



Zachor: I Samuel 15:1¹-34

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 commandments to remember and not to forget Amalek’s cowardly attack against the Israelites as they left Egypt (Ex. 17:8-13), and the duty for the Jewish people, at peace in the Land, to annihilate Amalek. The Haftarah records Saul’s failure to properly fulfill this command.² Furthermore, the Talmud (Megillah 13a) and the Midrash (Esther Rabbah Pesikta 7) directly connect Saul’s failure to the rise of Haman the Agagite many centuries later.

After centuries of ad-hoc military leadership, the Israelite tribes ask the prophet Samuel to appoint a king to lead them in battle against their enemies. God grants this request, and Samuel anoints the warrior, Saul, as king. Saul leads a powerful, centralized army to defeat all of Israel’s principal enemies. Afterwards³, Samuel commands Saul to battle the nation of Amalek in the south by killing every Amalekite person and animal. Saul and the people do so, except they spare Amalek’s king, Agag, and many of their animals. Samuel informs Saul that his failure to carry out God’s command without exception renders him unfit to be Israel’s king, and that he will be replaced with a better king. Saul’s reactions to this rejection further confirm his unworthiness. Samuel executes King Agag and departs from Saul. They will never again speak or meet.

Haftarah Breakdown

Verses 1-3: Samuel instructs Saul to avenge Amalek’s attack against the Israelites after the Exodus.

I Samuel 15:3	שמואל א ט"ו:ג
Now [Saul,] go and smite Amalek. [You and your men shall] utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not. Slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.	עֲתֵהּ לְךָ וְהִכִּיתָהּ אֶת-עַמְלֵק וְהִחַרְמְתָם אֶת-כָּל אֲשֶׁר-לָו וְלֹא תִחַמַּל עָלָיו וְהִמַּתָּהּ מֵאִישׁ עַד-אִשָּׁה מִעַלְלֵי וְעַד-יֹוֹנֵק מִשּׁוֹר וְעַד-שֶׁה מִגָּמֵל וְעַד-חֲמֹר:

Verses 4-6: Saul assembles more than 200,000 men. The Kenites, Israelite allies since the Exodus who lived among the Amalekites, accept Saul’s encouragement to depart before the war against Amalek.

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. You acted with kindness to all the children of Israel when they came up from Egypt.” The Kenites departed from among Amalek.	וַיֹּאמֶר שְׂאוּל אֶל-הַכִּינִיטִי לְכוּ סְרוּ רְדוּ מִתּוֹךְ עַמְלֵקִי פֶן-אֶסְכְּדָה עִמּוֹ וְאַתֶּם עָשִׂיתֶם חֶסֶד עִם-כָּל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּעֵלְוֹתָם מִמִּצְרָיִם וַיֵּסֶר קִינִי מִתּוֹךְ עַמְלֵק:

Verses 7-9: Saul and his men obliterate the Amalekites. They capture its king, Agag, alive. They destroy lesser quality property and animals but keep more valuable ones.

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 everything good- they refused to utterly destroy them. Everything that was of little value and weak, they utterly destroyed.	וַיַּחַמְלוּ שְׂאוּל וְהָעָם עַל-אַגָּג וְעַל-מֵיטֵב הַצֹּאן וְהַבָּקָר וְהַמִּשְׁגָּנִים וְעַל-הַכְּרִיִּים וְעַל-כָּל-הַטּוֹב וְלֹא אָבּוּ הַחֲרִימָם וְכָל-הַמְּלֹאכָה וְהַמְּבִזָּה וְהַנְּחִים אֶתֶּה הִחֲרִימוּ:

¹ Ashkenazim begin the Haftarah with verse 2.

² Centuries of discussion about the moral, political, and theological implications of this episode are beyond the scope of Haftarah Helper.

³ 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.

Verses 10-11: God informs Samuel that, due to Saul's deviation from His command, He regrets making Saul king. Upset by this, Samuel prays to God all night to no avail.

