

King Saul: A Study in Failed Leadership

by Joseph R. Rackman

Ever since learning the story of first king of Israel, Saul, in my childhood, it bothered me. His successor, King David, was a fuller, richer character. There seemed no point to the unsuccessful rulership of Saul. I could never discern any lessons to be learned nor did I develop any empathy for the first king of the Jewish people.

It must be the nature of youth, or at least my youth, that led me to focus on heroes and only with the passage of time and the experience of my own failures, that I came to understand that the story of King Saul is significant for what failures can teach us about life. To study the life of Saul, is to study the life of a failed leader. Just as we can learn lessons from successful leaders, so there are lessons to be drawn from failed leaders.

Prologue: The Book of Judges

Samuel is the third book of the prophets. The first, *Joshua*, tells the story of the conquest of Israel. The next book, *Judges*, is really one tale often told. When the Israelites entered Canaan under the leadership of Joshua, though they were successful in establishing themselves on the land, they had not subdued all of the indigenous tribes. Furthermore, the Israelite tribes were not united in the period following the death of Joshua, much like the states in North America before being united at the end of the 18th Century.

Repeatedly in *Judges*, neighboring tribes rise up against the Israelites, with the author of *Judges* attributing the incursions to the evil that the people had done in the sight of the Lord. Then, a hero arises, the first is Ehud, who by a subterfuge manages to gain entry into the court of the overweight King Eglon of Moab. Pretending to offer him a present of a beautiful sword, Ehud assassinates him. Then Ehud rose up against the people of Moab and Moab was subdued, “and the land rested for eighty years.”

Thereafter, there are the stories of various judges, including the well known Deborah and Gideon, and the best known of all, the wide screen cinemascope tale of Samson and Delilah.

The pattern is always the same: a threat, a Jewish judge or warrior coming to the rescue, followed by a period of tranquility in the land.

Yet the real setup for the story of King Saul is contained in the final story of the book of *Judges*. The opening verse of the story (19:1) makes the plot line clear: "And it came to pass in those days, when there was no king in Israel, that there was a certain Levite . . . who took a concubine." There was no king. That was the failure in the land. And the story of this Levite is the prologue to the creation of kingship in the land and certain elements of the story help us to understand why Saul, in particular, was chosen for that role.

The key character in this last story, a Levite, is symbolic of the nationhood of Israel. (The Levites did not receive any contiguous area as their inheritance, only cities that were scattered throughout and amongst the various tribes, so that the Levites could serve as religious teachers and leaders.) His concubine had fled to her father's house in Bethlehem and was there for four months until the Levite finally went to take her back. After the reconciliation between him and the father of the concubine, the Levite left with his entourage, including the concubine. It was late in the day and a servant requested that they turn aside into a (non-Jewish) Jebusite city to lodge there. The Levite, evidencing national pride, answers and says that "We will not turn aside into the city of a foreigner that is not of the children of Israel; but we will pass over to Gibeah." (19:12)

Big mistake. No one would give the group lodging in Gibeah, which was situated in the territory of the tribe of Benjamin, other than an old man who was of the tribe of Ephraim, but who lived in Gibeah. Perhaps he did so because he already knew what it was like to be an outsider amongst the inhospitable, insular Benjamites.

In a scene reminiscent of the evil behavior of the people of Sodom to the nephew of Abraham (see *Genesis* 19:1-14), a mob appeared at the door of the old man who had offered the hospitality and they said, "Bring forth the man that came into thy house, that we may know him." The old man refuses, but gives the concubine of the Levite to the mob, which abuses and kills her.

There is a tremendous irony, that this Levite, who had refused to go and sleep in the Jebusite foreign village encountered such vile behavior from his fellow Jews. Later, the Levite took a knife and divided his concubine, limb by limb, into twelve pieces and sent them throughout the borders of Israel, demanding revenge. (19:29)

The army that had assembled to punish the town Gibeah ultimately rampaged against the entire tribe of Benjamin after the Benjamites had refused to turn over the inhabitants of Gibeah. The Benjamites, vastly outnumbered, still managed to gain a victory on the first day of battle. Eventually, however, after suffering heavy casualties, the other tribes of Israel defeated the tribe of Benjamin.

