#footnote-15) Shaul was commanded to strike all the tribes of Amalek, but he apparently contented himself with attacking the city of Amalek, the capital city, and capturing the king of Amalek alive. The war ended in the city of Amalek not necessarily because Shaul wanted it to end there, but because the booty the people had taken delayed them. People who leave a city carrying a number of goats and donkeys will no longer be able to fight in the wide expanses of the desert. They will have to watch over their new property, so it does not get lost on the way. The blow that Shaul struck in the city of Amalek was a heavy one, but it left Amalek alive and kicking, as evidenced by the difficult war that David later fought at Tziklag. The prophet's plan, that he had received from God, failed because of the plunder taken from the city of Amalek.

By taking booty, the people transgressed the express command of the prophet at the beginning of the war. Why did they do that?

Two answers can be offered; one was considered correct at the beginning of the negotiations between Shmuel and Shaul below, and the other will be clarified below as the correct answer.

The first answer: The modest Shaul, who rose from the cattle and the donkeys to rule as king over the people of Israel, was unable to impose his authority over the people. Lack of discipline among the soldiers caused them to deteriorate into lust for plunder, and thus led to the early cessation of the fighting.

The second answer: The people saw that Shaul captured Agag alive, and inferred that the king's intention was not to destroy Amalek but to enter into negotiations them from a position of strength. Conquering the city of Amalek, the capital city, and taking the king as prisoner, achieved that power. There was no longer any point in chasing for months after every remnant of an Amalekite tribe in the vastness of the desert; now was the time to take booty for the soon-to-be-celebrated victory procession.

We encounter the capturing of a king as a means of gaining control over his people many years later, when Nevuchadnetzar tried to take Yehoyakim son of Yoshiyahu king of Yehuda as his captive in order to control thereby the kingdom of Yehuda. Yehoyakim died on his way to Babylon, apparently close to Jerusalem, and the king then returned to Jerusalem to take his son Yehoyakhin instead*,* and he indeed sat in a Babylonian prison for thirty-seven years. This is how the king of Babylon ruled the Jews who were exiled to his country, and this is how he also tried to rule those who were left in Jerusalem, in the days of Tzidkiyahu and then in the days of Gedalya son of Achikam.

We may be able to understand Shaul's motives by looking at the triangle of borders in the northern Negev – Israel, Philistines, and Amalek. Shaul's greatest enemies were the Philistines. If Shaul succeeds in inciting Amalek against them by virtue of his control over them, he will reap an important military and political profit. Shmuel had demanded the destruction of Amalek based on a long-term political and military perspective, and above all based on a moral assessment of Amalek, whom Shaul now turns into his junior partner.[[16]](#footnote-16)

**VII. The Negotiations Between Shmuel and Shaul**

Then the word of the Lord reached Shmuel: "I regret that I crowned Shaul as king, for he has turned away from following Me and he has failed to fulfill My words." This enraged Shmuel, and he cried out to the Lord all night long. And Shmuel set out early in the morning toward Shaul, and Shmuel was told, "Shaul has gone to Carmel, where he set up a monument for himself; then he turned off and made his way down to Gilgal." (15:10-12)

God does not tell Shmuel in what way Shaul sinned. He speaks vaguely, and sends Shmuel to clarify Shaul’s sin with him. God may have wanted to give Shaul an opportunity to spell out his sin and try to repair it, but Shaul did not take advantage of this opportunity. Shmuel himself cries out all night to arouse the attribute of God's mercy on behalf of Shaul, but it is also clear to him that the attribute of mercy will not activate if Shaul does not confess his sin and ask for a way to repair it. In any case, Shmuel had to clarify how Shaul had sinned against God's word, and it seems that there was one thing Shmuel could have surmised from the very fact of Shaul's quick return from the war. The war against Amalek that Shmuel had commanded Shaul to fight was supposed to span the entire desert as far as Shur, east of Egypt, and perhaps also south and east, as far as Chavila. It should have taken many months, but Shaul apparently returned to the Carmel[[17]](#footnote-17) a few days or weeks later – indicating that he did not conclude the war against Amalek as instructed.

