



PROBING

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THE PROPHETS

“Baruch ata LaShem – hakimoti et d’var Hashem.” After returning from his battle against the Amalekite people, King Shaul greets the navi Shmuel with these words, expressing to the prophet that he had fulfilled Hashem’s command and had destroyed Amalek, as he had been told. To which the prophet responds: “Lama LO shama’ta b’kol Hashem?” – “Why did you NOT listen to G-d’s command?” And it is this simple difference of opinion which will help us comprehend one of the most difficult narratives in all of Tanach.

Year after year, each time we read this special haftarah for Shabbat Zachor, a selection found in the 14th perek of Sefer Shmuel A, we attempt to understand two morally troubling messages from Hashem that were relayed to King Shaul by Shmuel HaNavi. These directives are especially difficult for a modern society to accept at face value. After all, how can we understand the command to utterly destroy an entire nation-men, women and children- as well as all cattle and livestock? Ironic (or hypocritical) as we might think

it is to see a generation that passively watched while one third of our nation was murdered, now shriek in horror at the very idea of committing genocide, the question is a valid one-and the reaction is as well. It is valid question, because it is a fair one, regardless of who asks it, and it is a valid reaction because a new generation, one brought up in the shadow of the Holocaust, one that (hopefully) learned of its horror, should certainly react in shock and disbelief.

In the past, I have discussed with you the evil of Amalek, an evil that continued throughout generations, an evil that saw them attack the weak, plunder the defenseless and enslave kidnapped women and children. Yes, we may still be puzzled at the harshness of the reaction of a merciful G-d, but as believers, ma’aminim b’nei ma’aminim, we accept the decision of the All-Knowing One as One Who knows more than we do. (I remember my earliest questioning of G-d, wondering why, on Yom Kippur, G-d wanted me to publicly walk in the street wearing my best suit, a starched shirt, a new tie and SNEAKERS?? – but, if Hashem wanted it then...). But the next question that should disturb us is somewhat different.

The second troubling message delivered to Shaul was that, due to his failure to TOTALLY destroy Amalek he had forfeited

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the right to lead the nation of Israel and, therefore, would be replaced by another. Additionally, we should remember that by losing the throne-the dynasty- he would also lose his sons – three of his four sons died with him in his final war!! But WHY?? Consider: the king gathered an army, led them into war and risked his life to fulfill Hashem's mitzvah! He killed all of the population and almost all of the animals, "...hakimoti et d'var Hashem" – no wonder he proudly told Shmuel "I have fulfilled G-d's command"!!! Why should he have deserved to lose the throne and the future dynasty he should have built??

Morality is established by Hashem's standards – not by man's preferences

I would submit that Shaul's failure to destroy everything was a sin worse than having ignored G-d's command completely. After all, what possible moral justification could one have for wiping out a people? None....except the same justification for going outside on Yom Kippur in formal wear and canvas sneakers.

It was G-d's command!!

Nothing else could justify such an extreme act. And if that was NOT Shaul's only reason, then he is regarded simply as a murderer. Had Shaul ignored G-d's demand he would have been punished as a sinner. But once he wiped out all of the children, all of the women and all of the men (save the king Agag) but kept the best quality livestock, it was clear that his actions were not based upon a Divine command alone and, if so, there was no justification to act as he did. In the end, morality is established by Hashem's standards – not by man's preferences.

Shaul believed that he had fulfilled G-d's command; Shmuel rightfully told him that he did not. But the prophet did not base his response upon the fact that Shaul spared the Amalekite king and some high-quality animals. Remarkably, the navi was teaching him that, by sparing lives, he became a murderer!!

How brilliantly do Chazal comment on Shaul's destruction of Nov, the city of Kohanim, that one who shows mercy the truly guilty will, eventually, show cruelty to the truly innocent! ■

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