The slaughter was great, but even worse was the resolve to ostracize the tribe of Benjamin with the other tribes resolving not to give their daughters to any Benjamite for a wife. (This became yet another of our intermarriage problems, that Israelite women not marry Benjamite men; the first was those darn Canaanite women who appear in *Genesis*.) There was no parallel prohibition of a non-Benjamite man marrying a Benjamite woman because those were the

days of patrilineal descent, where the tribe one belonged to was determined by the tribe of the father, so that the children of a Benjamite woman, if married to a non-Benjamite, were not Benjamites. Ultimately, this decision was regretted when it was realized that the tribe was threatened with extinction.

Finally, through a subterfuge, the prohibition of the giving over of daughters to Benjamite men was circumvented and the tribe of Benjamin was preserved.

(*Judges* 21:16-23) And *Judges* closes by noting that, "In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did that which was right in his own eyes."

A few things are obvious from this closing episode in *Judges*. First, the nation lacks and needs a centralized authority. Second, there were tremendous moral lapses throughout the land (with the mob at Gibeah demonstrating how Israelites could sink as low as Sodomites). And, perhaps most important of all, there was enough sense of national identity, despite all of the rivalries between the tribes, that could not permit the tribes to watch one of their group be extinguished. (The behavior of Judah in the Joseph story reflects the identical value, but that is another essay.) The sense of nationhood was there in the hearts and minds of every tribesman. In sum, like the American colonies on the eve of the American revolution, the ingredients were all there to make a united nation.

Why the tribe of Benjamin?

It is no accident that the first king chosen is from the tribe of Benjamin. There are two reasons, one political and the other literary.

It is clear, at the end of *Judges*, that the weakest of the tribes is Benjamin. There is a certain political logic in selecting a king from this tribe. Certainly, it represents the insistence that Benjamin not disappear as a tribe. Also, as the weakest tribe, the king will have the fewest number of troops that are loyal to him as a Benjamite, thus the new king will not be that threatening to the other tribes. David, by contrast, is from the powerful tribe of Judah. He will prove to be a more successful king. Perhaps, it was due in part to the fact that he had strong backing from his own tribe of Judah. Thus, one lesson of leadership is clear. If one is to have a leader, it must be a leader who is strong enough to lead. Saul, though this is not clearly a source of his downfall, as shall be seen, is not in such a position from the outset.

A second reason for the selection from the tribe of Benjamin of the first king relates to an issue raised in *Genesis*. The first patriarch, Abraham, had his eldest son from his concubine Hagar and only later would his wife Sarah give birth to Isaac. Does the selection of Isaac as Abraham's successor stand for the rule that leadership goes to the eldest child of the first wife, or is the principle that the youngest child is to be the leader. The primacy of the youngest seems to be confirmed in the second iteration of the story of the patriarchs. Isaac has only one wife, Rebecca, and she has twin children, Esau, the eldest, and Jacob, the younger. Again, it is the youngest who prevails. The youngest of the twelve children of Jacob was Benjamin. Perhaps the tribe of Benjamin can lay claim to the leadership of the Israelites. The ascension of David from Judah, however, will put the lie to this theory, but it requires the failure of a Benjamite to establish that it is not the youngest who (unlike the *Genesis* stories) is to attain the leadership role. The youngest, though, does get one prize—Jerusalem is located

in its boundaries. This special bequest had been ordained by God through Moses. (*Deuteronomy* 33:12)

When is a leader needed?

At the end of *Judges* it is clear that there was a political need for leadership. Tribes had the capacity to gang up on each other. A civil war was a possibility. The moral level of the people, as exemplified by the episode at Gibeah, is low. Which brings us to the most obvious leadership issue of all, namely, that one anoints leaders to solve particular problems. This seems obvious, but we often do not seem to understand this.

When *Judges* concludes, there is no sense of doubt. The people need a king. The nation must be consolidated. There are enemies to eliminate and moral standards to be set. This is the stage when Saul walks upon the scene. The question to be answered is why does he fail?

