

2000 11 02 Elie Wiesel Shmuel The Story of a Prophet Involved
in Politics 92Y Elie Wiesel Archive

Elie Wiesel:

(applause) Let us study. His story begins in prayer and ends in rage. What is one to make of his stubbornness, his rigidity? How does one account for his harshness towards Saul, his anointed leader, and his brutality, his cruelty, towards the king of the wicked Amalekites, Agag? Since when does a prophet of God act as executioner? Admit it. In the cast of biblical characters, Samuel is among the most complex and disturbing.

How is his character to be defined? Is he an altruistic leader who thinks only of God and his people, or an egotist, jealous of his prerogatives? One day, he seems to want to please, [00:01:00] only to regret it the next. Destined to shake up history itself, why does he find it so difficult to be a father? Capable of grandeur and of tenderness, why is he also so unforgiving? As the last of the judges, and the first of the prophets, is he meant to be an example of God's rigor or His charity? Is he meant to be an illustration of God's limitless goodness? But then, if God is good, mustn't man be, too? Often, there seems little room for kindness in Samuel's heart.

Why? Though he is already dead, he continues to persecute his favorite victim, Saul, the first illustrious king of our people.

A story. It takes place in a small, godforsaken village, near [00:02:00] Mount Ephraim, called Endor, known for its witches, all or almost all of whom were slain by royal decree. When the last witch is visited by the king, he commands her to summon Samuel from his grave. Reluctantly, she heeds his request, thus making the dead prophet furious, not at the witch, but at her august visitor. "Why do you disturb my sleep?" "I need your help," Saul answers. "Tomorrow I shall do battle with the Philistines. I must know whether God is at my side or not. You alone can tell me God's will."

The old warrior sounds desperate, betrayed by man and abandoned by their creator. That is why he turned to the person who drew him out of the masses and crowned him king. He owes this man both his glory and his burdens. He expects from him [00:03:00] more than from anyone, a word of encouragement. Samuel is his last chance. But Samuel responds harshly. "Why do you come to question me, when you know that God has forsaken you? What I have prophesized will happen. God has removed the crown from your head. He has given it already to someone else, to David, for you have not obeyed His voice. You have not made Amalek,

the enemy ruler, feel the weight of His wrath. You and your sons will perish, and the camp of Israel will be handed over to the Philistines.”

Samuel’s words filled Saul with panic, and he became weak. As we are told, his strength was gone. [00:04:00] He hadn’t eaten anything for a whole day, and an entire night. It’s impossible for a student of biblical literature not to be appalled. How could a prophet of the God of Israel treat another human being so heartlessly? Especially when that person is in such distress. Even if his nocturnal visitor were not a king, even if he had not waged heroic battles on behalf of his people, victorious battles, urgent battles, necessary battles, even if he had not brought honor and security to the land of Israel, how could God’s messenger inflict such pain on Saul in his darkest hour?

Of course, it is impossible to evoke Samuel without linking him to Saul, whose destiny [00:05:00] he shaped and dominated. There is between them a profound and mysterious and puzzling bond that is not found in Samuel’s relationship with the other king whom he anointed, David. With David, there is never a conflict or misunderstanding. With Saul, the relationship is tense, feverish, forever alternating between ecstasy and

despair. At times, it seems as if Samuel had entered Saul's life specifically, intentionally, to make him doubt himself and his mission. And yet.

Before we continue this exploration, let's open our customary parentheses. What has been our ambition and goal since we began so many decades ago, exploring together [00:06:00] the stories of men and women whose history has shaped our own? Not so much to identify with them, how could we, as to learn from them. Learning is what gives life its stimulating appeal. Learning is what brings people together. So much so that in moments of a romantic impulse, I felt -- a week or two ago -- I felt that I had to offer a childish advice to political rulers and leaders. Whenever they meet in Camp David, even in Camp David, let them devote several hours to discuss not political issues, but texts that have nothing to do with politics. Let them become students. Just imagine prime ministers and presidents [00:07:00] who meet in order to discuss very serious issues, sit down for three hours, and discuss anything else, but always based on text, on knowledge, on wisdom, that we have inherited - - we should have inherited -- from our teachers of long ago.