When Shmuel reached Shaul, Shaul said to him, "Blessed are you to the Lord! I have fulfilled the Lord's word." (15:13)

Shaul's words are grating to anyone who heard the word of God. God said to Shmuel: "and he has failed to fulfill My words," and Shaul says to him: "I have fulfilled the Lord's word." It seems that Shaul indeed believes that he fulfilled God's word; he is not just pretending to have done so. Shaul struck the city of Amalek and its army, which was the force that stood at the side of Agag, king of Amalek. He left the Amalek tribes as a flock without a shepherd, a political entity without independent influence. Shaul will hold onto his captive, Agag king of Amalek, and thus prevent Amalek from harassing Israel. He saw this as fulfillment of the vision of the war, even if he did not carry out all the details of Shmuel's plan to destroy Amalek’s women, children, and animals, and even if he did not pursue the leaderless Amalekites deep into the desert.

"Then what is this bleating of sheep in my ears," said Shmuel, "and the lowing of cattle that I hear?" (15:14)

Shmuel still knows nothing about the sin of allowing Agag to live in hopes of a political agreement that would leave Agag as Shaul’s subject, managing the Amalekite tribes from the dungeon in Shaul's court. Shmuel only hears the bleating of the sheep and the lowing of the cattle; he understands that taking booty brought the war in the desert to a standstill, and that Shaul, who is confident that he fulfilled the word of God, interpreted the word of God incorrectly. From a political point of view, this interpretation fails to consider the long term, leaving Amalek with the ability to recover from the war and to return to their crimes against Israel's settlements in the south; from a value-oriented point of view, Shaul’s approach would accept Amalek's values as legitimate, provided that they behave politically in a way that is appropriate for the kingdom of Israel that now controls them.

"They brought them from the Amalekites," said Shaul, "for the men spared the best of the sheep and cattle for sacrificing to the Lord, your God – but we utterly destroyed the rest." (15:15)

Shaul sought to atone for the sin of plunder and its implications of greediness by consecrating the animals as offerings to God. It is not clear what he thought to do with the camels and donkeys that presumably were also taken as booty. Perhaps he thought of dedicating them for "the upkeep of the house" (*bedek ha-bayit*), for the glory of God, or for the needs of the Temple to be built in the future. Here it is worth mentioning that Shaul did in fact dedicate a portion of his treasures to the building of God's house:

All that Shmuel the seer, Shaul son of Kish, Avner son of Ner, and Yoav son of Tzeruya had dedicated – all that that anyone else had dedicated – was under the charge of Shlomit and his brothers. (I *Divrei ha-Yamim* 26:28)

Shaul erred in his thinking about this atonement, as Shmuel will explain below.

"Stop," said Shmuel, "and let me tell you what the Lord told me last night." "Speak," he said to him. And Shmuel said, "Though you may seem small in your own eyes, you are the head of the tribes of Israel, and the Lord anointed you as king over Israel. The Lord sent you on a mission, bidding, 'Go and utterly destroy the offenders – Amalek – and fight them until you have destroyed them.' But why did you fail to heed the voice of the Lord, pouncing on the spoil and doing evil in the eyes of the Lord?" (15:16-19)

Shmuel still tries to see Shaul's sin as relatively small – surrendering to the people and thereby forfeiting the continuation of the war with Amalek in the distant desert. Shaul is guilty here, according to Shmuel, only because of his excessive humility, which resulted in a lack of firm leadership. Shmuel ends his words with the question, "But why did you fail to heed the voice of the Lord?" and waits for Shaul's response, which could still have been a confession of sin and a request for repair. Shaul does not adopt this approach, and thus he sins in two ways:

"But I did heed the voice of the Lord," Shaul said to Shmuel. "I set out on the mission the Lord assigned me, and I brought Agag, king of Amalek, and utterly destroyed Amalek. And the men took of the spoil – the choicest sheep and cattle from what was banned – to sacrifice to the Lord, your God, at Gilgal." (15:20-21)

Shaul insists on the rightness of his political interpretation of God's commandment to smite Amalek and on the correctness of allowing Agag, king of Amalek, to live – the same Agag who burned so many Israelite settlements and killed their inhabitants or sold them as slaves. Thus, Shaul unwittingly reveals the depth of his sin: his sin with respect to the spoil was not one of lack of leadership, but rather one of leadership that is not correct. By taking Agag, he announced his desire for a political agreement with Amalek, his legitimate opponent, and thus he permitted in practice the taking of the booty and the non-continuation of the war, as above.