What does the prophet Samuel think about anointing a king?

The book of *Samuel*—note that the breakup of Samuel into two books was a product of Christian scholarship—opens with the story of Hannah praying for a child whom she vows to dedicate to the service of God. The child who is born in answer to her prayers is Samuel. The book seems to be going along the lines of *Judges*. In Chapter IV we find that the Philistines have defeated the Israelite army even to the point that the Philistines managed to capture the Ark of God. Then a miracle occurred, the Philistines had taken the Ark of God and placed it in the palace of the Philistine god, Dagon. Behold, the next morning, the god had fallen face downward before the Ark of the Lord. The Philistines placed Dagon upright once again, yet, the following morning, Dagon had fallen face downward to the ground once again before the Ark of the Lord. The Philistines then moved the Ark to another location and there was panic and plague in the new Philistine location. Finally, the Philistines got the point and not only returned the Ark, but sent it back with gold and other offerings.

And Samuel preached to the people the obvious point, that God had saved them from the Philistines and that in return they must serve God alone and that the foreign gods that were (apparently) being worshiped by some Israelites were to be destroyed. In Chapter 7 the people repent.

The Philistines appear not to have been the brightest of nations, because when they saw the children of Israel gathered to hear the preaching of Samuel, they decided to again attack the Israelites. But “the Lord thundered with a loud noise on that day, upon the Philistines, and threw them into a panic, and they were beaten before Israel.” (I *Samuel* 7:10) And then in language very reminiscent of *Judges*, we read that “the Philistines were subdued, and they came no more into the border of Israel, and the hand of the Lord was upon the Philistines all the days of Samuel. And the cities which the Philistine had taken from Israel were restored to Israel . . . and Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life.” (I *Samuel* 7:13-15) It is almost as if the story belongs in *Judges*.

It is in the next chapter that the history of the Jewish people takes a different turn. We are told that Samuel has grown old and that his children “did not walk in

[Samuel's] ways, and they turned after gain, and they took bribes and perverted justice." (I *Samuel* 8:3)

The twist in the plot line is that, unlike the passivity of the people of the prior approximately two centuries, rather than await a new threat and for a new leader to arise, the people come to Samuel and ask that he "set up for us a king to judge as like the nations." (I *Samuel* 8:5) Well, Samuel did not like this and Samuel prays to God who responds and says, "Don't take it too hard Samuel, for they have not rejected you but they have rejected Me from reigning over them. Like all the deeds they have done from the day I brought them up from Egypt . . . and now, listen to their voice, except that you shall warn them, and tell them the manner of the king who will reign over them." (I *Samuel* 8:7-9) Samuel then tells the people that the king whom they will anoint will take your sons (for the army) and use monies for chariots and horsemen and he will take your daughters for cooks, bakers, etc. He will take from the best of the fields and he will tax "and you will cry out on that day because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves, and the Lord will not answer you on that day." (I *Samuel* 8:19) But the people responded saying that they still wanted to be like all other nations and "our king will judge us, go forth before us and wage our wars." (I *Samuel* 8:20) And then God tells Samuel to listen to the voice of the people and anoint a king. What an ominous beginning for kingship in Israel. The language in *Samuel* is much harsher than the words of Moses in *Deuteronomy* concerning the appointment of a king. Moses warns that the king must not accumulate many horses, nor have many wives, nor accumulate much silver and gold. And the king, Moses commands, must write a copy of the *Torah*, which must be with him always so that the king will learn to be in awe of God and to carefully observe the rules of the *Torah*. (*Deuteronomy* 17:14-20) The words of the prophet Samuel are much harsher. The prediction is that the king will abuse his powers; Moses had only suggested that this might happen.