Maybe that would help them. Even solve political problems. You find everything in the Bible, even politics. And of course, I'm

thinking of all of them because we are thinking, all of us, of Jerusalem. Had the meeting in Camp David been preceded by such a session, things might have taken a different turn. For the moment, I think you feel what I feel, a heavy heart. [00:08:00] What has been happening in that land, in that city, and around it, is -- it was a source of great anguish. We who believed in Jerusalem as a city of peace, is anything but. We who believed that it's possible -- it is possible, for nations and people who believe in one God, to live together with respect.

Why doesn't it happen? Why such hatred? When we watch the screen, and we read the papers, why should young people carry such hatred? Well, is it Jerusalem? Seventy times destroyed, 70 times rebuilt, Jerusalem should elicit love, [00:09:00] harmony, faith, and look what is happening. I wish I had a solution. I don't. Not now, not yet. It hurts too much. All we can do is learning together. Maybe from Samuel and Saul, their story, and from what our teachers in the Talmud say about their story, maybe we'll find an answer to our own questions. But, learning, of course, is what? Learning is a matter to open the doors. Let's open it. (pause)

Well, all right. Let us go back to the beginning. The Book of Samuel shows us a good Jewish family, [00:10:00] which leads a

serene life, but which also has its problems. Elkanah, son of Jeroham, from Ephrat, has two wives. Peninah and Hannah. The problem: he hates the first and loves the second. (laughter) To make matters worse, he has children from Penina, but not from Hannah. A pious man -- pious man. (laughs) How could he be pious if he hates his wife?

Nevertheless, he is pious, at least outwardly. He regularly revisits the house of God in Shiloh, the religious Jewish capital, and brings offerings to heaven. He would return with gifts for Penina and her children, but those he gave Hannah were doubly precious. Apparently Hannah was deeply unhappy. She could not stop crying. The text [00:11:00] speaks at length about her pain. Naturally, her husband tried to console her, at times naively. "Why do you cry?" he says. "Just because we have no children together? Why do you need children when you have me?" (laughter)

And he continues, "Am I not worth more than 10 children?" Soon, she became so upset, maybe by his answer (laughter), that she stopped eating altogether. Perhaps this was also Peninah's fault. She could have been kind to her poor rival. But according to the Midrash, she was nasty. In order to illustrate Hannah's virtues, it emphasizes Peninah's shortcomings. For

instance, in the morning, when Peninah was bathing her children, she would say to Hannah, "Why are you still in bed? You should be [00:12:00] preparing your little ones for school." And she knew very well that there were no little ones.

Or, "It is chilly outside. Are they warmly dressed?" As if she didn't know that Hannah was childless. Such cruelty was too much for Hannah. She returned to Shiloh, wept a bit more, and addressed her prayer to the Lord. "If You remember Your maidservant, if I am given a son, I shall consecrate him to You. Never will a razor touch his hair." In other words, even before he was born, she made him into a *Nazir*. Interestingly, our Talmudic sages do not question her right to commit a nonexistent son to God's service. Instead, they invent arguments for her. They make her say, "Oh Lord, God of hosts, [00:13:00] You have created so many human beings. Is it that difficult for You to give me one son?" (laughter)

And in case God doesn't understand, she tells Him a parable. A beggar appears at the entrance to the place, to the palace, where the king is entertaining his guests. "Give me a crust of bread," he asks one servant, then another, but all turn him away. So he pushes inside and approaches the king himself. "Majesty," he says, "you have treated so many guests to so many

courses. All I want from you is a piece of bread." Thus, Hannah, seeing so many Jewish pilgrims from all over the country gathered in Shiloh, exclaimed, "You have so many children here, oh Lord, and I don't even have one." And so God took pity on her.

A variation on the same theme, in the Midrash. Pleading with God, Hannah says, [00:14:00] "Everything You created in a woman has a purpose. Eyes to see, ears to hear, the nose to smell, the mouth to speak, hands to work, feet to walk. You also created in her the breast to feed her offspring. Look at mine, oh Lord. Why did You give me a breast, since it has no one to feed?" Well, confronted with such logic (laughs), God couldn't help but accept her plea.

