

# The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

**The Book of Shmuel  
Yeshivat Har Etzion**

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**LECTURE 28: CHAPTER 15**

**SHAUL'S WAR AGAINST AMALEK (PART II)**

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## **IV. "He Shall Give You Mercy, and Have Compassion Upon You"**

In the previous lecture, I noted that Shaul sinned in the war against Amalek in that he allowed Agag to live in order to add to the glory of his own victory. His sin, together with the people's taking of plunder, reflects a more general phenomenon of exploiting the war for personal interests. We still must explain: Why is this acting out of self-interest such a serious offense, in the wake of which Shaul forfeited his kingdom?

The severity of Shaul's action may be understood in light of what the Torah says elsewhere in another case in which Israel is commanded to utterly destroy a particular group of people. There, too, the Torah forbids the taking of plunder:

You shall surely smite the inhabitants of that city with the edge of the sword, destroying it utterly, and all that is in it, and its cattle with the edge of the sword. And you shall gather all the spoil of it into the midst of the open place of the city, and shall burn with fire both the city and the entire plunder taken in it, for the Lord your God. And it shall be a heap forever; it shall not be built again. And nothing of that which was devoted to destruction shall remain in your hand, so that the Lord may turn from the fierceness of His anger, and give you mercy, and have compassion upon you, and multiply you as He has sworn to your fathers. (*Devarim* 13:16-18)

Why does the Torah so strongly emphasize the prohibition of taking the plunder of an *ir ha-nidachat*, a city in which the majority of the inhabitants were guilty of idol worship? The *Or Ha-Chayyim* explains (ibid. v. 18):

"And He shall give you mercy, and have compassion upon you." What this statement wishes to say here – since He had commanded regarding an *ir ha-nidachat* that the entire city must be killed with the edge of the sword, even the cattle, this act might give rise to a cruel nature in the heart of man - as we have told by the Yishmaelim of the sect of the Assassins at the king's command, that they have great desire when they kill a person - and mercy will be uprooted from among them and they will turn cruel. This itself would be deeply planted in the killers of the [people of the] *ir ha-nidachat*. Therefore he promised them that God would give them mercy. Even though nature will give rise in them to cruelty, the Source of Mercy will once again bestow upon them the power of mercy to cancel the power of cruelty that arose in them because of their action. And by saying, "And He shall have compassion upon you," He means to say that as long as a person is cruel by nature, God will relate to him in similar manner, for God only shows compassion to the compassionate (*Shabbat* 151b).

Killing the inhabitants of an entire city is an exceedingly difficult task, which, by nature, is liable to erode a person's moral inclination. The Torah promises, however, that if the killers act for the sake of heaven, God will once again plant within their hearts, by way of a miracle, the attribute of mercy ("And He shall give you mercy, and show you compassion"), and cancel the moral damage caused by their action.

As stated, however, this has a clear proviso: that the deed be performed exclusively for the sake of heaven, and not out of any self-interest whatsoever. Thus writes the *Netziv* in his commentary, *Ha-Amek Davar*:

"And He shall give you mercy." The act involving an *ir ha-nidachat* gives rise to three evils in Israel: 1) A killer turns cruel in his very nature. Now, for an individual who is put to death by a court, court agents are chosen [to execute the decree]. But in the case of an entire city, of necessity, many people must be trained to kill and become cruel. 2) There is no one in that city who does not have relatives in another city, and hatred increases in Israel. 3) A bare spot and a diminution is made in Israel. Scripture therefore promises that **by engaging in this without deriving any pleasure from the plunder, God will repent from His anger.** "And He will give you mercy" – the attribute of mercy.

In this way, we can understand why the prohibition of taking plunder is so heavily emphasized in those sections where Israel is commanded to destroy certain populations, as

well as in other accounts, e.g., the battle of Jericho and the battles recorded in the book of Esther.<sup>1[1]</sup>

It seems that the same is true in our chapter. It is precisely because Israel was commanded to blot out the memory of Amalek that it is especially important that this exceptional task be performed entirely for the sake of heaven, without any self-interest whatsoever. Taking plunder, leaving Agag alive, and setting up a monument, all of which reflect a desire to reap some benefit from the act, undermine the moral foundations of their action.

The significance of this severe act is evident when Shaul commands the killing of the priests of Nov:

And Nov, the city of the priests, he smote with the edge of the sword, both men and women, children and sucklings, and oxen, and asses, and sheep, with the edge of the sword. (I *Shmuel* 22:19)

It is difficult not to see the similarity between this account and the command given to Shaul in chap. 15:

(3) Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass.

*Chazal* noted the connection between the story regarding Amalek and the story of Nov:

When the Holy One, blessed be He, said to Shaul, "Now go and smite Amalek," he said: If regarding one life the Torah said, Bring an *egla arufa*, regarding all these lives - all the more so! If a person sinned, how did the cattle sin? If the great ones sins, how did the little people sin? A heavenly voice issued forth and said to him: "Be not righteous overmuch" (*Kohelet* 7:16). And when Shaul said to Do'eg: "Turn you, and fall upon the priests" (I

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[1] In the account of the war in the ninth chapter of Esther, it is stated three times that "they did not lay their hands on the plunder" (vs. 10, 15, 16). Based on this principle, we can also understand the story of Shimon and Levi. See at length my article, "*Emdat Ha-Torah Be-Farashat Shimon Ve-Levi Bi-Shekhem*," soon to be published in *Megadim*.

