YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Understanding the haftarot**

**By Harav Yaakov Medan**

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In memory of Rebbetzin Rebecca Singer *z"l*,  
wife of Rabbi Joseph Singer *z"l*, daughter of Rabbi Chaim Heller *z"l*,  
upon her *yahrzeit*, 27 Sivan  
by her daughter Vivian Singer

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**PARASHAT KORACH**

**“Now Appoint a King for Us”**

And Shmuel said to the people, "Come, let us go to Gilgal, and we will renew the kingship there." All the people went to Gilgal, and they crowned Sha'ul king there at Gilgal before the Lord. They sacrificed peace offerings before the Lord, and Sha’ul rejoiced greatly along with all the men of Israel. Then Shmuel addressed all of Israel. "Now, I have heeded your voices in all you said to me, and I have crowned a king over you – and now, here is the king, walking before you. I have grown old and grey, but my sons are here with you; I have been walking before you from my youth until this day. Here I am – testify against me in front of the Lord and in front of His anointed – whose ox have I seized, and whose donkey have I seized? Whom have I cheated, and whom have I oppressed, and from whose hand have I taken a bribe and averted my eyes from him? Let me repay you." And they said, "You have not cheated us, nor oppressed us, nor taken anything from anyone." "The Lord is witness against you," he said to them, "and His anointed is witness on this day, that you have found nothing in my possession." And it was declared, "The witness is…. the Lord," Shmuel said to the people, "who appointed Moshe and Aharon and brought your ancestors out of the land of Egypt. Now take your stand, and I will plead my case with you before the Lord: all the Lord's acts of loyalty that He has done for you and your ancestors. When Yaakov arrived in Egypt and your ancestors cried out to the Lord, the Lord sent Moshe and Aharon to take them out of Egypt, and they settled them in this place. But they forgot the Lord their God, and He sold them into the hands of Sisera, the general of Chatzor, and into the hands of the Philistines, and into the hands of the king of Moav, who attacked them. Then they cried out to the Lord. 'We have sinned,' they said, 'for we left the Lord and served the Baalim and the Ashtarot – oh, save us from the hands of our enemies, and we will serve You.' So the Lord sent Yerubaal and Bedan and Yiftach and Shmuel and saved you from the hands of the enemies around you, and you dwelled in safety. But when you saw that King Nachash of the Amonites came upon you, you told me, 'No, we must have a king to reign over us,' though the Lord your God is your King. And now, here is the king that you yourselves have chosen – that you yourselves demanded – here, the Lord has set a king over you! If you fear the Lord, then serve Him and heed His voice, and do not spurn the word of God; both you and the king who reigns over you must follow the Lord your God. But if you do not heed the Lord's voice and rebel against the Lord's word, then the Lord's hand shall bear down against you and your ancestral houses. And now, stand by and see what a tremendous feat the Lord is about to perform before your very eyes: Is it not the wheat harvest today? I will call out to the Lord, and He will unleash thunder and rain. Then you will know, and then you will see, how great an evil you have committed in the eyes of the Lord by asking for a king for yourselves." Then Shmuel called out to the Lord, and the Lord unleashed thunder and rain on that day. All the people were struck with terror of the Lord, and of Shmuel as well. And all the people said to Shmuel, "Pray on your servants' behalf to the Lord your God so that we will not die; for we have added yet another evil to all our offenses by asking for a king for ourselves." "Do not fear, though you have done all this evil," Shmuel said to the people, "so long as you do not turn away from the Lord; serve the Lord with all your heart. But do not turn away to follow futilities that neither help nor save, for they are futile. For the Lord will not desert His people for the sake of His great name, because the Lord has undertaken to make you His people. (I *Shmuel* 11:14-12:22)[[1]](#footnote-1)

**I. The Connection Between the *Haftara* and the *Parasha***

There is a point of similarity between Moshe's claim against the company of Korach – "I have not taken a single donkey from them," and Shmuel’s words to the people – "and whose donkey have I seized?" But the similarity is in fact greater. Shaul was appointed king in the wake of an expression of lack of trust in Shmuel's continued leadership:

All the elders of Israel gathered and came to Shmuel at Rama. "Look, you have grown old," they said to him, "and your sons have not followed in your path. Now appoint a king for us to govern us like any other nation." When they said, "Give us a king to govern us," the idea displeased Shmuel, and Shmuel prayed to the Lord." (I *Shmuel* 8:4-6)

This lack of trust is somewhat reminiscent of the lack of trust on the part of Korach and his followers in the leadership of Moshe and Aharon, who failed to cancel the forty-year decree of wandering in the wilderness that God had decreed for His people. The thunder and rain that God brought down as punishment at the end of our *haftara* bring to mind the earthquake that struck the company of Korach, about which it is stated: "At their cry, all the Israelites around them fled" (*Bamidbar* 16:32).

**II. Background**

Shmuel had already anointed Shaul as king, both in his house in Rama and before all the people at Mitzpa:

And Shmuel took the juglet of oil and poured it over his head and kissed him. And he said, "The Lord hereby anoints you as ruler over His estate. (I *Shmuel* 10:1)

Shmuel summoned the people to the Lord at Mitzpa… Then he had the tribe of Binyamin come forward, clan by clan, and the Matrite clan was singled out; then Sha’ul son of Kish was singled out… They ran and took him from there, and when he presented himself among the people, he towered head and shoulders above everyone else. And Shmuel said to all the nation, "Have you seen whom the Lord has chosen – for there is none like him among all the people!" And all the people cheered and shouted, "Long live the king!" (I *Shmuel* 10:17-24)

Why was a third coronation, in Gilgal, necessary? The accepted answer is that of Rashi, that an additional coronation was necessary because of the challengers to Shaul's kingship after the first two coronations:

But some depraved men said, "How is that one going to save us?" They scorned him and did not bring him any gifts, but he feigned indifference. (I *Shmuel* 10: 27)

After Shaul's great victory over the Amonites (chapter 11), there were no longer any challengers to his kingship, and the monarchy could be established anew with the consent of all the people.[[2]](#footnote-2) Gilgal, near Yericho, where the Israelites went after they crossed the Jordan with Yehoshua, was chosen for this purpose, apparently because it was on the way back from the site of the war against the Amonites on the east bank of the Jordan to the land of Binyamin, Shaul's place of residence.[[3]](#footnote-3)

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The verses in chapter 8 that were cited above are the main background for Shmuel's oration in our *haftara*. It is related there that the elders of Israel argued that Shmuel was already old and that his sons were not following in his ways; therefore, they asked for a king. Shaul was displeased by this expression of lack of trust in him, and God responded that the aspiration for a king to deliver them in their wars was also an expression of lack of confidence in God, who protects His people.

Our *haftara* effectively ends the period of the judges and opens the period of the kings – Shmuel is both the last of the judges and also the first of the kings.

**III. Shmuel's Rebuke for His Rejection as a Judge**

Then Shmuel addressed all of Israel. "Now, I have heeded your voices in all you said to me, and I have crowned a king over you – and now, here is the king, walking before you. I have grown old and grey, but my sons are here with you; I have been walking before you from my youth until this day. Here I am – testify against me in front of the Lord and in front of His anointed – whose ox have I seized, and whose donkey have I seized? Whom have I cheated, and whom have I oppressed, and from whose hand have I taken a bribe and averted my eyes from him? Let me repay you." And they said, "You have not cheated us, nor oppressed us, nor taken anything from anyone." "The Lord is witness against you," he said to them, "and His anointed is witness on this day, that you have found nothing in my possession." And it was declared, "The witness is….” (12:1-5)

Let us compare this statement to the words of the elders who came to Shmuel to demand a king:

All the elders of Israel gathered and came to Shmuel at Rama. "Look, you have grown old," they said to him, "and your sons have not followed in your path. Now appoint a king for us to govern us like any other nation." (I *Shmuel* 8:4-5)

Shmuel's words imply that he concedes that his age does not allow him to continue leading the people, but he argues that his sons are indeed capable of doing so in his place. To reinforce his claim, he mentions his honesty in leading the people.