In the biblical text, the story is told in more realistic and concise terms. On that day, Hannah was in Shiloh, silently repeating her prayers to heaven. Eli, the priest, noticed her, thinking she must be drunk, for no sound left her lips. "Stop drinking," he warned her. [00:15:00] "I drank neither wine nor beer," she replied. "All I did was pour out my heart to God." The priest gave her his blessing. That night, Elkanah made her pregnant.

Nine months later -- six, according to one source -- (laughter) Samuel was born, bringing great happiness to his parents. Thus, Hannah let her husband go alone on the pilgrimage to Shiloh. She stayed home with her little boy. When she finally returned there, she brought Samuel with her. "This is the boy I prayed for," she told the priest. The verse is, in many ways, both difficult and significant. "*Vayiten Hashem li et-sh'eilati me'imo,*" He responded to my question or to my quest. "*Vegam anochi hishiltichu l'AdoShem kol-hayamim asher hayah hu* [00:16:00] *sha-ul l'AdoShem,*" and I loaned him to the Lord for all the time the Lord needed him. Remember the phrase, which is supposed to explain the name Hannah gave her son. It contains four references to the word *sha-al*. *Shin, alef, lamed*. To ask, to loan, to borrow.

Later, these words may help us explain certain aspects of Samuel's strange behavior. For the moment, at last, Hannah is happy. In her happiness, she composes a prayer which remains among the most poignant and beautiful of our liturgy, and in fact, our liturgy is influenced -- is impressed, is impregnated by that prayer. And she says, "My heart exalts in the Lord. My strength is exalted in the Lord. My mouth speaks against my enemies for Your rescue is my joy. [00:17:00] There is none holy like the Lord. There is no God without You. There is no

rock outside You. Broken is the bough of the mighty, strong are the weak. It is the Lord who causes death and creates life. It is God who gives riches or poverty. It is He who lifts up and brings down. From the dust, He raises the poor, and the needy from the ashes."

Now, Hannah, who had been reciting her prayers in whispers, expresses herself like a poet. Better yet, like a prophet. She speaks -- no, she sings. And her song penetrates all those who throughout the centuries feel the need to articulate their pain, or their gratitude. Though she is happy, she separates herself from her beloved child. Faithful to her pledge, [00:18:00] she leaves him with Eli, the priest, whom she entrusts with his education. Was she aware of the reputation Eli's school, or house of God, had in the Bible? His two sons were known to be corrupt, as were other priests there.

Still, Hannah had faith in her son. But according to a Midrash, she almost lost him. He was too precocious. In spite of his tender age, he managed to solve a difficult Halakhic problem in the presence of Eli, the priest. Humiliated, the priest reprimanded him. Didn't the boy know that teaching -- a Talmudic law -- that teaching in the presence of one's teacher is a transgression, theoretically deserving of capital

punishment? Luckily, Hannah was still there, and of course, she used her [00:19:00] greatest weapon, her tears. And she saved him.

Eli, the priest, tried to comfort her. "Don't worry, I shall pray for you, and God will give you another son, and he'll be better than this one." But Hannah cried out, "It is this one I wanted." And Samuel was saved. He's loved by his mother and also by Scripture. Shielded by God, he is perfect, above criticism. A just man, he inspires admiration, respect, and awe.

Elkanah and his cherished wife are at peace at last. What happens to Penina? We don't know, and apparently, they don't care. (laughter) The heavens are smiling upon them. They have more children, three sons and two daughters. The Midrashic legend adds an astonishing detail to the picture. [00:20:00] In the Midrash, but not in the text, we learn that each time Hannah had a son, Penina lost two of hers. And when only two remained, Hannah interceded on their behalf, and they were spared.

As for Samuel, he had a career before him. He grew up to become Eli's chief assistant. He, rather than the priest's two sons, who abused their family's status for personal gains. And once

again, we admire the biblical text that does not believe in cover-ups. If they were corrupt, the text says so. That even great men have problems with their children, occasionally. By now, Eli, the priest, has become old, and he said, because God had stopped speaking to him, the text says, "*U'dvar Adoshem hayah yakar* [00:21:00] *bayamim haheim; ein hazon nifratz,*" and God's word became rare in those times, as was man's vision.

