

# Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Zachor

- Gidon Rothstein

Haftarah No. 4: Parshat Zachor, I Samuel 15:2-34

This *haftarah* is read on the Sabbath before Purim; since the Megillah identifies Haman as a descendant of Agag (and Amalek), we take this opportunity to fulfill the commandment to always remember Amalek's evil in attacking us as we left Egypt.

## **Warring Against Amalek**

The *haftarah* offers an example of the attempt to eradicate Amalek, in line with the special Torah reading. Some struggle with the morality of the command to destroy Amalek, but Saul had little leeway for such considerations, since Samuel told him directly what to do. His words are notably explicit, requiring him to kill all of the Amalekites, old to young, man to woman, animals, and so on. Perhaps God spoke that way to forestall errors or miscommunications; if so, it did not work.

That Saul was punished for altering a Divine command should not give the impression that humans can never have input into the way the world runs. Moses himself sometimes acted differently than God said, only to have God later ratify his decision. Where the letter of the law is not explicit, there is room to follow the spirit in ways that had not been laid out by God. Saul was not given that option, so his failure to obey had the disastrous consequences (for him and his family) that we see this week.

## **Substituting Your Own Morality for God's**

Yoma 22b stresses that Saul's error lay in his assuming he had a better grasp of the morality of killing Amalek than did God, his thinking that he was more compassionate than God. The gemara links his actions to the verse "*al t'hi tzadik harbeh*, do not be excessively righteous." The Talmud then notes that Saul ends up also becoming the embodiment of the continuation of the verse, "*al tirsha harbeh*, do not be excessively evil" when he commands the slaughter of the city of Nov for (in his view) having abetted David's escape.

I think the Talmud is noting that what we see as compassion or moral indignance, when it flies in the face of God's Torah or direct command, is often more about our own emotions than the reality of the situation. Human beings certainly bear an obligation to apply their moral sense to decisions, especially when the only input is from other humans—there is no excuse, according to the Torah, for claiming "I was just following orders."

Saul failed to realize how much God's entering the picture alters the situation. What would be indefensibly cruel when initiated by a human being becomes perhaps puzzling but still obligatory when commanded by the Divine.

## **Not the Right Mistake to Make**

Saul wages the war effectively, winning a resounding victory, but fails to completely destroy Amalek, allowing the people to bring home the best of their sheep and cattle, and also taking captive their king, Agag. In reaction, God tells Samuel that Saul's failure has demonstrated his

lack of fitness to rule, using the verb “*nichamti*, I have regretted it” to describe the Divine “feelings” about Saul.

In Yoma 22b, R. Huna contrasts David to Saul, noting that David sinned several times without bearing the consequences just one sin earned Saul. The verb used for God’s reaction to Saul’s sin, “*nichamti*,” points the way towards an answer to R. Huna’s implicit question.

Since God does not experience the emotion of regret or need comfort (the two main meanings of the verb in question), the word is better translated as implying a rethinking of an earlier decision, which is what regret and comfort also involve.

When human beings’ misuse of their freewill “forces” God to rework His plan for history, the process involves a parallel enough re-orienting to justify that metaphor. Human freewill (and God’s “preference” for it) implies the power to instigate events that are not ideal, producing a world that diverges from the way God “wanted” it to work out.

If so, R. Huna might have just noticed that Saul’s one sin was more significant to God’s plan for the world than David’s several ones. All sin is problematic, but personal sin, with little effect on human history, elicits a different Divine response than ones that alter that history as a whole. In the litany of poor choices that comprise Saul’s tragedy, his failure here, just one, is significant enough to lose him the monarchy.

### **Saul’s Error, Amalek’s Error**

Saul’s failure thus taps into the issues that are central to the *mitzvah* of wiping out Amalek in general. Instead of striking a decisive blow for God’s way of running the world, Saul’s actions offered one more example of people neglecting/refusing to follow the Divine Wisdom when it contradicted their own.

Amalek took Saul’s error further, since they acted at a time when the civilized world had just been rocked by the Exodus, where God rescued a people from slavery despite the vigorous resistance of the most powerful nation on earth. Amalek’s attack implicitly argued that the Jewish victory over Egypt was qualitatively similar to any other war. By winning a skirmish, Amalek showed (wrongly) that war with the Jews was similar to war with other nations, win some, lose some.

That view of Amalek explains Maimonides’s interesting claim that we could spare Amalekites who agree to accept positions of servitude to the Jews (Rabad disagrees, but only to the extent of requiring full conversion). It is not Amalek as a race we seek to eradicate, but as a competitor to our worldview. We say that God runs the world, does what He wants, and selected the Jews for a particular role in world history. Amalek and his intellectual heirs argue otherwise; those who give up that worldview and accede to our special status are welcome to be part of our world.

Haman, too, was offended by Jewish exceptionalism; Purim was thus another time where we proved not only that we are different, but that the God we serve is the only One whose decisions about the world are always accurate. Saul, maliciously or not, failed to understand this. His story, Amalek’s story, and the Purim story, remind us to rejuvenate our commitment to subordinating

our own ideas to those stated in unambiguous fashion as the Will of the Creator.

Shabbat Shalom