

TWISTING THE WORD OF HASHEM UNTIL WE BELIEVE WE ARE RIGHTEOUS

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Parshas Tetzaveh

Twisting The Word of Hashem Until We Believe We Are Righteous

On Parshas Zachor, the Haftorah that we read is from Shmuel I Chapter 15. I find this story of Shmuel and Shaul to be one of the most compelling Haftorahs of the year. Shmuel told Shaul, in no uncertain terms, to wipe out Amalek - man, woman, children, and animals, eradicating any memory of Amalek, in accordance with the Biblical command, as we read in the Maftir of Parshas Zachor.

Shaul returned to Shmuel and said: "Blessed are you to Hashem. I fulfilled the word of Hashem." [Pasuk 13] This is very perplexing statement given the fact that Shaul did not entirely fulfill Shmuel's explicit instructions. Shmuel immediately inquired about the sound of the sheep (indicating that Shaul did not fulfill the instructions to kill all the animals).

Shmuel further asks: "Why did you not obey the voice of Hashem? You rushed to the loot and did what was evil in the eyes of Hasehm." [Pasuk 19] Shaul then strangely responds: "But I heeded the voice of Hashem and I walked the path on which Hashem sent me..." [Pasuk 20] How do we understand this communication? Someone does not understand something over here. Shaul is not at all remorseful. He repetitively maintains his righteousness.

There are two approaches that we may take to answer this question. I saw one approach in the name of Rav Chaim Soloveitchik. This is a classic halachic response to the question. When Shmuel gave Shaul the orders regarding Amalek he said: "Destroy everything he has" (v'hacharamtem es kol asher lo) [Pasuk 3]. V'hacharamtem is a technical term meaning everything belonging to Amalek should be made into 'cherem' [forbidden property].

Rav Chaim explains that the only way property can be made 'cherem' is to first own it. One must first acquire the property before one can proclaim it 'cherem'. Shaul did not want to destroy all the property so he tried to circumvent the order. His method of circumvention was to be makdish [dedicate] the cattle to the Almighty. Once the cattle was hekdesh [sanctified to G-d], it no longer belonged to the people and therefore they could not make it 'cherem'.

This, Rav Chaim Soloveitchik explains, is the explanation of the dialog between Shmuel and Shaul. Shmuel said everything should be made into 'cherem'. Shaul explained that they saw the animals and thought it was a good idea to offer them as sacrifices, so they immediately sanctified them. Once they were the property of Heaven, they could no longer be destroyed. This is the "Brisker approach" to this issue.

The Baalei Mussar take another approach. The Navi says about Shaul "And he made war in the valley (va'yarev banachal) [Pasuk 5]. The Talmud says that Shaul argued based on the law of Eglah Arufah [the calf decapitated in a valley in the aftermath of an unsolved murder] -- that it was not in the spirit of Torah to wipe out man, woman, and child [Yoma 22b]. If the Torah is so concerned about a single person who is killed (as we see from the ritual of Eglah Arufah) -- that an offering must be brought, certainly it would not be the Will of G-d for me to wipe out Amalek including all their animals. It must be that the Will of G-d was to use the animals of Amalek to bring sacrifices.

This is a classic example of how we twist and turn the Word of Hashem into what suits us. The Dvar Hashem becomes what we think the Dvar Hashem is or what we expect the Dvar Hashem should be. That is why we can find such a disparate dialog between Shmuel and Shaul. This is how Shaul can, in the face of open evidence to the contrary, brazenly claim: "I have fulfilled the Word of G-d." According to the way he twisted things, this is precisely what he was doing.

We do it all the time. "This is what the Almighty really wants." We have the uncanny ability when debating what Torah law demands of us to come to the conclusion that the law is in fact what we want it to be. We twist and turn the Torah to our satisfaction until everything we do is not sin-free, but is actually a righteous fulfillment of the Word of Hashem.

Overcoming One's Good Inclination

I have always felt this Haftorah is a study of two personalities - that of Shmuel and that of Shaul. If we read the chapters leading up to this incident, we get a sense of the personality of Shaul. Shaul was the first king of Israel and he was a Tzadik the likes of which we will never become and the likes of which we will never see. But in spite of that, he took actions, which for him were called mistakes.