One might be tempted to attribute the harshness of Samuel's words to the quest by the Jews to be like the nations who surround them. However, almost identical language appears in *Deuteronomy* (where it says that the people will say, "We would like to appoint a king, just like the nations around us"). Perhaps the reason for the harshness was that, Samuel, being human, took the rejection personally. Indeed, he may have felt slighted by the people having told him that "your sons do not walk in your ways." (I *Samuel* 8:5) Regardless, the main point is that kingship is not all that it is cracked up to be and that it is Saul who is going to have to test this premise. Will Saul be able to avoid the pitfalls that have been predicted? In all events, Saul must take a job that neither Samuel nor God want filled. The clamor of the people for kingship is especially poignant just after having been saved by miracles done by God (in defeating the Philistines). Yet, the people still wish to rely on mortal strength. In one sense, the people are correct. The time is right for the uniting of all the tribes as a nation. This is evident from the fact that David will succeed in this endeavor. The question is, is Saul the person for the job? The second related issue is what characteristics are necessary for a king to be successful. And while David will prove not to be a perfect king, if we examine the successes and failures of King Saul, the people of

Israel and David will be given a very direct lesson in what it takes to be a bad (or a good) king.

Saul's Background

Chapter 9 opens up by letting us know that Saul looks the part. "He was young and handsome, there being no one of the children of Israel handsomer than he; from his shoulders and upwards, he was taller than any of the people." (1 *Samuel* 9:2) Saul had the JFK charisma and looks. Presumably, he had style. This is not a necessary condition for leadership, to be handsome, but it does help. (Yet, Franklin Delano Roosevelt could defeat Hitler from a wheelchair, so physical attributes are not the be-all and end-all.) Indeed, as handsome as Saul was, perhaps his failures as a king came to teach us to ignore a leader's good looks. Indeed, when God instructs Samuel to anoint a successor to Saul, namely David, God says, "Look not upon appearances, or height, . . . the Lord looks into the heart." (1 *Samuel* 16:7) (Similarly, Absalom, David's son, who leads a rebellion against his father is described as, "In Israel there was not a man so highly praised for his handsome appearance . . ."; in other words, good looks are not indication of a good heart. (2 *Samuel* 14:25))

The first story about Saul concerns the assets that Saul's father had lost. The father says to his son to go and search for them. Saul is unsuccessful and, at the suggestion of his servant, goes to see a man of God for direction. This is strongly reminiscent of the story when Jacob sent Joseph out to the grazing fields to see how his brothers were doing. A stranger found Joseph wandering about and the stranger (which the rabbis say was the angel Gabriel), sent him in the direction of his brothers. Joseph would then be thrown into the pit, sold as a slave, and ultimately become the ruler of Egypt, saving his family. So, too, Saul's leadership journey begins with a tale of items that are lost. The implication is that a leader takes those who are lost and sets them on the right path.

In a nearby city, Saul meets with the man of God, Samuel. God had spoken to his prophet and had told him that He/She would be sending a man from the tribe of Benjamin to save the Jewish people from the Philistines. Samuel tells Saul that the assets of his father for which he is searching have already been found. Samuel will then anoint Saul, though Saul protests and notes, "Am I not a Benjamite of the smallest of the tribes of Israel?" (1 *Samuel* 9:21)

Then Samuel brings all the tribes of Israel near and, at his direction, the tribe of Benjamin came closer. Yet Saul could not be found. He was hiding among the baggage. This is an example, according to the rabbis, of Saul's modesty and humility and from which the rabbis will draw the conclusion that one who flees rulership, because of the honor and glory involved, will be pursued and overtaken by that very position of rulership. On the other hand, the one who pursues rulership, that position will elude him. Still, it appears that Saul lacks self-confidence. This will become even more evident later on.

After this, Samuel sends all the people away, each one to his house. And Saul, too, goes to his house. And guess where he lives? In the territory of Benjamin. What city? Since you know the name of one city in Benjamin, you should be able to guess where Saul lives. Yes, he comes from Gibeah, where the Levite's

concubine had been raped and murdered, further evidence that the selection of Saul was to countermand the events that had taken place at Gibeah generations ago. (I *Samuel* 10:26)