There is cause for surprise here, for Scripture testifies that the elders of Israel were right:

When Shmuel grew old, he appointed his sons to be Israel's judges. The name of his elder son was Yoel, and the name of his second was Aviya; they were judges in Be'er Sheva. But his sons did not follow his path; they were bent on gain, and they took bribes, and they bent justice. (I *Shmuel* 8:1-3)

We might suggest that Shmuel was blind to the shortcomings of his sons, but then why did the people not respond to his rebuke?

It seems that we must turn to Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachmani's words about the sins of the sons of Shmuel:

Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachmani said in the name of Rabbi Yonatan: Whoever maintains that Shmuel's sons sinned is merely erring. For it is stated: "When Shmuel grew old… But his sons did not follow in his path"; thus, they [merely] did not walk in his ways – yet, they did not sin, either. Then how do I fulfil, "and they took bribes"? That means that they did not act like their father. For Shmuel the righteous used to travel to all the places of Israel and judge them in their towns, as it is stated, "Year after year, he would make his rounds from Beit El to Mitzpa, judging Israel in all those places," but his sons did not act in this manner, but rather they sat in their cities, in order to increase the fees of their beadles and scribes. This is a controversy of *Tannaim*: "And they took bribes" – Rabbi Meir said: [This means] they openly demanded their portions. Rabbi Yehuda said: They forced goods on private people. Rabbi Akiva said: They took an extra basket of tithes by force. Rabbi Yose said: They took the priestly gifts by force. (*Shabbat* 55b-56a)

According to Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachmani, the two sons were still suitable for their position, despite their shortcomings. They could have continued in their father’s footsteps and judged the people – even if they did not follow precisely in his path, but instead established a bureaucratic governing mechanism for their leadership, and even if they demanded tithes (since they were Levites) in return to their leadership. The demand for their removal is like a demand for the shameful removal of Shmuel himself, despite the great salvation he brought to Israel in the second war against the Philistines at Even ha-Ezer, and despite his great work in judging the people and the great spiritual processes he led.

There is still room to wonder about the fact that Shmuel bases himself on an assumption he saw as self-evident – that sons should inherit positions of leadership.[[4]](#footnote-4) This was also Eli's assumption regarding his sons, and the man of God harshly criticized him for it (in chapter 2). During the period of the judges, Gidon refused the people's proposal that he rule over them and then leave his position to his sons:

The men of Israel said to Gidon, "Rule over us, you and your son and the son of your son – for you have saved us from Midyan’s hand!" "I shall not rule over you," Gidon said to them, "nor shall my son rule over you – the Lord shall rule over you." (*Shoftim* 8:22-23)

But we do also find traces of inheritance in the book of *Shoftim*, even apart from Avimelekh’s underhanded replacement of his father Gidon:

After him, Yair the Gileadite arose; he judged Israel for twenty-two years. He had thirty sons who rode on thirty donkeys and owned thirty villages. (Ibid.10:3-4)

After him, Avdon son of Hillel the Piratonite judged Israel. He had forty sons and thirty grandsons who rode on seventy donkeys. (*Shoftim* 12:13-14)

**IV. Shmuel's Rebuke for His Rejection as a Leader**

"… the Lord," Shmuel said to the people, "who appointed Moshe and Aharon and brought your ancestors out of the land of Egypt. Now take your stand, and I will plead my case with you before the Lord: all the Lord's acts of loyalty that He has done for you and your ancestors. When Yaakov arrived in Egypt and your ancestors cried out to the Lord, the Lord sent Moshe and Aharon to take them out of Egypt, and they settled them in this place. But they forgot the Lord their God, and He sold them into the hands of Sisera, the general of Chatzor, and into the hands of the Philistines, and into the hands of the king of Moav, who attacked them. Then they cried out to the Lord. 'We have sinned,' they said, 'for we left the Lord and served the Baalim and the Ashtarot – oh, save us from the hands of our enemies, and we will serve You.' So the Lord sent Yerubaal and Bedan and Yiftach and Shmuel and saved you from the hands of the enemies around you, and you dwelled in safety. But when you saw that King Nachash of the Amonites came upon you, you told me, 'No, we must have a king to reign over us,' though the Lord your God is your King." (12:6-12)

The style of these verses, especially the first two, seems somewhat unpolished. Shmuel's words seem to have been spoken from a broken heart, perhaps even in tears; in such a state, even an orator at a coronation ceremony does not choose his words carefully and polish his sentences. When writing the book, the prophet decided to record his words as they were uttered, to express his broken heart.