When we are first introduced to Shaul, he is described as a "nechba el hakelim" [hidden among the baggage] [Shmuel I 10:22]. His most prominent characteristic is his modesty (anivus).

Samuel praised Shaul in front of the people: "Have you seen the one whom Hashem has chosen, that there is none like him among all the people?" The people shouted: "May the King Live!" But there were some base men who said "How can this person save us!" Scripture relates that they ridiculed him and did not bring him a tribute. But, nevertheless, Shaul remained mute (va'yehi k'macharish) [Shmuel I 10:27].

Under normal circumstances this would be admirable. Normally, it is praiseworthy to be amongst those who hear themselves being shamed but do not respond [Yoma 23a]. However, that is not the

case for the King of Israel. Regarding the King of Israel, the law is that someone who acts rebellious towards, disobeys, or insults the king must be executed. Shaul was, first and foremost, a humble person and as such was not particular about his honor. However, he should have been particular about that honor.

Next, the people are gathered together about to go into battle. Shmuel HaNavi tells Shaul, "Wait for me. I will return in seven days and then together we will offer sacrifices." In an incident similar to Moshe not returning when the people were expecting him, which led to the making of the Golden Calf, Shmuel did not return exactly when he was expected. The people became impatient and urged Shaul to proceed without Shmuel. Shaul gives in to the pressure of the people. He offers the sacrifices without the presence of the prophet. Shmuel chastised him: "What have you done?" Shaul blames his action on the impatience of the people. Again it was his attribute of being overly modest that did not allow him to exert authority and dictate to the people the proper course of action.

Finally, our Haftorah contains a third example of this concept. When Shaul finally realized his sin, Shaul explains that the reason he spared the Amalek animals is because that is what the people wanted. Shmuel responds harshly to Shaul, "Even if you are small in your own eyes, you are the leader of the Tribes of Israel." This is not the time or place for modesty. True, that is your natural inclination and normally it is a good inclination, but your particular mission in life at this time is to rise above that. This mission was something Shaul failed to accomplish and as a result he was stripped of the monarchy.

On the other hand, at the end of the chapter, Shmuel asks that the King of Amalek be brought before him. Shaul had spared Agag King of Amalek and now he is brought in front of Shmuel. Agag, when brought before Shmuel proclaimed: "Truly the bitterness of death has passed" (Achen sar mar hamaves) [Pasuk 32].

Most commentaries interpret Agag's ambiguous remark to be a resignation to the fact that his time was now up. He no longer has to fear the bitterness of death because death was now upon him. However, the Ralbag interprets differently. The Ralbag says that Agag was saying the reverse. When he saw the Shmuel HaNavi, he proclaimed: "Now, I am spared. This is my lucky day. I am not going to be killed!"

The Ralbag explains that in encountering Shmuel's countenance, Agag was impressed with his great compassion and mercy. He said to himself "This man is the epitome of gentleness and kindness. Such a person will never kill me."

If one is old enough to remember how Rav Moshe Feinstein looked... Rav Moshe was a short man, less than five feet tall. He was the epitome of gentleness. Can one imagine that Rav Moshe Feinstein could ever pick up a sword and kill somebody? Think of Rav Pam - a short gentle man who exuded mercy. Picture this big brute Agag brought before Rav Pam and he Rav Pam supposed to be the executioner. Upon seeing his supposed executioner, the big brute might proclaim: "This is my lucky

day." This is how Shmuel looked to Agag.

But Shmuel looked straight at Agag and proclaimed: "Just as your sword made women childless, so shall your mother be childless among the women." "And Samuel split (vayeshasef) Agag before Hashem in Gilgal" [Pasuk 33]. The verb vayeshasef means he cut up Agag in four pieces. This gentle and frail prophet first cut Agag in half with a sword and then cut him again down the middle into four pieces.

What happened to Shmuel's gentleness? What happened to his compassion? This was the occasion in his life when his mission called for him to overcome his natural inclination. He had to act in a way that was different than he would normally be inclined to act. He had to go beyond who he was to satisfy G-d's Will.

Our purpose in this world is to do what we need to do, despite who we are. Shmuel met his challenge to do that. Shaul did not.

This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tape series on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic topics covered in this series for Parshas Tezaveh are provided below:

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