[Editor's note: For now, see Rav Bazak's lecture on *Parashat Vayishlach* (5765): "*Yachasah shel Ha-Torah Le-Farashat Shimon Ve-Levi Bi-Shekhem*,"

<http://www.etzion.org.il/vbm/archive/10-parsha/08vayishlach.rtf>.

*Shmuel* 22:18), a heavenly voice issued forth and said to him: "Be not wicked overmuch" (*ibid.* v. 17). (*Yoma* 22b)

To this we might add, in light of what was said above, that the killing of Amalek did, indeed, dull Shaul's moral sense. Owing to his exploitation of the killing for personal interest, Shaul forfeited the Torah's promise that his moral sense would not be impaired. Hence, it was no longer difficult for him to issue the command to kill the priests of Nov.

We are left with a question: What brought Shaul to commit this sin? Why was he unable to fulfill the Divine command in its entirety? This question is far more difficult, for it goes beyond what is stated explicitly in Scripture. Nevertheless, it might be conjectured that such behavior is characteristic of people who lack self-confidence. This attribute of Shaul characterizes him from his very first appearance on the scene. It is already evident in his hesitant interchange with his lad during the search for the asses (chap. 9). It continues with his hiding among the equipment during the lottery for the appointment of a king (chap. 10). And it reaches a climax when he succumbs to public pressure at the beginning of the campaign against the Pelishtim (chap. 13). People who suffer from a lack of self-confidence are especially liable to require tangible expressions of their victory over their enemies. It is certainly possible that this explanation stands behind Shaul's desire to perpetuate his victory over Amalek.

## **V. Shaul's Dodging of Responsibility**

In the continuation of the chapter, it becomes clear that the sin itself was not the only problem in Shaul's action. Shaul, who is apparently aware of his failure, disassociates from it as much as possible:

(13) And Shmuel came to Shaul; and Shaul said unto him, "Blessed be you of the Lord; I have performed the commandment of the Lord."

At this point, Shaul pretends innocence, as if he had fulfilled God's command in perfect fashion. Shmuel responds in kind: "And Shmuel said, "What<sup>2</sup>[2] means, then, this bleating of the sheep in my ears, and the lowing of the oxen which I hear?" (v. 14). Now Shaul adopts a different strategy:

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<sup>2</sup>[2] It is popularly understood that Scripture vocalizes this word with a *segol* – *u-meh* – in order to connect it to the sound of a sheep's bleating.

(15) And Shaul said, "They have brought them from the Amalekites; for the people spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen, to sacrifice unto the Lord thy God; and the rest we have utterly destroyed."

Two arguments emerge from Shaul's words. First, Shaul shifts the blame a second time onto the people, just as he had done in the wake of his first failure at Gilgal in chap. 13.3[3] Second, Shaul explains that the sheep and the cattle were not taken out of self-interest, but for a religious objective: "to sacrifice unto the Lord your God."

Was Shaul speaking the truth? Were the best of the sheep and the cattle spared in order to bring sacrifices to God? Scripture's account above gives no indication that this was the case: "But Shaul and the people spared Agag, and the best of the sheep, and of the oxen, even the young of the second birth, and the lambs, and all that was good, and would not utterly destroy them; but every thing that was of no account and feeble, that they destroyed utterly." Scripture does not say here that the people spared the cattle and the sheep for the sake of bringing sacrifices; on the contrary, we are left with the impression that they did this out of self-interest.

Shmuel cuts Shaul off: "Then Shmuel said to Shaul, "Stay, and I will tell you what the Lord has said to me this night" (v. 16). As *Metzudat David* writes: "Abandon your words and desist from them, and I will tell you." Shmuel does not relate at all to Shaul's excuses, but rather comes directly to the most important point – Shaul's inability to control the people:

(17) And Shmuel said, "Though you be little in your own sight, are you not head of the tribes of Israel? And the Lord anointed you king over Israel... (19) Wherefore then did you not hearken to the voice of the Lord, but did fly upon the spoil, and did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord?"

Shmuel relates to the phenomenon of Shaul's humility, which, as might be recalled, finds explicit expression in his first words to Shmuel at their first meeting: "Am not I a Binyamini, of the smallest of the tribes of Israel? And my family the least of all the families of the tribes of Binyamin? Why then do you speak so to me?" (9:21). Shmuel's central argument is that Shaul cannot cast the blame on the people, for he had been given the tools with which to rule, and it was his responsibility to lead them.

Special attention should be given to the expression used by Shmuel: "You did fly upon the spoil." It is difficult to ignore the similarity between these words and that which is stated in the previous chapter:

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3[3] See there, v. 11: "Because I saw that the people were scattering from me..."