A touching episode described the end of his reign and the beginning of his young successor's. Eli was bedridden. Most of the time, he could barely see. The impression the reader gets is that the priest was no longer functioning. One day, Samuel was awakened by a voice calling to him, and he responded, "*Hineini,*" like Abraham, "Here I am." At first, he thought it was Eli who needed him. "Did you call me, master?" "No," answered the old priest, "I did not call you, go back to sleep." Samuel went back to bed, only to hear the voice for a second time. Again, he ran to the old priest. "This time, you surely called me." "I have not, my son. Go back to sleep." Then God called him for the third time, [00:22:00] and again Samuel ran to his master's bedside. "I heard you again, so I have come." Now, Eli understood whose voice Samuel has heard. "Go back to sleep," he told him, "and if you hear the voice again, just say, 'Speak to me, oh Lord. Your servant hears You.'" "

Samuel went back to bed, and once again heard a voice.

Naturally, he followed Eli's instructions, repeating his exact words. Well, when God spoke, what He said must have terrified young Samuel. What he heard was a blunt condemnation of Eli, the priest. "I shall punish his house forever. I shall do so because of the crime his sons have committed, and which he did not prevent. This crime will be expiated neither by offerings [00:23:00] nor by sacrifice." What a disturbing passage.

First of all, Samuel heard God's voice three times and did not recognize it. Second, Scripture doesn't mention the specific nature of their crime. Eli's sons, Phinehas and Hophni, must have been guilty of more serious transgressions than appropriating a certain meat that did not belong to them. A Midrash suggests that they, and certain other young priests, may have indulged in some illicit sexual activities. Is this what moved God to everlasting anger? His rigor is so extreme that one cannot help but feel sorry for the father, Eli. Actually, he is one of the innocent victims of the story. He had done nothing wrong. [00:24:00]

His only mistake was in not repressing his sons' perversity. The sons were *b'nei bli'al*, says the text, they were lawless

individuals. *Lo yadu et Hashem*, they failed to recognize God's name and power. Comments the Midrash, "They pretended that the heavens were empty." So now, we understand why they had to be punished. But why the father? Are there no limits to paternal responsibility? Eli's sons were not minors. They were already grown. Why, then, did the father have to suffer because of their sins? Wasn't he punished enough simply by being their father? And if God had something to say about him, why didn't He speak to him personally, instead of confiding in his young pupil?

Eli must have sensed that [00:25:00] something was wrong, because as soon as Samuel returned, he asked what God said to him. At first, Samuel tried to protect the old priest. But when the old priest insisted on hearing the full truth, without any restraint, Samuel repeated God's words. "*Va'yigdal Shmuel*," says the text. Having heard the truth, *Shmuel*, having said the truth, having shared it, Samuel grew -- we also mean, Samuel became great. He became a servant of truth, and a true servant. And God was with him. And the entire people of Israel, from Dan to Beersheba, learned that Samuel was faithful to the prophet, or that he himself was a prophet. As for Eli, the priest, one can imagine what the old father must have felt at that moment. [00:26:00] But all he said was, "May God do what pleases Him."

Of course, God was not pleased with Eli or his people. So demoralized was Israel that after a fleeting victory over Philistine aggressors, it lost 30,000 men in battle. The Ark of the Covenant was captured by the enemy, and Eli's sons were killed. Hearing word of their death, Eli, at the age of 90, or 98, fell from his chair and died of a broken neck. He had served for 40 years as judge in Israel. Samuel was now his people's only spiritual leader. A perfect disciple, forever loyal to his master, Samuel showed Eli respect and devotion 'til the end. Was he a good son? He must have been, for nothing in scripture [00:27:00] or the Midrash tells us otherwise.

As leader, he knew how to mobilize his people, which under his supreme command, inflicted on the Philistines a defeat of such magnitude that during his entire lifetime, they did not dare to attack the Jewish state again. His popularity is virtually unmatched among religious leaders. He marries, has two sons, Joel and Abijah, and is greatly respected in his position as judge. The Midrash emphasizes both his wealth and his integrity. He was frequently on the road, but traveled always at his own expense. Unfortunately, what happened to his mentor Eli happened to him, too. His two sons, also judges, also went astray. Greedy, they allowed themselves to be bought, thus

betraying the law ruling over the nation and its citizens.