His second sin was that even when he focuses on the sin of plunder about which Shmuel spoke, he blames the people and tries to clear himself. This response is reminiscent of Adam's response to his sin. God asked Adam: "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree from which I commanded you not to eat?" In this way, He gave him the opportunity to answer that he had sinned and to ask for repair. But Adam chose to blame his wife, and thus to clear himself. God turned to the woman as well with a question, and she too prefers to blame the serpent and thus to clear herself, instead of confessing her sin and asking for a repair. This is also how Shaul acted when he attributed the sin to the people.

How striking is the difference between Shaul and David, who responded to Natan the prophet's rebuke with the words, "I have sinned against the Lord" (II *Shmuel* 12:13).

**IX. ”Behold – Obedience is Better than Sacrifice”**

And Shmuel said, "Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as obedience to the Lord's voice? Behold – obedience is better than sacrifice, and compliance than the fat of rams. (15:22)

Shmuel's words here are especially precious and important. The Torah devotes considerable attention to the sacrificial service and to the precision it requires. It is supposed to be an uplifting service, one which draws the worshipper close to his Creator. There are no clear hints in the Torah for prioritizing other *mitzvot* over the sacrificial service, and it could be understood that the sacrifices do in fact have the power to atone for sins even without the fulfillment of additional conditions.

However, we all grew up with the morality of the prophets – which in no way denies the preciousness of the sacrificial service, but conditions it time and time again on the inviolable condition of observing the *mitzvot* (especially those governing the relationship between man and his fellow) and asking for repair and atonement for every sin committed, repair that can come together with the sacrifice or before it. Without this repair and without asking for forgiveness and atonement, the sacrifice not only fails to atone for the sin but may even fall into the category of "the sacrifice of the wicked is anathema" (*Mishlei* 21:27).

Shmuel is the first to formulate this idea explicitly. The other prophets followed in his footsteps.

From where in God's Torah can such a central principle be drawn? It seems to me that the main point can be learned from the story of Bilam, which is a unique section of the Torah (see *Bava Batra* 14b). Bilam thought that even though God has no desire to curse Israel, he could persuade Him to retract and agree to the curse. He hoped to convince God through the altars he built and the many sacrifices that he brought (21 bulls and 21 rams), but the Torah emphasizes that God did not retract from the prohibition He had imposed on cursing the people of Israel and that He was not persuaded by way of the sacrifices.

Perhaps this is the meaning of Bilam's designation as a "sorcerer" [*kosem*] (see *Yehoshua* 13:22). A sorcerer is convinced of his power to influence the spiritual worlds and drag God into agreeing with him, at least after the fact. A prophet, on the other hand, knows very well that all his power comes from God, and he is nothing but His messenger and the messenger of the people to Him.

The prophet Mikha also understood that the notion of justice and loving kindness as preconditions for offering sacrifices follows from the story of Bilam:

My people, remember now how Balak, king of Moav, schemed, and how Bilam son of Beor responded; remember from Shitim to Gilgal so that you may come to realize the righteous ways of the Lord. What then can I offer the Lord when I bow low to the God Most High? Should I come before Him with burnt offerings, with year-old calves? Would the Lord want a thousand rams, untold rivulets of oil? Should I offer my firstborn as payment for my crimes, the fruit of my womb for the sins of my being? Man, God has told you what is good and what the Lord seeks from you: only to do justice, love goodness, and walk modestly with your God. (*Mikha* 6:5-8)

It is possible that Shmuel as well refers to Bilam in his words here:

For rebellion [*meri*] is as bad as the sin [*chatat*] of divination [*kesem*], and presumption [*haftzar*] as corruption [*aven*] and idolatry [*u-terafim*].Because you rejected the word of the Lord, He has rejected you as king.