I Samuel 15:11	שמואל א ט"ו:יא
"I [God] regret that I made Saul king because he turned away from [following] Me, and did not fulfill My words." This aggrieved Samuel, and he cried out to the Lord all night.	נחמתני כִּי־הִמְלַכְתִּי אֶת־שְׂאוּל לְמַלְךְ כִּי־שָׁבַ מֵאַחֲרַי וְאֶת־דְּבָרַי לֹא הִקְיִים וַיִּחַר לְשִׁמּוֹאֵל וַיִּזְעַק אֶל־ה' כָּל־הַלַּיְלָה:

Verses 12-15: Samuel finds Saul leading a victory celebration. Samuel rejects Saul's claim that he fulfilled God's word. Saul states that his soldiers destroyed all Amalekite property, keeping only the finest animals as sacrifices.

I Samuel 15:15	שמואל א ט"ו:ט"ו
Saul said, "[The soldiers] brought [the animals] from the Amalekites. For the people spared the best of the sheep and oxen to sacrifice to the Lord your God. We utterly destroyed the rest."	וַיֹּאמֶר שְׂאוּל מֵעַמְלֻקֵי הַבְּיֵאוֹם אֲשֶׁר חָמַל הָעָם עַל־מֵיטֵב הַבְּצֹאן וְהַבְּקָר לְמַעַן זָבַח לַה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ וְאֶת־הַיֹּתֵר הִתְרַמְנִנִי:

Verses 16-19: Samuel replies that, despite Saul's personal humility, he failed his royal duty by allowing his soldiers to take spoils.

I Samuel 15:17	שמואל א ט"ו:י"ז
Samuel said, "Though you [Saul] are small in your own eyes, you are the head of Israel's tribes- the Lord anointed you king over Israel!"	וַיֹּאמֶר שִׁמּוֹאֵל הֲלוֹא אִם־קָטָן אַתָּה בְּעֵינֶיךָ רָאִישׁ שִׁבְטֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אַתָּה וַיִּמְשְׁחֶךָ ה' לְמַלְךְ עַל־יִשְׂרָאֵל:

Verses 20-23: Saul explains that he killed all Amalekites and captured their king, Agag, and that the soldiers took the finest animals to sacrifice. Samuel replies that God has rejected Saul as king because He values strict obedience.

I Samuel 15:22	שמואל א ט"ו:כ"ב
Samuel said [to Saul], "Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as obeying the Lord's voice? Behold! To obey is better than sacrifice; and to hearken [is better] than the fat of rams."	וַיֹּאמֶר שִׁמּוֹאֵל הֲחִפְּזָן לַה' בַּעֲלוֹת וּזְבָחִים כְּשֹׁמֵעַ בְּקוֹל ה' הִנֵּה שֹׁמֵעַ מִזְבַּח טוֹב לְהִקְשִׁיב מִתְּלַב אֵילִים:

Verses 24-31: Saul requests forgiveness for heeding his soldiers instead of the divine command, and asks Samuel to serve God with him. Samuel declines, telling Saul that God has irrevocably decided to replace him with a better king.

I Samuel 15:26	שמואל א ט"ו: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 שִׁמּוֹאֵל אֶל־שְׂאוּל לֹא אָשׁוּב עִמָּךְ כִּי מָאַסְתָּהוּ אֶת־דְּבָר ה' וַיִּמְאַסְךָ ה' מִהִיְוֹת מֶלֶךְ עַל־יִשְׂרָאֵל:

Verses 32-34: Samuel explains the justice of executing Agag, and then does so.

I Samuel 15:33	שמואל א ט"ו: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 שִׁמּוֹאֵל בְּאֲשֶׁר שִׁפְלָה נְשִׁים חֲרָבְךָ כִּוְתִשְׁפֵּל מְנַשִּׁים אִמָּךְ וַיִּשְׁפֹּף שִׁמּוֹאֵל אֶת־אַגָּג לִפְנֵי ה' בְּגִלְגָל: