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THE IMAGE OF SAUL IN RABBINIC LITERATURE

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion

1981

Referee, Prof. Edward A. Goldman

DEDICATION

To my mother, Helen Cecil Berk, ל"טז

and

To my father-in-law, Samuel Kasdan, ל"טז

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Without the love and the patience and the support and the good humor of Shoshana, my wife, there probably would have been no thesis.

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DIGEST

This work is a collection and analysis of midrashim about King Saul. An analysis of this material allows one to view Saul through the eyes of the Rabbis. The study thus becomes an analysis of the image of Saul in rabbinic literature.

In the biblical narratives Saul is an enigmatic and compelling personality. The Rabbis were struck most by Saul's tragic fate. They struggle to justify his fate and to unlock the reasons for the downfall of his kingdom. In the process of justifying his fate they clear Saul's name. He is held responsible for only one sin: the sparing of Agag, King of Amalek. All the rest of the sins and faults attributed to him, either on the biblical or rabbinic level, are rebutted.

This work begins with a description of the rabbinic desire to explain Saul's fate. The various sins and faults attributed to Saul are catalogued as they form the basis for the attempt to justify this fate. Saul's major sin of sparing Agag is then analyzed. In the course of studying Saul's worst sin we learn of a tendency to free Saul of culpability. This tendency is then portrayed and material is presented which clears Saul of the sins and faults presented at the beginning of the work. This is followed by a look at the sin of destroying Nob. On one hand the sin accounts for Saul's fate and yet a full analysis reveals that Saul is in the end not held culpable for this sin. Similarly a look at Saul's relationship with David reveals this tendency to clear Saul of all possible guilt. The last chapter presents material on Saul's family,

his death, and other miscellaneous midrashim. This is followed by a brief conclusion where some reasons for the dynamic portrayed in this work are suggested.

This is material which was gathered in the course of this study on Saul. I did not do the separate research which would be necessary to present the complete image of Saul's family in rabbinic literature.

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CHAPTER ONE

I

Saul, the first king of Israel, met with a tragic fate. He reigned for only two years. He met a horrible, gruesome death. He lost his kingdom and most of his family. That the first king of Israel should suffer such a fate prompted a great deal of midrashic commentary. This concern of the rabbis to come to terms with Saul's fate lies at the core of most of the comments on Saul in the midrash. Typical of this concern are the following selections:

Rab Judah said in the name of Samuel: Why did the kingdom of Saul not endure?...Rab Judah said in the name of Rab: Why was Saul punished?¹

For five sins Saul died...²

Saul, the king of Israel, had a spirit of arrogance in him. Therefore he was killed and the kingdom was uprooted from him.³

The Attribute of Justice strikes everyone who shows mercy to cruel people, as it is written, SO SAUL DIED, AND HIS THREE SONS, AND HIS ARMOR-BEARER, AND ALL HIS MEN, THAT SAME DAY TOGETHER (I Sam. 31:6).⁴

THOU LOVEST EVIL MORE THAN GOOD (Ps. 52:5). David said to Doeg: You desire evil for Saul more than you desire good for yourself. For had Saul not accepted slander from you, he would not have been punished.⁵

Many differing and at times conflicting justifications are offered by the rabbis in this endeavor to explain Saul's

1 Yoma 22b

2 Lev. Rabba 26:7

3 Seder Eliyahu Rabba Chap. 31

4 Kohelet Zuta 7:16

5 Midrash Tehilim 52:7

fate. Saul is "turned back" and has his kingdom removed from him for his failure to eliminate the seed of Amalek.⁶ He did not prosper because he covered up his transgressions.⁷ He was afflicted because of imprecations spoken against him by David.⁸ Calamity is brought down upon him for his failure to kill Agag, the Amalekite king.⁹ He was abased and had his kingdom removed from his family for his arrogance.¹⁰ It is said that his kingdom failed to endure due to the manner in which he was anointed.¹¹ In Genesis Rabba the fate suffered by Saul's kingdom is attributed to the fact that he was of the Tribe of Benjamin. For the Tribe of Benjamin is fated to rule first and to have its rule overcome by the much stronger Tribe of Judah:

If a wolf attacks a lion can come and rescue. But if a lion attacks a wolf cannot come and rescue. Thus Judah and Benjamin. Let Benjamin take (power first) for his (reign) is for a moment and afterwards let Judah (take power) for his (reign) is forever.¹²

It has been shown that in numerous midrashim the rabbis struggle to identify the cause of Saul's fate.

The point here is not their explanations. It is, rather, this frequent concern with Saul's fate. Given this marked

6 Numbers Rabba 1:12

7 Midrash Tehilim 100:2

8 Midrash Tehilim 7:2; Midrash Shmuel Chap. 25

9 Yoma 22b

10 Zebahim 102a

11 Kerithoth 6a, Horayoth 12a; Megillah 14a

12 Genesis Rabba 95

tendency, let us proceed to piece together the full picture of Saul's character as revealed in the midrash. Such a picture will reveal the rabbinic image of the underpinnings of Saul's fate. We begin with his sins and faults.

II

Most of Saul's major sins are neatly described for us by Leviticus Rabba:

For five sins Saul died, SO SAUL DIED FOR HIS TRANSGRESSION WHICH HE COMMITTED AGAINST THE LORD (I Chron. 10:13): (1) because he smote Nob, the city of priests; (2) because he spared Agag, King of Amalek; (3) BECAUSE OF THE WORD OF THE LORD, WHICH HE KEPT NOT (ib.); (4) because he did not obey Samuel who said to him: SEVEN DAYS SHALT THOU TARRY, TILL I COME UNTO THEE (I Sam. 10:8) but he did not do so; (5) AND ALSO FOR THAT HE ASKED COUNSEL OF A GHOST, TO INQUIRE THEREBY (I Chron. 10:13), that is to say, he inquired of a ghost, AND INQUIRED NOT OF THE LORD: THEREFORE HE SLEW HIM (ib. 10:14).¹³

Though not included in this list three other sins will be shown to be of some significance: the sin of jealousy, the sin of listening to slander, and the sin of oppressing David. Of these eight sins three will be dealt with in subsequent chapters: the failure to kill Agag, the slaughter of the priests of Nob, and Saul's oppression of David. Therefore this chapter will deal with the following major sins: Saul's failure to keep the word of the Lord (faithlessness), inquiring of a ghost (necromancy), Saul's acceptance of slander, his jealousy, and his disobedience to Samuel. Additionally, this chapter will elucidate the minor sins and faults of King Saul.

¹³ Lev. Rabba 26:7; Midrash Shmuel Chap. 24; Tanhuma Emor 2; Tanhuma Buber Emor 4; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, **שנ**

Faithlessness

Let us consider first Saul's faithlessness which was described earlier as his failing to keep the word of the Lord. This faithlessness is conceived as originating in Saul's failure to faithfully follow God's command to eliminate Amalek:

IN WHOSE EYES A VILE PERSON IS DESPISED (Ps. 15:4). These words refer to the Holy One, blessed be He, who rejected (Saul's) kingship, (saying through Samuel to Saul:) BECAUSE THOU HAST REJECTED THE WORD OF THE LORD, HE HATH ALSO REJECTED THEE FROM BEING KING (I Sam. 15:23) and again, I HAVE REJECTED HIM FROM BEING KING OVER ISRAEL (ib. 16:1).¹⁴

The initial statement of rejection (I Sam. 15:23) is part of Samuel's criticism of Saul for failing to obey God's command to eliminate Amalek (ib. 15:3). The concept of his faithlessness, while originating in this failure, is spoken of in general terms as a sin in and of itself:

.../What is the meaning of/ COMMIT A TRESPASS AGAINST THE LORD (Lev. 5:20). Every place where **מעילה** (trespass) occurs it refers only to breaking faith (**שיקור**). And thus it says, AND THEY BROKE FAITH (**ויקעלו**) WITH THE GOD OF THEIR FATHERS (I Chron. 5:25). And Scripture says, BUT THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL BROKE FAITH (**ויקעלו מעל**) WITH THE DEVOTED THING (Joshua 7:1). And it says, SO SAUL DIED FOR HIS BREACH OF FAITH (**קמץ לו אשר קעל**) WHICH HE COMMITTED AGAINST THE LORD, WHICH HE KEPT NOT (I Chron. 10:13).¹⁵

In later rabbinic material this faithlessness loses all connection to the Amalek incident. In Pesikta Rabbati we find Saul's faithlessness rooted in the manner in which he uses and fails to use the Urim and Thummim. Saul is contrasted with David who is portrayed as making faithful, steady, and

¹⁴ Midrash Tehilim 15:4

¹⁵ Sifre, Naso, par. 2
Numbers Rabba 8:5
Yalkut Shimoni, Torah, אשא

courageous use of these means of inquiring of God. Saul, however, breaks off his attempt at communicating with God due to imminent danger. Saul is thus portrayed as one not trusting in God:

When Samuel went to anoint David the ministering angels, making accusation before the Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: Why are you taking the kingdom (from Saul) and giving it to David? The Holy One, blessed be He, said to them: I will tell you the difference between Saul and David. Saul stood to make inquiry of the Urim and Thummim, and when the Philistines came upon him, he left off in the act of inquiring of the Urim and Thummim and he fled. During the one time that he inquired of the Urim and Thummim, when the Philistines came he said to the priest, WITHDRAW THY HAND (I Sam. 14:19) as it is written, AND IT CAME TO PASS, WHILE SAUL TALKED UNTO THE PRIEST, THAT THE TUMULT THAT WAS IN THE CAMP OF THE PHILISTINES WENT ON AND INCREASED; AND SAUL SAID UNTO THE PRIEST: WITHDRAW THY HAND (ib.). And he would not wait for the priest to finish! But as for David, when the Philistines were upon him he began to inquire. At that time (when his army will be) stationed in the Valley of the Rephaim, God will say to him: Do not make a direct attack. (I will) go about to the rear (of the Philistines), but you do not have permission to stretch out a hand against them, even if they come near you, until you hear the sound of marching in the tops of the shaking mulberry trees, as it is written, THE PHILISTINES CAME UP YET AGAIN, AND ENCAMPED IN THE VALLEY OF REPHAIM. AND WHEN DAVID INQUIRED OF THE LORD, HE SAID: THOU SHALT NOT GO UP; MAKE A CIRCUIT BEHIND THEM, AND COME UPON THEM OVER AGAINST THE MULBERRY TREES. AND IT SHALL BE, WHEN THOU HEAREST THE SOUND OF MARCHING IN THE TOPS OF THE MULBERRY TREES, THAT THEN THOU SHALT BESTIR THYSELF... (II Sam. 5:22-24)... As David goes forth the Philistines will be coming nearer and nearer and Israel will see them, that they are not far from them, only four cubits. Israel will ask him: David, what are we doing just standing still? He will say to them: I am commanded by God not to stretch forth (a hand) until I hear the sound of marching in the tops of the shaking trees. And he will say: If we stretch forth a hand, we will die and if we do not stretch forth a hand, we will die. It is better for us to die as righteous men and not to die as wicked men. And he will say: I and you, let us lift up our eyes towards the Holy One, blessed be He. Immediately the trees will shake and immediately they will stretch forth their hands, as it is said, AND DAVID DID AS THE LORD COMMANDED HIM (II Sam.

5:25). Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to the ministering angels: See the difference between Saul and David...What will cause David and Israel to be saved? The DIVINE WORD which gives them light: THY WORD IS A LAMP UNTO MY FEET (Psalm 119:105).¹⁶

Saul is vividly portrayed as one who, in sharp contrast to David, cuts himself off from the Divine Word, and hence from Divine Providence. Another example of this is presented in the following midrash which suggests that Saul's death was due to his utter trust in the prophet Samuel and a corresponding unwillingness to trust in God. This midrash suggests that by not praying to God to avert the decree of death of which Samuel informs him, Saul sealed his own fate. Saul is contrasted to Hezekiah who, trusting in God, appeals to have the decree annulled and his prayer is answered:

Another interpretation of THERE IS THAT SPEAKETH (יֵט בּוֹטָה) LIKE THE PIERCINGS OF A SWORD: BUT THE TONGUE OF THE WISE IS HEALTH (Prov. 12:18). Do not read it except as בּוֹטָה (trust). There is that trust: Everyone who trusts in that which is spoken to him by the prophets is like one who takes a sword and thrusts it into his guts. From whom do we learn this? From Saul, who trusted in the words of Samuel. When Saul went and inquired by means of a woman that divines by a ghost, she raised Samuel for him and Samuel said to him all those things /condemning Saul and informing him of his impending disaster/. And when Samuel said to Saul: TOMORROW SHALT YOU AND YOUR SONS BE WITH ME (1 Sam. 28:19) Saul trusted (בּוֹטָה) his words and despaired of prayers. Said Saul: Since Samuel has said to me that I shall die what benefit is there for me in prayer? So he withheld himself from prayers. And he was stabbed by a sword as it says, THEN SAUL SAID TO HIS ARMOR-BEARER: DRAW THY SWORD, AND THRUST ME THROUGH THEREWITH; LEST THESE UNCIRCUMCISED COME AND THRUST ME THROUGH, AND MAKE A MOCK OF ME. BUT HIS ARMOR-BEARER WOULD NOT; FOR HE WAS SORE AFRAID (1 Sam. 31:14). And so what did

16. Pesikta Rabbati Chap. 8. Note: Future tense used because God is talking to the angels at the time of David's anointment; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets קיב

he do? He took the sword and stabbed himself. Who (or what) caused him to trust the words of Samuel? For if he had prayed before the Holy One, blessed be He, he would have canceled from him the decree (of death). Another example of **יש בוטח** (there is that speaketh, taken as trusteth). This refers to Hezekiah who did not do like Saul. Rather, when Isaiah the prophet came and said to him: SET THY HOUSE IN ORDER; FOR THOU SHALT DIE (II Kings 20:1), immediately Hezekiah girded himself for prayer, as it says, THEN HE TURNED HIS FACE TO THE WALL, AND PRAYED UNTO THE LORD (ib. 20:2). What is written immediately after this? AND IT CAME TO PASS, BEFORE ISAIAH WAS GONE OUT OF THE INNER COURT OF THE CITY, THAT THE WORD OF THE LORD CAME TO HIM (ib. 20:4). And what is then written? THUS SAITH THE LORD, THE GOD OF DAVID THY FATHER: I HAVE HEARD THY PRAYER, I HAVE SEEN THY TEARS (ib. 20:5). What caused it so that the decree was annulled? Because he prayed.¹⁷

Necromancy

Saul not only behaved with considerable faithlessness but he also engaged in the sin of necromancy which is considered to be rebellion against God:

Said R. Shmuel b. Nahman: Everyone who goes to a diviner rebels against the word of the Holy One Blessed be He. Why? FOR REBELLION IS AS THE SIN OF WITCHCRAFT, AND STUBBORNNESS IS AS IDOLATRY AND TERAPHIM (I Sam. 15:23). And the sin of teraphim urges and causes even sorrow to himself (the one who uses them).¹⁸

A connection between his faithlessness and the sin of necromancy is described well by this midrash from Leviticus Rabba:

What is written just before this passage (Lev. 21:1)? A MAN ALSO OR A WOMAN THAT DIVINETH BY A GHOST OR A FAMILIAR SPIRIT, SHALL SURELY BE PUT TO DEATH (Lev. 20:27). R. Joshua of Siknin said in the name of R. Levi: A MAN applied to Saul; OR A WOMAN applies to the WOMAN THAT DIVINETH BY A GHOST (I Sam. 28:7). R. Levi in the name of R. Hama b. Hanina said: It would have been better for Saul to have enquired

17 Deut. Rabba (Lieberman) p. 45

18 Midrash Shmuel Chap. 18

by the Urim and Thummim of the One Above and not by the ghost and familiar spirit of the One Below, as he said to his servants, SEEK ME A WOMAN THAT DIVINETH BY A GHOST, THAT I MAY GO TO HER, AND INQUIRE OF HER (I Sam. 28:7).¹⁹

Why did Saul inquire by means of a ghost instead of by the acceptable means of Urim and Thummim? The answer to this can be found in midrashic commentary to I Sam. 28:15 wherein Saul explains to Samuel why he bothered to inquire of him by means of necromancy:

AND SAUL ANSWERED: I AM SORE DISTRESSED; FOR THE PHILISTINES MAKE WAR AGAINST ME, AND GOD IS DEPARTED FROM ME, AND ANSWERETH ME NO MORE, NEITHER BY PROPHETS, NOR BY DREAMS: THEREFORE I HAVE CALLED THEE, THAT THOU MAYEST MAKE KNOWN UNTO ME WHAT I SHALL DO (I Sam. 28:15). R. Isaac son of R. Hiyya answered: THE HEART KNOWETH ITS OWN BITTERNESS (Prov. 14:10). Why did he (Saul) not say to him 'Nor by the Urim and Thummim'? Because if he had said to him 'by the Urim and Thummim' (which were in the hands of the priests), Samuel could have said to him: You have done harm (to yourself) that you smote Nob the city of the priests. AND SAMUEL SAID: WHEREFORE THEN DOST THOU ASK OF ME, SEEING THE LORD IS DEPARTED FROM THEE, AND IS BECOME THINE ADVERSARY (I Sam. 28:16)? Because of them (and) what is written of them: AND AARON'S SONS, THE PRIESTS, ETC. (Lev. 1:8).²⁰

Having slain the priests of Nob, Saul is unable to bring himself to inquire of God by the legal, approved means of Urim and Thummim. This process of using the Urim and the Thummim necessitates contact with, and the co-operation of, the priests. Being cut off from God, Saul must resort to inquiring of the dead by means of a familiar spirit. The midrash makes very clear the seriousness and the negative consequences of such

19 Lev. Rabba 26:7
All material cited from Lev. 26:7 is found also in Tanhuma, Emor 2; Tan. Buber, Emor 4; Mid. Shmuel Ch. 24; Yal. Shimon, Proph. שם

20 Lev. Rabba 26:7

a sin:

AND SAMUEL SAID TO SAUL: WHY HAS THOU DISQUIETED ME, TO BRING ME UP (I Sam. 28:15)? He (Samuel) said to him (Saul): Had you no other means of enraging your Creator except through me, that you have made of me an idol!? Do you not know that just as punishment is inflicted upon the worshippers, so it is inflicted upon the worshipped? And not only that but I thought that this was the Day of Judgment and I brought up Moses with me (to testify on my behalf).²¹

Saul's necromancy enrages Saul's Creator, turns Samuel into an idol, and disturbs Moses' peace. It also leads to the suffering of all of Israel:

Hillel, the Elder, said: Samuel said to Saul: Was it not enough that you did not hearken unto His voice, neither did you execute His fierce anger against Amalek? But now you also inquire by means of one possessed of a familiar spirit? Woe to the shepherd, woe to his flock! For on your account has the Holy One, blessed be He, given over Israel into the hand of the Philistines.²²

There are two comments about the hypocritical nature of Saul's behavior in seeking to communicate with God by divination. The first points out Saul's reversal of his own edict against necromancy:

Resh Lakish said: To what could Saul be compared at that moment (the moment he commanded his servants to find a woman that could divine by means of a ghost)? He was like a king who entered a province and decreed that all the roosters that were there should be slaughtered. He wished to depart on the road (inferred: at early dawn) and asked: Is there not a rooster in the place that will crow? They answered him: You were the one who issued the decree and ordered that every rooster be slaughtered. Similarly (with Saul) just yesterday AND SAUL HAD PUT AWAY THOSE THAT DIVINED BY A GHOST OR A FAMILIAR SPIRIT OUT OF THE LAND (I Sam. 28:3). And today he says to his servants, SEEK ME A WOMAN THAT DIVINETH BY A GHOST (ib. 28:7).²³

21 Lev. Rabba 26:7; Hagigah 4b; Yerushalmi, Hagigah 2, Hal. 1

22 Pirke Ge R. Eliezer Chap. 33; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, **ap**

23 Lev. Rabba 26:7

The second comment illustrates the hypocrisy of his promise to the woman that she would not be punished, a promise made in the name of God:

AND THEY CAME TO THE WOMAN BY NIGHT (I Sam. 28:8). But was it night (for therefore Saul's disguise would be unnecessary)? No, but it teaches that the hour was a dark (i.e. gloomy) one like night. AND HE SAID: DIVINE UNTO ME, I PRAY THEE, BY A GHOST, AND BRING ME UP WHOMSOEVER I SHALL NAME UNTO THEE (ib.). AND THE WOMAN SAID UNTO HIM: BEHOLD, THOU KNOWEST WHAT SAUL HATH DONE (ib. 28:9). AND SAUL SWORE TO HER BY THE LORD, SAYING: AS THE LORD LIVETH, THERE SHALL NO PUNISHMENT HAPPEN TO THEE FOR THIS THING (ib. 28:10). Said R. Shimon b. Lakish: To what could Saul be compared with at that moment? He was like a woman who is in the company of her paramour and swears by the life of her husband!! So it was with Saul; he enquires of the ghost and the familiar spirit and then swears to her AS THE LORD LIVETH, THERE SHALL BE NO PUNISHMENT HAPPEN TO THEE FOR THIS THING.²⁴

We learn from this last midrash that this sin was committed at a dark time. The entire enterprise, from the beginning of Saul's trek to the woman-diviner until he received Samuel's condemnation and God's verdict, gained Saul nothing. In a description of Saul's behavior at the beginning of the venture a play on words is utilized to show that Saul's behavior in disguising himself was symbolic of a deed which would divest him of his kingdom:

HIS SERVANTS SAID TO HIM: BEHOLD THERE IS A WOMAN THAT DIVINETH BY A GHOST AT EN-DOR (I Sam. 28:7). AND SAUL DISGUISED HIMSELF (**וַיִּתְּכֶנָּה**)...it is written with a ט shin, that is to say, he delivered himself from royalty (**שִׁנָּה חֹסֶה מִן הַמַּלְכוּת**). AND PUT ON OTHER RAINMENT (ib.); a commoner's garments.²⁵

The following material explains what Saul did and did not experience of the ghost and tells us of fear he suffered:

²⁴ Lev. Rabba 26:7

²⁵ Ibid.

When she saw him (the risen Samuel) she was startled, as it says, AND WHEN THE WOMAN SAW SAMUEL, SHE CRIED WITH A LOUD VOICE: AND THE WOMAN SPOKE TO SAUL, SAYING: WHY HAST THOU DECEIVED ME? FOR THOU ART SAUL (I Sam. 28:12). How did she know that he was Saul? They say that not as the ghost comes up for an ordinary person does it come up for a king. For an ordinary person it comes up with its head down and its feet up (upside down) for a king its feet are down and its head is up. AND THE KING SAID UNTO HER: BE NOT AFRAID; FOR WHAT SEEST THOU (ib. 28:13)? AND THE WOMAN SAID UNTO SAUL: I SEE GOD-LIKE BEINGS (אלהים) COMING UP OUT OF THE EARTH (ib.). When he heard GOD-LIKE BEINGS (אלהים - *is plural*) he was afraid. There are those that say that many righteous men came up together with him at that moment. AND HE SAID UNTO HER: WHAT FORM IS HE OF (ib. 18:14)? But did he (Saul) not recognize him (Samuel)? Yes, but three things have been said in regard to one who conjures up the dead by means of necromancy: (1) the one who conjures him up sees him but does not hear his voice; (2) the one that needs him hears his voice but does not see him; (3) one that does not need him neither hears his voice nor sees him. Thus with Samuel, the woman who conjured him up saw him but did not hear his voice; Saul who needed him heard his voice but did not see him; Abner and Amasa, who did not need him, neither saw him nor heard him.²⁶

Slander

Saul is portrayed as being a member of a generation of slanderers and as being himself active in listening to slander. His behavior is condemned and the fallout of such behavior is clearly and repeatedly described. We shall see here and in subsequent chapters that the issue of slander is tied to Saul's sins of oppressing David, slaughtering the priests of Nob, and of failing to kill Agag. Additionally the question of slander will be shown to be of enormous importance in the attempt to clear Saul's name. For our purposes in this chapter we are isolating the issue as much as possible in an effort to further our understanding of the complete picture of the sins

²⁶ Lev. Rabba 26:7

associated with Saul in rabbinic literature.

There were so many slanderers and informers in the generation of Saul that this was why Saul was not permitted to build the Temple:

Another comment on WHEN THOU ART COME UNTO THE LAND WHICH THE LORD THY GOD GIVETH THEE, AND SHALL POSSESS IT, AND SHALT DWELL THEREIN; AND SHALL SAY: I WILL SET A KING OVER ME, LIKE ALL THE OTHER NATIONS THAT ARE ROUND ABOUT ME (Deut. 17:17). R. Judah b. Ilai said: When Israel entered the land they were commanded three things: namely; to blot out the memory of Amalek, to set a king over them, and to build a Temple unto themselves. They set a king over them, and they blotted out the memory of Amalek, but they did not build a Temple unto themselves. Know that this was because there were informers among them. A proof for this is the statement of R. Samuel b. Nahman: The generation of Ahab were idolaters, and yet when they went out to war they were victorious. And why? Because there were no informers amongst them; therefore when they went out to war they were victorious. Know that when Jezebel sought to kill all the prophets of God, what did Obadiah do? He hid them in caves, as it is said, HOW I HID A HUNDRED MEN OF THE LORD'S PROPHETS BY FIFTY IN A CAVE (I Kings 18:13); And there was not a man to tell Ahab, 'Thus and thus did Obadiah do.' But the generation of Saul, all of them were informers. Know that when Saul pursued after David they all spoke evil concerning David to Saul, as it says, WHEN DOES THE EDMITE COME AND TOLD SAUL...DAVID IS COME TO THE HOUSE OF AHIMELECH (Ps. 52:2); WHEN THE ZIPHITES CAME AND SAID TO SAUL: DOETH NOT DAVID HIDE HIMSELF WITH US (ib. 54:2). Therefore they fell in battle.

Another explanation (of why Saul's generation built no Temple): R. Muna said: Everyone who speaks slander causes the Shechinah to depart from earth to heaven. Know (by way of proof) what David says, MY SOUL IS AMONG LIONS, I DO LIE DOWN AMONG THEM THAT ARE AFLAME (i.e. aflame with slander); EVEN THE SONS OF MEN, WHOSE TEETH ARE SPEARS AND ARROWS, AND THEIR TONGUE A SHARP SWORD (Ps. 57:5). What follows right after this? BE THOU EXALTED, O GOD, ABOVE THE HEAVENS, ETC. (ib. 57:6); David said: Master of the Universe, what has the Shechinah to do on earth? Remove the Shechinah to heaven.²⁷

27 Deut. Rabba 5:10; Sanhedrin 20b

David, the victim of most of the slander spread about in Saul's generation, pleads with God to remove the Shechinah from earth in order to keep it from slander. Slander is so pervasive, its influence cuts so deeply that Saul not only listens to it but he blesses the slanderers:

HEAR MY PRAYER, O GOD: GIVE EAR TO THE WORDS OF MY MOUTH (Ps. 54:4). According to R. Hoshaya, David said to the Holy One, Blessed be He: Master of the Universe, Doeg came and slandered me, and Saul accepted the slander from him and listened to him. The Ziphites came and Saul heeded them also. HEAR MY PRAYER, O GOD. FOR STRANGERS HAVE RISEN UP AGAINST ME...THEY HAVE NOT SET GOD BEFORE THEM. SELAH (Ps. 54:5). They (these slandering strangers) have not set their minds on what is written in the Torah: CURSED BE HE THAT SMITETH HIS NEIGHBOR IN SECRET (Deut. 27:24). But what have they set their minds on? On what Saul said to them: BLESSED BE YE OF THE LORD (I Sam. 23:21, spoken to the Ziphites after they informed Saul of David's whereabouts). But of what avail is Saul's blessing, if they are accursed men? They have long been accursed, for Moses cursed them, saying: CURSED BE HE THAT SMITETH HIS NEIGHBOR IN SECRET (Deut. 27:24). Hence it is said: THEY HAVE NOT SET GOD BEFORE THEM. SELAH (Ps. 54:5).²⁸

Saul must bear responsibility for the extent of the slander in his generation. His inclination to hear slander increased the falsehood and wickedness of his generation:

FOR THE LEADER: WITH STRING-MUSIC. MASCHIL OF DAVID; WHEN THE ZIPHITES CAME AND SAID TO SAUL: DOTH NOT DAVID HIDE HIMSELF WITH US (Ps. 54:1,2)? This is what Scripture says, IF A RULER HEARKENETH TO FALSEHOOD, ALL HIS SERVANTS ARE WICKED (Prov. 29:12). Thus did Israel behave when they saw Saul incline his ear to hear slander about David, they all came and said to him, and thus it says: WHEN DOEG THE EDMITE CAME AND TOLD SAUL (Ps. 52:2). And Scripture reports Nabal saying: WHO IS DAVID? AND WHO IS THE SON OF JESSE (I Sam. 25:10)? When they all saw that Saul inclined his ear to hear slander, immediately the Ziphites came, THEN CAME UP THE ZIPHITES TO SAUL (I Sam. 23:19).²⁹

28. Midrash Tehilim 54:3; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, **אעטא** (slightly different version)

29. Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, **אעטא**

Saul's and David's warriors were not immune to the cancer of slander abroad in the land:

...They (David's armies) used to go out to battle and fall (despite the stress on learning among children in those days and David's prayers for his people). It was only because there were informers among them that they fell. This is as David says. MY SOUL IS AMONG LIONS, I DO LIE DOWN AMONG THEM THAT ARE AFLAME: EVEN THE SONS OF MEN, WHOSE TEETH ARE SPEARS AND ARROWS, AND THEIR TONGUE A SHARP SWORD (Ps. 57:5). MY SOUL IS AMONG LIONS--this is Abner and Amasa who were lions in the Torah. I DO LIE DOWN AMONG THEM THAT ARE AFLAME (לוהט) --this is Doeg and Ahitophel who were burning (לוהט) to spread slander. EVEN THE SONS OF MEN, WHOSE TEETH ARE SPEARS AND ARROWS--these are the men of Keilah, WILL THE MEN OF KEILAH DELIVER ME UP INTO HIS (Saul's) HAND (I Sam. 23:11)? AND THEIR TONGUE A SHARP SWORD--these are the Ziphites, AND THEY (the Ziphites) SAID TO SAUL: DOTH NOT DAVID HIDE HIMSELF WITH US (Ps. 54:2)?³⁰

The following midrash provides us with an example of how these warriors would slander David. This midrash comments on the fact that David spared Saul after having an opportunity to kill his pursuer in a cave:

AND SAUL WENT HOME (I Sam. 24:23). When Saul went home his warriors said to him: Because he didn't kill you in the cave he is righteous? (In I Sam. 24:18 Saul says David is more righteous than he for having spared Saul's life.) He knew that if he did anything to you we would have entered (the cave) and devoured him as roasted meat. And Saul listened to them.³¹

The worst of the slanderers around Saul was his servant Doeg. Before Saul had even met David, Doeg managed to provoke Saul and to arouse his jealousy by describing David in a false and intimidating manner. The following narration begins

³⁰ Lev. Rabba 26:2; Yerushalmi, Peah, Ch. 2, Hal. 1; Pesikta de R. Kahana p. 32a, b; Numbers Rabba 19:2

³¹ Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets קלד

immediately after Saul asked his servants to find someone who could play harp for him:

THEN ANSWERED ONE OF THE SERVANTS, AND SAID: BEHOLD, I HAVE SEEN A SON OF JESSE, THE BETHLEMITES, THAT IS CUNNING IN PLAYING, AND A MIGHTY VALIANT MAN, AND A MAN OF WAR, AND UNDERSTANDING IN MATTERS, AND A COMELY PERSON, AND THE LORD IS WITH HIM (I Sam. 16:18). And Rab Judah said in Rab's name: This whole verse was said by Doeg with nothing but evil intent (that these praises should excite Saul's jealousy of David's halachic skills). Thus THAT IS CUNNING IN PLAYING--skillful in asking questions (of law); A MIGHTY VALIANT MAN--adept in answering them; A MAN OF WAR--well versed in the battle of the Torah (Biblical dialectics); UNDERSTANDING IN MATTERS--understanding (how to deduce) one thing from another; AND A COMELY PERSON--one who shows a face in halacha; AND THE LORD IS WITH HIM--everywhere the halacha is determined in accordance with his views. With respect to all he replied: My son Jonathan is equally so. When he (Doeg) said AND THE LORD IS WITH HIM, a privilege which even he himself did not enjoy, he felt humiliated and envied him.³²

The following midrash portrays the much more serious slanderous statement that Doeg spoke to Saul after the conflict between Saul and David had fully developed. In this piece Doeg informs Saul of David's whereabouts and this leads to the slaying of eighty-five priests by Doeg's own hand:

And similarly Doeg is banished (to Gehinom) because of his tongue. When? The time David fled to the city of Nob, to Ahimelech the priest who accepted him. And Saul perceived (this) and gathered all his servants and said to them: You are all treating me in a beautiful way...David does whatever he wants and not one of you tells me, as it says, ALL OF YOU HAVE CONSPIRED AGAINST ME, AND THERE WAS NONE THAT DISCLOSED IT TO ME WHEN MY SON MADE A LEAGUE WITH THE SON OF JESSE, AND THERE IS NONE OF YOU THAT IS SORRY FOR ME (I Sam. 22:8). Doeg began to speak slander, as it says, THEN ANSWERED DOEG THE EDMITE, WHO WAS SET OVER THE SERVANTS OF SAUL, AND SAID: I SAW THE SON OF JESSE COMING TO NOB, TO AHIMELECH THE SON OF AHITUB (1b. 22:9). And by his (Doeg's)

32 Sanhedrin 93b; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, נב

hand eighty-five priests were killed, that did wear a linen ephod and Ahimelech the high priest and Nob the city of priests was destroyed by the edge of (his) sword.³³

A detailed description of Doeg's slander is provided in a midrash which also reveals Saul's acceptance of the slander and the violence which results from this acceptance. Other details of the incident at Nob are included as they illustrate the extent to which Saul was provoked. Note Saul's remark to Doeg that since Doeg smote the priests with his tongue, he might as well do it with his sword:

AND (Doeg) TOLD SAUL (Ps. 52:1). What did he say? Thus spoke Doeg: David has been made king while you still live. For though inquiry may not be made of the Urim and Thummim on behalf of anyone except the king, the Beth Din, or one upon whom the needs of many people depend, yet inquiry has been made of the Urim and Thummim on behalf of David! When he was told this a spirit of envy entered Saul. How do we know this? Because Saul said to Ahimelech: THOU HAST GIVEN HIM BREAD, AND A SWORD (I Sam. 22:13), and as if this were not enough for you, THOU HAST ALSO INQUIRED OF GOD FOR HIM (Ib.). Therefore, THOU SHALT SURELY DIE, AHIMELECH (Ib. 22:16). When he saw the face of Saul seething with anger at him, immediately AHIMELECH ANSWERED THE KING, AND SAID: AND WHO AMONG ALL THY SERVANTS IS SO TRUSTED AS DAVID, WHO IS THE KING'S SON-IN-LAW (Ib. 22:14): /Therefore, impute nothing to me/ either because of the giving or because of the inquiring. Indeed, was this the first time that David called upon me? HAVE I ONLY TODAY BEGUN TO INQUIRE OF GOD FOR HIM? BE IT FAR FROM ME (Ib. 22:15). This was not the first time, for it is my custom to inquire on behalf of David. Therefore, LET NOT THE KING IMPUTE ANYTHING TO HIS SERVANT, NOR TO ALL THE HOUSE OF MY FATHER (Ib.). Saul said to him: So all along you were inquiring for David! And you are not deserving of death?! When Saul brought forth the sentence of death against Ahimelech, THE KING SAID UNTO THE GUARD THAT STOOD ABOUT HIM: TURN, AND SLAY THE PRIESTS OF THE LORD (Ib. 22:17). But the guards did not heed him...When Saul saw that the guards did not obey him, he said to Doeg: Why do you just stand there: You, who smote them with your

33 Tanhuma, Metzora 1

tongue, rise now and smite them with the sword. As it says, THE KING SAID TO DOEG: TURN THOU, AND FALL UPON THE PRIESTS (Ib. 22:18). Immediately Doeg stood up and smote them, as it says, HE SLEW ON THAT DAY FOURSORE AND FIVE PERSONS THAT DID WEAR A LINEN EPHOD (Ib.).³⁴

Another description of Doeg's slanderous act informs us of a terrible punishment suffered by Doeg for his deed:

FOR THE LEADER. MASCHIL OF DAVID: WHEN DOEG CAME AND TOLD SAUL: DAVID IS COME TO THE HOUSE OF AHIMELECH (Ps. 52:1). These words are to be read in the light of the verse, SUFFER NOT THY MOUTH TO BRING THY FLESH INTO GUILT (Eccles. 5:5)--(this verse) refers to slander, for with their mouths people make their flesh suffer guilt. By what they let escape from their mouths they are stricken by leprosy...When Doeg slandered David he became leprous, as it says, GOD WILL LIKEWISE BREAK THEE FOREVER...AND ROOT THEE OUT OF THE LAND OF THE LIVING FOREVER (Ps. 52:7). What is the meaning of HE WILL BREAK THEE? That he was made leprous, just as it is said of a leprous house HE SHALL BREAK THE HOUSE (וְנָפַץ אֶת הַבַּיִת גַּם אֵל יִפְזֹק הַבַּיִת) (Lev. 14:33).³⁵

A vivid portrayal of Doeg's slander and Saul's complicity as a listener of slander is found in the following midrash. It makes mention of another important slanderer of Saul's generation, Ahitophel:

Another interpretation of SHIGGAYON OF DAVID WHICH HE SANG UNTO THE LORD CONCERNING THE MATTER OF CUSH A BENJAMITE (ps. 7:1). A parable: to what is the matter similar? It happened once that a man was walking along a road and one person started pursuing him and he escaped from his hand. Then another seized him, but again he escaped. Hardly had he escaped from the second when a third tried to seize him. Only then did he cry out to his friend to save him from the hand of this third pursuer. Thus it was with David. Saul pursued him and the Holy One, blessed be He, rescued David from his hand, as it says, DAVID FLED AND ESCAPED, AND CAME TO SAMUEL TO RAMAH (I Sam. 9:18). As soon as he had fled from Saul, Doeg stood up against him. Doeg began speaking

³⁴ Midrash Tehilim 52:5

³⁵ Midrash Tehilim 52:1

to Saul, saying: I SAW THE SON OF JESSE COMING TO NOB, TO AHIMELECH...AND HE...GAVE HIM VICTUALS (I Sam. 22:9-10). The Holy One, blessed be He, asked Saul: Was it from your victuals that Ahimelech gave to David? Was it not from the showbread that is placed before Me that he gave David bread to eat/(I Sam. 21:7)? Doeg said further to Saul: HE ALSO GAVE HIM THE SWORD OF GOLIATH THE PHILISTINE...AND HE INQUIRED OF THE LORD FOR HIM (Ib. 22:10). Immediately the Holy One, blessed be He, silenced the mouth of this evil one and of him it is said, LET THE LYING LIPS BE PUT TO SILENCE, WHICH SPEAK ARROGANTLY AGAINST THE RIGHTEOUS (Ps. 31:19). Thus David was saved from Doeg. Along came Ahitophel. David cried out: O LORD, I PRAY THEE, TURN THE COUNSEL OF AHITOPHEL INTO FOOLISHNESS (II Sam. 15:31). And when he was delivered from the three of them (Saul, Doeg, and Ahitophel) David began to sing: SHIGGAYON OF DAVID WHICH HE SANG UNTO THE LORD CONCERNING THE MATTER OF CUSH (Ps. 7:1).³⁶

Doeg and Ahitophel came to be paradigmatic slanderers in rabbinic literature. Along with Bilam and Gozazi they are two among four bound for Gehinom due to crimes committed by their tongues.³⁷ Doeg's sole reason for existence, in fact, was God's intention of using him to publicize the danger of slander.³⁸ The two of them are accused of slander which led to incest and to the shedding of blood. Note the severe punishment meted out to them:

AND THE LORD SAID UNTO NOAH: COME THOU AND ALL THY HOUSE INTO THE ARK, ETC. (Gen. 7:1). It is written, THOU DESTROYEST THEM THAT SPEAK FALSEHOOD, ETC. (Ps. 5:7). This refers to Doeg and Ahitophel: THEM THAT SPEAK FALSEHOOD: them and their speech (דוֹבֵי כֹזֶב - דוֹבֵי כֹזֶב). R. Phinehas said: them and their company (בְּנֵי וְדִבְרוֹתָן - דוֹבֵי כֹזֶב)--reading to lead instead of דוֹבֵי כֹזֶב to speak. THE MAN OF BLOOD AND DECEIT (Ib.): the one permitted incest and bloodshed, and the other permitted incest and bloodshed, (when he counseled Absalom), GO IN UNTO THY FATHER'S CONCUBINES (II Sam. 16:21). The other (Doeg) permitted

36 Midrash Tehilim 7:15

37 Tanhuma Metzora 1 and Tanhuma Buber Metzora 1

38 Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, שֵׁנָא

incest: (where do we find this?) Said R. Nahman b. Samuel b. Nahman: He annulled his (David's) citizen's rights and declared him an outlaw and as one dead, so that his blood was permitted and his wife was permitted. THE LORD ABHORRETH (Ps. 5:7): this means that they will neither be resurrected nor judged.³⁹

An explanation of how incest followed from slander is provided in this midrash:

(Commenting on Doeg and Ahitophel as speakers of falsehood, the text zeroes in on Doeg) Nehemiah the son of R. Shmuel b. Nahmani said: He said to Saul: Is there marriage /of Michal/ to David? Does he not rebel against the kingdom? Thus he is considered dead and (therefore) now, it is permissible (for there to be another marriage). Saul rose and gave Michal, the wife of David, because of his (Doeg's) words, to Palti the son of Leish.⁴⁰

In Genesis Rabba another condemnation of Doeg and Ahitophel is to be found and a statement that they are to function in a symbolic way as a reminder of the horror of slander.⁴¹ We may conclude that Saul, prominent men close to him and his entire generation were considered to have been caught up in a web of slander. Some of the results of all these crimes of the tongue have been mentioned: the Temple was not built in Saul's day, David's armies were not victorious, Saul was provoked into being jealous of David, other crimes (incest and murder) were committed, Doeg was struck with leprosy, and Doeg and Ahitophel were banished to Gehinom. For our purposes the most important result of all this speaking and listening to slander is the punishment and tragic death of Saul. Throughout midrashic literature Saul's punishment and death are repeatedly linked

³⁹ Genesis Rabba 32:1

⁴⁰ Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, תרל"א

⁴¹ Genesis Rabba 38:1

to slander:

THOU LOVEST EVIL MORE THAN GOOD (Ps. 52:5). David said to Doeg: You desire evil for Saul more than you desire good for yourself. For had Saul not accepted slander from you, he would not have been punished.⁴²

Why is a slanderer called a 'third'? Because he kills three: the one who speaks it, the one who listens to it, and the one about whom it is spoken. In the days of Saul it killed four: Doeg who spoke it, Saul who listened to it, Ahimelech about whom it was spoken, and Abner.⁴³

Another version of this last midrash includes a statement which communicates rabbinic horror at the crime of slander. It does this by equating slander with murder and by explaining that the punishment is automatically death:

...And if a man engages in slander he is obligated to lose his life, for slander is as horrible as murder. For everyone who murders someone has only murdered one. But the slanderer kills three: the speaker, the receiver, and the one slandered. Behold, Doeg slandered Ahimelech the son of Ahitub and Ahimelech died, as it says, AND THE KING SAID: THOU SHALT SURELY DIE, AHIMELECH (I Sam. 22:16). And Saul was killed, as it says, SO SAUL DIED FOR HIS TRANSGRESSION WHICH HE COMMITTED AGAINST THE LORD (I Chron. 10:13).⁴⁴

Saul engaged in slander by listening to the slander so prevalent in his generation. For this sin he was punished and for this sin he was killed. We shall return to this subject in Chapter Five in order to examine more fully the context in which this slanderous listening took place.

⁴² Midrash Tehilim 52:7

⁴³ Lev. Rabba 26:2; Yerushalmi Peah 1, Hal. 1; Yerushalmi Sotah 1, Hal. 8; Pesikta de Rab Kahana, p. 32a,b; Numbers Rabba 19:2; Tanhuma Chukat 4; Tanhuma Buber Chukat 8; Mishnat R. Eliezer Chap. 9 (In all this material an explanation of why Abner was punished is included and we shall examine this in Chapter Four).

⁴⁴ Tanhuma Metzora 2; Tanhuma Buber Metzora 4; Midrash Tehilim 52:2; Talkut Shimon, Torah, נגף

Jealousy

We saw in the last section on slander that one of the results of Doeg's slander of David at the time of David's introduction to Saul's Court was intense jealousy on Saul's part.⁴⁵ The Bible makes Saul's jealousy of David abundantly clear (I Sam. 17:31-33 and 18:7-9). For the most part the midrash takes this jealousy of David for granted. One midrash retells the Biblical story (I Sam. 31-19) and emends it ever so slightly by inserting that Saul cast an evil eye on David after discovering that his war-garments fit him. The fact that the massive garments of King Saul could fit David comes about because when one is anointed one becomes superior to all others. This superiority of David leads necessarily to his replacing Saul as king, which is of course the ultimate threat to Saul. Thus David's ability to wear Saul's garments stirs Saul to considerable jealousy:

When he (David) went to fight with Goliath Saul said to him: THOU ART NOT ABLE TO GO AGAINST THIS PHILISTINE TO FIGHT WITH HIM; FOR THOU ART BUT A YOUTH (I Sam. 17:33). Said David to him: THY SERVANT KEPT HIS FATHER'S SHEEP; AND WHEN THERE CAME A LION, OR A BEAR, AND TOOK A LAMB OUT OF THE FLOCK, I WENT OUT AFTER HIM, AND SMOTE HIM, AND DELIVERED IT OUT OF HIS MOUTH: AND WHEN HE AROSE AGAINST ME, I CAUGHT HIM BY HIS BEARD, AND SMOTE HIM, AND SLEW HIM. THY SERVANT SMOTE BOTH THE LION AND THE BEAR; AND THE UNCIRCUMCISED PHILISTINE SHALL BE AS ONE OF THEM (Ib. 17:34). Saul asked him: Who told you that you will be able to slay him? Thereupon David answered him: THE LORD THAT DELIVERED ME OUT OF THE PAW OF THE LION, AND OUT OF THE PAW OF THE BEAR, HE WILL DELIVER ME OUT OF THE HAND OF THIS PHILISTINE (Ib. 17:37). Straightway SAUL CLAD DAVID WITH HIS APPAREL (Ib. 17:38), though it is written of Saul, FROM HIS SHOULDERS AND UPWARD HE WAS HIGHER THAN ANY OF THE PEOPLE (Ib. 9:2). When he clothed him in his garments and saw that they fitted him, he

⁴⁵ Sanhedrin 93b; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, **נב**

instantly cast an evil eye upon him.⁴⁶

Though the midrash finds little need to prove or illustrate the cause of Saul's jealousy, it does comment on the unpleasant results of this sin. In a discussion of **ויהי** R. Samuel b. Nahman argues that wherever Scripture says **ויהי** it does not insinuate either pure joy or pure misfortune. The following is offered as proof:

They raised another objection: AND DAVID WAS (**ויהי דוד**) SUCCESSFUL IN ALL HIS WAYS; AND THE LORD WAS WITH HIM (I Sam. 18:14). He (R. Samuel b. Nahman) replied: That, too, was not an occasion for (complete) rejoicing, for it is said: AND SAUL EYED DAVID FROM THAT DAY AND FORWARD (Ib. 18:9).⁴⁷

Seder Eliyahu Rabba contains a midrash that states that one of the reasons for Saul's death and the removal of the kingdom from him was because:

...he kept jealousy and revenge in his heart for Israel in all their dwelling places.⁴⁸

The utter harmfulness of his sin of jealousy is portrayed in Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer:

From where do we know that it is forbidden to be jealous of one another? As it says, FOR ANGER KILLETH THE FOOLISH MAN, AND ENVY SLAYETH THE SILLY ONE (Job 5:2). Because of jealousy Saul slew Nob, the city of priests, and because of jealousy he was overthrown, as it says, SO SAUL DIED FOR HIS TRANSGRESSION WHICH HE COMMITTED AGAINST THE LORD (1 Chron. 10:13).⁴⁹

Saul's jealousy of David becomes, finally, an example par excellence of jealousy:

46 Lev. Rabba 26:9; Tanhuma Emor 4; Tanhuma Buber Emor 6

47 Lev. Rabba 11:7

48 Seder Eliyahu Rabba p. 159 Note: A reference is made here to I Sam. 22:7, 8 where Saul charges that his men are all conspiring against him on behalf of David.

49 Mishnat R. Eliezer Chap. 4

FOR LOVE IS AS STRONG AS DEATH, JEALOUSY IS CRUEL AS THE GRAVE (Song of Songs 8:6). Another interpretation, FOR LOVE IS AS STRONG AS DEATH...the love which Jonathan bore to David, as it says, AND JONATHAN LOVED HIM AS HIS OWN SOUL (I Sam. 18:1). JEALOUSY IS CRUEL AS THE GRAVE...the jealousy that Saul had for David, as it says, AND SAUL EYED DAVID (Ib. 18:9).⁵⁰

In our discussion of the relationship between Saul and David (Chapter Five) we shall discover that Saul's jealousy leads to a number of hither-to-unmentioned misdeeds.

Disobedience to Samuel

Saul is portrayed as having disobeyed Samuel, disappointed him, and as having threatened his life. There were two acts of disobedience on Saul's part: his failure to eliminate Amalek and his failure to wait for Samuel before offering a sacrifice at Gilgal. The first (Amalek) is generally understood as disobedience to God and shall be dealt with extensively in Chapter Two. There are two very similar midrashim narrating Saul's disobedience to Samuel at Gilgal. The first explains that Saul was a Cushite (Ps. 7:1) not in the sense of nationality or race but by virtue of being different (**שׁוֹנֵה** taken as meaning different in virtue as opposed to different by reason of skin color). One of the reasons he was different was his act of disobedience at Gilgal:

But was Saul a Cushite? No, rather, /the word Cush shows that/ Saul was different in his actions and in his beauty. /For example/ Samuel said to Saul: THOU SHALT GO DOWN BEFORE ME TO GILGAL; AND BEHOLD, I WILL COME DOWN UNTO THEE, TO OFFER BURNT-OFFERINGS, AND TO SACRIFICE SACRIFICES OF PEACE-OFFERINGS

⁵⁰ Song of Songs Rabba 8:6; Tanchuma Buber Vayashev 19; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, **תנ"ך**

(I Sam. 10:8). But Saul didn't do this. Instead Saul said: BRING HITHER TO ME THE BURNT-OFFERINGS AND THE PEACE-OFFERINGS. AND HE OFFERED THE BURNT-OFFERING. AND IT CAME TO PASS THAT AS SOON AS HE HAD MADE AN END OF OFFERING THE BURNT-OFFERING, BEHOLD, SAMUEL CAME...AND SAMUEL SAID: WHAT HAST THOU DONE (I Sam. 13:9,10)? Behold, this is one example of Saul's being different. And, behold, the matter of Amalek makes two.⁵¹

The other very similar midrash inserts I Sam. 10:9 (GOD GAVE HIM ANOTHER HEART) in order to explain why Saul came to disobey Samuel at Gilgal. Whereas in context I Samuel 10:9 is meant in praise of Saul, he being then able to prophesy with a band of prophets, it now takes on a negative meaning here in this midrash:

Like /those kings whose actions are different/
Saul was a Cushite. For Samuel said to him: AND THOU SHALT GO DOWN BEFORE ME TO GILGAL; AND, BEHOLD, I WILL COME DOWN UNTO THEE, TO OFFER BURNT-OFFERINGS, AND TO SACRIFICE SACRIFICES OF PEACE-OFFERINGS, SEVEN DAYS SHALT THOU TARRY, TILL I COME UNTO THEE, AND TELL THEE WHAT THOU SHALT DO (I Sam. 10:8). But Saul didn't do this. Rather, GOD GAVE HIM ANOTHER HEART (Ib. 10:9). AND SAMUEL SAID: WHAT HAS THOU DONE (that you have sacrificed without me)? AND SAUL SAID: BECAUSE I SAW THAT THE PEOPLE WERE SCATTERED FROM ME, AND THAT THOU CAMEST NOT WITHIN THE DAYS APPOINTED, AND THAT THE PHILISTINES ASSEMBLED THEMSELVES TOGETHER AGAINST MICHMAS; THEREFORE SAID I: NOW WILL THE PHILISTINES COME DOWN UPON ME TO GILGAL, AND I HAVE NOT ENTREATED THE FAVOR OF THE LORD; I FORCED MYSELF THEREFORE, AND OFFERED THE BURNT-OFFERING (Ib. 13:11,12). This is one /difference that makes Saul a Cushite/. But there is more. Samuel said to him: NOW GO AND SMITE AMALEK (Ib. 15:3). But he didn't do this. Rather, BUT SAUL AND THE PEOPLE SPARED AGAG (Ib. 15:9).⁵²

While not coming under the category of Saul's disobedience to Samuel, the rabbis attribute to Saul an intimidation of

51 Midrash Tehilim 7:17

52 Midrash Tehilim 7:18

Samuel. This intimidation is clearly part of a negative picture of Saul vis a vis his relationship to Samuel. The following Mishnah argues that because Samuel was afraid of a human being (Saul) he was a Nazarite not in the sense of no fear (**מורא**) coming upon his head, but because no razor (**מורה**) came upon his head:

Mishnah: Samuel was a Nazarite in the opinion of R. Nehorai, as it says, AND THERE SHALL NO RAZOR **מורה** COME UPON HIS HEAD (I Sam. 1:11). It says with reference to Samson, AND /no/ RAZOR (**מורה**) SHALL COME UPON HIS HEAD (Judges 13:5), and it says with reference to Samuel, AND NO RAZOR (**מורה**); Just as **מורה** in the case of Samson /is used of/ a Nazirite, so (we should say) **מורה** in the case of Samuel /is used of/ a Nazirite. R. Jose objected: But has not morah (reading **מורה** as **מורא**) reference to /fear of/ a human being? R. Nehorai said to him: But does it not also say, AND SAMUEL SAID: HOW CAN I GO? IF SAUL HEAR IT HE WILL KILL ME (I Sam. 16:2) /which shows/ that he was in fact afraid of a human being.⁵³

Samuel himself admits having feared Saul. This confession comes when Samuel is raised from the dead:

/Said Samuel/: AND THE LORD HATH WROUGHT FOR HIMSELF, AS HE SPOKE BY ME; AND THE LORD HATH RENT THE KINGDOM OUT OF THY HAND, AND GIVEN IT TO THY NEIGHBOR, EVEN TO DAVID (I Sam. 28:17). He (Saul) said to him: When you were with me you said to me: THE LORD HATH RENT THE KINGDOM...AND HATH GIVEN IT TO A NEIGHBOR OF THINE THAT IS BETTER THAN THOU (I Sam. 15:28) and now you say to me TO THY NEIGHBOR, EVEN TO DAVID (mentioning the name David this time). He replied: When I was with you I was in the world of lies and I was afraid of you lest you should kill me. I spoke lying words to you. But now that I am in the world of truth you will only hear from me words of truth, for I am not afraid of you.⁵⁴

53. Nazir 10a

54. Lev. Rabba 26:7

Samuel is greatly disappointed by Saul's behavior. That the first king should disobey God (as we shall see in the next chapter) and disobey and threaten the very prophet who anointed him, caused Samuel considerable consternation. His plans for Israel's first kingdom going awry, he informs Saul that the kingdom will be rent from him (I Sam. 15:23). He then rends his own garment as a sign of mourning:

AND AS SAMUEL TURNED ABOUT TO GO AWAY, HE LAID HOLD OF THE SKIRT OF HIS ROBE, AND IT RENT (I Sam. 15:27). Whose skirt? Rab and Levi disagree. One says the skirt of Saul. The other says the skirt of Samuel. But reason suggests that he who says the skirt of Samuel is correct, for it is the custom of the righteous to rent their garments when their plans do not turn out well.⁵⁵

Thus far we have considered midrashim which relate five of the eight major sins committed by Saul. We turn now to two minor sins and eight flaws in Saul's character which are revealed in other midrashim.

III

The rabbis, ever anxious to justify Saul's fate, enumerate two minor sins committed by Saul: he increased abominations in Israel and he neglected the laws of chastity. Additionally, the following character flaws are commented upon in the midrash: Saul was weak, overly-humble, he came from an overly-righteous family, he was aggressive and wolf-like, he was arrogant and covered up sins, he became fearful once he sinned, he possessed faulty legal judgment, and he lacked derech eretz (דִּרְךְ אֵרֶץ).

⁵⁵ Ruth Rabba 7:12

He increased abominations in Israel and neglected the laws of chastity:

He neglected /the laws of/ chastity and gave Michal his daughter, the wife of David, to Palti...and he increased the practice of great abominations in Israel.⁵⁶

Saul is portrayed as being weak. He is labeled one of the **ד'ג'לול**, which means one of the lowly or weak. A famine which should have occurred in his days was postponed by God due to Saul's inability to withstand it:

AND THERE WAS A FAMINE IN THE LAND (Gen. 26:1). Famine visited the world ten times: once in the days of Adam: CURSED IS THE GROUND FOR THY SAKE (Gen. 3:17); once in the days of Lamech: FROM THE GROUND, WHICH THE LORD HATH CURSED (Gen. 5:29); once in the days of Abraham: AND THERE WAS A FAMINE IN THE LAND (Gen. 12:10); once in the days of Isaac: AND THERE WAS A FAMINE IN THE LAND BESIDE THE FIRST FAMINE (Gen. 26:1); once in the days of Jacob: FOR THESE TWO YEARS HATH THE FAMINE BEEN IN THE LAND (Gen. 45:6); once in the days when the judges judged: AND IT CAME TO PASS IN THE DAYS WHEN THE JUDGES JUDGED, THAT THERE WAS A FAMINE IN THE LAND (Ruth 1:1); once in the days of David: AND THERE WAS A FAMINE IN THE DAYS OF DAVID (II Sam. 21:1); once in the days of Elijah: AS THE LORD, THE GOD OF ISRAEL, LIVETH, BEFORE WHOM I STAND, THERE SHALL NOT BE DEW NOR RAIN THESE YEARS (I Kings 17:1); once in the days of Elisha: AND THERE WAS A GREAT FAMINE IN SAMARIA (II Kings 6:25); one famine which travels about in the world; and one in the Messianic future, as it says, NOT A FAMINE OF BREAD, NOR A THIRST FOR WATER, BUT OF HEARING THE WORDS OF THE LORD (Amos 8:11). R. Huna and R. Jeremiah in the name of R. Samuel b. Nahman said: Its appearance ought really to have come in the days of Saul, but because Saul was the shoot of a sycamore tree, the Holy One postponed it and brought it in the days of David. Shila sins and Johana is punished! Said R. Hiyya: it is like the case of a glass-worker who held a basket full of goblets and cut glass; when he wished

⁵⁶ Seder Eliyahu Rabba Chap. 31 Note: This is part of a longer piece portraying Saul's arrogance which shall be presented later in this chapter.

to hang the basket he brought a nail, drove it /into the wall/, suspended himself thereby, and then hung up his basket. For that reason all these /famines/ came not in the days of the lowly (or weak) men, but in the days of mighty men who could withstand it.⁵⁷

Saul represents the Tribe of Benjamin and in this midrash presented earlier that tribe is contrasted with the much stronger Tribe of Judah:

...If a wolf attacks a lion can come and rescue. But if a lion attacks a wolf cannot come and rescue. Thus Judah and Benjamin: Let Benjamin take /power first/ for his /reign/ is for a moment and afterwards let Judah /take power/ for his /reign/ is forever.⁵⁸

Saul's weakness is viewed in both examples presented as being in contrast with David's strength. We shall see in the next chapter on the sin of Amalek indications that weakness was a most significant flaw and quite naturally lent itself as an explanation of the fate of Saul's kingdom. The rabbis see also in Saul a reticence to assert himself. He did not accept the honor due him:

Rab Judah said in the name of Rab: Why was Saul punished? Because he forewent the honor due to himself, as it is said: BUT CERTAIN BASE FELLOWS SAID: HOW SHALL THIS MAN SAVE US? AND THEY DESPISED HIM AND BROUGHT HIM NO PRESENT. BUT HE WAS AS ONE THAT HELD HIS PEACE (I Sam. 10:27) (i.e. Saul failed to press on these men his new position) And it is written /immediately following that/: THEN NAHASH THE AMMONITE CAME UP AND ENCAMPED AGAINST JABESH-GILEAD (I Sam. 11:1).⁵⁹

57 Genesis Rabba 40:3; Genesis Rabba 64:2; Ruth Rabba 4 **שליך פתוחתא**; Midrash Shmuel Chap. 28; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, **נגב**. Note: "shoot of a sycamore" is an idiom denoting barren of thought or merit, or something that is easily broken. (Genesis Rabba, Soncino, p. 208)

58 Genesis Rabba 95

59 Yoma 22b; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, **ין**. Note: Comments Rashi: "From the beginning of his kingship he forewent the honor due him and thus revealed himself to be unworthy to rule."

Saul's excessive humility is followed immediately by the attack by Nahash. This is interpreted as being a punishment for his reticence. Another drawback for Saul that will affect his ability to lead is that he comes from a family with no blight on its reputation:

Rab Judah said in the name of Samuel: Why did the kingdom of Saul not endure? Because no reproach rested on him (Rashi: this means: on his family) for R. Yohanan has said in the name of R. Simeon b. Jehozadak: One should not appoint an administrator of a community unless he carries a basket of reptiles on his back, so that if he become arrogant, one could tell him: Turn around!⁶⁰

In contrast to this image of Saul, an altogether opposite picture is painted on two occasions. In Genesis Rabba Saul is portrayed as an aggressive, ferocious wolf. Whereas I Sam. 14:47 speaks of Saul's military victories in a most positive light (crediting him in 14:48 with smiting the Amalekites and delivering Israel out of the hands of them that spoiled them), the following midrash presents the verse in such a way as to portray Saul as being extremely aggressive:

BENJAMIN IS A WOLF THAT RAVENETH: IN THE MORNING HE DEVoureth THE PREY, AND AT EVEN HE DIVIDEth THE SPOIL (Gen. 49:27)...Another interpretation: The text alludes to the king descended from him. As a wolf seizes, so did Saul seize the kingdom, as it says, SO SAUL TOOK THE KINGDOM OVER ISRAEL (I Sam. 14:47). IN THE MORNING HE DEVoureth THE PREY... AND /Saul/ FOUGHT AGAINST ALL HIS ENEMIES ON EVERY SIDE (ib.). AND AT EVEN HE DIVIDEth THE SPOIL ((**וַיִּפְלֹק שָׁלַל**)--SO SAUL DIED, AND HIS THREE SONS (I Sam. 31:6) (rendering: and at even--the evening of Saul--he shall cause spoil to be divided; namely, his own spoil to be divided by the enemy--**שִׁחַוְלָן שָׁלוּ** instead of **יִפְלֹק**).⁶¹

⁶⁰ Ibid. Note: Rashi explains that a basket of reptiles means a blight on the family's reputation.

⁶¹ Genesis Rabba 99:3; Tanhuma Buber **ויחי יר**; Tanhuma ; Yalkut Shimoni, Torah, **קס א**

The following midrash portrays Saul as being a man with a sharp barb covered by a sweetness which is only on the surface. The comment is based on Saul's statement to Jonathan (I Sam. 20:30) protesting Jonathan's allegiance to David:

AND THE ROOF OF THY MOUTH (**חֵכֶךְ**, but read: And your fishhook) IS LIKE SWEET WINE (Song of Songs 7:10). This refers to Saul who mentioned to Jonathan his son, THOU SON OF PERVERSE REBELLION, DO NOT I KNOW THAT THOU HAST CHOSEN THE SON OF JESSE TO THINE OWN SHAME (I Sam. 20:30).⁶²

This last midrash comes to suggest that Saul's sweetness, his humility, is only part of the picture. There lurks within Saul an aggressive, arrogant spirit which the rabbis argue led to the ephemeral nature of his kingship. The following midrash holds that a "spirit of arrogance" led to an assortment of sins, including a completely arrogant response to Samuel's inquiry about Saul's failure to kill Agag and the rest of Amalek:

Saul, the king of Israel, had a spirit of arrogance in him. Therefore he was killed and the kingdom was uprooted from him. As it says, AND SAMUEL SAID: WHAT MEANETH THEN THIS BLEATING OF THE SHEEP IN MINE EARS, AND THE LOWING OF OXEN WHICH I HEAR? AND SAUL SAID: THEY HAVE BROUGHT THEM FROM THE AMALEKITES; FOR THE PEOPLE SPARED THE BEST OF THE SHEEP AND OF THE OXEN, ETC. (I Sam. 15:14,15). A parable is told... to what is the matter similar? To a king of flesh and blood who told his son: My son, fence in this field, hoe this field, and water this field. He fenced in part of the field but not all of it. He hoed part of the field but not all of it. He watered part of the field but not all of it. When his father came he said to him: My son, have you done all that I decreed to you? He (the son) replied: Since I didn't do it, why did you command me /in the first place/? Immediately he turned his face from his father. /Saul's behavior is parallel to this/ As it says, AND SAUL SAID UNTO SAMUEL: YEA, I HAVE HEARKENED TO THE VOICE OF THE LORD, AND HAVE GONE

62 Song of Songs Zuta Chap. 7, Par. 10 Note: On the Biblical level **חֵכֶכְךָ** means "the roof of thy mouth." However, **חֵכֶכְךָ** means fishhook (Jastrow, p.461). Therefore there appears to be a play on words here. Saul's words are likened by the rabbis to a fishhook. Saul has a barb which is like sweet wine.

THE WAY WHICH THE LORD SENT ME, AND HAVE BROUGHT AGAG THE KING OF AMALEK, AND HAVE UTTERLY DESTROYED THE AMALEKITES. BUT THE PEOPLE TOOK OF THE SPOIL, SHEEP, AND OXEN, THE CHIEF OF THE DEVOTED THINGS, TO SACRIFICE UNTO THE LORD THY GOD IN GILGAL (I Sam. 15:20,21). And not just this but he kept jealousy and revenge in his heart for Israel in all their dwelling places. What was commanded him he did not do: NOW GO AND SMITE AMALEK, AND UTTERLY DESTROY ALL THAT THEY HAVE, AND SPARE THEM NOT; BUT SLAY BOTH MAN AND WOMAN, INFANT AND SUCKLING, OX AND SHEEP, CAMEL AND ASS (I Sam. 15:3). What he was not commanded he did do: he slew Nob, the city of the priests. He neglected the laws of chastity and gave Michal his daughter, the wife of David, to Palti. And he inquired by means of a ghost and diviners. And he increased the practice of great abominations in Israel. Therefore he was killed and his kingdom was uprooted.⁶³

According to Zebahim 102a Saul's unique fate entailed being granted kingship but never really receiving a full, authentic, lasting kingship for himself or for his descendants. This was due to his arrogance:

Ulla said: Moses desired kingship, but He did not grant it to him, for it is written, DRAW NOT NIGH HITHER (Ex. 3:5 **אל יקרבו הלוים**); halom (**הלוים**) can only mean kingship, as it is said, /THEN DAVID... SAID: /WHO AM I, O LORD GOD...THAT THOU HAST BROUGHT ME HALOM (**הלוים**) THUS FAR (II Sam. 7:18, "thus far" refers to kingship). Raba raised an objection: R. Ishmael said: Her (Elisheba's) brother-in-law (Moses) was a king? Said Rabbah b. Ulla: He (Ulla) meant, /Moses desired kingship/ for himself and for his descendants (implied: he was granted kingship but his descendants were not).

Does then halom (**הלוים**) refer to /future/ generations whenever it is written /for according to the answer just given, when God said to Moses DRAW NOT NIGH HALOM, He meant that Moses could not enjoy kingship for future generations/? Surely it is written in connection with Saul, IS THERE YET A MAN COME HALOM (**הלוים**) (I Sam. 10:22), yet only he /enjoyed kingship/, but not his seed? If you wish I can answer that there was Ish-bosheth (who succeeded Saul for a short time).

63 Seder Eliyahu Rabba, p. 159 Note: It will be shown later that this text so critical of Saul is unique among later texts in its negative portrayal.

If you wish I can answer that Saul was different for it (kingship) did not remain even with him. This agrees with R. Eleazar's dictum in R. Hanina's name: When greatness is decreed for a man, it is decreed for him and for his seed unto all generations, for it is said: HE WITHDRAWETH NOT HIS EYES FROM THE RIGHTEOUS; BUT WITH KINGS UPON THE THRONE HE SETTETH THEM FOREVER (Job 36:7). But if he becomes arrogant the Holy One, blessed be He, abases him, for it is said /AND THEY BE EXALTED, end of Job 36:7/ AND IF THEY BE BOUND IN FETTERS, AND BE HOLDEN IN CORDS OF AFFLICTION (Ib. 36:8).⁶⁴

The following chapter on Amalek will provide the classic example of Saul's arrogance. However, there is one other example of this arrogance that, though connected to the sin of Amalek, is a variation on it. Saul is charged with covering up the sin of Amalek. He is contrasted to David who, when he sins, acknowledges his transgression:

HE THAT COVERETH HIS TRANSGRESSIONS SHALL NOT PROSPER; BUT WHOSO AVOWETH AND FORSAKETH THEM SHALL OBTAIN MERCY (Prov. 28:13). This (first part of the verse) refers to Saul to whom Samuel said: WHAT MEANETH THEN THIS BLEATING OF THE SHEEP IN MINE EARS, AND THE LOWING OF THE OXEN WHICH I HEAR (I Sam. 15:4, which follows Saul's claim to Samuel: I HAVE PERFORMED THE COMMANDMENT OF THE LORD. Saul "covered his transgression" for had he not exterminated all that belonged to Amalek)? The end of the verse, BUT WHOSO AVOWETH AND FORSAKETH THEM SHALL OBTAIN MERCY refers to David, of whom it is said: AND DAVID SPOKE UNTO THE LORD...AND SAID: LO, I HAVE SINNED AND I HAVE DONE INIQUITOUSLY (II Sam. 24:17); and of whom it is also said: AND DAVID SAID UNTO THE LORD: I HAVE SINNED GREATLY IN WHAT I HAVE DONE (Ib. 24:10). Immediately the prophet (Nathan) said to David: THE LORD HATH PUT AWAY THY SIN: THOU SHALT NOT DIE (II Sam. 12:13). Thus, WHOSO AVOWETH AND FORSAKETH THEM SHALL OBTAIN MERCY.⁶⁵

Once Saul sinned he suffered the fate of many other leaders (Adam, Moses, David, Solomon) who, due to having sinned, must live in fear:

⁶⁴ Zebahim 102a

⁶⁵ Midrash Tehilim 100:2

Up until the time Saul sinned, what was written of him? SO SAUL TOOK THE KINGDOM OVER ISRAEL, AND FOUGHT AGAINST ALL HIS ENEMIES ON EVERY SIDE...AND AGAINST THE PHILISTINES; AND WHITHERSOEVER HE TURNED HIMSELF, HE PUT THEM TO THE WORSE (**יָרְשִׁיעַ**). What is the meaning of **בָּנָל אִשָּׁר יִפְנֶה יָרְשִׁיעַ**? It means he was victorious over his enemies. And when he sinned, what is written of him? AND WHEN SAUL SAW THE HOST OF THE PHILISTINES, HE WAS AFRAID, AND HIS HEART TREMBLED GREATLY (I Sam. 28:5).⁶⁶

Saul's scholarship left something to be desired. He is criticized for not making his studies available to the public;

Rabina said: The Judeans who made their studies accessible to the public retained their learning, but the Galileans who did not make their studies accessible to the public did not retain their learning. David made his studies accessible and Saul did not make his studies accessible. Of David who made his studies accessible it is written in Scripture, THEY THAT FEAR THEE SHALL SEE ME AND BE GLAD (Ps. 119:74); but of Saul who did not make his studies accessible to the public it is written, AND WHITHERSOEVER HE TURNED HIMSELF HE ACTED WRONGLY (I Sam. 14:47).⁶⁷

Rashi, in fact, interprets I Sam. 14:47 as meaning that Saul did not merit to teach the Halacha.⁶⁸ An example of Saul's halachic skills is provided in Sanhedrin 19b. Though one is impressed by Saul's ability to handle himself in an halachic dispute, note that Saul's opinion (on whether or not a would-be-husband thinks mainly of a loan or a perutah in a case where both are possible) is clearly the minority opinion, different from that which "all agree" upon:

66 Pesikta de Rab Kahana p. 45b; Number Rabba 11:3; Midrash Shmuel Chap. 17; Yalkut Shimoni, Torah, **שם**

67 Erubin 53 a,b Note: I Sam. 14:47 is usually translated as "he put them to the worse," meaning, in context, that wherever Saul turned he defeated his enemies. Here **יָרְשִׁיעַ** is taken as meaning he acted wrongly wherever he turned in matters of halacha.

68 Ibid.

R. Jose was asked by his disciples: How could David marry two sisters while they were both living? He answered: He married Michal after the death of Merab. R. Joshua b. Korha said: His marriage to Merab was contracted in error, as it is said: DELIVER ME MY WIFE MICHAL WHOM I BETROTHED UNTO ME FOR A HUNDRED FORESKINS OF THE PHILISTINES (II Sam. 3:14). How does this prove it? R. Papa answered: Because he said MY WIFE MICHAL but not "my wife Merab." Now, what was the error in his marriage /with Merab/? /It was this/ It is written, AND IT SHALL BE THAT THE MAN WHO KILLETH HIM, THE KING WILL ENRICH HIM WITH GREAT RICHES AND WILL GIVE HIM HIS DAUGHTER (I Sam. 17:25). Now he (David) went and slew him, whereupon Saul said to him: I owe thee a debt, and if one betrothes a woman by a debt, she is not betrothed (Kidd. 6b,47a). Accordingly he gave her to Adriel, as it is written, BUT IT CAME TO PASS AT THAT TIME WHEN MERAB, SAUL'S DAUGHTER SHOULD HAVE BEEN GIVEN TO DAVID, THAT SHE WAS GIVEN TO ADRIEL THE MEHOLATHITE TO WIFE (I Sam. 18:19). Then Saul said to David: If you still wish me to give you Michal to wife, go and bring me /another/ hundred foreskins of the Philistines. He went and brought them to him. Then he said: You have now two claims on me, /the repayment of/ a loan and a perutah. Now, Saul held that when a loan and a perutah are offered (as kiddushin), he (the would-be-husband) thinks mainly of the loan; but in David's view, when there is a loan and a perutah, the mind is set on the perutah. Or if you like, I will say, all agree that where a loan and a perutah /are offered/ the mind is set on the perutah. Saul, however, thought that /the hundred foreskins/ had no value, while David held that they had value at least as food for dogs and cats.⁶⁹

Saul is portrayed as lacking in **דרך איץ**. A lack of appropriate manners is particularly regretful in a king. He "asked" in an improper manner:

Four asked improperly: three were granted their request in a fitting manner, and the fourth, in an unfitting manner. They are: Eliezer, Caleb, Saul, and Jephthah. Eliezer: SO LET IT COME TO PASS

69 Sanhedrin 19b; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, **קנה**
Note: A perutah must be given to the bride or the bride's family with full intent that it is for the purpose of establishing kiddushin.

THAT THE DAMSEL TO WHOM I SHALL SAY: LET DOWN THY PITCHER, ETC. (Gen. 24:14)...even a bondmaid /could have been chosen to be Isaac's wife/!! Yet God prepared Rebekah for him and granted his request in a fitting manner. Caleb: HE THAT SMITETH KIRIATH-SEPPHER, AND TAKETH IT, TO HIM WILL I GIVE ACHSAH MY DAUGHTER TO WIFE (Judges 1:12)...it might even be a slave!! But God chose Othniel for him. Saul: AND IT SHALL BE, THAT THE MAN WHO KILLETH HIM, THE KING WILL ENRICH HIM WITH GREAT RICHES AND WILL GIVE HIM HIS DAUGHTER (I Sam. 17:25)...it might even be a slave!! But God prepared David for him.⁷⁰

Saul is seen as having arranged his daughter's engagement to David in an unseemly way:

His (David's) strength trusted in the Holy One, blessed be He. When? At the time that he became engaged to Michal. What was Saul considering for it says: AND SAUL SAID: I WILL GIVE HIM HER, THAT SHE MAY BE A SNARE TO HIM (I Sam. 18:21). It is not seemly for a king to either hasten or delay /his daughter's engagement/. And if you say that /David/ would not have been affected (by this suspicious behavior on Saul's part) did Saul not just previously seek to kill him (I Sam. 18:11)? Despite this, he trusted in the Holy One, blessed be He, and went out /for God/ as it says, AND DAVID AROSE AND WENT, HE AND HIS MEN, AND SLEW OF THE PHILISTINES TWO HUNDRED MEN (Ib. 18:27).⁷¹

Having determined that the rabbis are concerned with elucidating the underpinnings of Saul's fate, we have seen material which portrays him in a negative light. He committed serious sins which account for his downfall. His character was flawed in a number of different ways. Of particular harm

70 Genesis Rabba 60:3; Lev. Rabba 37:4 Difference: "Said the Holy One, blessed be he, 'If a slave or a Gentile had killed him would you have given him your daughter?' What did the Holy One, blessed be He, do? He responded properly and prepared David for him. Taanith 4a Difference: Three, instead of four, asked improperly. Caleb is left out. Yaikut Shimon, Torah, 17

71 Mishnat R. Eliezer Chap. 7

were his weaknesses and his arrogance. We turn now to Saul's most serious sin: his failure to kill Agag, King of Amalek, and to eliminate the seed of Amalek.

CHAPTER TWO

I

In Chapter One we glimpsed the significance of Saul's failure to eliminate Amalek. Saul's arrogance, his lying cover-up to Samuel, and his faithlessness were all explained as being linked to his sin of sparing the last vestiges of Amalek.¹ We saw that one of the two reasons Saul was considered "different" in his behavior was this failure to utterly destroy Amalek.² The centrality of this transgression becomes more evident as we focus in on its nature and ramifications. The Rabbis determined that this sin was the primary cause of Saul's fate and that subsequent sins and punishments were linked to this one sin:

R. Huna said: How little does he whom the Lord supports need to grieve or trouble himself! Saul /sinned/ once and it brought /calamity/ upon him. David /sinned/ twice and it did not bring /calamity/ upon him. What was the one sin of Saul? The affair with Agag. But there was also the matter with Nob, the city of priests? /Still/ --it was because of what happened with Agag that Scripture says: IT REPENTETH ME THAT I HAVE SET UP SAUL TO BE KING (I Sam. 15:11)...³

To fully comprehend the dimensions of this sin it is necessary to understand the importance God attached to eliminating Amalek. The midrash, closely following the Bible, makes God's abhorrence of Amalek very clear. The elimination of Amalek was one of three tasks God set for the Israelites

1 See Chapter One, footnotes 14, 63, 64, 65

2 See Chapter One, footnotes 51, 52

3 Yoma 22b

to carry out upon entering the land:

R. Judah said: Three commandments were given to Israel when they entered the land: to appoint a king (Deut. 17:14), to cut off the seed of Amalek (Deut. 25:19 and I Sam. 15:3), and to build themselves the chosen house (Deut. 12:11).⁴

This command to eliminate Amalek is on a par with establishing a monarchy and building the Temple. Of the three tasks it is the second priority to be fulfilled:

R. Judah said: Three commandments were given to Israel when they entered the land: to appoint a king, to cut off the seed of Amalek, and to build themselves the chosen house. And I do not know which of them is the first /to be executed/. When it says, THE HAND UPON THE THRONE (**כס**) OF THE LORD (Ex. 17:16) it speaks of raising for them a king first. For **כס** can mean only king, as it says, THEN SOLOMON SAT ON THE THRONE (**כסא**) OF THE LORD AS KING (I Chron. 29:23). Still, I do not know if cutting off the seed of Amalek comes first or if the building of the chosen house comes first. When it says, AND HE GIVETH YOU REST FROM ALL YOUR ENEMIES ROUND ABOUT, SO THAT YE DWELL IN SAFETY; THEN IT SHALL COME TO PASS THAT THE PLACE WHICH THE LORD YOUR GOD SHALL CHOOSE TO CAUSE HIS NAME TO DWELL THERE, THITHER SHALL YOU BRING ALL THAT I COMMAND YOU (Deut. 12:10, 11) -- it becomes /clear/ that cutting off the seed of Amalek comes first. And thus of David it says: AND IT CAME TO PASS, WHEN THE KING DWELT IN HIS HOUSE, AND THE LORD HAD GIVEN HIM REST FROM ALL HIS ENEMIES ROUND ABOUT, THAT THE KING SAID NATHAN THE PROPHET: SEE NOW, I DWELL IN A HOUSE OF CEDAR, BUT THE ARK OF GOD DWELLETH WITHIN CURTAINS (II Sam. 7:1, 2).⁵

4 Sanhedrin 20b; Pesikta de Rav Kahana Chap. 2; Pesikta Rabbati Chap. 23; Tanhuma Tetzay 11; Pesikta Meyucheset le Rav Kahana Chap. 2; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, **ק"ט**
Note: The command in Deut. 25:19 is to blot out the memory (**זכר**) of Amalek. The midrash often interprets this as meaning to cut off the males (**זכר**) of Amalek. The command in I Sam. 15:3 is to fall upon the Amalekites, to destroy them, to put their property under a ban, and to spare no one. The command in Deut. 12:11 is to build a chosen place for God, which is interpreted as meaning house (Temple). In some versions of this piece R. Jose is in place of R. Judah.

5 Sanhedrin 20b; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, **ק"ט**

Why should the elimination of Amalek be such a high priority for God? The answer is found in the Torah and this answer is quoted verbatim by Pesikta Rabbati in an introduction to the importance of Joshua's involvement in combatting Amalek:

REMEMBER WHAT AMALEK DID UNTO THEE BY THE WAY AS YE CAME FORTH OUT OF EGYPT; HOW HE MET THEE BY THE WAY, AND SMOTE THE HINDMOST OF THEE, ALL THAT WERE ENFEEBLED IN THY REAR, WHEN THOU WAS FAINT AND WEARY; AND HE FEARED NOT GOD (Deut. 25:17, 18).⁶

Knowing no fear of God, Amalek preyed on the most helpless of the Hebrews. For this crime Amalek comes to symbolize absolute evil. The removal of such evil is an important part of God's agenda. God prefers the elimination of Amalek to burnt offerings and sacrifices:

R. Simeon b. Yochai said: It is the will of the Holy One, blessed be He, to destroy and cut off all the seed of Amalek. He sent Saul the son of Kish to destroy and cut off all the seed of Amalek. Saul and the people heard and did not spare any vile man except Agag, as it says, BUT SAUL AND THE PEOPLE SPARED AGAG, AND THE BEST OF THE SHEEP, AND OF THE OXEN (I Sam. 15:9). Samuel heard and he went towards them and he said to them: You have spared Amalek and you have left a remnant of him. They said to him: The sheep and the oxen are for sacrifices unto the Lord thy God. He said to them: The Lord takes no delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, but only in obeying His voice, as it says, AND SAMUEL SAID, HATH THE LORD AS GREAT DELIGHT IN BURNT OFFERINGS AND SACRIFICES, AS IN OBEYING THE VOICE OF THE LORD? BEHOLD, TO OBEY IS BETTER THAN SACRIFICE, AND TO HEARKEN THAN THE FAT OF RAMS (1b. 15:22).⁷

⁶ Pesikta Rabbati Chap. 12

⁷ Pirke de R. Eliezer Chap. 49

So powerful is God's abhorrence of Amalek that Amalek is the one people in the world that will never be accepted into the household of Israel:

AND HE (Moses) SAID: THE HAND UPON THE THRONE OF THE LORD: THE LORD WILL HAVE WAR WITH AMALEK FROM GENERATION TO GENERATION (Ex. 17:16). It was taught in the name of R. Eleazar: The Holy One, blessed be He, swore an oath and said: My right hand /upon/ My right hand, My throne /upon/ My throne, if converts come /to Israel/ from all the nations of the world I will accept them. But from the seed of Amalek I will not accept them. And so it was with David, who did likewise. As it says, AND DAVID SAID UNTO THE YOUNG MAN THAT TOLD HIM: WHENCE ART THOU? AND HE ANSWERED: I AM THE SON OF AN AMALEKITE PROSELYTE (II Sam. 1:13).⁸

R. Eliezer b. Jacob said: The Holy One, blessed be He, swore by His throne that He would not receive any proselyte of the seed of Amalek. Therefore when he brought tidings /of the death of Saul and Jonathan/ came to David, who asked him: WHENCE ART THOU? (II Sam. 1:13) and he replied: I AM THE SON OF AN AMALEKITE PROSELYTE, David would not receive him.⁹

The seriousness of Saul's failure to eliminate Amalek is particularly evident in this midrash which states that the continued existence of Amalek causes God's face to be covered, and prolongs the time when neither God's name nor God's throne are complete:

R. Berechiah in the name of R. Abba B. Kahana says: As long as the seed of Amalek exists, it is as if a garment covers God's face... R. Levi in the name of R. Acha b. Chaninah says: As long as Amalek's seed exists in the world the name will not be complete and the throne will not be complete...¹⁰

⁸ Pesikta de R. Kahana p. 28a; Tanhuma Tetzay 11
Note: Here and in the following midrash **וְאֵל** is taken as meaning proselyte which is often the meaning used in Rabbinic Hebrew. In the Bible it probably means "stranger" and is translated accordingly in the biblical version.

⁹ Tanhuma Tetzay 11; Pesikta Rabbati Chap. 12

¹⁰ Tanhuma Tetzay 11

God first charged Joshua with the important task of doing away with Amalek. However, Joshua was not expected to complete the task. He was merely expected to deal Amalek a severe blow. The task of finally eliminating Amalek was to fall to Saul:

R. Isaac said: We find that Joshua sought to blot out the remembrance of Amalek, as it says, AND JOSHUA DISCOMFITED AMALEK AND HIS PEOPLE WITH THE EDGE OF THE SWORD (Ex. 17:13). The Holy One, blessed be He, said: By your life, some Amalekites are to remain. But King Saul will in the future rise from Benjamin and pluck out by the root Amalek's line, as it says, OUT OF EPHRAIM CAME /Joshua, one who would have plucked up/ AMALEK BY THE ROOTS; AFTER THEE /will rise Saul, man of/ BENJAMIN, WITH MANY SOLDIERS (Judges 5:14).¹¹

Saul's failure to fully carry out this task is viewed as the source of the breach between God and Saul. This task was Saul's test of faith and having failed it he is not trusted or loved by God:

...For all who are tested in a matter and are found to be trustworthy, the Holy One, blessed be He, trusts forever...Saul was tested and was not found trustworthy with his charge. But, rather, SAUL AND THE PEOPLE SPARED ACAG (I Sam. 15:9). This /failure/ came back on him and took his kingdom from him...¹²

You find that whoever fights on behalf of the Omnipresent, /God/ loves him forever. For thus you find in the case of Joshua who joined issue with Amalek and dealt with them in accordance with the Torah and the commandments, as it is said, AND JOSHUA DISCOMFITED AMALEK, ETC. (Ex. 17:13). Said God to him: From your tribe (Ephraim) will I raise

11. Pesikta Rabbati Chap. 12

Note: Another interpretation in the midrash is that it was God's intention for Saul to deal Amalek a severe blow but, like Joshua, he was not expected to complete the task. This interpretation will be presented and discussed in Section III of this chapter.

12. Tanhuma Buber Bemidbar 32; Yalkut Shimoni, Torah, נרצה

up one that shall punish Amalek forever: OUT OF EPHRAIM SHALL COME THEY WHOSE ROOT IS IN AMALEK (Judges 5:14). Saul, however, who joined issue /with Amalek/ and was not found to have properly carried out his charge, but, AND SAUL AND THE PEOPLE SPARED AGAG, ETC. (I Sam. 15:9) --was turned back and after that had his kingdom taken from him: AFTER THEE, BENJAMIN (Judges 5:14 --"an allusion to the withdrawal from him of his kingdom.")...¹³

Unlike Joshua, Saul was not one of God's faithful warriors. He failed to be a faithful warrior for he lacked the willingness to mercilessly inflict a total punishment upon Amalek. God demanded ruthless, utter persecution of Amalek and Saul did not comply. He showed mercy to barbarous, cruel Amalek. Showing mercy to a cruel nation which was the virtual embodiment of evil was not considered by the Rabbis to be a mark of compassion on Saul's part. On the contrary, the Rabbis posit the following dynamic: one showing mercy to very cruel people will in the end be found inflicting suffering on those deserving of mercy. With this truth in hand, the midrash links Saul's merciful sparing of Amalek to his ruthless destruction of the innocent priests of Nob. This linkage reveals the full dimension of Saul's transgression in sparing Amalek.

The earliest example of this linkage is to be found in Yoma 22b. The comment is based on a dispute as to the meaning of I Sam. 15:5, AND SAUL CAME TO THE CITY OF AMALEK AND **וַיִּרְבֵּץ בְּנֶחְלָהּ**,

¹³ Numbers Rabba 1:12

Note: The explanation of AFTER THEE, BENJAMIN is from Soncino note p. 19. The midrash continues by describing the Levites as faithful fighters for God. Saul is thus contrasted with them and with Joshua.