Shmuel sees a correspondence between the people's crying out to God, promising to correct their deeds and to worship Him, and the salvation that God brought to Israel at the hands of their leaders, who were not kings. Thus, their request for a king at a time when Nachash, king of the Amonites, posed a grave danger, is interpreted as an unwillingness to continue crying out to God and correcting their actions and as an unwillingness to accept the punishment they deserve, should they, God forbid, worship the Baalim and the Ashtorot.

These words require clarification and expansion. The armies of the judges were small, probably because their authority was similarly small. Thus, for example, the prophetess Devora rebukes the tribes that did not mobilize for Barak's campaign against Sisera. Gidon's army was also small: even before God demanded of him that he remain with only three hundred soldiers, there were not very many soldiers in his army. The people of Efrayim enlisted for his war against the Midyanites only after his victorious blow against his enemies, and the people of Sukkot and Penuel did not cooperate with him when he pursued his enemies.

It appears from Shmuel's oration on the laws pertaining to a king (chapter 8) that the people were willing to grant a king almost unlimited powers in mobilizing the people for war or for the needs of the kingdom. Indeed, Shaul took three hundred and thirty thousand men to wage war against the Amonites, and led them to a great victory. Shaul also raised a large army to fight against Amalek. The people were ready to pay a very heavy price of subservience to a king of flesh and blood, provided that their victory over their enemies would be guaranteed by the power of the great army that the king would establish.

In contrast, Shmuel, in discussing the laws pertaining to a king, sees clearly the high social cost of appointing a king and being subjected to him. In his speech to the people in our *haftara*, he also sees the great spiritual cost of the separation that the people wanted between observance of God's commandments and the ability to defeat enemies. Shmuel claimed that if they serve God and remove the foreign gods, God will grant them victory in their wars even through a judge who rises up for a short time and mobilizes a relatively small army. Later, he will say that even after establishing a king over them, if they fail to obey God, they will suffer calamities in their wars or other disasters, and the king will be unable to help them.

Shmuel's claim seems to be based first and foremost on the central event that took place during his term of leadership:

Shmuel said to all the House of Israel, "If you mean to return to the Lord with all your heart, then remove the alien gods from among you, along with the Ashtarot, and direct your hearts to the Lord, and serve Him alone; then He will save you from the hand of the Philistines." So the Israelites removed the Baalim and the Ashtarot and served the Lord alone. Then Shmuel said, "Assemble all of Israel at Mitzpa, and I will pray to the Lord on your behalf." They assembled at Mitzpa and drew water and poured it out before the Lord. On that day they fasted, declaring there, "We have sinned against the Lord," and Shmuel judged the Israelites at Mitzpa. When the Philistines heard that the Israelites had gathered at Mitzpa, the Philistine chieftains marched up toward Israel. And when the Israelites heard, they were frightened of the Philistines, and the Israelites said to Shmuel, "Do not be deaf and dumb to us, not crying out to the Lord our God – let Him save us from the hand of the Philistines!" Shmuel took a suckling lamb and offered it up as a whole burnt offering to the Lord. And Shmuel cried out to the Lord for Israel's sake, and the Lord answered him. For just as Shmuel was offering up the burnt offering, and the Philistines advanced to attack Israel, the Lord thundered with a mighty voice against the Philistines at that moment, throwing them into a panic, and they were routed before Israel. (I *Shmuel* 7:3-10)

The great victory over the Philistines was due not to a royal ability to raise a large army, but to Shmuel’s ability to bring the people back to their God and remove the Baalim and Ashtarot.