Some of the Israelites whose “heart God had touched, went with” Saul, but the “unscrupulous [ones] despised him.” (I *Samuel* 10:26-27) The Abarbanel, writing in the late 15th Century, deduces from this passage that the coronation of a king involves two factors: first, divine choice; and, second, acceptance by the people. Since Saul perceived that the second factor was lacking, he returned home like one of the people. The Abarbanel makes his comment with knowledge of the realities of political affairs. He wrote this commentary on *Joshua*, *Judges* and *Samuel* between June of 1483, when he had been forced to flee from Portugal to Spain, until around the middle of March 1484. In Portugal, he had reached the highest stage of his power and prestige as the principal advisor to the king of Portugal. That king’s unexpected death at the age of 49 from plague would prove to be the Abarbanel’s downfall. Less than a year later, in 1484, recognizing both the political and financial genius of this great Bible commentator, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain would bring him to the court as one of their more important (if not most important) advisers. (Ironically, the Abarbanel would be so successful advising Ferdinand and Isabella, that the two would complete their conquest of Spain with the expulsion of the Muslims and, desiring to make Spain exclusively Christian, in 1492, they expelled the Jews, including the Abarbanel and his family.)

So, the Abarbanel knows a lot about politics and so his observations at this juncture should be examined. He is not a man of democratic inclination. (The concept has yet to be invented.) Still, the Abarbanel understands that it is not enough to be anointed. A leader must have followers.

One further irony: Samuel publicly anointed Saul in the city of Mizpah, where a few decades earlier the Israelite tribes had gathered an army to punish the Benjamites for the sins that had taken place at Gibeah. Now they are gathering there to anoint a king from the tribe of Benjamin. (*Judges* 20:1; I *Samuel* 10:17). Again we see that Saul’s anointment has much to do with rectifying the events portrayed at the end of *Judges*.

I don't care what you think—not too much.

Chapter 11 opens up with a familiar theme. The Jewish inhabitants of Jabesh-Gilead are threatened by the Ammonites. Word reaches Saul in Gibeah (on his way home from tending to the cattle in the field). He takes an oxen, cuts it into pieces and sends them to the Israelite tribes (as the Levite in *Judges* had done to his concubine), with the message, “Whosoever does not go forth after Saul and after Samuel, so shall be done to his oxen.” (I *Samuel* 11:7) Saul is threatening that those who do not respond to his call will be punished. Perhaps, he should have appealed on a higher level to the obligation of fellow Israelites to maintain morality throughout their land. By contrast, when the Levite in *Judges* summoned his fellow Israelites, he wrote, “Such a thing has not happened [as happened to his concubine] nor been seen from the day that the children of Israel came up out of the land of Egypt unto this day; consider it, take counsel and speak.” (*Judges* 19:30) This is a summons on a much higher moral plane and is

evidence that Saul may not be so great. On the other hand, maybe Saul has hit the right note, as otherwise the tribes (who do not yet function like a united nation) might not have responded to his summons.

Later, Saul is very effective as a military leader, breaking his assembled army into three contingents and gaining victory in but a single day of battle. To the credit of Saul, at the end of this great victory, the early loyalists of Saul, the ones who followed him to Gibeah after Samuel had anointed him, when most of the others had gone to their homes, wanted to put the ones who had previously gone home to death, but Saul refuses.

Saul has started out well, to my mind, though the Talmud records an opinion critical of Saul for his having permitted the dishonor to his person to occur when, immediately after this anointment, there were those who returned to their homes instead of staying with Saul. (Talmud Yoma 22b, noting the comment of one rabbi that any *Torah* scholar who does not take revenge or bear a grudge like a snake is not a true *Torah* scholar.) Such is one person's opinion, but I do not agree. The ability to forgive (at appropriate times) is not just a matter of courtesy or big-heartedness or even humility. It is about building up a nation.