This verse is difficult, and many interpretations have been offered. Following the above approach, it can be understood as follows: For a sin [*chatat*] offering is liable to be the charm of a sorcerer [*kesem*], who rebels [*meri*] against the word of God and thinks that the offering will appease God and bring Him to agree with him. The petition [*haftzar*] of one who brings an offering is liable to be the work tools of the sorcerer [*aven u-terafim*]. These are appropriate for Balak and Bilam, but not for Shaul and Shmuel.

Shmuel concludes with the harsh message that God has rejected Shaul. He says this after twice trying to get Shaul to recant and repair his actions; Shaul failed to do so, but rather insisted on his innocence and his ability to appease God with sacrifices. (Let us recall that Shaul had already been warned about this issue, after he offered an unworthy sacrifice in order to appease God on the eve of the war at Mikhmash.)

**X. The Tearing of the Corner of the Robe**

And Shmuel turned to go, and he grabbed the corner of his robe, and it tore. "The Lord has torn the kingship of Israel away from you today," Shmuel said to him, "and has granted it to your peer, who is better than you." (15:27-28)

Who tore the corner of whose robe? The *midrashim* and commentaries offer three possible explanations.

The first possibility is that Shmuel turned himself to go, and Shaul grabbed his robe, asking him to stop and hear his supplication. But Shmuel did not turn his head, and continued walking. The result was that Shmuel's robe was torn by Shaul's hand. In this reading, the torn robe expresses more than anything the rift created between Shaul and Shmuel, who had crowned him as king, loved him, and cried out to God all night about the decree issued against him. This understanding fits in well with the plain meaning of the verses, which imply that the robe was not torn intentionally, but as the result of an accident.

The second possibility is that Shmuel himself held the corner of his own robe and tore it in his grief over Shaul, which is described below:

Shmuel never saw Shaul again to his dying day, yet Shmuel grieved for Shaul, for the Lord regretted appointing Shaul over Israel. (15:35)

In both of these possibilities, it was the corner of Shmuel's robe that was torn. It is possible that this is then alluded to on Shaul's final day, when he goes to the necromancer of Ein Dor:

"What form does he have?" he asked her, and she replied, "An old man is rising up, and he is cloaked in a robe." And Shaul knew that it was Shmuel, and he bowed down with his face to the ground in homage. (I *Shmuel* 28:14)

It is possible that the Bible abridged the story, and that Shaul actually asked the necromancer what was noticeable about the robe and the necromancer answered that the robe has a tear. *Then* Shaul understood that it was Shmuel rising up to meet him, and that the time had come to mourn him, Shaul.

The third possibility is that Shmuel held the corner of Shaul's robe and tore it to express the tearing of the kingdom from him. This interpretation is supported by what will happen later in the Ein Gedi cave, in David's action and Shaul's response to it:

And David got up and stealthily cut off the corner of Shaul's robe… I now know that you will surely become king and that the kingdom of Israel will be established through you. (I *Shmuel* 24:4-20)[[18]](#footnote-18)

**XI. “Israel’s Eternal Will Not Betray or Waver”**

What is more, Israel's Eternal will not betray or waver, for He is not a mere wavering human. (15:29)

The commentators[[19]](#footnote-19) explain that "*Netzach Yisrael,*" "Israel's Eternal," is God, who promises Israel's victory and His eternal covenant with them. But a question may be raised about this from verses in this very prophecy:

Then the word of the Lord reached Shmuel: "I regret that I crowned Shaul as king"… for the Lord regretted appointing Shaul over Israel.

We see from here that God did in fact regret his crowning Shaul as king. So too, Moshe asked of God: "Turn from Your fierce anger and relent from doing evil to Your people," and this attribute appears among God’s attributes of mercy in several places in the Prophets. Why then will God not relent about his decree against Shaul, if Shaul properly repents?