**V. Shmuel's Rebuke and Reliance on Miracles**

The argument in the previous section, about the need to rely on God and the fulfillment of His commandments rather than on a large army, raises the question of relying on a miracle, which in our worldview is considered undesirable.[[5]](#footnote-5) In the previous *haftara*, I brought the words of Rabbeinu Bachya in this regard, and it seems that there is no escape from repeating them here:

"The horse is prepared for the day of battle; but victory comes from God" (*Mishlei* 21:31). In this verse, King Shlomo warns everybody to do whatever is in his power by using natural means to achieve his success. Beyond that, he must leave things to God. A miracle occurs only when all the natural means have been exhausted and have proven to be inadequate. Man was created in such a way that he can cope with most problems by using natural means… One who wishes to go out to war against his enemies must strive to equip himself with the weapons, horses, and chariots needed for battle. For if he does not make adequate preparations and relies on a miracle, he will be handed over to his enemies… After one does everything in his power and makes all the natural preparations, he should not trust that he will reach the desired end because of these preparations, but only because of God. (Rabbeinu Bachya, *Bamidbar* 13:2)

Furthermore: God Himself explains the need for Shaul, who will save Israel from the military challenges they face:

Now, the Lord had revealed the following to Shmuel on the day before Shaul's arrival: "At this time tomorrow, I will send a man from the land of Binyamin to you, and you shall anoint him as ruler over My people, Israel. He shall rescue My people from the hand of the Philistines, for I have taken notice of My people – their cries have reached Me." (I *Shmuel* 9:15-16)

The answer to this question is long beyond measure, and this forum allows only for brevity. I will allude to two points:

1. God instructed that Shaul be anointed as a ruler [*nagid*], not as a king, and this is precisely what Shmuel did:

And Shmuel took the juglet of oil and poured it over his head and kissed him. And he said, "The Lord hereby anoints you as ruler [*le-nagid*] over His estate. (10:1)

A *nagid* has greater coercive power than a judge, and his rule suffices to meet the challenges of military recruitment. Our *haftara*, however, begins with establishing the monarchy, in accordance with the will of the people, not the rule of *negidim*. Monarchy includes additional elements that are not found in the rule of *negidim*, such as dynastic inheritance.[[6]](#footnote-6)

2. The ongoing conflict with the Philistines did require a permanent army.[[7]](#footnote-7) A permanent army requires a permanent leader, who collects permanent taxes in both manpower and money, and it is not enough to have a judge who only rises temporarily in a time of need. The Amonites were an external enemy, and the war against them, for which the people demanded a king, was a one-time event; for that, it would have sufficed to appoint a leader for a short time, as a judge with extensive recruiting powers. As I wrote above (in note 2), Shaul conducted that war as a judge appointed for a short time, not as a permanent ruler.

**VI. Rain During the Wheat Harvest**

"And now, stand by and see what a tremendous feat the Lord is about to perform before your very eyes: Is it not the wheat harvest today? I will call out to the Lord, and He will unleash thunder and rain. Then you will know, and then you will see, how great an evil you have committed in the eyes of the Lord by asking for a king for yourselves." Then Shmuel called out to the Lord, and the Lord unleashed thunder and rain on that day. All the people were struck with terror of the Lord, and of Shmuel as well. And all the people said to Shmuel, "Pray on your servants' behalf to the Lord your God so that we will not die; for we have added yet another evil to all our offenses by asking for a king for ourselves." (12:16-19)

Heavy rain during the harvest is a serious inconvenience, and also involves financial loss, but it is not a terrible disaster that cannot be endured, as might be inferred from Shmuel's words and the frightened reaction of the people.