This is no small matter and an important episode in Jewish history that occurred in June 1948 illustrates the importance of this principle of forgiving one's foes. At the dawn of the Jewish state, there were rival political factions, all of whom, as of June 1948, had maintained their own military structures. The largest of the minority groups in opposition to David Ben-Gurion's leadership was the Irgun led by Menachem Begin (later to become an Israeli Prime Minister). The Irgun had loaded up a ship called the "Altalena" whose cargo of armaments were not headed for the State of Israel and Prime Minister Ben-Gurion, but were specifically heading towards Menachem Begin and his Irgun-commanded army. Ben-Gurion and his ministers regarded these actions as a rebellion. Begin demanded that the weapons be distributed to his battalion. Ben-Gurion maintained that the country could have only one army, the Israel Defense Forces. In the showdown, government troops surrounded the area where the ship was moored and ultimately Israel Defense Forces artillery opened fire on the ship. The Irgun dissidents were arrested and disarmed. Eighteen men died in the clashes. It was this act that ended all military dissent, in part because Menachem Begin, to his credit, could not bring himself to wage war with the Israel Defense Forces. But to the credit of Ben-Gurion, once the initial military clashes of the day had concluded, there were no further reprisals. Menachem Begin, who had clearly rebelled against the authority of the then seven-week old State of Israel, was not arrested. David Ben-Gurion let the matter slide. By not standing on his honor, Ben-Gurion helped to mold a nation.

I think that Saul acted in a similar manner. The people were now united behind him and there was no reason to take revenge.

A warning once again

Samuel now gives his farewell speech to the nation. God is his witness that he has never taken anything from the people (in contrast to the predictions that a

king will gather horses and overtax the people). He again reminds the people of how they had rejected his own leadership and had sought a king.

The omens are not good. Samuel has taken yet another dig at the institution of kingship.

Troubles begin anew. Saul's son, Jonathan, had murdered an officer of the Philistines and now the people are gathering with Saul to fight the Philistines. Saul had been instructed by Samuel to go to Gilgal, to wait there for Samuel and then to offer sacrifices to God. (See

1 Samuel 10:8) As Samuel was not there, Saul decided to go ahead with the sacrifices and, as his (bad) luck would have it, just as Saul had finished offering up the burnt offering, Samuel arrived and is critical of Saul for having started without him. Saul replies and excuses his actions by the fact that "the people had scattered from me, and you did not come at the appointed time, and the Philistines [were gathering for battle]". (*1 Samuel 13:11*) And Saul continued by noting that he could not go fight the Philistines before he had "made supplication before the Lord, and I forced myself and I offered up the burnt offering." (*1 Samuel 13:12*)

Samuel, in response, lashes out at Saul, telling him that he has behaved foolishly and the punishment for not having done the proper thing is that his kingdom will not continue forever. (*1 Samuel 13:13*)

The judgment of Samuel, at first blush, seems very harsh. But I think I know what merited Saul his terrible punishment. We will see the same character failure in a scene involving yet another confrontation of Saul by Samuel concerning King Agag (which we will discuss shortly) and yet once again.

The problem is that Saul was influenced by the people scattering from him, as noted before. He feels rushed. He must somehow maintain his position and prestige. He is unwilling to stand alone. This is a great failing in a king or any leader. While the art of politics may entail never getting too far ahead of the people, the art of leadership requires the ability to stand (at times) alone.

Leaders must ultimately persuade the community to follow them, but they must be willing to stand alone, if needed. This failing of Saul, while not fully self-evident in this scene alone, will be confirmed twice more. Certainly, one might excuse Saul's behavior, in this instance, because he was trying to keep his military forces together. Nevertheless, in a very short time frame, we shall see that Saul is excessively concerned about what the masses think of him.

Saul's Son, Jonathan, Arrives on the Scene

The next two chapters, fourteen and fifteen, are action-packed and filled with drama that will once again demonstrate Saul's excessive concern for what his followers think and say. The story opens up with Jonathan, Saul's oldest son, engaging in a sneak attack on the garrison of the Philistines (who have, once again, assembled to attack the Israelites). Jonathan and his armor bearer win a great victory.

Meanwhile, Saul has gathered his troops and made them swear that they will not eat of the honey which was on the ground (perhaps it was sugarcane) until the enemy has been completely defeated. Jonathan had not heard of this and ate of the honey and even tells those assembled around him (once he has learned of

Saul's order not to eat of the honey) that the weary troops should eat of the honey in order to regain their strength.