**And the people flew upon the spoil**, and took sheep, and oxen, and calves, and slew them on the ground; and the people did eat them with the blood. Then they told Shaul, saying, "Behold, the people sin against the Lord, in that they eat with the blood." And he said, "You have dealt treacherously; roll a great stone unto me this day." And Shaul said, "Disperse yourselves among the people, and say unto them: Bring me hither every man his ox, and every man his sheep, and slay them here, and eat; and sin not against the Lord in eating with the blood." And all the people brought every man his ox with him that night, and slew them there. (14:32-34)

In the previous war as well, the people flew upon the plunder, but then Shaul was able to put an end to the phenomenon and repair it. By using these same words, Shmuel wishes to imply that had he really wanted to do so, Shaul could have stopped the people despite his usual modesty. It stands to reason, then, that Shaul's action did not stem from an inability to rule, but from the desire common to both him and the people to derive personal benefit from the war against Amalek, because of which "you did not hearken to the voice of the Lord, but did fly upon the spoil."

Shaul continues to insist that he had done everything in proper manner. He interrupts Shmuel<sup>4[4]</sup> and argues once again:

(20) And Shaul said unto Shmuel, "Yea, I have hearkened to the voice of the Lord, and have gone the way which the Lord sent me, and have brought Agag the king of Amalek, and have utterly destroyed the Amalekites. (21) But the people took of the spoil, sheep and oxen, the chief of the devoted things, to sacrifice unto the Lord your God in Gilgal.

Shaul refuses to admit his mistake, and repeats the excuses that he had already given to Shmuel. Shaul insists that the sheep and cattle were spared for the sake of heaven.

Shmuel therefore moves on to a different strategy; he is prepared, for argument's sake, to accept the claim that the people took the sheep in order to offer a sacrifice, but he argues that even if that were true, there would be no justification for this in the present circumstances.

And Shmuel said, "Has the Lord as great delight in burnt-offerings and sacrifices, as in hearkening to the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams. (23) For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as idolatry and terafim. Because you

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<sup>4[4]</sup> Radak notes that Shmuel did not finish what he had wanted to say, for he first said: "Stay, and I will tell you what the Lord has said to me this night," and at this point, he did not yet say what he had been told.

have rejected the word of the Lord, He has also rejected you from being king."<sup>5</sup>[5]

Shmuel rails against the offering of sacrifices that go against God's command. Here it is appropriate to repeat a point that was already emphasized regarding the offering of the burnt offering at the beginning of the campaign against the Pelishtim (see lecture no. 23). Shaul's sin is even more serious than the phenomenon about which many prophets warned, namely, offering sacrifices while guilty of all kinds of sins (between man and God and between man and his fellow)! The prophets admonished about the offering of such sacrifices, which in themselves are positive, because they lose their meaning when they are not accompanied by appropriate religious behavior. In contrast, the sacrifices to which Shaul refers are problematic in themselves, for they were to be brought from forbidden plunder taken from Amalek. This severs not only the specific action from general conduct (as in the evil practices to which the prophets related), but also between the specific action from the Divine command.

The harsh words that Shmuel directs against Shaul bring him eventually to confess his sin and recognize his error. Even so, his confession is stated in weak terms:

(24) And Shaul said unto Shmuel, "I have sinned; for I have transgressed the commandment of the Lord, and your words; because I feared the people, and hearkened to their voice. (25) Now therefore, I pray you, pardon my sin, and return with me, that I may worship the Lord."

There are two problems with Shaul's confession. First of all, at the same time that Shaul confesses his sin, he casts the blame on the people whom he fears. It is ironic that Shaul confesses that he sinned owing to his fear of the people – "I hearkened to their voice" – whereas Shmuel's main argument with him was: "Wherefore, then, **did you not hearken to the voice of the Lord.**" Shaul preferred to obey the people than to obey the voice of God. Second, Shaul implies that he is not really interested in repenting for his sin, but primarily in his personal status: "Now therefore, I pray you, pardon my sin, and return with me, that I may worship the Lord."

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<sup>5</sup>[5] Many explanations have been offered for these verses (see *Da'at Mikra*), and especially for the difficult words and expressions that they include. Of these, the following explanation seems to be closest to the simple meaning of the text. Shmuel first argues that it is more important to God that one obey what He says than that one offer sacrifices to Him. And he adds: "Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice," and similarly, "to hearken than the fat of rams." Shmuel further argues: "For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as idolatry and terafim." This, too, means that one who does not obey the word of God is regarded as if he were using idolatrous witchcraft.

After this weak confession, even Shmuel breaks, and he pronounces the decree of the heavenly court:

(26) And Shmuel said unto Shaul, "I will not return with you; for you have rejected the word of the Lord, and the Lord has rejected you from being king over Israel."

The story could have ended here, but in an unexpected manner, another event occurs that constitutes a crushing epilogue to the whole affair. I will deal with this epilogue and with the relationship between Shaul's forfeiture of the kingdom here and his forfeiture of the kingdom in previous chapters in the next lecture, our final lecture for the year.

(Translated by David Strauss)

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