[00:28:00] Thus, the elders of Israel felt compelled to appear before Samuel, saying, "Since you are old, and your sons do not resemble you, give us a king to govern us, so that we shall be like other nations."

And here, for the very first time, we discover something negative in Samuel's character. He is displeased by the request of the elders. Frustrated, he addresses a prayer to God, who reassures him, "Don't take all this to heart. They are not against you. It's me they are against," says God. "Whatever they have done to me since I rescued them from the Egyptian bondage, they are now doing to you, so why cry?" In other words, are you better than me? And God gives him a very sound piece of advice. "Listen to them. [00:29:00] But tell them what is in store for them, what having a king will mean to the nation."

And so Samuel recites before the leaders the law governing royalty in Israel. Listen. "The king will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen. And to run before the chariots. And he will appoint for himself commanders of hundreds and commanders of fifties. And some to plow his ground, to reap his harvest, and to work on his weapons to make

war. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his servants. And on that day, you will cry out, because of your king, but the Lord will not answer you." [00:30:00]

Did God give Samuel all these details so that they would be repeated in public? Samuel does everything in his power to frighten the Jews, but his voice has lost some of its power. The Jews are insisting on a king because they want to be like other nations. They are tired of being a special people, a people apart. Chosen by God and by history, for who knows what obscure mission. They want to be neither superior nor inferior to other nations. Is that too much to ask? Pressed by the elders and counseled by God, Samuel gives in, and that is how Saul is crowned.

The prophet and judge turned king-maker has obeyed, but with a great deal of reluctance. In fact, he is angry. But why? On what ground does he oppose a monarchy whose roots can be found in Scripture? The Torah stipulates [00:31:00] that the king must be Jewish, the brother of his subjects or to his subjects, that's all. But Samuel is against royalty altogether. Is it because he believes that God and God alone is Israel's king?

That God and God alone is to be obeyed? He and not mortal kings, whose vanity makes them potentially corrupt? Is Samuel in this respect more demanding than the Bible?

Some of his critics believe that his resistance to the whole idea of royalty is personal, motivated by jealousy. Had the elders simply asked for a king, he might have accepted. But in the process of making their request, they slandered his sons. They were corrupt. It's one thing for Samuel to know that his sons are corrupt, and another for them to declare that they know it, too. And they use it as an argument [00:32:00] to prove their point. Furthermore, they explicitly requested a king to judge them. To judge them? But wasn't he, Samuel, still their judge? They need a leader? Didn't he lead them into battle? Didn't he gain military victories for their nation? He was old, so what? In other words, he was, according to his critics, like the politician who doesn't know when to leave the stage.

Which is always difficult. Actors will tell you that it is much more difficult to leave the stage than to enter onstage. But they don't know. And they stay. They overstay. In other words, he was, according, therefore, to his critics, someone who clings to power, instead of relinquishing it with grace.

[00:33:00] Is it out of spite that he crowns an unknown youth,

whose spends his time looking for lost donkeys? You know, Saul, the famous sentence, "Saul looked for donkeys and found a kingdom." Could it be that Saul's appointment was actually a vindictive act, whose purpose was to show the foolishness, the absurdity of popular interference in national policy?

Such critics forget that Samuel only follows Divine instructions. It is God who tells him to implement the idea of royalty. It is God who tells him how to go about finding the candidate. And the two form a strange pair. The opposite of Samuel, young Saul is everything but charismatic. From the outset, he moves us by his naïveté, his innocence. His father sends him off [00:34:00] in search of donkeys, so he obeys. But after three days, he becomes anxious that his father may be worried about him. So people advise him to seek the help of a man called the Seer. Little does he know that their encounter will be a turning point in his life, as well as that of his nation.

When the prophet tells Saul of his new status, he is incredulous. "I belong," says he, "to the smallest tribe of Israel. To one of its youngest families. Why, then, do you speak to me like this?" In other words, please don't torment me

with your bizarre fairy tales about Jewish royalty. He accepts the crown only when he becomes *ish acher*, another man.

