

Haftarot Unrolled: Zachor

The Reboot

On the Shabbat immediately before Purim, we read a special Maftir, which talks about the commandment to remember to wipe out Amalek. We then read a special Haftarah, the story of how King Shaul was charged with fulfilling this commandment. While we are told how he destroyed the strongholds of Amalek in Israel, the Haftarah's mainly talks about how he lost his chance to establish a dynasty, because he allowed the people to take spoils from the war with Amalek.

We could fulfill the commandment of remembering to wipe out Amalek any Shabbat of the year, but it was established to do so on the week before Purim, due to the many connections it has to the Megilla.

Let's start with the most familiar one:

אַחַר הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה גָּדַל הַמֶּלֶךְ אַחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ אֶת הָמָן בֶּן הַמְּדָתָא הָאֲגָגִי
After these events, the king Achashverosh promoted Haman ben Hemdata the **Agagi**.
(Esther 3:1)

The name of the king of Amalek that Shaul conquered in the Haftarah was Agag:

וַיִּתְפֹּשׂ אֶת אֲגָג מֶלֶךְ עַמְלֵק חִי
He captured **Agag**, King of Amalek, alive (Shmuel I 15:8)

By calling Haman, "the Agagi", the Megilla implies that he is a descendant of Amalek. He may have been literally from that nation, or only a follower of the Amaleki way of life. Either way, in Jewish lore, Haman is Amalek.

But Haman is not the only one of the protagonists of the Megilla to be found in the Haftarah:

הָאִישׁ יְהוּדִי הָיָה בְּשׁוּשַׁן הַבִּירָה וּשְׁמוֹ מֹרְדֵכַי בֶּן יָאִיר בֶּן קִישׁ אִישׁ יְמִינִי:
A Jewish man lived in Shushan City, whose name was Mordechai ben Yair ben
Shimi ben **Kish**, a **Man of Binyamin**. (Esther 2:5)

The hero of our Haftarah, King Shaul, is introduced as:

וַיְהִי אִישׁ מִבְּנֵימִין וּשְׁמוֹ קִישׁ בֶּן אַבְיָאל בֶּן צְרוּר בֶּן בְּכוֹרָת בֶּן אֶפְיַח בֶּן אִישׁ יְמִינִי גִבּוֹר חַיִּל:
לוֹ הָיָה בֶן וּשְׁמוֹ שָׁאוּל...
There was a man from Binyamin, whose name was **Kish** ben Aviel ben Tzror ben Bchorat ben Afiach, son of a **Man of Binyamin**, a great warrior. He had a son named Shaul...
(Shmuel I 9)

The Megilla implies that Mordechai is related to Shaul. He is certainly from the same tribe, and even from the same family, and the text goes out of its way to make that point.

Now for Esther, the heroine of the Megilla. She enters the story because the king's advisors suggest that because Vashti refused to come when called, she should be replaced:

ומלכותה יתן המלך לרעותה הטובה ממנה

King will **give** her kingdom to **her fellow woman who is better than her**. (Esther 1:19)

In the Haftarah, the prophet Shmuel tells King Shaul that he will lose his kingdom, and be replaced:

קרע ה' את ממלכות ישראל מעליך היום ונתנה לרעה הטוב ממך:

"Hashem tore the kingdom of Israel from you today,

and has **given** it to **your fellow man who is better than you**. (Shmuel I 15:28)

Thus, the Megilla is a "reboot" of the story of the Haftarah, with Haman cast as Agag, and the role of Shaul divided between Mordechai and Esther.

In the Haftarah, Shaul loses his power due to his misreading of the nature of the conflict with Amalek, and due to his failure to exert his authority as king. In the Megilla, Mordechai and Esther are faced with similar challenges, and overcome them, ending up with greater positions of power.

What were Shaul's mistakes, and how do Mordechai and Esther make up for them in the "reboot"?