The problem is the meaning of **וַיִּבֶן**. One position holds that it means Saul "strove in the valley" and the other position is that "he lay in wait." R. Mani, taking **וַיִּבֶן** as "he strove", interprets Saul's striving as being an argument with God over the righteousness of totally eliminating Amalek:

R. Mani said: / **וַיִּבֶן** means he strove/ because of what happens IN THE VALLEY. When the Holy One, blessed be He, said to Saul: NOW GO AND SMITE AMALEK (I Sam. 15:3), he (Saul) said: If on account of one person the Torah said: Perform the ceremony of the heifer whose neck is to be broken (Deut. 21:1-9), how much more /ought consideration to be given/ to all those persons! And if human beings sinned, what has the cattle committed; and if the adults have sinned, what have the little ones done? A divine voice came forth and said: BE NOT RIGHTEOUS OVERMUCH (Eccl. 7:16). And when Saul said to Doeg: TURN THOU AND FALL UPON THE PRIESTS (I Sam. 22:18), a heavenly voice came forth to say: BE NOT OVERMUCH WICKED (Eccl. 7:17).¹⁴

Later versions of this midrash add details and make explicit the principle that showing mercy to cruel people leads to cruelty to those deserving of mercy:

BE NOT RIGHTEOUS OVERMUCH; NEITHER MAKE THYSELF OTHERWISE (Eccl. 7:16). Do not be more righteous than your Creator, as in the name of Saul of whom it is written, AND SAUL CAME TO THE CITY OF AMALEK...BUT SAUL AND THE PEOPLE SPARED AGAG, ETC. (I Sam. 15:5). R. Huna and R. Benaiah say: He began to contend against his Creator, arguing: Thus has the Holy One, blessed be He, ordered you: NOW GO, AND SMITE AMALEK... SLAY BOTH MAN AND WOMAN, INFANT AND SUCKLING, OX AND SHEEP, CAMEL AND ASS (ib. 15:3). If the men sinned, how have the women sinned? And how have the cattle, ox, and ass sinned? A Bat Kol went forth and said: BE NOT RIGHTEOUS OVERMUCH MORE THAN YOUR CREATOR! And the Rabbis say: Saul began to argue about the precept of the heifer whose neck was to be broken, saying: Scripture declares, THEY SHALL BREAK THE HEIFER'S NECK THERE IN THE VALLEY (Deut. 21:4 - when a slain person is found and the murderer is

¹⁴ Yoma 22b

not known). A man commits a murder and the neck of a heifer is broken! If the man sinned, how had the animal sinned? A Bat Kol went forth and said: BE NOT RIGHTEOUS OVERMUCH (Eccl. 7:16). R. Simeon b. Lakish said: Whoever shows himself merciful in circumstances where he should be pitiless, in the end becomes pitiless where he should be merciful. From where do we know that Saul was pitiless in a place where he should have been merciful? As it is said: AND NOB, THE CITY OF THE PRIESTS, SMOTE HE WITH THE EDGE OF THE SWORD, BOTH MEN AND WOMEN, CHILDREN AND SUCKLINGS, AND OXEN, AND ASSES, AND SHEEP (I Sam. 22:19). And Nob should not have been treated like the seed of Amalek. And the Rabbis say: Whoever makes himself merciful in a place where he should be pitiless will in the end be overtaken by the attribute of justice, as it is said, SO SAUL DIED AND HIS THREE SONS (Ib. 31:6).¹⁵

A similar midrash begins by reminding us of God's charge to Saul to eliminate Amalek. Unlike Abraham's plea on behalf of Sodom, Saul's plea for innocent Amalekite women, children, and animals receives no positive response:

Israel forgot to destroy and cut off all the seed of Amalek but the Holy One, blessed be He, did not forget. And when Saul ruled Samuel said to him: THUS SAITH THE LORD OF HOSTS, I HAVE MARKED THAT WHICH AMALEK DID TO ISRAEL...NOW GO AND SMITE AMALEK, AND UTTERLY DESTROY ALL THAT THEY HAVE (I Sam. 15:2,3). Saul took the men of war and went out to meet Amalek. When Saul came to the crossing of the ways, he stood still, and thought in his heart, as it says, AND SAUL CAME TO THE CITY OF AMALEK AND MEDITATED (another rendering of **וַיִּחַ**). Saul said: If the men sinned, have the women sinned? If the women sinned, have the children sinned? If the children have sinned, have the oxen sinned? A Bat Kol went forth and said to him: Do not be more righteous than your Creator!¹⁶

The following is one other statement of the dynamic that mercy misplaced leads to cruelty misplaced:

Said R. Eleazar: All who show mercy to the cruel ones in the end do mercy to the ones who do mercy

15 Kohelet Rabba 7:1 and 7:33; Midrash Shmuel Chap. 18; Kohelet Zuta 7:16; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, **ק**

16 Pirke de R. Eliezer Chap. 44

(implied: ones who deserve mercy). It is written, BUT SAUL AND THE PEOPLE SPARED AGAG, AND THE BEST OF THE SHEEP, AND OF THE OXEN (I Sam. 15:9) and it is written of Nob, the city of priests, AND NOB, THE CITY OF THE PRIESTS, HE SMOTE WITH THE EDGE OF THE SWORD (Ib. 22:19).¹⁷

Saul's sparing of Amalek was a violation of God's explicit Deuteronomic instructions. It was a rebellion against a responsibility God had set for him. It was the source of the breach between him and God. Having failed to be a faithful warrior of God, Saul ends up a warrior against God. He turns on God's own priests and sheds their blood. The full scope of this transgression is thus portrayed. We turn now to the ramifications of this enormous sin.

II

It has been shown that the sin of sparing Amalek led directly to the sin of destroying Nob. Besides leading to this sin, the failure to eliminate Amalek resulted in the end of Saul's kingdom, great calamity for him and for Israel, and even future pain and suffering for Israel. In the following midrash, the end of Saul's kingdom is expressly tied to the sin of sparing Amalek. It leads even to the supremacy of the Davidic authority in the world to come:

R. Tanhalifa of Caesarea taught: At the time when Saul violated the decree of the Holy One, blessed be He, concerning Amalek, Samuel came and rebuked him, saying THOU HAST REJECTED THE WORD OF THE LORD (I Sam. 15:26). When he sought to leave he rent his robe, as it says, AND AS SAMUEL TURNED ABOUT TO GO AWAY, HE LAID HOLD UPON THE SKIRT OF HIS ROBE, AND IT RENT. AND SAMUEL SAID UNTO HIM: THE LORD HATH RENT THE KINGDOM OF ISRAEL FROM THEE THIS DAY, AND HATH GIVEN IT TO A NEIGHBOR OF THINE, THAT IS BETTER THAN THOU (I Sam. 27,28). Saul asked: And who is this neighbor of mine

¹⁷ Tanhuma Metzora 1; Tanhuma Buber Metzora 1

who is better than I and who will rule in my place? Samuel answered: I will give you a hint. He who rends your robe will in the future take your kingship. And when Saul entered the cave, and David cut off the skirt of his robe, Saul remembered at once what Samuel told him. Thereupon Saul said: I KNOW THAT AS KING YOU WILL RULE (I Sam. 24:21). You will rule in this world and you will rule in the world to come. As it says, AND MY SERVANT DAVID SHALL BE KING OVER THEM (Ezekial 37:24).¹⁸

The following midrash was cited earlier in order to show the importance of the sin of Amalek vis a vis Saul's other sins. It is cited here in order to illustrate the calamity brought upon Saul by this transgression:

R. Huna said: How little does he whom the Lord supports need to grieve or trouble himself! Saul /sinned/ once and it brought /calamity/ upon him, David /sinned/ twice and it did not bring /calamity/ upon him. What was the one sin of Saul? The affair with Agag. But there was also the matter of Nob, the city of priests? /Still/ --it was because of what happened with Agag that Scripture says: IT REPENTETH ME THAT I HAVE SET UP SAUL TO BE KING (I Sam. 15:11)...¹⁹

It brought great calamity on Israel. Two hundred and twenty thousand men of war lost their lives on account of this transgression:

JUDAH AND ISRAEL INCREASED (I Kings 4:20). From where do we know that Israel had decreased /in the first place/? When Samuel told Saul that the Israelites should go forth to blot out the name of Agag and they disobeyed the command, there were 220,000 men of war in Israel, as it says, AND SAUL ...NUMBERED THEM IN TELAIM, TWO HUNDRED THOUSAND FOOTMEN, AND TEN THOUSAND MEN OF JUDAH (I Sam. 15:4). At that moment they were condemned to destruction /for disobedience/. Said the Holy One, blessed be He: If they all go at once, Israel can not stand it. Behold, then, I shall take them some at a time. And thus, seventy thousand of them died

¹⁸ Midrash Tehilim 57:3

¹⁹ Yoma 22b; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, קכא

in the plague (at the time of David) and the remainder died on Mt. Gilboa with Saul.²⁰

In a midrash cited in Chapter One, Saul's failure to eliminate Amalek is, along with his inquiring of a ghost, blamed for the handing over of Israel to the Philistines:

Hillel, the Elder, said: Samuel said to Saul: Was it not enough that you did not hearken unto His voice, neither did you execute His fierce anger against Amalek? But now you also inquire by means of one possessed of a familiar spirit? Woe to the shepherd, woe to his flock! For on your account has the Holy One, blessed be He, given over Israel into the hand of the Philistines.²¹

The worst of the ramifications of Saul's sin is the future suffering of Israel. By sparing Agag, Saul became responsible for the harm caused by Agag's descendants. The most notorious of these descendants was a man named Haman:

THERE WAS A CERTAIN JEW (אִישׁ יְהוּדִי) IN SHUSHAN THE CASTLE...A BENJAMITE (אִישׁ בִּנְיָמִי) (Esther 2:5)... Raba said: The community of Israel (offering one of many explanations to the problem of Mordecai being referred to as an אִישׁ יְהוּדִי, a Jew or Judean, and as an אִישׁ בִּנְיָמִי, a Benjamite) explained /the two designations/ in the opposite sense: See what a Judean did to me -- that David did not kill Shimei from whom was descended Mordecai who provoked Haman. And how a Benjamite repaid me -- that Saul did not slay Agag from whom was descended Haman who oppressed Israel.²²

Haman was a thorn in the side of Israel. Israel suffered greatly and cried out, "WOE!" in the time of Haman. This was all due to Saul's sparing of Agag:

20 Pesikta Rabbati Chap. 11

Note: This midrash appears to be mistaken when it claims that 220,000 men perished instead of 210,000 men that I Sam. 15:4 claims were available to Saul.

21 Pirke de R. Eliezer Chap. 33

22 Megillah 12b, 13a

R. Levi opened with the text, BUT IF YOU WILL NOT DRIVE OUT THE INHABITANTS OF THE LAND FROM BEFORE YOU, THEN SHALL THOSE THAT YE LET REMAIN OF THEM BE AS THORNS IN YOUR EYES, AND AS PRICKS IN YOUR SIDES (Numbers 33:55). This refers to Saul. When Samuel said to him: NOW GO AND SMITE AMALEK (I Sam. 15:3), he (Samuel) said to him on his return: You went forth virtuous and have brought back a sinner and spared him, as it says, BUT SAUL AND THE PEOPLE SPARED AGAG (Ib. 15:9). And behold, a scion shall rise from him who will inflict on you hardships like thorns in your eyes and pricks in your sides. Who will this /scion/ be? Haman, who decreed to destroy, to slay, and to cause to perish. And when they saw all this they began crying, WOE!--WAYYEHİ (וַיֵּי) there was a woe) IN THE DAYS OF AHASUERUS (Esther 1:1).²³

In a similar vein the entire episode in Shushan is tied to Saul and Amalek. In this version Esther is recognized as a descendant of Saul:

Mordecai responded to the matter (of Esther's responsibility vis a vis helping the Jews in their hour of need) by saying (to Esther): Perhaps you imagine to yourself as follows: I am indeed ready to reign and I will become a great queen and perhaps you think in your heart and say: that it is not incumbent upon me to seek mercy for Israel. You should know that even if one leg of a man of Israel is struck don't think you can be saved there in the house of the king from /the fate/ of all the Jews. For it is because of Saul, your father, that all this sorrow has come. He is the one that caused the children of Israel all this evil. For if he had fulfilled the words of Samuel and had killed Agag, the king of Amalek as he was commanded, Haman the wicked would not have arisen from the seed of Amalek to destroy us. And he would not have purchased us for ten thousand kikars of silver from the hand of Ahasuerus. The Holy One, blessed be He, would not, then, have delivered us into the hand of these two wicked men (Haman and Ahasuerus). For from the first of our ancient days Amalek was our great enemy.²⁴

²³ Esther Rabba Petichta 7

²⁴ Targum Sheni Esther 4:13

The following midrash also links Agag to Haman but is different as it links Saul to Mordecai:

R. Phineas said: The Holy One, blessed be He, saw that in the future there would arise from Agag a man, a great enemy and adversary of the Jews. And who was this? Haman, the wicked, as it says, BECAUSE HAMAN, THE SON OF HAMMEDATHH, THE AGAGITE, THE ENEMY OF ALL THE JEWS (Esther 9:24). And from the seed of Saul /would arise/ an avenger for the Jews /who would deliver them/ from the hand of Haman. And who would this be? Mordecai, as it says, THERE WAS A CERTAIN JEW IN SHUSHAN, THE CAPITAL, WHOSE NAME WAS MORDECAI...THE SON OF KISH, A BENJAMITE (Ib. 2:5).²⁵

Saul's major sin has been shown to have had terrible consequences. Only the last two midrashim, by positing Esther and Mordecai as Saul's descendants, come in any way to lessen the full measure of responsibility Saul must bear for these consequences. There is great irony in the fact that Saul is seen both as the ultimate cause of Haman's persecutions of the Jews and as having merited two descendants who act as Israel's saviors in that dangerous moment. That Saul should merit such descendants is a clue to a dimension of his image that we can only now begin to understand: for no sin does Saul stand totally condemned. For every sin and fault presented in the midrash one finds material which mitigates and often rejects altogether Saul's guilt. That is to say, a dynamic exists whereby Saul's name is continually cleared and his reputation upheld. We glimpse this dynamic when we examine later rabbinic material which casts doubt on Saul's guilt regarding his failure to eliminate Amalek. We will also see that even where guilt is

²⁵ Pirke de R. Eliezer Chap. 49

assumed, mitigating factors exist. What is with regard to Amalek a minority view (that Saul) bears no guilt for sparing Amalek) will be shown in subsequent chapters to be the dominant view.

III

Though clearly a minority view, midrashic opinion also holds that Saul did blot out the memory of Amalek:

Another comment on, WHEN THOU ART COME UNTO THE LAND WHICH THE LORD THY GOD GIVETH THEE, AND SHALL POSSESS IT, AND SHALT DWELL THEREIN; AND SHALL SAY: I WILL SET A KING OVER ME, LIKE ALL THE NATIONS THAT ARE ROUND ABOUT ME (Deut. 17:14). R. Judah b. Ilai said: When Israel entered the land they were commanded three things: to blot out the memory of Amalek, to set a king over them, and to build a Temple unto themselves. They set a king over them, and they blotted out the memory of Amalek, but they did not build a Temple unto themselves. Know that this was because there were informers among them.²⁶

Another midrash suggests that God's command to the Israelites was not the physical elimination of Amalek but the remembrance of Amalek. This interpretation is based on Ex. 17:14 where God declares His intention to blot out the remembrance of Amalek. The interpretation deduced by this midrash mitigates Saul's guilt since it declares that only the remembrance is to be blotted out. Additionally, the midrash concludes by declaring that Saul did in fact smite Amalek:

R. Berekiah said: The Holy One, blessed be He, had already recorded the deliverance of Israel in the Torah, as it is written, AND IF A STRANGER WHO IS A SETTLER WITH THEE WAXEN RICH, ETC. (Lev. 25:47). A STRANGER WHO IS A SETTLER refers to Haman, who became great and rich and could pay out ten thousand

²⁶ Deut. Rabba 5:10

Note: The informers are linked to the generation of Saul. See Chapter One, footnote 27.

shekels of silver. He was called a **גר תושב** (a stranger who settled) because he was of the seed of Amalek and he was a stranger in Media and Persia... FOR I WILL UTTERLY BLOT OUT (**מַחֶה אֶמְחֶה**) THE REMEMBRANCE OF AMALEK FROM UNDER HEAVEN (Ex. 17:14).

מַחֶה -- I will blot out in this world. **אֶמְחֶה** -- I will blot out in the world to come. THE REMEMBRANCE (**זִכָּר**) of Amalek --this refers to Haman but the passage is /erroneously/ read as **זִכָּר**, the males of Amalek. And even Jacob our father hinted at this in the blessing of the tribes. As it is written, BENJAMIN IS A WOLF THAT RAVENETH; IN THE MORNING HE DEVORETH THE PREY (Gen. 49:27). This refers to Saul who was the morning of Israel, being the first of the kings, from the tribe of Benjamin, and who smote Amalek and spoiled all their possessions.²⁷

Another midrashic piece confirms that God's command to Israel was not the physical elimination of Amalek. It interprets that command as being a charge to remember Amalek every year by reading the appropriate passage in Scriptures:

THEREFORE IT SHALL BE, WHEN THE LORD THY GOD HATH GIVEN THEE REST FROM ALL THINE ENEMIES ROUND ABOUT (Deut. 25:19). R. Azariah and R. Judah the son of Simon said in the name of R. Judah the son of R. Ilai: Israel was commanded three things upon their entrance to the land: to set up a king over them, to build themselves the Temple, and to blot out the remembrance of Amalek, THAT THOU SHALT BLOT OUT THE REMEMBRANCE OF AMALEK FROM UNDER HEAVEN (Ib.). Said Israel before the Holy One, blessed be He, Master of the Universe, you tell us /to blot out/ the remembrance of Amalek. But we are of flesh and blood. We exist but for a moment. You, who exist forever, you remember! The Holy One, blessed be He, replied to them: My children, you need only read every year the passage concerning Amalek, and I shall reckon it for you as though you were wiping out his name from the world.²⁸

There is midrashic opinion that, while accepting Saul's obligation vis a vis Amalek and accepting that he did in the end fail to carry out this obligation, comes to mitigate his

²⁷ Esther Rabba 10:13

²⁸ Pesikta Rabbati Chap. 12

culpability. It does this by blaming Doeg for influencing and even preventing him from carrying out this task:

Ben Kappara said: Doeg was called the Edomite because he forbade Saul to shed the blood (דָּם) being connected to אֶדוֹמִי of Agag. For Doeg said: It is written in the Torah: YE SHALL NOT KILL IT AND ITS YOUNG BOTH IN ONE DAY (Lev. 22:28), yet you are about to kill young and old, children and women, in one day. Therefore, Doeg was called the Edomite, because through Doeg's decree Saul was held accountable /of bloodguiltiness/ (Agag's descendants were blood foes of Israel).²⁹

One last mitigating factor is that Saul's failure is interpreted as being part of the Divine Plan. God knows all along that Saul will spare Amalek. It is for this reason that Israel is commanded to blot out the remembrance of Amalek. In the end of time a Benjamite will come and complete the task:

The Holy One, blessed be He, said: With me there is no forgetfulness and I remember what they (Amalek) did. You, who are flesh and blood, and are likely to forget, you should remember what Amalek did to you in order to blot out his name from the world: REMEMBER WHAT AMALEK DID UNTO THEE...THOU SHALT BLOT OUT THE REMEMBRANCE OF AMALEK (Deut. 25:17,19). They said: Master of the Universe, is it for us to blot out his name? God said to them: Is it not revealed and anticipated by Me that when I deliver Amalek into the hand of Saul your king, he will let some of Amalek's seed remain alive, indeed will spare the king of Amalek: BUT SAUL AND THE PEOPLE SPARED AGAG (I Sam. 15:9). Therefore I command you (Israel): THOU SHALT BLOT OUT (Deut. 25:19). And despite the fact that Saul will spare Agag, still Samuel will come and slay him in an unnatural (horrible) way: AND SAMUEL HEWED AGAG IN PIECES (I Sam. 15:33). Said Agag to Samuel: Do prophets slay in such a manner? Said Samuel to Agag: AS THY SWORD HATH MADE WOMEN CHILDLESS (ib.). What is the meaning of HATH MADE...CHILDLESS? What he said was: As your ancestor Amalek did, who mutilated

²⁹ Midrash Tehilim 52:4; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, אבא

the sexual parts of Israel's males and doomed their wives to be childless and widowed, AS THY SWORD HATH MADE WOMEN CHILDLESS (**כאשר שפלה**) SO SHALL THY MOTHER BE CHILDLESS AMONG WOMEN (Ib. -- **כן תפלה**). Said the Holy One, blessed be He: In this world I told them (the children of Israel) to blot out the name of Amalek but in the future to come the tribe I hold ready against Amalek will exact punishment from him and pluck up by the root the last of his line from the world: IT IS OF ME (**מיני אגונים** --read "it is of me" instead of "out of Ephraim") THAT EPHRAIM PLUCK THEM UP --THEM OF AMALEK-- BY THE ROOTS; AFTER THEE, BENJAMIN (Judges 5:14).³⁰

Midrashic evidence mitigating Saul's guilt for the sin of sparing Amalek is thin. It is presented in order to fill in the complete picture and to suggest traces of what we shall discover dominates his image in regard to most other sins and faults: an attempt to clear Saul of blame. This dynamic of clearing Saul's good name cannot undo the damage done by his worst sin. This sin stands, we shall see, as the only transgression of an otherwise perfect man.

³⁰ Pesikta Rabbati Chap. 13

Note: God chose Benjamin for this role because "Joseph, a humble man, turned his brother's hatred of him into love. So God said: Let Joseph who rooted hatred out of his heart come and requite Esau (considered Amalek's ancestor) who kept his hatred in his heart" (Pesikta Rabbati, Braude, p. 243).

CHAPTER THREE

I

Many midrashim praise Saul. So many, in fact, particularly among the later midrashim, that one is convinced of an attempt to portray the fallen king in as positive a light as possible. In this chapter we shall look first at material which speaks highly of Saul -- material for the most part unrelated to anything we have thus far examined. Then we shall investigate midrashim relating to the sins and faults presented in Chapter One. We shall find that these sins and faults are either directly negated or contradicted by material which comes to show Saul's virtues and attributes in precisely those areas in which he had been denigrated.

The earliest material to lavish praise on Saul is to be found in Pesikta de R. Kahana. In the following midrash it is written that Saul merited to rule immediately after his anointment whereas David had his reign delayed. The midrash comes to explain the reasons Saul merited such distinction:

Another interpretation of HOPE DEFERRED MAKETH THE HEART SICK; BUT DESIRE FULFILLED IS A TREE OF LIFE (Prov. 13:12). HOPE DEFERRED MAKETH THE HEART SICK -- this refers to David who was anointed but had to wait two years to rule. BUT DESIRE FULFILLED IS A TREE OF LIFE -- this refers to Saul who was anointed and ruled immediately. Through what merit? Through the merit of the good deeds he accumulated, for being meek and humble, for observing the Levitical precautions of purity even when he ate common food, because he spent his own wealth freely in order to save Israel's wealth, and he considered the honor of his servant to be of equal weight to his own

honor (I Sam. 9:5). Taught R. Judah b. Nahman in the name of R. Simeon b. Lakish: Saul was a scholar in Torah: BY ME, says Torah, PRINCES COME TO REIGN (Prov. 18:16); BY ME KINGS COME TO REIGN (Ib. 8:15).¹

In the early days of his kingship Saul was remarkably successful in battle. Two midrashim explain that this success was due to his outstanding character and deeds:

R. Simeon b. Yohai said: As long as he does not sin a man is an object of awe and fear. When one sins he is himself subject to awe and fear... Before Saul sinned the text writes, not that Saul took (לקח) the kingdom but that SAUL CONQUERED (לכד)--denoting a conquering by moral and legal right whereas לקח would denote a taking done simply by physical force) THE KINGDOM OVER ISRAEL, ETC. (I Sam. 14:47). What is the meaning of, AND WHITHERSOEVER HE TURNED HIMSELF, YARSHIA (ירשיע, usually taken as "He put them to the worse.")? It means: He conquered them. By what merit? By the merit of the /performance of/ commandments and good deeds that he had to his credit; for he was meek and he used to eat /even/ non-sacred food in a state of ritual-purity; he used to be lavish with his own wealth and sparing of his servant to the same extent that he considered his own dignity (he held his servant to be his equal in terms of the honor deserved). R. Judah b. Nahman in the name of R. Simeon b. Lakish said: And in addition he was a scholar, as it is written, BY ME KINGS REIGN, ETC. (Prov. 8:15). But when he sinned, WHEN SAUL SAW THE HOST OF THE PHILISTINES, HE WAS AFRAID (I Sam. 28:5).²

SO SAUL TOOK THE KINGDOM OVER ISRAEL (I Sam. 14:47). For he was very humble and feared sin and spent his wealth and spared the wealth of Israel. Judah b. Nahman in the name of R. Simeon b. Lakish said: For he was learned in Torah, as it is written, THROUGH

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- 1 Pesikta de R. Kahana 5:3; Pesikta Rabbati Chap. 15; Midrash Shmuel Chap. 17
Note: These attributes will be explained later in this chapter.
 - 2 Numbers Rabba 11:3
Note: Explanation of לכד was found in the Soncino notes, p. 420.

