

Haftarah Helper 5781: Zachor

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On four Shabbatot beginning in Adar, additional Torah readings (the “Four Parashiyot”) are read after the weekly Parashah, reflecting seasonal themes relating to Purim and Passover. Their associated Haftarot also relate to these themes. The second of the Four Parashiyot, “Zachor” (Deut. 25:17-19), records the commandment to remember Amalek’s cowardly attack against the Israelites as they left Egypt (Ex. 17:8-13), and, in response, to annihilate Amalek. The Haftarah records Saul’s attempt to fulfill this command.

I Samuel 15:1¹-34

After centuries of ad-hoc military leadership against their enemies, the Israelite tribes ask Samuel the Prophet to appoint a king to lead them in battle. Samuel and God grant this request, anointing the warrior, Saul, as king. Saul assembles an army and defeats Israel’s principal enemies.² Samuel commands Saul to do so by killing every Amalekite person and animal. Saul and the people nonetheless spare Amalek’s king, Agag, and many of their animals to offer to God. God and Samuel inform Saul that his failure to carry out their command with precision renders him unfit to be Israel’s king and that he will be replaced; Saul’s reactions to this rejection further confirm his unworthiness. Samuel executes King Agag; Samuel and Saul never speak again.³

Haftarah Breakdown

Verses 1-3: God commands Saul to eradicate Amalek.

I Samuel 15:3	שמואל א ט"ו:ג
Now[, Saul] go and smite Amalek. [You and others must] utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not -slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.	עֲתָה לֵךְ וְהִכִּיתָהּ אֶת־עַמְּלֵק וְהִחַרְמְתָם אֶת־כָּל אֲשֶׁר־לוֹ וְלֹא תִחַמְל עֲלֵיו וְהִמַּתָּהּ מֵאִישׁ עַד־אִשָּׁה מִעֵלִיל וְעַד־יֹנֵק מִשׁוֹר וְעַד־שֶׁה מִגַּמְל וְעַד־חֲמֹר:

Verses 4-6: Saul prepares to destroy Amalek, but spares the neighboring Kenites.

I Samuel 15:6	שמואל א ט"ו:ו
Saul said to the Kenites, “Go, depart, descend from among the Amalekites, lest I destroy you with them, for you acted with kindness to all the children of Israel when they came up out of Egypt. So the Kenites departed from among Amalek.	וַיֹּאמֶר שָׁאוּל אֶל־הַכִּנִּיזִי לְכוּ סְרוּ רְדוּ מִתּוֹךְ עַמְּלֵק יִפְּוּ אֶת־סֶפֶד עִמּוֹ וְאֵתָהּ עֲשִׂיתָהּ חֶסֶד עִם־כָּל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּעֵלְוֹתָם מִמִּצְרַיִם וַיִּסַּר קִינִי מִתּוֹךְ עַמְּלֵק:

Verses 7-9: Saul and his men destroy most of Amalek, but spare its king, Agag, and its valuables and sheep.

I Samuel 15:9	שמואל א ט"ו:ט
Saul and the people had pity on Agag, and on the best of the sheep, oxen, fatlings, lambs, and all that was good - they refused to utterly destroy them. Everything that was of little value and weak, they utterly destroyed.	וַיַּחַמְלוּ שָׁאוּל וְהָעָם עַל־אַגָּג וְעַל־מֵיטֵב הַצֹּאן וְהַבְּקָר וְהַמִּשְׁנֵיִם וְעַל־הַפְּרִים וְעַל־כָּל־הַטּוֹב וְלֹא אָבּוּ הַחֲרִימָם וְכָל־הַמְּלֹאכָה נִמְבָּזָה וְנִמְסָ אֹתָהּ

¹ Ashkenazim begin the Haftarah with verse 2.

² A few verses before the Haftarah begins (I Sam 14:47), the text recounts Saul’s defeat of “all [of Israel’s] enemies round about”, the condition required in Deut 25:19, “When the Lord relieves you [Israel] of all your enemies round about” for the duty to destroy Amalek.

³ Centuries of discussion about the moral, political, and theological implications of this episode are beyond the scope of Haftarah Helper.