Is Saul respected by the people? Not right away. In the street, [00:35:00] passersby are astonished to see him among the musicians, who engage in prophecy while playing music. "*Ha-gam Shaul ban'viim?*" they say, "What? Saul, the young kid from our neighborhood? What is he doing among the prophets?" The *b'nei Belial*, the wicked ones, mock him publicly. "Look at our king. Can you imagine him as our savior?" They taunt and insult him. But *vay'hi k'macharish*, says the text. He keeps quiet. Even as king, he remains silent. His dignity forbids him to respond to insults. A king does not stoop to the level of his detractors. In due course, they stop attacking him.

He asserts his position as sovereign through his courage in battle, and his determination to unite the people by restoring its sense of national purpose and pride. Until then, [00:36:00] the nation dwelled in fear. So profound was this sense of defeat among the tribes that Nahash, king of the Ammonites, told the inhabitant of a village called Jabesh-Gilead that if they surrendered to his army, they would each live, but at the cost of one eye. Both ridiculing and terrorizing them, he said,

"Run, run for seven days, run anywhere to anyone. We shall catch up with you, and put you on your knees."

Saul organized a counterattack, saving Israel's freedom and honor. Ever modest, this first king of the Jews, who could have lived in luxury, continued to work in the fields. His coronation? It had been kept secret by Samuel. Now, the prophet, advocating democracy, [00:37:00] staged a sort of national referendum to elect the king who had already been anointed. Men from all the tribes were presented as candidates, all except Saul, who was hiding. Eventually, he was found among the luggage. "Here's your king," Samuel declared. And the people shouted, "Long live the king." Whereupon, Samuel sent them all home. A king against his will, Saul wanted to go on living as a simple citizen. Samuel was still the true leader of Israel, and Saul paid him the homage due his rank.

When Saul waged his first war against the Ammonites, he did so in Samuel's name, and on his authority. Still, the prophet constantly seemed troubled, frustrated, even bitter. An example. After the victory over the Ammonites, Saul and the entire population rejoiced [00:38:00] over the Ammonites. They rejoiced, and they gathered at Gilgal for the festivity. And

Samuel? Didn't he feel gratified that his candidate, that his pupil, that his choice, had done so well? Apparently not.

And yet, he was there. He even made a speech. What he said was indicative of his mood. "I heard your demand," he began. "You wanted a king, here he is. As for myself, I am old." In other words, he accepted the consequences of his situation, which he did not like, but could not control. But suddenly, he changed course. Like Moses to whom he's often compared, he indulged in a pre-prodromo. "Since my youth, I have been in your midst," he said. "So tell me. In the presence of the Lord and His anointed emissary, tell me whether I have ever taken an ox from someone, [00:39:00] or a donkey from someone else. And whether I have ever stolen anything from anyone, or even bought -- been bought by anyone. Tell me, and I will answer you."

What happened to our beloved prophet? What was he talking about? Whoever accused him of stealing? Whoever leveled any accusation at all against him? Guilty of corruption of justice, he? The incorruptible? His sons, yes, that's a different matter. But then, why should he have to justify himself before his people, and at the festive gathering to boot? And why did he ask for an immediate response? Did he feel that insecure?

And here, we discover an anomaly in the Midrashic treatment of a biblical character. Generally, the Bible glorifies its heroes, whereas the Midrash humanizes them by uncovering their weaknesses, [00:40:00] and we shall see the same next week about Hosea. In the case of Samuel, it is the opposite. Scripture accentuates his failings, while the Midrash emphasizes his virtues. Actually, the biblical sources are generous towards the young Samuel. Less so towards the grown man. As an adolescent, he's close to perfection. *V'hana'ar Shmuel*, and the adolescent Samuel, *holech v'gadel*, constantly grows, *va tov*, and he is good, *gam im Adoshem v'gam im anashim*, he's good with God as well as with his people.

Few men in Jewish history have received such praise. It is only when Samuel acquires influence that he becomes controversial. Hence, the impulse in Midrashic literature to balance the portrait by glorifying him. Listen. Midrash says, "Born circumcised, he is [00:41:00] among the eight princes and founders of humankind. At 12, he was endowed with prophetic powers. The Palestinian Talmud calls him *Rabban Shel Nevi'im*, a master of prophets. Though wealthy, he never profited financially from his position. When thirsty, he never drank from a public well. When traveling to sit in judgment, he rode his own donkey.