First, Shaul misunderstood the nature of the battle. He treated it as any other war, against any other enemy. However, the war with Amalek is not our war, it is G-d's war. Amalek represent an ideology and a culture that is incompatible with what G-d is trying to achieve with mankind. The Torah wants us to understand this, remember it, and act on it. That is why there is a specific commandment to hear the following verses read from the Torah, at least once a year, as the Maftir of Zachor:

זכור את אשר עשה לך עמלק בדרך בצאתכם ממצרים:

אשר קרה בדרך ויזנב בך כל הנחשלים אחריך ואתה עיף ויגע ולא ירא אלהים ויהיה בהגית ה' אליה לך מכל איביה מסביב בארץ אשר ה' אליה נתן לך נחלה לרשתה תמחה את זכר עמלק מתחת השמים לא תשכח:

17) Remember what Amalek did to you on the road, when you left Egypt.

18) That he **happened** upon you on the road; he attacked those lagging at your rear, when you were tired and exhausted; and did not fear G-d.

19) And it will be, when Hashem gives you relief from all your enemies all around, in the land that Hashem your G-d is giving you as an inheritance, wipe out the memory of Amalek, from under the heavens; do not forget! (Devarim 25)

When the Torah describes what Amalek did, it says two things:

- 1) He happened upon you on the road and
- 2) He attacked the weak at the edge of the camp.

The first refers to Amalek's ideology, the second, to the actions that result from that ideology. Amalek believes that our world is random; things happen, there is no rhyme nor reason, all is meaningless coincidence. Life is unpredictable and cruel; the distinction between good and evil is artificial and unnecessary. The only thing that has meaning is power; raiding the weak and taking what you can is as valid way as any to succeed in life.

Hitler, who in Jewish lore is also identified with Amalek, said it very clearly:

Providence has ordained that I should be the greatest liberator of humanity. I am freeing man from the restraints of an intelligence that has taken charge, from the dirty and degrading self-mortifications of a false vision known as conscience and morality, and from the demands of a freedom and personal independence which only a very few can bear. ... Conscience is a Jewish invention; it is a blemish, like circumcision (Rauschnig, Hitler Speaks, p. 222).

This is why G-d is in a state of war with Amalek.

When King Shaul allowed his people to take from the spoils of Amalek, he reduced the battle to a normal war against a normal enemy, in which, as per the laws and customs of the time, the spoils belonged to the conqueror. But this war was G-d's war, not Shaul's. The spoils were not theirs to take.

Unlike Shaul, Mordechai and Esther understood exactly who their enemy was. When Mordechai tells Esther about Haman's plan to kill all the Jews, he tells her:

וַיִּגַּד לוֹ מֵרַדְכַּי אֵת כָּל אֲשֶׁר קָרְהוּ וְאֵת פְּרִשְׁת הַכֶּסֶף אֲשֶׁר אָמַר הַמֶּלֶךְ שְׂקוּל עַל גִּנְי הַמֶּלֶךְ בְּיְהוּדִים לְאַבְדָם:

Mordechai told [Esther's messenger] about **all that had happened to him**, and about the matter of the money, that Haman had said to weigh out to the king's treasury to destroy the Jews. (Esther 4:7)

The Midrash explicitly connects this term to the one in Parshat Zachor:

אמר להתך לך אמור לה בן בנו של קרהו בא עליכם הה"ד (דברים כ"ה) אשר קרך בדרך
He told [Esther's messenger], "Go tell her, the grandson of "**happening**" has come at us, as it says, "that **happened** upon you on the road". (Midrash Esther Rabbah 8)

Mordechai realized that he was not dealing with just an ordinary enemy, he was dealing with Amalek. Haman was "the grandson" of the philosophy that power is the only value, that the weak exist to be exploited, and that a conscience is a blemish upon humanity. To save the Jewish People from Amalek, all resources must be mustered, and G-d's war must be fought.