	הַחֲרִימוּ:
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Verses 10-11: God informs Samuel that He does not wish for Saul to rule any longer.

I Samuel 15:11	שְׂמוּאֵל אֵלֶּי: י"א
“I [God] regret that I made Saul king because he turned away from [following] me, and did not perform my words.” This aggrieved Samuel, and he cried out to the Lord all night.	נָחַ מְתִי כִּי־הִמְלַכְתִּי אֶת־שָׂאוּל לְמֶלֶךְ כִּי־שָׁבַ מְאַחֲרַי וְאֶת־דְּבָרַי לֹא הִקִּים וַיִּחַר לְשָׂמוּאֵל וַיִּזְעַק אֱלֹהֵי כָל־הַלַּיְלָה:

Verses 12-23: Samuel confronts Saul: despite Saul’s good intentions, he has failed in his divine mission. Therefore he has lost the kingship.

I Samuel 15:22	שְׂמוּאֵל אֵלֶּי: כ"ב
Samuel said [to Saul], “Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams.”	וַיֹּאמֶר שְׂמוּאֵל לַהֲתַפְזֵן לָהּ בְּעֹלוֹת וּזְבָחִים כְּשֹׂמֵעַ בְּקוֹל ה' הֲנֵה שֹׂמֵעַ מִזְבַּח טוֹב לְהִקְשִׁיב מִחֻלָּב אֵילִים:

Verses 24-31: Saul explains his sin, requests forgiveness, and seeks to move on; Samuel continues to reject him.

I Samuel 15:26	שְׂמוּאֵל אֵלֶּי: כ"ו
Samuel said to Saul, “I will not return with you: for you rejected the word of the Lord, and the Lord has rejected you from being king over Israel.”	וַיֹּאמֶר שְׂמוּאֵל אֶל־שָׂאוּל לֹא אָשׁוּב עִמָּךְ כִּי מָאַסְתָּהּ אֶת־דְּבַר ה' וַיִּמְאַסְךָ ה' מִהִיְוֹת מֶלֶךְ עַל־יִשְׂרָאֵל:

Verses 32-34: Samuel puts Agag to death, and returns home.

I Samuel 15:33	שְׂמוּאֵל אֵלֶּי: ל"ג
Samuel said [to Agag], “As your sword made women childless, so shall your mother be childless among women. Samuel cut down Agag before the Lord in Gilgal.	וַיֹּאמֶר שְׂמוּאֵל כַּאֲשֶׁר שִׁפְלָה נְשִׁים חַרְבְּךָ כִּוַּת־שִׁפְלָה מִנְּשִׁים אִמְךָ וַיִּשְׁפֹּר שְׂמוּאֵל אֶת־אַגָּג לִפְנֵי ה' בְּגִלְגָּל:

Connections

The Midrash connects **Saul’s failure to kill Agag with Haman’s rise** in the Book of Esther.

Esther Rabbah, Petichta 7	אסתר רבה, פתיחתא ז'
Rabbi Levi opened [his sermon about the book of Esther by citing Num. 33:55], “If you do not expel the inhabitants of the Land from before you, [then] those that you let remain [shall be as thorns in your eyes, and as pricks in your sides.] [R. Levi said] this [verse] speaks of Saul... [Samuel said to Saul,] ‘You departed innocent but returned guilty [since] you had compassion on [Agag], as (1 Samuel 15:9) states, “Saul and the people had pity on Agag.” A sprout will arise from [Agag] and will do harsh things to you, [becoming] “thorns in your eyes, and as pricks in your sides”! Who is this? It is Haman who stated [his plan to] “exterminate, kill, and destroy [all the Jews].” (Esther 3:13)”	רבי לוי פתח (במדבר לג, נה): ואם לא תורישו את יושבי הארץ מפניכם והיה אשר תותרו מהם, מדבר בשאול... אמר ליה אזלת זפאה ואתית חייבא וחסת עלי, שנאמר (שמואל א טו, ט): ויחמל שאול והעם על אגג, והא צמחא קיימא מיניה שהוא עושה לכם דברים קשים, לשפים בעיניכם ולצנינם בצדיכם, ואיזה זה, זה המן, שאמר: להשמיד להרג ולאבד.