His misfortune was his two sons. They aged him prematurely. It was because of their unworthy behavior that he died at 52. His relations with Saul were not easy, either. We are told in the text that Samuel mourned the downfall of his young protégé. He was disappointed that God had changed His mind, and removed Saul from the throne, replacing him with David. Then, why did Samuel have outbursts of anger against Saul? [00:42:00] They preceded the episode with Agag, the Amalekite king.

One incident occurred when Saul organized a victory celebration after a major defeat. A defeat of the Philistines. Everybody was there except Samuel. Saul and the people waited for him one day, another day, seven days. Finally, Saul began the ceremony without him. It was almost concluded when Samuel appeared, and of course, he was enraged. Was it entirely his fault? Not Saul's? How could a new king begin a popular event without Samuel? Granted, the prophet was late. So what? Didn't Saul owe him his career? Couldn't he have been more patient?

Let us turn the question around. Why was Samuel late? Why did he make his king and his people wait for such a long time? If he had had an unexpected obligation, [00:43:00] a call from God, for instance, why didn't he dispatch a messenger to inform the

king of the emergency he, the prophet, had to deal with? Still, Samuel's explosive reaction to Saul's apparent haste does seem a bit unreasonable. Saul tried to explain. "The enemy was approaching, and my people were apprehensive. I had no choice, I had to start." The prophet refused to accept the king's apology. "You did the wrong thing," he said, "thus, your reign will not last. God has already chosen someone else to rule over His people."

Poor Saul. What happened to him was unfair, unjust. God had chosen his successor, even before he committed his sin? If it was a sin at all? And what if, in fact, God had actually entrapped his prophet with the sole purpose of provoking Saul's downfall? [00:44:00] After all, the date for the celebration had been set by Samuel himself. Saul was on time. So were the people. Samuel alone was late. Why, then, hasn't Samuel granted the inexperienced young king a special dispensation for extenuating circumstances? It is sad to admit, but Samuel seems to have waited for the king's defeat.

Even if Saul had not acted with such haste, or rather with such punctuality, Samuel would have announced to him the end of his reign. So why such a lack of compassion towards a man like Saul, who was usually willing to share his power, and who in

fact did little without consulting him? From that moment on, nothing could bring them together. Everything conspired to separate and to oppose one to the other. Samuel treated Saul not as an adversary, but as an enemy. Could Samuel have elevated Saul [00:45:00] only so as to better hate him afterwards? Or to witness his fall? Was it his hate that he drew from his grave to the despairing king in the home of the witch at Endor?

To explore this text is to choose between the prophet's apparent harshness and the king's apparent humanism. It is impossible to embrace one without distancing oneself from the other. Their final clash occurred after Israel's stunning victory over the Amalekites. A time when Israel sighed with relief. Another tragedy had been averted. Everybody ought to be exuberant and celebrate the military triumph of brave Jewish warriors over their hereditary enemy. But victory, instead of creating national unity, occasionally tears it apart. [00:46:00] Poor Saul. God was against him, and he knew it.

Eventually, the king grew melancholy, moody, isolated. Suspecting the whole world of plotting against him, he ordered the slaying of the priests of Nov, the witches, and all those whose occult powers eluded his authority. Naturally, David's

arrival on the scene didn't help matters. The young shepherd with his golden voice became a national hero. At what point was Saul aware of David's clandestine coronation? The last period of Saul's reign is depressing. He let himself fall deeper and deeper into the abyss, and all this because earlier in his life, he had not waited for Samuel at the popular ceremony. On that day, he understood that he would never free himself from [00:47:00] his mentor's hold on him. What occurred later, after his victory over the Amalekites, after his refusal to execute their king Agag, was merely a confirmation of what he had felt then, at Gilgal, at the ceremony.