ME KINGS RULE (Prov. 18:16). AND (Saul) FOUGHT AGAINST ALL HIS ENEMIES ON EVERY SIDE...WITHERSOEVER HE TURNED HIMSELF, HE PUT THEM TO THE WORSE (I Sam. 14:47). What is the meaning of **בכל אשר יפנה ירשיע**? He brought evil upon the sinner.³

Later material waxes on about Saul's many attributes. Mishnat R. Eliezer, quoting R. Yanai, claims that Scripture describes Saul as possessing twelve good attributes. Reishit Hohma, also quoting R. Yanai, claims thirteen attributes for Saul. These two versions are almost identical. The longer one mentions Saul's containment of his desire to hurt David and praises Saul for asking David for help even though he knew David would replace him as king. Mishnat R. Eliezer does not mention these two characteristics and instead contains one trait not mentioned by Reishit Hohma: there was in Saul's heart a tender willingness to repent. Here is the fuller version in its entirety and the one attribute in Mishnat R. Eliezer that is not contained in this longer version:

R. Yanai said: Thirteen positive attributes Scripture ascribes to Saul. And they are: 1) his humility: AM I NOT A BENJAMITE, OF THE SMALLEST OF THE TRIBES (I Sam. 9:21)? 2) He heard obscenity /directed/ at him and was quiet, as it says, BUT CERTAIN BASE FELLOWS SAID: HOW SHALL THIS MAN SAVE US?...BUT HE WAS AS ONE THAT HELD HIS PEACE (Ib. 10:27), as if he did not know /how they were speaking of him/. 3) He pardoned his detractors, as it says, AND THE PEOPLE SAID UNTO SAMUEL: WHO IS HE THAT SAID: SHALL SAUL REIGN OVER US? BRING THE MEN, THAT WE MAY PUT THEM TO DEATH (I Sam. 11:12). And then it is written, AND SAUL SAID: THERE SHALL NOT A MAN BE PUT TO DEATH THIS DAY (Ib. 11:13). 4) He kept the commandment of tsitsith, as it says, THEN DAVID AROSE, AND CUT OFF THE SKIRT OF SAUL'S ROBE (**כנף המעיל** - I Sam. 24:5). This robe was tsitsith, as it says, SPEAK UNTO THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL, AND BID THEM THAT THEY MAKE THEM

3 Midrash Shmuel Chap. 17

THROUGHOUT THEIR GENERATIONS FRINGES IN THE CORNERS OF THEIR GARMENTS (**וּנְתַן עַל צִיצִית הַכֵּנָף** - Num. 15:38). 5) He married off all the daughters of Israel and every one who had no bride's outfit, he would provide her with it, as it says, YE DAUGHTERS OF ISRAEL, WEEP OVER SAUL, WHO CLOTHED YOU IN SCARLET, WITH OTHER DELIGHTS, WHO PUT ORNAMENTS OF GOLD UPON YOUR APPAREL (II Sam. 1:24). 6) He had the strength to make teshuvah (**גִּשּׁוּבָה**). For twice Samuel said to him: There is no returning with you (i.e. you have sinned and you are "finished"). Saul said to him: I PRAY THEE, PARDON MY SIN, AND RETURN (**שׁוּב**) WITH ME, THAT I MAY WORSHIP THE LORD (I Sam. 15:25). 7) He was modest. As it says, AND HE CAME TO THE SHEEPCOTES BY THE WAY, WHERE WAS A CAVE; AND SAUL WENT IN TO COVER HIS FEET (I Sam. 24:4). There were two fences and a cave and despite these he covered himself! And for this modesty he was saved from death, as Masechet Berakoth substantiates: (Said David:) AND SOME BADE ME KILL THEE; BUT MINE EYE SPARED THEE (**וְהָיָה עֵינִי מְסַלֵּחַ**); AND I SAID: I WILL NOT PUT FORTH MY HAND AGAINST MY LORD (I Sam. 24:11). I ask, what does it tell us that is says **וְהָיָה** instead of **וְהָיָה**? Said R. Akiba: David said to Saul: By the law of the Torah I am permitted to kill you. Why? For you are a pursuer and when one is coming to kill you, a person is to kill him first. Only your modesty -- this is what spared you (**וְהָיָה** is written in third person: and it, your modesty, spared you). And what was Saul's modesty? As it says, AND HE CAME TO THE SHEEPCOTES BY THE WAY...AND SAUL WENT IN TO COVER HIS FEET. We are taught: There was a fence within a fence and a cave within a cave /and still he covered his feet/!! To cover -- Said R. Akiba: This means that he covered himself like a succah. 8) Saul spent his own wealth and spared the wealth of Israel, as it says, AND THE SPIRIT OF GOD CAME MIGHTILY UPON SAUL WHEN HE HEARD THOSE WORDS, AND HIS ANGER WAS KINDLED GREATLY. AND HE TOOK A YOKE OF OXEN, AND CUT THEM IN PIECES, AND SENT THEM THROUGHOUT ALL THE BORDERS OF ISRAEL, ETC. (I Sam. 11:6,7). 9) Saul ate even non-consecrated food while observing the laws of Levitical purity, as it says, NEVERTHELESS SAUL SPOKE NOT ANY THING THAT DAY; FOR HE THOUGHT: SOMETHING HATH BEFALLEN HIM, HE IS UNCLEAR; SURELY HE IS UNCLEAR (I Sam. 20:26). This teaches you that if something happened to someone -- if, for example, that a person became unclear at night, he could not come to Saul's table. 10) He dedicated the dedicated things, as it says, AND ALL THAT SAMUEL THE SEER, AND SAUL THE SON OF KISH...HAD DEDICATED (I Chron. 26:28). 11) He equated the honor due his servant to the honor due himself, as it says, AND THE KING SAT UPON HIS SEAT, AS AT OTHER

TIMES, EVEN UPON THE SEAT BY THE WALL; AND JONATHAN STOOD UP, AND ABNER SAT BY SAUL'S SIDE; BUT DAVID'S PLACE WAS EMPTY (I Sam. 20:25 - in parenthesis the text acknowledges another example of this: in I Sam. 9:5 Saul includes his servant by saying that his father might be worried about "us" - **וְדָאָג לָנוּ**). Also it explains how unusual it is for a king to sit at the same level as his servants). 12) Saul contained his desire /to hurt David/. You find that when David reconciled with Saul in the cave, immediately Saul became reconciled, as it says, THEN SAID SAUL: I HAVE SINNED; RETURN, MY SON DAVID (I Sam. 26:21). 13) He knew that in the future David would rule and he sought help from him, as it says, AND NOW, BEHOLD, I KNOW THAT THOU SHALT SURELY BE KING, AND THAT THE KINGDOM OF ISRAEL SHALL BE ESTABLISHED IN THY HAND. SWEAR NOW THEREFORE UNTO ME BY THE LORD, THAT THOU WILT NOT CUT OFF MY SEED AFTER ME (Ib. 24:21,22).⁴

Twelfth, there was in his heart a tender willingness to repent. You find that when David reconciled with Saul in the cave, immediately Saul became reconciled, as it says, THEN SAID SAUL: I HAVE SINNED; RETURN, MY SON DAVID (I Sam. 26:21). Were it not for the slanderers who came and informed on him (David), Saul would not have pursued him.⁵

Besides midrashim which list Saul's attributes, there are many which detail his superior appearance, character, and deeds. Saul is one of five created in God's likeness:

Our Rabbis have taught: Five were created after the likeness of Him who is above, and all of them incurred punishment on account of /the feature which distinguished/ them: Samson in his strength, Saul in his neck (I Sam. 10:23), Absalom in his hair, Zedekiah in his eyes, and Asa in his feet. Samson in his strength -- as it is written, AND HIS STRENGTH WENT FROM HIM (Judges 16:19). Saul in his neck -- as it is written, SAUL TOOK HIS SWORD AND FELL UPON IT (I Sam. 31:14)...⁶

4 Reishit Hohma, **שער הענוה** - Chap. 7

5 Mishnat R. Eliezer, Chap. 10
Note: This attribute will be discussed further in Chap. 5.

6 Sotah 10a; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, **עא**

Saul is one of six similar to the first man:

Six people were similar to the first man and all were slain. They were: Samson with his might and he was slain by his might; Saul with his stature and he was slain in his stature; Asahel with his swiftness and he was slain with his swiftness; Josiah with his nostrils, and he was slain through his nostrils; Zedekiah with his eyes, and he was slain through his eyes; Absalom with his hair and he was slain with his hair.⁷

He is portrayed as being extraordinary in stature:

It is written, NOW IN ALL OF ISRAEL THERE WAS NONE TO BE SO MUCH PRAISED AS ABSALOM (II Sam. 14:25). You might think /that in regards to/ everything /there was none to be so praised/. Scripture says: FROM THE SOLE OF HIS FOOT EVEN TO THE CROWN OF HIS HEAD THERE WAS NO BLEMISH IN HIM (Ib.). It is written: AND HE (Kish) HAD A SON, WHOSE NAME WAS SAUL, YOUNG AND GOODLY, AND THERE WAS NOT AMONG THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL A GOODLIER PERSON THAN HE (I Sam. 9:2). You might think /that in regards to/ everything /he was so goodly/. Scripture says: FROM HIS SHOULDERS AND UPWARD HE WAS HIGHER THAN ANY OF THE PEOPLE (Ib.).⁸

Saul was so attractive that young women delayed him in order to have more time to look at him. Saul asked the maidens where the seer (Samuel) was to be located. They responded with a reply that was so lengthy and wordy that the Rabbis question their ulterior motives:

AND THEY (the young maidens) ANSWERED THEM (Saul and his servant), AND SAID: HE IS, BEHOLD, HE IS BEFORE THEE; MAKE HASTE NOW, FOR HE IS COME TODAY INTO THE CITY; FOR THE PEOPLE HAVE A SACRIFICE TODAY IN THE HIGH PLACE, AS SOON AS YE ARE COME INTO THE CITY, YE SHALL STRAIGHTWAY FIND HIM, BEFORE HE GO UP TO THE HIGH PLACE TO EAT; FOR

7 Pirke de R. Eliezer Chap. 53; Midrash Hagadol Bereshit p. 66; Sotah 10a; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, עא

8 Yerushalmi Sotah Chap. 1, Hal. 8; Numbers Rabba 9:24; Midrash Shmuel Chap. 13; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, גרנה; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, ק

THE PEOPLE WILL NOT EAT UNTIL HE COME, BECAUSE HE DOTH BLESS THE SACRIFICE; AND AFTERWARDS THEY EAT THAT ARE BIDDED. NOW THEREFORE GET YOU UP; FOR AT THIS TIME YE SHALL FIND HIM (I Sam. 9:11-13). Why did they make a long story of it? Because women are fond of talking. Samuel, however, says it was so that they might feast their eyes on Saul's good looks, since it is written, FROM HIS SHOULDERS AND UPWARD HE WAS HIGHER THAN ANY OF THE PEOPLE (I Sam. 9:2); while R. Yohanan says it was because one kingdom cannot overlap another by a hair's breadth.⁹

We saw previously that references to Saul as a Cushite were interpreted as meaning that he was different because of his unusual behavior (sparing Amalek and disobeying Samuel). These references are also interpreted as meaning that he stood out because of his great appearance and beauty. The first of many such references is in Sifre.¹⁰ The following midrash combines this interpretation with the delaying tactics of the maidens in order to provide a most convincing picture of Saul's beauty:

Another interpretation of CONCERNING THE MATTER OF CUSH (Ps. 7:1). Cush refers to the congregation of Israel. For when Israel sins against the Holy One, blessed be He, He calls them Cushites, as it says, ARE YE NOT AS THE CHILDREN OF THE CUSHITES UNTO ME, O CHILDREN OF ISRAEL (Amos 9:7)? Similarly Scripture says: MOSES...HAD MARRIED A CUSHITE WOMAN. Did he really take a Cushite woman? Did he not marry Zipporah (a Midianite woman, Ex. 2:16,21)? Rather, just as a Cushite woman is different because of her skin (being black), so Zipporah was different by her

9 Berakoth 48b; Midrash Shmuel Chap. 13; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, קה

Note: Midrash Shmuel quotes R. Judah as saying, "they stared at Saul's build and were not satisfied by it (i.e. kept wanting to look more)."

10 Sifre בהעלגך par. 99; Sifre Zuta p. 204; Yalkut Shimoni, Torah, תשלח; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, קה
Note: These midrashim also claim that Saul stood out because of his good deeds.

good deeds. Similarly, Saul was different by his deeds and his beauty: SAUL, A CHOICE YOUNG MAN, AND A GOODLY...FROM HIS SHOULDERS AND UPWARD HE WAS HIGHER THAN ANY OF THE PEOPLE (I Sam. 9:2). If you want to know just how beautiful he was look at what is written: AS THEY WENT UP THE ASCENT TO THE CITY, THEY FOUND YOUNG MAIDENS GOING OUT TO DRAW WATER, AND SAID UNTO THEM: IS THE SEER HERE? AND THEY ANSWERED THEM, AND SAID: HE IS, BEHOLD, HE IS BEFORE THEE; MAKE HASTE NOW, FOR HE IS COME TODAY INTO THE CITY; FOR THE PEOPLE HAVE A SACRIFICE TODAY IN THE HIGH PLACE. AS SOON AS YE ARE COME INTO THE CITY, YE SHALL STRAIGHTWAY FIND HIM, BEFORE HE GO UP TO THE HIGH PLACE TO EAT; FOR THE PEOPLE WILL NOT EAT UNTIL HE COME, BECAUSE HE DOETH BLESS THE SACRIFICE; AND AFTERWARDS THEY EAT THAT ARE BIDDEN. NOW THEREFORE GET YOU UP; FOR AT THIS TIME YE SHALL FIND HIM (I Sam. 9:11-13). Behold, he asked one /simple/ thing and they answered him with so many words--in order to gaze upon his beauty. Therefore, he was called Cush.¹¹

In addition to his magnificent stature and beauty a host of titles and honors are ascribed to Saul. He is mentioned as being one of two kings to come forth from Jacob:

R. Berekiah and R. Helbo interpreted it in R. Samuel b. Nahman's name: AND KINGS SHALL COME OUT OF THY LOINS (God speaking to Jacob - Gen. 35:11) alludes to Jeroboam and Jesu (descended from Manasseh and Ephraim, Jacob's future children). The Rabbis said: Was it possible that Abner, who was a righteous man, should yet fight against the Davidic dynasty? In fact he interpreted a text, as a result of which he proclaimed Ishbosheth king, viz. AND KINGS SHALL COME OUT OF THY LOINS -- this alluding to Saul and Ishbosheth.¹²

Saul is one of two kings to come out of Benjamin:

...AND FOR THE SACRIFICE OF PEACE-OFFERINGS, TWO OXEN (Num. 7:65). This is an allusion to the two kings who would come out of Benjamin: Saul and Ishbosheth.¹³

11 Midrash Tehilim 7:14; 7:17; 7:18

12 Gen. Rabba 82:4; Pesikta Rabbati Chap. 3; Tanhuma Buber Beyishlach 29

13 Numbers Rabba 14:8

Being a king from the loins of Jacob and Benjamin is a most special status. Saul was chosen at creation to be the prototype of the anointed one:

R. Berekiah opened with the text, WHO HATH WROUGHT AND DONE IT? HE THAT CALLED THE GENERATIONS FROM THE BEGINNING (Is. 41:4). From the beginning of His creation of the world the Holy One, blessed be He, appointed for each one what would be appropriate for him (Soncino note: He chose the proper men to be the prototypes of certain kinds of characters. P.10). He appointed Adam to be the head of those who are formed (i.e. human beings), Cain the first of the slayers, Abel the first of all slain, Noah the first of all those saved from calamity, Abraham the first of all circumcised, Isaac the first of all bound for sacrifice, Jacob the head of the blameless, Judah the head of the tribes, Joseph the head of the saintly, Aaron the head of the priests, Moses the first of the prophets, Joshua the head of the conquerers, Othniel the head of the dividers, Samuel of anointers, Saul of anointed, David the foremost of singers, Solomon the head of the builders...¹⁴

Saul is labeled "righteous" by many midrashim. He is spoken of as being one of seven righteous descendants of Abraham:

AND ABRAHAM SET SEVEN EWE-LAMBS OF THE FLOCK, ETC. (Gen. 21:28). The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him (to Abraham): Thou gavest him (Abimelech) seven ewe-lambs; as thou livest, I will delay the joy of thy children for seven generations. Thou gavest him seven ewe-lambs; as thou livest, his descendants will slay seven righteous men of thy descendants: Hofni, Phinehas, Samson, and Saul with his three sons.¹⁵

He is twice labeled righteous by midrashim found in Ruth Rabba:

OF THE FAMILY OF ELIMELECH, AND HIS NAME WAS BOAZ (Ruth 2:1). In the case of wicked people, the name

¹⁴ Esther Rabba Petichta 10

¹⁵ Gen. Rabba 54:4; Pesikta de R. Kahana 11:9; Midrash Shmuel Chap. 12

precedes the word "his name". For example, GOLIATH WAS HIS NAME (I Sam. 17:4), NABAL WAS HIS NAME (Ib. 25:3), SHEBA, THE SON OF BICHRI, WAS HIS NAME (II Sam. 20:1). But the righteous, the word "his name" precedes the name. For example, AND HIS NAME WAS KISH (I Sam. 9:1), AND HIS NAME WAS SAUL (Ib. 9:2), AND HIS NAME WAS JESSE (Ib. 17:12), AND HIS NAME WAS MORDECAI (Esther 2:5), AND HIS NAME WAS ELKANAH (I Sam. 1:1). AND HIS NAME WAS BOAZ. /Why is this?/ Because they are like their Creator, as it says, BUT BY MY NAME 'THE LORD' (**יהוה**) I MADE ME NOT KNOWN TO THEM (Ex. 6:3 -- **שמ** comes before **יהוה** just as **שמ** comes before the names of the righteous ones).¹⁶

(Said Boaz to Ruth:) AND WHEN THOU ART ATHIRST, GO UNTO THE VESSELS (**הכלים** - Ruth 2:9). These are the righteous who are called vessels, as in the verse, HOW ARE THE MIGHTY FALLEN (reference on the biblical level is to Saul and Jonathan) AND THE VESSELS (**כלי מלחמה**) OF WAR (i.e. interpreted as the righteous) PERISHED (II Sam. 1:27).¹⁷

Saul held the distinguished title of Nasi:

For a Nasi or Ab Beth din or on hearing evil tidings (one needs to rend one's garment and is not to sew it up). Whence do we derive /these rulings/? From what is written, THEN DAVID TOOK HOLD OF HIS CLOTHES AND RENT THEM; AND LIKEWISE ALL THE MEN THAT WERE WITH HIM. AND THEY WAILED AND WEPT AND FASTED UNTIL EVEN, FOR SAUL AND FOR JONATHAN HIS SON AND FOR THE PEOPLE OF THE LORD AND FOR THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL, BECAUSE THEY WERE FALLEN BY THE SWORD (II Sam. 1:11,12). Now Saul, that is the Nasi; Jonathan, that is the Ab Beth din. AND FOR THE PEOPLE OF THE LORD AND FOR THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL, that refers to evil tidings.¹⁸

In the time of the Messiah Saul is to be one of eight princes among men:

AND THIS SHALL BE PEACE: WHEN THE ASSYRIAN SHALL COME INTO OUR LAND, AND WHEN HE SHALL TREAD IN OUR PALACES, THEN SHALL WE RAISE UP AGAINST HIM SEVEN

16 Ruth Rabba 4:3

17 Ruth Rabba 4:12

18 Mo'ed Katan 26a; Yerushalmi Mo'ed Katan Chap. 3, Hal. 7; Sheiltot Chap. 35

SHEPHERDS AND EIGHT PRINCES AMONG MEN (Micah 5:4). Who are the seven shepherds? David in the middle, Adam, Seth, and Methuselah on his right, and Abraham, Jacob, and Moses on his left. And who are the eight princes among men? Jesse, Saul, Samuel, Amos, Zephaniah, Zedekiah, the Messiah, and Elijah.¹⁹

Saul's deeds stand out as his appearance and titles and honors stand out. We have already seen mention made of his outstanding deeds.²⁰ Here is another example of such praise for Saul:

SHIGGAION OF DAVID, WHICH HE SANG UNTO THE LORD, CONCERNING CUSH A BENJAMITE (Ps. 7:1). Was Cush that Benjamite's name? And was not his name Saul? But just as a Cushite is distinguished by his /good/ deeds...In like manner you explain: ARE YE NOT AS THE CHILDREN OF THE CUSHITES UNTO ME, O CHILDREN OF ISRAEL, SAITH THE LORD (Amos 9:7). Now is their name (Children of) Cushites? Was not their name (Children of) Israel? The truth is that as the Cushite is distinguishable by his skin, so are Israel distinguished by their ways from all other nations.²¹

Saul's good deeds are many. One of the most outstanding was that of spending his own wealth in order to spare the wealth of Israel. We have seen mention of this earlier.²² The following recitation of this deed of Saul's is to be found in a speech God makes to David where God criticizes David for comparing himself to Saul:

19 Sukkah 52b; Song of Songs Rabba 8:3; Bet Ha-Midrash, Vol. 6, p. 150.

20 See footnotes 1,2,11 of this Chapter.

21 Mo'ed Katan 16b; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, נפ

22 See footnotes 1,2,3,4 of this Chapter.

Saul renounced ownership of his wealth for the sake of Israel's war, as it says, HE TOOK A YOKE OF OXEN, AND CUT THEM IN PIECES AND SENT THEM THROUGHOUT... ISRAEL (I Sam. 11:7). And you liken yourself to Saul!²³

Also prominent among Saul's good deeds was his support of scholars and the daughters of Israel whose husbands had gone off to war. In fact his support of the daughters of Israel accounted for their weeping over his death:

Mishnah: And when R. Ishmael died they offered a lament and they said, "Daughters of Israel, weep over R. Ishmael." And similarly it says of Saul, YE DAUGHTERS OF ISRAEL, WEEP OVER SAUL (II Sam. 1:24). Gemara: It is written, YE DAUGHTERS OF ISRAEL, WEEP OVER SAUL (Ib.). R. Judah and R. Nehemiah /have different interpretations of this verse/. One said that it literally refers to the daughters of Israel, whose husbands had gone off to war and they (the wives) were provided with sustenance /by Saul/. What does Scripture say? WHO PUT ORNAMENTS OF GOLD (עֲרֵי זָהָב) UPON YOUR APPAREL (Ib.). For ornamentation becomes only a well-nursed (or graceful) body (גוף מְנוּחָה). The other said: Banot Yisrael (בנות ישראל - Daughters of Israel) /really refers to/ Bena'ot Yisrael (the beautiful of Israel - בְּנֵיּוֹת יִשְׂרָאֵל), which is the Sanhedrin. For when he (Saul) would see a group of scholars, he would provide them with food and drink. What does the text mean - WHO PUT ORNAMENTS OF GOLD UPON YOUR APPAREL (Ib.)? It means he would listen to the lessons of a sage and praise him.²⁴

Saul possessed many virtues. Among the most prominent was his modesty.²⁵ When David nakedly and wildly danced with the Ark he was reproached by Michal who reminded him of her father's modesty. This occasion is used for a lengthy discourse on the subject of Saul's modesty and David's experience of that

²³ Midrash Tehilim 7:2

Note: In Chapter Five we shall review this speech in its entirety.

