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Torat Imecha
NACH YOMI

ד"ר

Shaul, David and Sovereignty

The Talmud poses a conundrum suggested by Rav Huna: If Shaul sinned once and David sinned twice, why was Shaul punished with the loss of his kingdom while David's kingdom remained firmly established? The discussion in the Talmud continues with attempts to clarify which specific sins Rav Huna alluded to, concluding that the sin for which Shaul was punished was the failure to completely eradicate Amalek, and David's two offenses were his treatment of Uriah and the census he conducted.¹

Commentators on the Talmud are quick to pounce. Doesn't this seem like favoritism? What distinction between Shaul and David would merit such a profound difference in the way each was treated? Opinions vary. Maharsha cites an opinion that Shaul's offense was directly linked to his kingship; he failed in a divinely ordained mission assigned to him as king of Israel, while this was not true of David's sins. He offers his own opinion

that the critical difference between the two was that Shaul offered excuses and tried to rationalize his failures, while David admitted his shortcomings, accepted the punishment decreed upon him and did complete Teshuvah, serving as an eternal model for the Jewish people.²

Rav Chaim Shmulevitz teaches that this difference reveals a character flaw deeply embedded in Shaul's personality, making him unworthy of establishing a monarchic dynasty. When Shaul sinned, both in the case of not waiting for Shmuel before offering his sacrifice in Gilgal and by not killing Agag and the choice animals of Amalek, the excuse he proffered was that he was pressured by the people. Shmuel responded scathingly, "Even if you are small in your own eyes, you are head of the tribes of Israel, and Hashem has anointed you as king over Israel." There is such a thing as misplaced humility. A king has to act with dignity, integrity and conviction. Shaul's failure to do so was emblematic of his inability to serve as an arm of divine authority over the nation, and thus rendered him incapable of founding the monarchy that would lead the Jewish people eternally. David's ability to admit his own shortcomings in the face of divine authority proved the opposite: He acknowledged his own status, as a king and as a human being, and humbled himself before Hashem while maintaining his integrity as a leader.³ Rav Nevenzal, shlit"a, explains that Shaul's desire to please all parties led him

1. Yoma 22b. The Talmud notes that these were not the exclusive misdeeds committed by the two kings, but rules out other options as having been the direct cause of the loss of the kingship, in Shaul's case, or its potential loss, in the instance of David.

2. Maharsha, Hiddushei Aggadot Yoma 22b

3. Sichot Mussar Ma'amar 53

to compromise rather than adopt a strong stance, and Hashem wants a king of Israel who will act steadfastly in keeping with his principles.⁴

The Netziv notes a further distinction between Shaul and David that resonates profoundly. When enumerating the military successes of Shaul, the Navi concludes, “וּבְכָל אֲשֶׁר יִפְנֶה יִרְשִׁיעַ”. Literally, the word “ירשיע” means to cause harm; thus, among all the nations to which Shaul turned his attention, he caused damage. When describing the victories of David, the Navi exclaims, “וַיְהִי דָוִד לְכָל דָּרָכָו מַשְׁכִּיל” - and David was successful in all his ways.” The root of the term used here to express success is שכל - intellect. David applied his intelligence to his successes. The Netziv explains that Shaul’s victories remained temporary because he didn’t follow through. He weakened his enemies, but then left them to their own devices so that they were able to retrench and recover. In contrast, David subdued his enemies and then placed governors over them, firmly applying his sovereignty over the newly conquered enemy and rendering them incapable of reasserting themselves through renewed attack. In this manner he prepared the way for the enduring peace of Shlomo’s kingdom, allowing for the building of the Beit HaMikdash.⁵

May our contemporary leaders be inspired to follow in the footsteps of David HaMelech. ■

4. Sichot L’Sefer Bereshit Parashat VaYeshev

5. Ha’amek Davar Bemidbar 24:8

Mrs. Leah Feinberg is a master educator who taught at the SKA High School for Girls in Hewlett for twenty-one years, also serving as Tanach Department chairperson and New Teacher Mentor. Leah is currently on the faculty of the OU Israel Center and has taught in all three cycles of the OU Women’s Initiative Nach Yomi program

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