Saul, later on, deals with Jonathan's failure to observe the oath. Saul can either insist upon his authority and punish (by death) his own child or uses his authority to admit that his order was unwise (or, at the very least, as a third alternative, forgive his son).

In fact, there is a forth choice, the worst of all, the one that Saul makes. At least if he had shown mercy to his own son, while it might have in the future undercut faithfulness to the commands of the king (knowing that they might be reversed in the future), at least the mercy would have come from the king. If a king changes his mind, at least it is still the king who is in charge. He is the one with the authority. As the story plays out, though, when Saul is ready punish Jonathan, it is the people who intervene and declare that Jonathan is not to be punished (I *Samuel* 14:45) Once again, Saul is influenced by the masses. It makes one wonder whether Saul truly is the master.

No doubt, he was placed in an unfortunate position but he has managed to make the worst possible choice of all.

The Critical Lesson to be Learned from Saul

Chapter 15 opens with Samuel telling Saul that God wishes him to go and smite the nation of Amalek and that not only are they to be utterly destroyed, but "you shall not have pity on [Amalek]; you shall slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, oxen, sheep, camel and ass." (I *Samuel* 15:3)

Now Saul must have been somewhat successful as a king because he is able to assemble 200,000 soldiers. (I *Samuel* 15:4) This contrasts with the army of 3,000 mentioned at the very beginning of Saul's reign. (I *Samuel* 13:2)

Not surprisingly, given this numerically superior army, Saul triumphs. Still Saul commits two cardinal errors. First, Agag, the king of Amalek was captured alive, violating the command to kill every Amalekite. Second, the best of the sheep and cattle were not destroyed but were taken as booty. So it comes as no surprise that God tells Samuel that he regrets having made Saul king and the prophet goes to confront the king of Israel.

It is a poignant scene. "Samuel approaches Saul and says, 'What is then this bleating of the sheep in my ears?' . . . And Saul answers, 'They [the soldiers] brought them from the Amalekites for the people had pity on the best of the sheep, and the oxen in order to sacrifice to the Lord, your God; and the rest we have utterly destroyed.'" (I *Samuel* 15:15) Saul, in other words, excuses his failure. And with great psychological insight, understanding Saul's need for followers and his inability to stand against the desires of those he leads, Samuel asks rhetorically, "Even if you are small in your own eyes, are you not the head of the tribes of Israel?" (I *Samuel* 15:17) In other words, Sauls, who hid among the baggage, who consistently worries about what the people think of him, must remember his position. He is supposed to be the leader, but he is not.

Samuel has to inform Saul that God has rejected him from being a king.

Previously, for the sin of having brought sacrifices before Samuel had arrived, the punishment was that Saul's line would not endure. (I *Samuel* 13:13). Now Samuel tells Saul that he is destined to lose his kingship.

The next words of Saul to Samuel are heartbreaking. The king of Israel says to Samuel, "I have sinned, for I have transgressed the Lord's command and your words, for I feared the people, and I harkened to their voice. And now, forgive now my sin and return with me, and I shall prostrate myself to the Lord." (I *Samuel* 15:24-25) Saul very explicitly confesses to his fear of the people, to his need for their approval.

As Samuel rejects his plea and turns to leave, the garment of either Saul or Samuel is torn (the text is not entirely clear). Nonetheless, this tear is a symbol of God's word that the kingship has been torn from Saul. Still, Saul pleads with Samuel to "honor me now in the presence of the elders of my people, and in the presence of Israel, and return with me." (I *Samuel* 15:30) The prophet Samuel refuses and demands that the captured King Agag be brought before him and Samuel cut Agag into pieces. Never again would Samuel and Saul see each other. (Though Samuel would mourn over the fate of Saul. (I *Samuel* 16:1))

A student of the Bible could readily question why Saul merited such a harsh punishment. Especially if we take Saul's word at face value, that he had seized the best of the animals in order to sacrifice them to God, what was so great about this sin that he could not be forgiven?