²⁴ Yerushalmi Nedarim Chap. 9, Hal. 9; Midrash Shmuel Ch. 25

²⁵ See footnote 4 of this Chapter where Saul's modesty is referred to.

modesty in the cave when he had an opportunity to kill the pursuing Saul. There are several versions of this midrash and though similar all are presented for slightly varying nuances. First presented is the shortest version:

Michal said to David: Today the honor of my father's house was revealed (at the time of David's wild dance at the return of the Ark). They said of the House of Saul that one never saw his heel or toe. Thus it is written: AND HE CAME TO THE SHEEPCOTES BY THE WAY, WHERE THERE WAS A CAVE, AND SAUL WENT IN (I Sam. 24:4) to relieve himself a little at a time, and cover it repeatedly. Said David: Cursed be whoever touches that modest one.²⁶

The following midrash provides us with more details of Saul's modesty. Note that in these midrashim David concurs with Michal's judgment that Saul was very modest indeed:

THEN DAVID RETURNED TO BLESS HIS HOUSEHOLD. AND MICHAL THE DAUGHTER OF SAUL CAME OUT TO MEET DAVID, AND SAID: HOW DID THE KING OF ISRAEL GET HIM HONOR TODAY WHO UNCOVERED HIMSELF TODAY IN THE EYES OF THE HANDMAIDS (אֲמָהוֹת) OF HIS SERVANTS, AS ONE OF THE VAIN FELLOWS (אֲחֵרִים) SHAMELESSLY UNCOVERETH HIMSELF (II Sam. 6:20,21). What is the meaning of אֲחֵרִים? Said Abba b. Kahana: אֲחֵרִים - these are vain fellows (or lowly people). She said: Today the honor of father's House was revealed. They said of it, of the House of Saul, that in all their life no one had ever seen /the naked/ heel or toe of any of them. So it is written, AND HE CAME TO THE SHEEPCOTES (גִּדְרוֹת זֵאֵן) BY THE WAY, WHERE WAS A CAVE (I Sam. 24:4). R. Abin in the name of R. Eleazar said: There was a fence (גִּר) inside from the /outside/ one (responding to the plural form of גִּדְרוֹת). AND SAUL WENT IN TO COVER HIS FEET (ib.). And he (David) saw him letting down a little and lifting up a little (the text doesn't indicate what he was letting down and lifting up--presumably bandages or his garment). Said David: How could I touch this righteous body...²⁷

²⁶ Yerushalmi Sanhedrin Chap. 2, Hal. 4

²⁷ Yerushalmi Sukkah Chap. 5, Hal. 4

In this next version Michal's wrath is extreme and David announces that it is not right to harm such a modest body:

THEN DAVID RETURNED TO BLESS HIS HOUSEHOLD...AND MICHAL...CAME OUT TO MEET DAVID, ETC. (II Sam. 6:20). She did not let him come into the house. Rather, she went outside and overwhelmed him with reproaches and she said: HOW DID THE KING OF ISRAEL GET HIM HONOR TODAY, WHO UNCOVERED HIMSELF TODAY IN THE EYES OF THE HANDMAIDS OF HIS SERVANTS (Ib.)! ...She began quarrelling with him and sought to destroy his countenance. She said to him: Have I seen your glory? O, HOW DID THE KING OF ISRAEL GET HIM HONOR TODAY! Now you have made it known that you are indeed a king! WHO UNCOVERED HIMSELF TODAY. O, that it had at least been in private! But no; IN THE EYES OF THE HANDMAIDS OF HIS SERVANTS! It was the women of Israel that she called handmaids. AS ONE OF THE VAIN FELLOWS SHAMELESSLY UNCOVERETH HIMSELF! R. Abba b. Kahana said: A dancer is the lowest of the low, for there is none more empty of mitzvot than he is, and like him David danced before the Ark. She said to him: This day the honor of my father's house has been revealed. Come and see what a difference there is between you and my father's house. All the members of my father's house were modest and pious. They said of the members of the House of Saul that in all their life no one had ever seen the heel or toe of any of them. So it is written, AND HE CAME TO THE SHEEPCOTES BY THE WAY, WHERE WAS A CAVE; AND SAUL WENT IN TO COVER HIS FEET (I Sam. 24:4). What is the meaning of AND HE CAME TO THE SHEEPCOTES? R. Abin, in the name of R. Eleazar, explained it as meaning that he entered a sheepcote which had a fence within a fence. AND SAUL WENT IN TO COVER HIS FEET. He disposed himself like a succah and wrapped himself in feminalia (bandages) as he seated himself in the privy. He (David) saw him lower a little and then raise a little, lower them a little, then raise them a little. Said David: It is not right to harm such a modest body...²⁸

In the following midrash David does not accept Michal's judgment. He defends his behavior. However the midrash concludes with Michal getting in the final word and the reader is left with the impression that Michal's assessment stands:

²⁸ Numbers Rabba 4:20

...AND IT WAS SO, AS THE ARK OF THE LORD CAME INTO THE CITY OF DAVID, THAT MICHAL THE DAUGHTER OF SAUL LOOKED OUT AT THE WINDOW, AND SAW KING DAVID LEAPING AND DANCING BEFORE THE LORD; AND SHE DESPISED HIM IN HER HEART (II Sam. 6:16). She said to him: My father's house was more becoming than yours. It was a desecration for them if a man ever saw an exposed hand or ankle dancing -- rather, all were more dignified than you. And what did David say to her? BEFORE THE LORD, WHO CHOSE ME ABOVE THY FATHER, AND ABOVE ALL OF HIS HOUSE, TO APPOINT ME PRINCE OVER THE PEOPLE OF THE LORD, OVER ISRAEL, BEFORE THE LORD WILL I MAKE MERRY (Ib. 6:21). He further said to her: The members of your father's house sought only their own glory, and did not trouble about the glory of heaven; I do not so, but, I do not trouble about my own glory whereas I seek the glory of heaven. He /further/ said: You say that I act lowly before the eyes of others but not despised before myself (i.e. I do realize that such conduct is normally unbecoming for a king but I do it anyway, abusing myself in other's eyes, in order to increase God's glory). Scripture states, I WILL BE BASE IN MINE OWN SIGHT; AND WITH THE HANDMAIDS WHOM THOU HAST SPOKEN OF, WITH THEM WILL I GET ME HONOR (Ib. 6:22). David said: Michal, Heaven forbid that you should call them handmaids (**עֲמָהוֹת**), rather they are mothers (**אִמָּהוֹת**). And she said: HOW DID THE KING OF ISRAEL GET HIM HONOR TODAY, WHO UNCOVERED HIMSELF AS ONE OF THE VAIN FELLOWS SHAMELESSLY UNCOVERETH HIMSELF (Ib. 6:20). She said: Would that/this happened/ before the eyes of regular people, but before the eyes of the handmaids of his servants, like the complete uncovering of one of the vain fellows. Said R. Abba b. Kahana: Like the chiefs of robbers.²⁹

Modesty saved Saul's life. In the cave, as we have seen, Saul's extreme modesty led to David's announcing that such a body should not be harmed by him or anyone else. The midrash additionally provides textual evidence to prove that it was Saul's modesty in the cave that spared his life:

Said David: How could I touch this righteous body? As it is written, he said to him: BEHOLD, THIS DAY THINE EYES HAVE SEEN HOW THAT THE LORD HAD DELIVERED THEE TODAY INTO MY HAND IN THE CAVE; AND SOME BADE ME KILL THEE (I Sam. 24:11); but it isn't written **וְאִנִּי עָלִיךָ** (and I spared you) - rather /it is

written/ **וַתִּחַס עָלָיו** (and it--your modesty--spared you). Your modesty spared you.³⁰

In another version David articulates his right to kill Saul but then states that Saul's modesty saved him. Textual evidence is again employed:

AND HE BADE TO KILL THEE, BUT HE SPARED THEE (I Sam. 24:11). AND HE BADE --it should be "And I bade!" R. Eleazar said: David said to Saul: According to the law, you deserve to be slain, since you are a pursuer, and the Torah has said, If one comes to kill you, rise and kill him first. But the modesty which you have shown has caused you to be spared. What is this? As it is written: AND HE CAME TO THE FENCES BY THE WAY, WHERE WAS A CAVE; AND SAUL WENT IN (**לְהִסְתָּר**) TO COVER HIS FEET (I Sam. 24:4). It has been taught: There was a fence within a fence, and a cave within a cave. R. Eleazar says: **לְהִסְתָּר** teaches that he covered (**שִׁסְכָּךְ**) himself like a sukkah (**כְּסוּכָה**).³¹

Saul is portrayed, finally, as being the right person for the historical situation faced by Israel in his day. He was the right one to help Israel:

AND LET THE MAIDEN THAT PLEASETH THE KING BE QUEEN INSTEAD OF VASHTI (Esther 2:4). Who was the right person for this situation? Mordecai (for right next to the verse announcing the opportunity we find:) THERE WAS A CERTAIN JEW IN SHUSHAN THE CASTLE, WHOSE NAME WAS MORDECAI (Ib. 2:5). Similarly (we find that in the following historical situations the right person for the situation appears in the text next to the comment which describes or sets up the opportunity to help Israel), AND GOD SAW THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL, AND GOD TOOK COGNIZANCE OF THEM (Ex. 2:25). Who was the right person for this situation? Moses -- NOW MOSES WAS KEEPING, ETC. (Ib. 3:1). Similarly, AND SAMUEL SAID UNTO THE MEN OF ISRAEL: GO YE EVERY MAN UNTO HIS CITY (I Sam. 8:22). Who was the right person for this situation? Saul -- NOW THERE WAS A MAN OF BENJAMIN, WHOSE NAME WAS KISH...AND HE HAD A SON...(Ib. 9:1,2).³²

30 Yerushalmi Sukkah Chap. 5, Hal. 4; Yerushalmi Chap. 2, Hal. 4; Numbers Rabba 4:20

31 Berakoth 62b; Midrash Tehilim 56:1; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, **קלג**

32 Esther Rabba 5:4

II

Having reviewed midrashim in praise of Saul's appearance, deeds, and character we turn now to midrashim which contain material relating to the sins and faults which were detailed in Chapter One.

Faithlessness

In contrast to midrashim which portray his faithlessness many midrashim describe Saul's piety and his devotion to God. For example, Saul is said to have run one hundred and eighty miles in a single day in order to recapture the Ark from the Philistines:

Of Saul it is said: SWIFTER THAN EAGLES...STRONGER THAN LIONS (II Sam. 1:23). R. Levi said: Saul ran sixty miles in one day. R. Simon said: One hundred and twenty miles. And the Rabbis say: One hundred and eighty miles. When? When the Ark was captured by the Philistines. As it says, THERE RAN A MAN OF BENJAMIN WITH HIS CLOTHES RENT, AND WITH EARTH UPON HIS HEAD (I Sam. 4:12). This was Saul.³³

At the time of his selection as king Saul insisted that the Urim and Thummim be consulted in order to ascertain divine approval. This is in clear contrast to the midrash in Chapter One which criticizes Saul for his reluctance to rely upon the Urim and Thummim:

Thus says the text, A MAN'S PRIDE SHALL BRING HIM LOW, BUT HE THAT IS OF HUMBLE SPIRIT SHALL ATTAIN HONOR (Prov. 29:23). Whoever pursues high office, high office flees from him. But whoever flees high office, the high office pursues him. Saul was one who fled from high office at the moment they wanted to make him king. Said the Holy One, blessed be He to Samuel: HE HAS HID HIMSELF AMONG THE BAGGAGE (I Sam. 10:22). When they came to Saul he said to them:

³³ Midrash Tehilim 7:2; Midrash Shmuel Chap. 11

Go and inquire of the Urim and Thummim /to see/ if I am worthy or not -- then put me in my place (i.e. do what is appropriate to me). Immediately they asked God if he was worthy or not. Thus the sages taught that BAGGAGE (**הכלים**) refers only to the Urim and Thummim.³⁴

Saul was so pious and devoted to God that it is accounted to him as if he built the first altar to God:

It is written, AND SAUL BUILT AN ALTAR UNTO THE LORD; HE WAS THE FIRST THAT BUILT AN ALTAR UNTO THE LORD (I Sam. 14:35). How many altars the ancients built! Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Joshua /all built altars/ and you say it (Saul's) was the first, meaning first among the kings. Said R. Judah: Because he (Saul) put his soul into the thing (the thing probably refers to the ritual slaughtering which accompanies the setting up of an altar, for the midrash previously discusses this), Scripture credits him as if he built the first altar to the Lord.³⁵

Saul gave concrete expression of his devotion to God through pious adherence to a variety of laws and rituals. He observed the Levitical precautions of purity even when he ate common food:

Saul observed the Levitical precautions of purity even when he ate common food, as it says, AND THE COOK TOOK UP THE THIGH AND THAT WHICH WAS UPON IT (**הַעֲלִיָּה**) AND SET IT BEFORE SAUL (I Sam. 9:24). The word (**העליה**) according to R. Johanan has the same meaning in the phrase "the thigh together with the fat-tail (**הַעֲלִיָּה**) but according to R. Eliezer **הַעֲלִיָּה** means "that which was upon it." This teaches that /Saul/ used to observe the

³⁴ Midrash Agadah Buber Vayikra 1:1; Tanhuma Buber Vayikra 4; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, **יא**

³⁵ Lev. Rabba 25:8; Numbers Rabba 10:1; Song of Songs Rabba 5:15; Midrash Samuel Chap. 17; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, **יז**

Levitical precautions of purity even when he ate common food.³⁶

Saul is credited with performing correct, halachic ritual slaughtering:

Who fulfilled the commandment of the blood? Saul, as it says, THEN THEY TOLD SAUL: BEHOLD, THE PEOPLE SIN AGAINST THE LORD, IN THAT THEY EAT WITH THE BLOOD... AND SAUL SAID: DISPERSE YOURSELVES AMONG THE PEOPLE, AND SAY UNTO THEM: BRING ME HITHER EVERY MAN HIS OX... AND SLAY THEM WITH THIS - BAZEH (**בזה** - I Sam. 14:33, 34). What is the meaning of **בזה**? The Rabbis say: He showed them a knife fourteen fingers long - beth represents two, zayin seven, hé five -- and said to them: You are to slaughter and eat according to this prescribed method. What did the Holy One, blessed be He, repay him? You must say that it was on the day of the battle (with the Philistines), as it is written, SO IT CAME TO PASS IN THE DAY OF BATTLE, THAT THERE WAS NEITHER SWORD NOR SPEAR FOUND IN THE HAND OF ANY OF THE PEOPLE...BUT WITH SAUL...WAS THERE FOUND (I Sam. 13:22). And you say BUT...THERE WAS FOUND! Who supplied it to him? R. Haggai in the name of R. Isaac said: An angel supplied it to him. But our Rabbis say: The Holy One, blessed be He, supplied it to him.³⁷

R. Hisda said: Whence do we learn from Scriptures that it is necessary to examine the slaughtering

36 Midrash Tehilim 7:2

Note: Brief reference to Saul's observance of ritual purity is also found in Pesikta de R. Kahana 5:3; Numbers Rabba 11:3; and Pesikta Rabbati Chap. 15. Braude (Mid. Tehilim p. 418, 419) explains how the rabbis deduced Saul's observance of ritual purity as follows: "The proof for Saul's scrupulous observance of Levitical precautions is not quite clear. However, the deduction seems to have been made in the following manner: the meat must have been common; otherwise Saul could not have eaten either the fat-tail or the breast, or the thigh, all of which were in a sacrifice reserved for the priests. On the other hand, the cook's excessively long invitation (I Sam. 9:24) is regarded as an indication that the cook had taken special pains to keep ritually pure the common food which he set before Saul."

37 Lev. Rabba 25:8; Num. Rabba 10:1; Song of Songs Rabba 5:15; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, **י**

knife? From the verse, AND SLAUGHTER WITH THIS
AND EAT (I Sam. 14:34).³⁸

He is portrayed as one who strictly kept his oaths. In the following midrash based on the story in I Samuel Chap. 14 Saul nearly kills his son because of an oath sworn forbidding the eating of food in a time of danger:

You should know the power of the ban. Come and see from (the story of) Saul, the son of Kish, who decreed that all the people, from the youngest to the oldest, would fast, as it says, CURSED BE THE MAN THAT EATETH ANY FOOD UNTIL IT BE EVENING (I Sam. 14:24). But Jonathan did not hear and he ate a little honey and his eyes were enlightened, as it says, AND HIS EYES WERE ENLIGHTENED (Ib. 14:27). Saul saw the Philistines returning against Israel and he knew that Israel had trespassed the ban. He looked at the twelve stones of the tribes; for each tribe which performed one of the precepts had its stone (on the High Priest's breast-plate) shining with its light, and each tribe which transgressed, the light of its stone was dim. And he knew that the tribe of Benjamin had trespassed the matter of the ban. He cast lots and Saul and Benjamin were taken (their family being the guilty party among the tribe of Benjamin), as it says, AND SAUL AND JONATHAN WERE TAKEN (Ib. 14:41). And Saul took his sword to slay his son, as it says, GOD DO SO (TO ME) AND MORE ALSO; THOU SHALT SURELY DIE, JONATHAN (Ib. 14:44). The people said to him: Our Lord King! It is an error! They brought on his behalf a sacrifice of a burnt offering for his error and He was entreated of him, and they saved him from death, as it says, SO THE PEOPLE RESCUED JONATHAN, THAT HE DIED NOT (Ib. 14:45).³⁹

Saul is praised for being like Moses, Samuel, and Ezra because of the fast he proclaimed which was referred to in the previous midrash. These pious men all proclaimed fasts in moments of danger:

And similarly (as in the cases of Samuel, Moses and Ezra) we find with Saul. When he saw that it

³⁸ Hullin 17b

³⁹ Pirke de R. Eliezer Chap. 38; Tanhuma Vayashav 2; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, 117

was a time of trouble he decreed a fast for all Israel, as it says, SAUL ADJURED THE PEOPLE, SAYING: CURSED BE THE MAN THAT EATETH ANY FOOD UNTIL IT BE EVENING (I Sam. 14:24). There was no time of distress like that day, as it says of it, THE PEOPLE DID HIDE THEMSELVES IN CAVES, AND IN THICKETS, AND IN ROCKS, AND IN HOLDS, AND IN PITS (Ib. 13:6). And by the merit of Jonathan, who delivered himself on behalf of Israel, they were answered, as it says, AND THAT FIRST SLAUGHTER, WHICH JONATHAN AND HIS ARMOR-BEARER MADE, WAS ABOUT TWENTY MEN...AND THERE WAS A TREMBLING IN THE CAMP IN THE FIELD, AND AMONG ALL THE PEOPLE (Ib. 14:14,15). What does it say (at the end)? SO THE LORD SAVED ISRAEL THAT DAY (Ib. 14:23).⁴⁰

Saul was strictly observant in the duty of wearing tsitsith.

In fact, his observance of this ritual saved him from death:

R. Yehuda b. Shalom said: Great is the tsitsith for it saves one from death. For behold, Saul was chasing after David and David was /legally/ permitted to kill him. But /Saul/ was strictly observant in the duty of /wearing/ tsitsith, as it says, THEN DAVID AROSE, AND CUT OFF THE SKIRT OF SAUL'S ROBE PRIVILY (I Sam. 24:5). When he (David) succeeded in this, he stopped returning after Saul and he said, MOREOVER, MY FATHER, SEE, YEA, SEE THE SKIRT OF THY ROBE IN MY HAND; FOR IN THAT I CUT OFF THE SKIRT OF THY ROBE, AND KILLED THEE NOT, KNOW THOU AND SEE THAT THERE IS NEITHER EVIL NOR TRANSGRESSION IN MY HAND, AND I HAVE NOT SINNED AGAINST THEE, THOUGH THOU LAYEST WAIT FOR MY SOUL TO TAKE IT (I Sam. 24:12)...What did he say? YEA, SEE (**גַּם רֵאָה**). (The midrash will now explain the reason for the repetition of **גַּם רֵאָה**.) He (David) said to him (Saul): Don't you see that only the skirt is in my hand but if I had wanted, your head would be in my hand. And afterwards he regretted the remark. He said: Just as my impulse (**יִצְרִי**) told me to cut his skirt and I hearkened to it, so if it had told me to kill him, I would have listened to it (thus the second **רֵאָה** comes to indicate this second remark by David, a remark admitting that the matter was beyond his control, i.e. in God's control, which links back to Saul's tsitsith saving him)...What caused him (Saul) to be saved? The Tsitsith /the wearing of which/ he strictly observed.⁴¹

40 Mishnat R. Eliezer Chap. 15

41 Mishnat R. Eliezer Chap. 14

In a speech to David, God recalls Saul's piety and devotion. According to the following midrash no idolatry was practised in Saul's day:

...For you (David) have not shown kindness to him (Saul) and have not mourned (him) in accordance with the law. The Holy One, blessed be He, further said: David! Is he not Saul who was anointed with the anointing oil? Is he not Saul, in whose days idolatry was not practiced in Israel?⁴²

One is hard pressed to conclude that Saul's overall image in the midrash is that of a faithless man. As we have seen, many more midrashim come to praise his devotion to God and his pious adherence to law and ritual than come to decry his faithlessness.⁴³

Slander

As we saw in Chapter One, Saul is portrayed as being an active listener of slander and as being a member of a generation of slanderers. In Chapters Four and Five we shall have occasion to examine this sin in greater detail as it relates to the crime of Nob and to Saul's relationship with David. Here, however, let us consider one midrash which praises Saul for his silence and his discreetness. Saul practiced silence as did Rachel, Benjamin, and Esther:

ESTHER HAD NOT YET MADE KNOWN HER KINDRED (Esther 2:20). This teaches that she made herself practice silence like Rachael her ancestress, who made silence her duty. All the greatest of her (Rachael's) descendants practiced silence. Rachael made silence her

⁴² Numbers Rabba 8:4

⁴³ Note: The reader may wish to compare the midrashim in this Chapter with the midrashim in Chapter One to determine Saul's overall image. This might be done for all of the sins and faults presented in the following pages and in Chapter One.

duty -- she saw her wedding presents in the hand of her sister and was silent. Benjamin her son practiced silence. The proof is that his stone in the High Priest's breastplate was a jasper, indicating that he knew of the sale of Joseph but kept silent. **ישפה** (jasper), as if to say, **יש פה** (there is a mouth), and yet he was silent. Saul, her descendant -- CONCERNING THE MATTER OF THE KINGDOM...HE TOLD HIM NOT (I Sam. 10:16) --Saul did not speak of his anointment to his uncle). Esther -- ESTHER HAD NOT YET MADE KNOWN HER KINDRED NOR HER PEOPLE.⁴⁴

Jealousy

Saul's jealousy of David is taken for granted by the midrash. Yet this jealousy was not unbridled. It was a jealousy subject to limitations. When faced with a choice between killing David and rescuing Israel, Saul immediately chose the latter (unlike some of his men who preferred an attack on David):

What prompted David to praise God as a rock (THE LORD IS MY ROCK AND MY FORTRESS - Ps. 18:3)? Because a miracle was done for David at a rock, as it says, DAVID CAME DOWN INTO A ROCK...AND...SAUL... PURSUED AFTER DAVID...AND DAVID MADE HASTE TO GET AWAY...FOR SAUL AND HIS MEN COMPASSED DAVID AND HIS MEN ROUND ABOUT...BUT THERE CAME A MESSENGER UNTO SAUL, SAYING: HASTE THEE, AND COME; FOR THE PHILISTINES HAVE INVADDED THE LAND. WHEREFORE SAUL...WENT AGAINST THE PHILISTINES; THEREFORE THEY CALLED THAT PLACE THE 'ROCK OF DIVISIONS' (I Sam. 23:25-28). R. Abba /took the phrase SAUL AND HIS MEN COMPASSED DAVID (**עטרים אל דוד**) to mean that/ they compassed him as a crown (**עטרה**) /encompasses a man's head/. But R. Yannai said: As a helmet...BUT THERE CAME A MESSENGER UNTO SAUL. Rabbi took MESSENGER to refer to a messenger from heaven above, since it says, HE SENT FROM ABOVE, HE TOOK ME (Ps. 18:17). But R. Judan said: The messenger was /an ordinary/ courier. Said R. Phinehas to R. Judah: But would /a common/ courier advise him (Saul, the king)? Yet he said to him: HASTE THEE, AND COME. Rather, he must have been a heavenly messenger. THEREFORE THEY CALLED THAT PLACE THE 'ROCK OF DIVISIONS'? Why was it called 'ROCK OF DIVISIONS'? R. Samuel b. Nahmani said:

⁴⁴ Esther Rabba 6:12; Genesis Rabbi 71:5; Midrash Shmuel Chap. 28

For there Saul's mighty men were divided concerning David. What did they say? /Some said:/ Now that the son of Jesse is in our hands, let us not turn away from him! What did the others say? Israel's war takes precedence, and this son of Jesse can always be found. R. Eliezer said: The rock was divided from end to end, Saul and his mighty men standing on one part, and David and his men standing on the other part. /It is to this division/ David refers in saying: IT IS HE THAT GIVETH SALVATION UNTO KINGS (Ps. 144:10) -- /salvation/ to two kings, and these are Saul and David. Saul, who was delivered from the shedding of blood. David, who was delivered from the sword of Saul, as it says, WHO DELIVERETH DAVID HIS SERVANT FROM THE HURTFUL SWORD (Ps. 144:10).⁴⁵

Weak

Saul is portrayed as being one of the weak or lowly ones. Yet as we shall see he is also portrayed as a truly great and powerful leader. In Chapter Five we shall encounter midrashim claiming Saul to be the most powerful of all the enemies faced by David (including Goliath). Exodus Rabba testifies to Saul's greatness:

None was greater than Saul, as it says, YE DAUGHTERS OF ISRAEL, WEEP OVER SAUL (II Sam. 1:24).⁴⁶

At the moment of his anointment Samuel kissed him with a kiss acknowledging greatness:

⁴⁵ Midrash Tehilim 18:7; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, נב
Note: Braude, in Midrash Tehilim, p. 445 comments on the meaning of Saul's encompassing David as a helmet: "Meaning that Saul's men were stationed not only all around the rock, but also on top of it, thus covering David all over, just as a helmet covers one's head. In other words, were it not for the miracle which caused Saul to depart in haste, David could not possibly have escaped death."