Perhaps "*Netzach Yisrael*" is not "Israel's Eternal," i.e., God, but rather the "Victory of Israel," i.e., the future kingdom of Israel.[[20]](#footnote-20) So it would appear from several *midrashim*:

As it is stated: "What is more, the Victory of Israel will not betray or waver." This is what David says to Israel… it will certainly be announced to you that you have been victorious over the nations of the world, as it is stated: "What is more, the Victory of Israel." (*Vayikra Rabba* *Emor* 30)

Immediately, the ministering angels rejoice and say: Israel is victorious, Israel is victorious, "What is more, the Victory of Israel will not betray or waver." (*Midrash Tehillim* 17)

That is, the eternal kingdom of Israel will not withdraw. It will be given to one who is better than you (David), who knows how to confess his sin and accept God's judgment, and is not like a man (Shaul) who wavers about his commitment to God and to the prophet.

**XII. The Ceremony**

"I have sinned," Shaul said to Shmuel, "for I violated the Lord's command and your word, because I feared the people and heeded their voice. But now, please forgive my sin and return with me, so I may worship before the Lord." "I will not return with you," Shmuel said to Shaul, "for you have rejected the word of the Lord – and the Lord has rejected you from being king over Israel."… "I have sinned," he said. "Now please honor me in front of the elders of my people and in front of Israel; return with me and I will worship the Lord your God." So Shmuel followed Shaul back, and Shaul worshipped the Lord. Shmuel then gave the order, "Bring Agag, king of Amalek, to me." Agag walked up to him with stately steps. "So," said Agag, "the bitterness of death is upon me." And Shmuel said, "As your sword has made women childless, so your mother shall be childless among women!" And Shmuel hacked Agag to pieces before the Lord at Gilgal. (15:24-33)

Shaul, disappointingly, does not relate to the harsh sentence he received but only to the victory ceremony that is supposed to take place now before the people. It should be emphasized once again: the victory over Amalek was great and politically important. It left the Amalekite tribes scattered in the desert, without an independent king and without a capital city. Shaul makes a superficial confession only so that Shmuel will accompany him (while he is dressed in his torn robe) to the ceremony of worshipping God, worship that probably had no burning inner truth behind it. Shmuel initially refuses to return with him, so the people won’t think he agrees in hindsight with Shaul's actions, but a short time later he retracts and does return with Shaul to the ceremony. However, in return for his participation, Shmuel demands a price – that Agag king of Amalek be brought before him. Shmuel, at his age and appearance, does not seem to be capable of the terrible act, but he hacks Agag to pieces before the entire nation – after he publicly clarifies his crime and the immorality of allowing him to live for political reasons. In doing so, Shmuel displays his serious disagreement with Shaul to all the people, and it is not at all clear what remains of the sweet taste of the victory ceremony.

David did not conduct a "respectable" ceremony of this type when he brought the ark of God to Jerusalem (II *Shmuel* 6), and this stood at the center of the dispute between him and his wife Michal, daughter of Shaul, at that time.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. a. The story of Amalek, as well as this *haftara*,are analyzed at length in the chapter entitled "*Amalek*" in my book, "*Ha-Mikra'ot ha-Mitchadshim*," Alon Shevut 5775, pp. 266-349. Our *haftara* is analyzed there on pp. 311-322.

   b. The *haftara* is long, as is our discussion in its regard. The reader is advised to consider reading only part of the discussion at this time, and leave the rest for years to come. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Mordechai and Esther preceded Ezra and Nechemya (whose books mark the chronological end of the Bible), but the misgivings about whether or not to commemorate the holiday of Purim for future generations and record its story in a book continued until the days of Ezra and Nechemya, not long after the story of Purim took place, and there was a feeling that the Bible had already been sealed. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The areas of Mount Sagi, Mount Arif, Mount Ramon, Givat Barnea, and more – today, the Western Negev, south of Nitzana and Azuz. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. a. According to Rashi in *Devarim* 1, the Israelites lived in Kadesh Barnea for nineteen years.