Esther needed more convincing. Like her ancestor Shaul, her innate humility had the potential to paralyze her. She did not believe that she had the power to make a difference, and she was highly concerned about making a bad impression on the people around her:

(יא) כָּל עַבְדֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ וְעַם מְדִינֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ יוֹדְעִים אֲשֶׁר כָּל אִישׁ וְאִשָּׁה אֲשֶׁר יָבֹא אֶל הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶל הַחֲצַר הַפְּנִימִית אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִקְרָא אֶתְּת דָּתוֹ לְהִמִּית לְבַד מֵאֲשֶׁר יוֹשִׁיט לוֹ הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת שַׁרְבִיט הַזֶּהָב וְחָנָה וְאֲנִי לֹא נִקְרָאתִי לְבֹא אֶל הַמֶּלֶךְ זֶה שְׁלוֹשִׁים יוֹם:

All the king's servants and all the members of all the king's states know that any man or woman that comes to the king to the inner courtyard without having been summoned, the law is that they be put to death; unless the king stretches his scepter toward him. And I have not been called to come to the king for the past thirty days. (Esther 4:11)

She did not feel that she had any royal authority to exercise, no power at all that could be mustered. It was perhaps similar thinking on the part of Shaul that caused him to look the other way when the people took from the spoils of Amalek. Indeed, this is what the prophet Shmuel accuses him of:

וַיֹּאמֶר שְׂמוּאֵל הֲלוֹא אִם קָטָן אַתָּה בְּעֵינֶיךָ רֹאשׁ שְׁבֵטֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אַתָּה

"Even if you are small in your own eyes, you are the head of the tribes of Israel!"

(Shmuel I 15: 17)

Shaul let his humility interfere with his ability to act, and Esther was about to make the same mistake. At this point Mordechai takes on the additional role of the prophet Shmuel:

כִּי אִם הַחֲרֹשׁ תִּחְרְיִשִׁי בְּעַת הַזֹּאת רוּחַ וְהַצֵּלָה יֵעָמוּד לְיְהוּדִים מִמְּקוֹם אֲחֵר וְאַתָּה וּבֵית אָבִיךָ תֵּאבְדוּ וְגַם יִדְעַ אִם לָעַת כְּזֹאת הַגְּעַתָּ לְמַלְכוּת:

If you will be silent right now, relief and salvation will come to the Jewish People from another place. But you and your father's house will be lost. And who knows, if it were not for this moment that you became queen?" (Esther 4:14)

Mordechai understands that Esther's nature might cause her to continue to be silent. She does not believe in her power, does not believe in herself as a queen. So Mordechai warns her of the consequences; not to the Jewish People, who will be saved some other way anyway, but to Esther herself and to "her father's house".

But if the Jewish People would be saved, why would Mordechai suggest that Esther and her father's house would be lost? Would she not be included in the salvation? Why would an orphan be concerned about what will happen to "her father's house"?

"Her father's house" refers to Mordechai and Esther's ultimate ancestor, Kish Ish Yemini. The loss refers to the loss of the royal dynasty, which was Shaul's punishment for his inaction and lack of leadership. Mordechai tells Esther that she is getting a second chance. If she acts now, she can defeat Amalek. If she fails to act, the opportunity to make up for Shaul's failure will also be lost.

Esther takes up the challenge. She has Mordechai gather the people she leads, and then:

וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי וַתִּלְבַּשׁ אֶסְתֵּר מַלְכוּת

On the third day, Esther dressed herself in royalty (Esther 5:1)

Royalty, the use of power, was not an innate part of her character. But when it was necessary, she put it on as if a costume, and wielded this power to effect the salvation of her people. The kingdom of Persia was given to Esther, "the fellow one who is better than her". In this reboot of the story, Esther does better than Shaul, and redeems the royal house of Esther and Mordechai's ancestor, Shaul ben Kish Ish Yemini.

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In memory of my father, Peter Rozenberg, ז"ל

לעילוי נשמת אבי מורי פנחס בן נתן נטע ז"ל