It seems that Shmuel's appeal to God, and the thunder and rain that followed, came to remind the people of a similar event they had experienced, but in the opposite direction:

And Shmuel cried out to the Lord for Israel's sake, and the Lord answered him. For just as Shmuel was offering up the burnt offering, and the Philistines advanced to attack Israel, the Lord thundered with a mighty voice against the Philistines at that moment, throwing them into a panic, and they were routed before Israel. The men of Israel charged out of Mitzpa and chased the Philistines, striking them down as far as below Beit Kar. And Shmuel took a single stone and placed it between Mitzpa and Shen, naming it Help Stone: "For thus far," he said, "the Lord has helped us." The Philistines were crushed and no longer ventured into Israel’s territory, and the Lord’s hand bore down against the Philistines for the rest of Shmuel’s life. And the cities that the Philistines had seized from Israel, from Ekron to Gat, were restored to Israel; Israel recovered their territory from Philistine control, and there was peace between Israel and the Amorites. (I *Shmuel* 7:9-14)

The words "the Lord thundered... throwing them into a panic" refer to loud and powerful thundering sounds from the sky, which sent the Philistines' horses into a panic, causing them to lose their sense of direction. Thunder is often followed by torrential rain, and the mud that ensues cripples a chariot-based army and offsets its relative superiority to an army of foot soldiers. The Israelite victory against the Philistines, in the wake of the eradication of the Baalim and Ashtarot under Shmuel’s direction, was major and important. In both places, the thunder and rain came at an unexpected time, following Shmuel's appeal to God. The people recognized the weight of an appeal to God following a great process of repair and repentance, but now things were happening in the wake of Shmuel's calling out to God, including terrifying thunder, as an expression of the attribute of judgment and as a punishment imposed on the people. As stated, this was not only a punishment, but also a lesson regarding the question of what will decide a war between Israel and their enemies – the recruiting authority of the king, or the prophet's call to God following repentance, repair of the people's deeds, fasting, and prayer.

I will not keep to myself something that I heard in my youth from my revered teacher, Rabbi Chanan Porat: Rain is a great blessing, but when it falls during the days of harvest, not in its appointed time, it is a curse. So too the kingdom of Israel: it is a great blessing, but when it comes at the wrong time, there is no blessing in it. When Shmuel rebuked the people, the time of the kingdom of blessing – the kingdom of David – had not yet arrived.

We will conclude with a statement about the prophet Shmuel:

Rather, that Shmuel was equal to Moshe and Aharon, as it is stated: "Moshe and Aharon of His priests, Shmuel of those who called on His name" (*Tehillim* 99:6). (*Pesikta Rabbati* 43; and similarly in *Ta'anit* 5b)

Surely, no prophet arose in Israel like Moshe (*Devarim* 34:10). It seems that the Shmuel who is equal to Moshe and Aharon together is Shmuel in his prayer, as indicated in the continuation of the verse cited in the *midrash*:

Moshe and Aharon of His priests, Shmuel of those who called on His name – they called on the Lord, and He answered them. (*Tehillim* 99:6)

Indeed, we find in the two aforementioned prayers of Shmuel, facing the Philistines in Mitzpa and in our *haftara*, that God answers his call immediately.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Unless specified otherwise, all references to Biblical books are to the book of I *Shmuel*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In my humble opinion, the answer is different. Due to the constraints of space, I will allude to it without bringing the supporting proof: In my opinion, the war against the Amonites (chapter 11), which was a large and all-encompassing regional war, was waged after Shaul fought the Philistines in Mikhmash (chapters 13-14). With the war at Mikhmash, Shaul was removed from kingship because of his sin and mistake, and Shmuel said to him: "Now your dynasty will not endure. The Lord will seek out a man after his own heart, and the Lord will charge him as ruler over His people, for you have not done what the Lord commanded you" (I *Shmuel* 13:14). Shaul did not fight the Amonites as king, but as a chance leader, like the judges, and as emerges, in my opinion, from the verses in chapter 11. Now, after his great success in this war, it was necessary to renew his kingship. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Y. Kil, *Da'at Mikra* commentary. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. To my regret, I must admit that all of my explanations of this chapter do not completely remove my bewilderment about Shmuel's argument; further consideration is necessary. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. There is great similarity between Shmuel's words and my questions about them and the debate that exists today between religious Zionism and the *Charedim*. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See also *Esther* 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This is also my opinion regarding the war against Amalek, but this is not the forum to expand at length. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)