   b. Their advantage from those heights is similar to the Syrians' advantage over the settlements east and north of the Kinneret and in the Jordan hill country during the first nineteen years of the state. The Syrians made life in these settlements bitter on a daily basis. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. One might object to this understanding because the promise regarding obliteration of Amalek is mentioned in *Shemot* 17 immediately after the fighting in Refidim. In my humble opinion, this is precisely the Tannaitic dispute mentioned earlier between Rabbi Yehoshua and Rabbi Eliezer the Moda’i: according to Rabbi Eliezer the Moda’i, the last verses in this section are from the time of the book of *Devarim*. They were put in the ears of Yehoshua after it was decreed that Yehoshua would replace Moshe, and were recorded in the book of *Shemot* in order to connect them to the incident at Refidim as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The verse mentions “woman, child, and infant” before ox and sheep, but we will discuss them below. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. "*Masa Agag*," *Megadim* 7, 5749, pp. 49-63. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Many wars have been conducted in this manner in our generation as well, with no distinction between combatants and others. For instance – the bombing of the cities along the Suez Canal during the War of Attrition, which turned them into ghost towns, and Operations Accountability and Grapes of Wrath in Lebanon, which were intended to bring quiet to the north of Israel. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. I prefer the opinion of Prof. Immanuel Velikovsky (*"Tekufot be-Tohu*," see note 11) to that of my revered teacher, Rabbi Yoel Bin-Nun (in his aforementioned article), who proposed that it was somewhere north of Dimona. Rabbi Bin-Nun's opinion has the advantage that the Kenites lived in the vicinity, for we know that they lived in the area of Arad, but it is is not clear that they lived only there. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. This is the opinion of I. Velikovsky, *Tekufot be-Tohu*, Israel 5757, pp. 64 and 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See Velikovsky, ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. a. In accordance with the opinion of most commentators, and against Rashi, who argues that Chovav is Yitro himself.

    b. The Ibn Ezra argues in his commentary to the Torah (*Shemot* 19) that Yitro only came to the camp of Israel after the giving of the Torah, but the Torah advanced his arrival and juxtaposed it to the war against Amalek in order to remind the people of Israel to save Yitro's descendants when they go out to fight against Amalek – as Shaul in fact did. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See more on this matter in my [study of the *haftara* for *Parashat Beshalach*](https://etzion.org.il/en/tanakh/torah/sefer-shemot/parashat-beshalach/veohavav-ketzeit-hashemesh-begevurato)*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. From here on, the discussion will mostly follow the approach of my revered teacher Rabbi Yoel Bin-Nun in his excellent article, "*Masa Agag*" (see note 8), except for a few points on which I will disagree with his approach. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. This explanation of Rabbi Bin-Nun makes it easier to accept the opinion of the experts (I. Velikovski above and Y. M. Grintz, *Motza'ei ha-Dorot*, Kibbutz Ha-Me'uchad 5729, p. 39) that the land of Chavila is located at the end of the Euphrates River, near the Persian Gulf, and that the expression, "from Chavila up to Shur, which is east of Egypt," describes the entire desert from the Persian Gulf through the Arabian peninsula to Sinai and to Shur in Egypt. It is difficult to say Shaul reached these places; it is easier to assume that Amalek, with all of its tribes, resided there. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. I will not hide the fact that in my eyes, there is a considerable similarity between Shaul's sin with Amalek and the pact that the State of Israel made with the terrorist gangs of the PLO, which, in my opinion, are the disciples and most faithful successors of the Biblical Amalek. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Unlike Mount Carmel in the northern part of the country, Carmel is located in the southeastern portion of Mount Hebron, west of today’s settlement of Carmel. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. There is also room to compare this to the prophet Achiya the Shilonite, who tears Yarovam's garment (I *Melakhim* 11), but this is not the forum to explore the comparison. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Except for the Radak, who explains: "The eternity of Israel will not move from its place, and the Holy One, blessed be He, will not make it a lie, but rather He will establish it." [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. This is also how the expression was understood by the founders of Nili (***N****etzach* ***I****srael* ***L****o* ***Y****eshaker*), the underground movement founded by the Aharonson family during the First World War against the Turkish regime. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)