Why had he disobeyed the prophet's order to kill Agag? A victim of his own compassion, Saul had to endure Samuel's wrath. And God's, because he was too kind, too charitable, incapable of beheading a human being, even that of his enemy, whose eyes were fixed on his. That is why he was condemned to lose his kingdom. The Talmud says, "*Kol ham'racheim al ha'achzar,*" whoever has pity on a cruel person, in the end will be cruel to the innocent, to the merciful ones. And Saul didn't understand that. [00:48:00] And therefore, between the voice of God and that of his heart, Saul chose to listen to the latter.

Actually, this is how the Midrash portrays him, demonstrating real understanding both for his humanity and his transgression. According to some commentators, Saul refused to kill not only Agag, but also civilians and animals, thus resisting a direct order from Samuel, who spoke in the name of the Lord. Saul's argument? The Torah prohibits the slaying of an animal and its offspring on the same day. Thus, how could he, Saul, kill parents and children together? And besides, even if human beings did sin, why should animals be punished? And even if adults did commit serious transgressions, why do children die?

Was he waiting for an answer? [00:49:00] It is offered to him in the Midrash, which quotes a celestial voice. "Do not be more just than necessary." Saul was not convinced. His humanity is criticized by some commentators. One of them maintains that because Saul allowed Agag to live another night in jail, he was responsible for a near-tragedy of Jews in Persia. We are told that Agag had seduced a woman in jail, and that Haman was his descendant. Had Agag been immediately executed, there would be no Purim.

Reish Lakish, in the Talmud, formulates his condemnation of behavior very, very strongly. "Misguided pity is no less dangerous than cruelty." Still, [00:50:00] between one man who

is harsh, and another who is not harsh enough, there is something in me that says, perhaps, sometimes, we should favor the latter. Ultimately, it was the prophet Samuel who, with one stroke of the sword, beheaded Agag, saying, "Just as your sword has orphaned many mothers, this will orphan yours." Is he commended for this gesture? The lack of unanimity in the Midrash is meaningful. One sage believes that Samuel tortured Agag before putting him to death. Another maintains that he castrated him. With his last breath, Agag is said to have asked Samuel, "Is this how a prince is executed in your land?" And the third theory. Actually, Saul was not as innocent as he appears. If he refused to kill Agag, it was because he sought to humiliate him. [00:51:00] And that is why he needed him alive, which is why Agag preferred death.

Now, to return to the animosity that Samuel expressed towards Saul. Interestingly, it transcends both the personal and the theological. In fact, I think it preceded them. Why should a messenger of God be resentful of a man also chosen by God for other missions? After many months and years of reflection and research, I stumbled upon a theory. I remembered that Hannah called her son Samuel, or *Shmuel*, because "*Vayiten Hashem li et-sh'eilati ashei sha'alti me'imo*," God had fulfilled my wish,

"vegam anochi," and I, too, "hishiltichu l'Adoshem," I loaned him to God.

The word *sha-al* occurs four times. We have said it in one sentence. [00:52:00] That word is clearly on her mind. But then, the question arises: if she thinks so much of *sha-al*, why doesn't she call her son *Sha-ul*, Saul? That would be the logical name. And because she chooses to call him *Shmuel*, which means something totally different, "the name of God" -- does this explain the prophet's resentment towards Saul? Not for receiving his tasks, but for usurping his name?

As readers and students of biblical tales, we surely accept the idea that both a king and a prophet have their place in our collective memory. Of the two, who is more human? Samuel, who communicates God's will in history, or Saul, who is mainly concerned with the present? [00:53:00] For Samuel, the question is simple. God wants all Amalekites to be killed, with no exceptions. For Saul, a man who has seen his soldiers kill and be killed, death is not an abstraction. Of course, Agag is an Amalekite. But he's also a human being. Is Saul against corrective guilt and punishment? No. He had ordered the execution of so many others. The false priests, the sorcerers, the witches. So why has he singled out Agag for mercy?

Was it, perhaps, a sudden impulse on his part to allow Samuel, the prophet, to act as Saul, the king? Or was it a way for him to challenge the Almighty, as if to say, "Master of the universe, You want me to kill this man? Then speak to me personally, not through another person, [00:54:00] and it will be done." But God never spoke to Saul. He spoke to Samuel, who heard a voice and did not realize that it was God's. Is this one of the lessons we draw from this tale? That it is possible that God speaks to us, and we don't know it? (pause) (applause)

END OF VIDEO FILE