The answer is found by contrast to the actions of King David well into his reign. It was the spring, the time for kings to go out for battle, yet David rests at home with the servants in Jerusalem. As if neglecting his duties was not enough, David sees a woman bathing on a rooftop and her beauty leads him to commit adultery with her, though she was the wife of one of his generals. When she becomes pregnant, David has to arrange for the murder of her husband. These crimes tower in evil over the acts of Saul. The key difference between the two men, however, occurs when the prophet confronts the king with his wrongdoing. Saul blamed his soldiers for having taken the booty. When Nathan the prophet confronts David, his response is two words (in Hebrew), "I have sinned against the Lord". (II *Samuel* 12:13)

If one applies the principles of checks and balances to the Jewish system of political theory, it becomes evident that the check against the absolute power of the king is his own conscience. It is the job of the prophet to confront the leader, but it is the obligation of the leader to acknowledge his wrong doing and to rectify it. In this particular instance, David accepts his punishment.

By contrast, Saul insults Samuel, when he is accused of having taken booty, by blaming his soldiers. He does not understand that the acts of his followers are his acts. For better or worse, the actions of his followers are a reflection on him. Only after Saul is told by Samuel that he will lose his kingship does Saul confess to having sinned and says (as quoted earlier), "I have sinned for I transgressed the Lord's commands, and your words, for I feared the people, and I harkened to their voice." But instead of stating that he will accept his punishment, Saul continues by saying, "Now forgive my sin, and return with me, and I shall prostrate myself to the Lord." Somehow, Saul thinks he can get away with it. Perhaps, as had been suggested by some commentators, Saul still thinks that he was in the right and that the prophet Samuel was in the wrong. What is wrong

with saving the best of the cattle to sacrifice to God? What is wrong with holding captive a king of a vanquished enemy?

What Saul has not understood is that it is the words of a prophet that must prevail over the inclinations of a king. And that the king must lead his people, even if the actions will not prove popular. Indeed, the name Saul has the root letters for the Hebrew words “to ask”; too often Saul wants to know what the people think. (By contrast, Samuel, in Hebrew, means “he listens to God”.) Above all, a king must acknowledge his own wrongdoing. There has been perhaps no greater shortcoming in modern American politicians than the inability to acknowledge wrongdoing. Coverup and spin control is the name of the game. Almost unknown is the politician who can simply answer an accusation by saying, “I have sinned.” Instead, we hear presidents who say, “I am not a crook” or “I never had sex with that woman.” Perhaps, this is the most important leadership lesson to be derived from Saul. With leadership comes the responsibility not to be perfect, but to admit wrongdoing when such is the case. This moment, when confronted with his wrongdoing, was the moment when Saul might have redeemed himself. Certainly, one can suspect that Saul has been set up; that he has been chosen because he is a hapless leader whom Samuel and God hope will fail. I do not like this read of the story, first because it attributes a mean-spiritedness to both Samuel and God. Second, we know that Samuel truly mourned for Saul’s downfall. (1 *Samuel* 16:1) I believe that the better read is to see Saul as a failed leader, but as one who might have succeeded. In other words, to study the failures of Saul is to learn how to become a better leader. And Saul, near the end of his life, recognizes his own failures. By now, David is the national favorite and the Philistines (once again) threaten the Israelites. Finally, Saul has learned to seek not the voice of the people, but of God. Unfortunately, Samuel was dead and so Saul deceived a conjurer into summoning Samuel from the dead. There is an irony in the scene. Saul is not hapless or Godless; he had banned conjurers throughout the land. (1 *Samuel* 28:9) And yet he goes to a conjurer, but in disguise, lest it be known that the king is violating his own decree. Yet again, as when Jonathan had been caught eating the honey during battle, we see that Saul does not have the courage to alter his own decree, openly and directly, with kingly dignity. Nothing goes right for Saul in this scene. His disguise is pierced and the ghost of Samuel must inform Saul that he is too late. “The Lord hath sent the kingdom out of thy hand and given it to . . . David because thou didst not hearken to the voice of the Lord.” (1 *Samuel* 28:17-18) Saul had at last understood not to seek guidance from the people, but from God, for he was (through Samuel) calling on the Lord, only it is too late.

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