



## **Haftarah Shabbat Zachor**

### **1 Samuel 15:2-34**

### **February 28, 2015 / 9 Adar 5775**

It's almost Purim and the special Haftarah is connected to the Torah portion through the so called genealogical or at least literary connection of Agag, King of the Amalekites, to Amalek. Having mentioned that, I'd like to focus on the manner in which King Saul is depicted.

Saul failed to fulfill the Lord's commandment to completely eradicate the Amalekites. This included destroying their livestock. The text, through the voice of Samuel, understands this to be a violation of God's will and provides ample reason for his removal as King. Even though Saul assumed responsibility for his failure and begged Samuel's forgiveness, we are told that repentance was not sufficient, Saul had rejected the Lord's commandments and the Lord had rejected him.

If one views this haftarah and the 1st Book of Samuel as a continuation of the Book which preceded it, the book of Judges, a different picture begins to emerge. Judges is primarily concerned with the development of leadership and the need for a central government ruled by a King. Samuel, the last of the Judges was responsible for anointing, (actually appointing in a ceremonial manner) the first two kings of Israel, Saul and David. Both of these Kings had serious flaws. Saul was a warrior, a charismatic figure, but at the same time a somewhat tragic, Macbeth-like figure. The job was too much for him, and as the pressures increased, so did his rage. And as his rival, David, gained in popularity; so did his jealousy.

David, who like Saul, exhibited charismatic leadership qualities at the beginning of his rise to power, fell prey to the sins of success. He failed to appoint a successor, allowed dissent to ferment amongst his sons, viciously wiped out Saul's family in order to secure his own position and of course, like too many men in power, loved the ladies. I'm not certain if the plural form of the word "lady" is sufficient to describe his behaviors.

What is usually not taken into account when one reads and studies these texts is the importance that geography played to the authors of this story. Saul was the son of Kish from the tribe of Benjamin. Benjamin was one of the major tribes and received land in what we call the North. Jerusalem, what was to become the city of David, was in the South. The authors of our story, that is to say, the people in Babylon, living in exile during the period 597 B.C.E. to let's say around 450. B.C.E., inherited wonderful stories about those who lived 500 plus years earlier. They understood their task to weave together the myths and stories of their ancestors into a united message that would empower our people to return and to rebuild Israel into a united

country. One of the ways this was accomplished was to diminish the credibility of the Northern tribes and to stress the importance of a kingdom united under the Davidic line. For this reason, Saul is portrayed as flawed and abandoned by God; while David, who is equally flawed, retains God's love.

One final note: Each of these men heard God's voice at the beginning of their political lives and lost it as they garnered power and success. This was not the lesson or the reason that the rabbis living in the 3rd and 4th centuries C.E. selected this passage as the haftarah, but it certainly leaves us much to consider.

*This week's Haftarah commentary was written by Rabbi Simon, Executive Director of the FJMC and author of numerous books, including "Understanding the Haftarah. An Everyperson's Guide" and "The Non-Jewish Spouse: Strategies for Clergy and Lay Leadership". [Both of these books are available in the FJMC on-line store]*