⁴⁶ Exodus Rabba 30:16
Note: Soncino translation p. 365 states: "Saul was the first to raise Israel's glory." This, apparently, accounts for the daughters of Israel weeping and for the statement that none was greater than Saul.

All kisses are frivolous except three. These are they: the kiss of separation, the kiss /acknowledging/ greatness, and the kiss /when encountering one/ at the crossroads. The kiss of separation, as it says, AND ORPAH KISSED HER MOTHER-IN-LAW (Ruth 1:14). The kiss /acknowledging/ greatness, as it says, THEN SAMUEL TOOK THE VIAL OF OIL, AND POURED IT UPON HIS (Saul's) HEAD, AND KISSED HIM, AND SAID: IS IT NOT THAT THE LORD HATH ANOINTED THEE TO BE PRINCE OVER HIS INHERITANCE (I Sam. 10:1).⁴⁷

He was supreme both in Torah and in worldly affairs.

Unlike Moses and Rabbi he was not designated the greatest all his life but like David and Solomon he was so designated for part of his life:

Rabbah the son of Rabbah -- others state R. Hillel the son of R. Wallas -- also said: From Moses until Rabbi we do not find sacred learning and /worldly/ greatness combined in the one /person/. But do we not? Was it not so in the case of Joshua? /No, for/ there was Eleazar. But what of Phinehas? There were the Elders. But was not Saul such? No, /with him/ was Samuel. But did not Samuel die /before him/? We are referring to his whole life-time (that is, someone who was greater than all during their entire life). But did not David /combine these possessions/? There was Ira the Jairite. But he died /before David/. We are referring to his whole life-time. Was not Solomon /such a man/? /No, for/ there was Shimei son of Gera. But he (Solomon) slew him! We are referring to his whole life-time...⁴⁸

After the death of some (Abraham, Moses, Joshua, and Saul) the world reverts to its previous inferior state. One can deduce from this that during their lives the world was affected by what was presumably their strong leadership and influence:

AND IT CAME TO PASS AFTER THE DEATH OF ABRAHAM, THAT GOD BLESSED ISSAC HIS SON (Gen. 25:11). R. Simon

⁴⁷ Tanhuma Buber Shemot 25; Ylakut Shimoni, Prophets, **נ?**

⁴⁸ Sanhedrin 36a; Gittin 59a

said: Wherever it says AND IT CAME TO PASS AFTER THE (וַיְהִי אַחֲרָיִךְ), the world relapsed into its former state. Thus: AND IT CAME TO PASS AFTER THE DEATH OF ABRAHAM -- straightway, ALL THE WELLS WHICH HIS FATHER'S SERVANTS HAD DIGGED IN THE DAYS OF ABRAHAM HIS FATHER, THE PHILISTINES STOPPED THEM (Gen. 26:15, 18). NOW IT CAME TO PASS AFTER THE DEATH OF MOSES THE SERVANT OF THE LORD (Joshua 1:1) -- immediately thereafter the well, the manna, and the clouds of glory ceased. NOW IT CAME TO PASS AFTER THE DEATH OF JOSHUA (Judges 1:1) -- straightway, the powerful men of the land rose against them. NOW IT CAME TO PASS AFTER THE DEATH OF SAUL (II Sam. 1:1)--AND THE PHILISTINES FOUGHT AGAINST ISRAEL (I Sam. 31:1).⁴⁹

Overly Humble, Aggressive, Arrogant

It has been shown that Saul is portrayed as being too humble and yet at the same time is portrayed as being aggressive and arrogant. Of all the negative elements in Saul's overall image, this contradictory notion stands up least when subjected to the full weight of midrashic evidence. Saul is lauded for his deep humility. Just prior to listing Saul's thirteen positive attributes the midrash tells us that Saul was raised to be humble:

Saul was raised to be very humble. The proof is to be found in the following exchange. Said Samuel to Saul: AND ON WHOM IS ALL THE DESIRE OF ISRAEL? IS IT NOT ON THEE, AND ON ALL THY FATHER'S HOUSE (I Sam. 9:20)? Saul humbled himself before answering him and then replied: AM NOT I A BENJAMITE, OF THE SMALLEST OF THE TRIBES OF ISRAEL? AND MY FAMILY THE LEAST OF ALL THE FAMILIES OF THE TRIBE OF BENJAMIN (Ib. 9:21)? And when they sought to anoint him king, he went and hid himself among the baggage until they cast lots, as it says, AND THE LORD SAID: BEHOLD, HE HATH HID HIMSELF AMONG THE BAGGAGE (Ib. 10:23).⁵⁰

49 Genesis Rabba 62:4; Yalkut Shimoni, Torah, קי;
Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, א

50 Reishit Hohma שער הענוה Chap. 7

As in the case of Gideon, Aaron, Moses, the Levites, Samuel, and David, Saul became great by virtue of his humility:

Great is humility, for through it Saul /also/ became great. When Samuel said to him: AND ON WHOM IS ALL THE DESIRE OF ISRAEL (I Sam. 9:20)? What did Saul say to him? AM NOT I A BENJAMITE, OF THE SMALLEST OF THE TRIBES OF ISRAEL? AND MY FAMILY THE LEAST OF ALL THE FAMILIES OF THE TRIBE OF BENJAMIN (Ib. 9:21)? And at the moment when they sought his anointment he went and he hid himself until they cast lots, as it says, AND THE LORD ANSWERED: BEHOLD, HE HATH HID HIMSELF AMONG THE BAGGAGE (I Sam. 10:22).⁵¹

In rabbinic discussions of humility Saul's name is very prominent. In the following midrash he is portrayed as a model of humility. We read this previously in this chapter as evidence that Saul was faithful and willing and anxious to communicate with God by means of the Urim and Thummim. Here it is presented for its portrayal of a man running from honor and high office and only willing to accept it if God agrees:

Thus says the text, A MAN'S PRIDE SHALL BRING HIM LOW, BUT HE THAT IS OF HUMBLE SPIRIT SHALL ATTAIN HONOR (Prov. 29:23). Whoever pursues high office, high office flees from him. But whoever flees high office, the high office pursues him. Saul was one who fled from high office at the moment they wanted to make him king. Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to Samuel: HE HAS HID HIMSELF AMONG THE BAGGAGE (I Sam. 10:22). When they came to Saul he said to them: Go and inquire of the Urim and Thummim (to see) if I am worthy or not -- then put me in my place (do what is appropriate to me). Immediately they asked God if he was worthy or not. Thus the sages taught that BAGGAGE (הַכֵּלִים) refers only to the Urim and the Thummim.⁵²

He merited to rule because of his humility:

51 Mishnat R. Eliezer Chap. 10

52 Midrash Agadah Buber Vayikra 1:1; Tanhuma Buber Vayikra 4; Yalkut Shimoni Prophets, ק"א

Through what merit /did Saul rule immediately/?
Through the merit of the good deeds he accumulated,
for being meek and humble...⁵³

He merited success in battle because of his humility:

He (Saul) conquered them. By what merit? By the
merit of /the performance of/ commandments and good
deeds that he had to his credit; for he was meek...⁵⁴

The following midrash provides us with two examples of
Saul's humility: he considered his servant along with himself
and he fled from rulership. Additionally he is compared
favorably to Samuel who did not consider Saul's servant along
with Saul:

By what merit was Judah entitled to kingship?
Because of humility...And even Saul merited king-
ship only because /of his/ humility. As it says,
COME AND LET US RETURN; LEST MY FATHER LEAVE CARING
FOR THE ASSES AND BECOME ANXIOUS CONCERNING US
(וְדָאג לָנוּ - I Sam. 9:5). He considered his servant
along with himself. Samuel did not do likewise,
rather THE ASSES WHICH THOU WENTEST TO SEEK ARE
FOUND; AND, LO, THY FATHER HAS LEFT OFF CARING FOR
THE ASSES, AND IS ANXIOUS CONCERNING YOU SAYING:
WHAT SHALL I DO FOR MY SON (לִבְנִי - I Sam. 10:2)?
/Another example of Saul's humility is/ when he fled
from rulership, what is written, THEY ASKED OF THE
LORD FURTHER: IS THERE YET A MAN COME HITHER? AND
THE LORD ANSWERED: BEHOLD, HE HATH HID HIMSELF AMONG
THE BAGGAGE (I Sam. 10:22).⁵⁵

Another example of Saul's humility appeared at the begin-
ning of this chapter in the listing of Saul's attributes. He
equated the honor due his servant to the honor due himself by
sitting at the same level as his servants Abner and David:

53 Pesikta de R. Kahana 5:3
Note: See footnote 1 of this Chapter for the full text.

54 Numbers Rabba 11:3
Note: See footnote 2 of this Chapter for the full text.

55 Tosefta Berakoth 4:16; Yalkut Shimon, Prophets, קן

...He equated the honor due his servant to the honor due himself, as it says, AND THE KING SAT UPON HIS SEAT, AS AT OTHER TIMES, EVEN UPON THE SEAT BY THE WALL; AND JONATHAN STOOD UP, AND ABNER SAT BY SAUL'S SIDE; BUT DAVID'S PLACE WAS EMPTY (I Sam. 20:25).⁵⁶

Yet another example of Saul's humility was when he did not tell his uncle that he had been anointed king (I Sam. 10:16). For this act of humility Saul received the reward of meriting Esther as a descendant:

R. Eleazar said: What is the meaning of the verse, HE WITHDRAWETH NOT HIS EYES FROM THE RIGHTEOUS (Job 36:7)? In reward for the modesty displayed by Rachael, she was granted to number among her descendants Saul; and in reward for the modesty displayed by Saul, he was granted to number among his descendants Esther... What modesty did Saul display? As it is written, BUT CONCERNING THE MATTER OF THE KINGDOM WHEREOF SAMUEL SPOKE HE TOLD HIM NOT (I Sam. 10:16). He was therefore rewarded by having Esther among his descendants.⁵⁷

Covering Up Sin

It is true, as we saw at the end of Chapter One, that Saul is portrayed in the midrash as covering up the sin of Amalek. Yet we shall now see that he is praised for being pure and free of sin and that one who denigrates or casts aspersion on Saul's character will meet with divine disapproval. The following midrash suggests that when he began to reign Saul had not even tasted sin. When one rabbi suggests that Saul might in fact have been wallowing in sin he receives several frightening nightmares and must repeatedly beg Saul's forgiveness and acknowledge that Saul was King of Israel:

⁵⁶ Mishnat R. Eliezer Chap. 10; Reishit Hohma **שער הענוה** Chap. 7
Note: See footnote 4 of this Chapter for the full text and explanatory notes on this passage.

⁵⁷ Megillah 13a,b; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, **ק'**
Note: This incident was referred to earlier. See footnote 44 of this Chapter.

SAUL WAS A YEAR OLD WHEN HE BEGAN TO REIGN (I Sam. 13:1 --finding the literal interpretation impossible the Rabbis endeavor to find therein homiletical suggestion). R. Huna said: Like an infant of one year, who had not tasted the taste of sin. R. Nahman b. Isaac demurred to this: Say perhaps: Like an infant of one year that is filthy with mud and excrement? R. Nahman thereupon was shown a frightening vision in his dream whereupon he said: I beg your pardon, bones of Saul, son of Kish. But he saw again a frightening vision in his dream, whereupon he said: I beg your pardon, bones of Saul, son of Kish, King of Israel.⁵⁸

Another version of this midrash omits the dream episode and concludes that Saul was simply free of sin when he began to rule:

What is the meaning of **בֶּן שָׁנָה** in the verse: THIS IS THE OFFERING MADE BY FIRE WHICH YE SHALL BRING UNTO THE LORD: HE-LAMBS OF THE FIRST YEAR (**בְּנֵי שָׁנָה**) WITHOUT BLEMISH (Num. 28:3). He said to them: If you sacrifice before Me by the merit of your sacrifice I will grant you atonement and you will be to me as a baby of one year who has no sin. As we learn from Saul: SAUL WAS ONE YEAR OLD (**בֶּן שָׁנָה**) WHEN HE BEGAN TO REIGN (I Sam. 13:1). Was Saul really a one-year-old when he began to rule? Rather, he was free from sin like a one year old baby.⁵⁹

Incompetent Scholar and Not Devoted to Scholarship

One of the faults we encountered in Chapter One was Saul's poor scholarship and his lack of devotion to scholarship. Many midrashim, however, give us the opposite picture. We have already read in this chapter midrashim which account for Saul's reigning immediately after anointment and for his military victories by virtue of his being a scholar. Both statements are credited to R. Judah b. Nahman:

⁵⁸ Yoma 22b

⁵⁹ Pesikta Rabbati Chap. 1; Midrash Shmuel Chap. 17; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, **ק"י**; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, **קכ"א**

Taught R. Judah b. Nahman in the name of R. Simeon b. Lakish: Saul was a scholar in Torah: BY ME, says Torah, PRINCES COME TO REIGN (Prov. 18:16); BY ME KINGS COME TO REIGN (Prov. 8:15).⁶⁰

Saul sat in attendance at the Sanhedrin:

R. Zeira said in the name of R. Yehudah b. Simeon **סול** (tamarisk-tree) means Sanhedrin, as it says, NOW SAUL WAS SITTING IN GIBEAH, UNDER THE SANHEDRIN (**סול**) IN RAMAH (I Sam. 22:6). According to the opinion of R. Nehemiah - **סול** is a tavern, meaning a place where Abraham ate and drank and blessed God.⁶¹

Saul questioned Abner about David's background for halachic purposes. Note Saul's expertise and his concern for accurate halachic information:

Mishnah: An Ammonite and a Moabite are forbidden /to enter the assembly of the Lord -- Deut. 23:4/ and their prohibition is forever. Their women are permitted at once...Gemara: Whence are these laws inferred? R. Yochanan replied: Scripture stated, AND WHEN SAUL SAW DAVID GO FORTH AGAINST THE PHILISTINE, HE SAID UNTO ABNER, THE CAPTAIN OF THE HOST: ABNER, WHOSE SON IS THIS YOUTH? AND ABNER SAID: AS THY SOUL LIVETH, O KING, I CANNOT TELL (I Sam. 17:55). But did he (Saul) not know him? Surely it is written, AND HE LOVED HIM GREATLY; AND HE BECAME HIS ARMOR BEARER (Ib. 16:21). He rather made the inquiry concerning his father. But did he not know his father? Surely it is written, AND THE MAN WAS AN OLD MAN IN THE DAYS OF SAUL, STRICKEN IN YEARS AMONG THEM (Ib. 17:12); and Rab, or, it might be said, R. Abba, stated that this referred to the father of David, Jesse, who came in with an army and went out with an army. It is this that Saul meant: Whether he descended from Perez, or from Zerach. If he descended from Perez he would be king, for a king breaks (**פיר** to break, a play upon Perez **פיר**) for himself a way and no one can hinder him. If, however, he is descended from Zerach he would only be an important man. What is the reason why he gave instructions that inquiry be made concerning him? Because it is written, AND SAUL CLAD DAVID WITH HIS APPAREL (**מדי** his apparel - I Sam. 17:38), being of

60 Pesikta de R. Kahana 5:3; Numbers Rabba 11:3; Pesikta Rabbati Chap. 15

61 Yalkut Shimoni, Torah, **צה**

the same size (**כְּמִדָּתוֹ** - like his size) as his, and about Saul it is written, FROM HIS SHOULDERS AND UPWARD HE WAS HIGHER THAN ANY OF THE PEOPLE (I Sam. 9:2). Doeg the Edomite then said to him (Saul): instead of enquiring whether he is fit to be king or not, enquire rather whether he is permitted to enter the assembly or not. What is the reason? Because he is descended from Ruth the Moabitess. Said Abner to him (to Doeg): We learned an Ammonite (is forbidden) but not an Ammonitess; a Moabite, but not a Moabitess. But in that case a bastard would imply: But not a female bastard? It is written 'mamzer' /which implies/ anyone objectionable (man or woman). Does then Egyptian exclude the Egyptian woman? Here (case of the Ammonite and the Moabite) it is different since the reason for the Scriptural text is explicitly stated: BECAUSE THEY MET YOU NOT WITH BREAD AND WITH WATER (Deut. 23:5); it is customary for a man to meet /wayfarers/; it is not, however, customary for a woman to meet /them/... He (Abner) remained silent. THEREUPON THE KING SAID: INQUIRE THOU WHOSE SON THE STRIPLING IS (I Sam. 17:56). Elsewhere he calls him youth (**נַעַר** - Ib. 17:55) and here he calls him stripling (**עַלְמָא**). It is this that he (Saul) implied: you have overlooked (**נִתְעַלְמָה** - root is **עָלַם**) an halacha; go and inquire at the college...⁶²

And, as we saw earlier, Saul is said to have sustained members of the Sanhedrin with food and drink and to have listened eagerly to them:

The other said: Banot Israel (**בָּנוֹת יִשְׂרָאֵל** - Daughters of Israel) /really refers to/ Bena'ot Yisrael (the beautiful of Israel - **בְּנוֹת יִשְׂרָאֵל**), which is the Sanhedrin. For when he (Saul) would see a group of scholars, he would provide them with food and drink. What does the text mean - WHO PUT ORNAMENTS OF GOLD UPON YOUR APPAREL (II Sam. 1:24)? It means he would listen to the lessons of a sage and praise him.⁶³

Lack of **דֶּרֶךְ אֵרֶץ**

Saul asked in an improper manner and he arranged for his daughter's engagement in a way that was unseemly for a king.

62 Yebamoth 76b; Ruth Rabba 4:6; Midrash Shmuel Chap. 22; Yalkut Shimoní, Prophets, **קִנּוּ**

63 Yerushalmi Nedarim Chap. 9, Hal. 9; Midrash Shmuel Chap. 25
Note: See footnote 24 of this Chapter for the full text.

Now we shall see that he is praised for his manners and is said to have been the only one besides Abraham to travel in a proper way:

AND /Abraham/ TOOK TWO OF HIS YOUNG MEN WITH HIM, AND ISAAC HIS SON (Gen. 22:3). R. Abbahu said: Two people behaved with propriety (**יין איין**), Abraham and Saul. Abraham, as it says, AND TOOK TWO OF HIS YOUNG MEN WITH HIM; Saul as it says, AND SAUL... WENT, HE AND TWO MEN WITH HIM (I Sam. 28:8).⁶⁴

AND HE DISGUISED HIMSELF...AND WENT, HE AND TWO MEN WITH HIM (I Sam. 28:7) -- Abner and Amasa. Said R. Isaac: The Torah here teaches you proper behavior -- that a man should not set out on a journey accompanied by less than two persons. For if he does he will eventually become a servant to servants. Said R. Aibu: There were two who followed the correct procedure: Abraham and Saul. Abraham -- AND ABRAHAM ROSE EARLY IN THE MORNING...AND TOOK TWO OF HIS YOUNG MEN WITH HIM (Gen. 22:3). And Saul -- AND WENT, HE AND TWO MEN WITH HIM (I Sam. 28:8). This was Abner and Amasa.⁶⁵

In Chapter One it was shown that the Rabbis are very concerned with justifying Saul's fate. Many sins and faults are put forth as explanations for this fate. In this chapter we have discovered that Saul is greatly praised and that most of his so-called sins and faults turn out to be either negated or eminently debatable (only the sins of necromancy and disobedience to Samuel are uncontested by other midrashic evidence). This dynamic we are witnessing appears to be as follows: Concerned with his fate, the Rabbis struggle to determine the reasons Saul fell from power and lost his life. They reject out of hand most of the justifications for his fate. One justification, the sin of Amalek, is accepted. Having settled on Saul's one clear sin,

⁶⁴ Gen. Rabba 55:8; Yalkut Shimoni, Torah, **יין**

⁶⁵ Lev. Rabba 26:7; Midrash Shmuel Chap. 24; Tanhuma Emor 4; Tanhuma Buber Emor 4; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, **יין**

they praise and defend him. This is particularly clear among later midrashim.⁶⁶ We turn now to Saul's sin of destroying Nob. We shall see that this dynamic reaches its zenith when the Rabbis consider Saul's culpability for this tremendous sin.

66 See footnotes 4 and 5.

CHAPTER FOUR

I

In I Samuel Chapter Twenty-two Saul give instructions for the priests of Nob to be slain on account of assistance rendered to David. Doeg, carrying out Saul's order, proceeds to put to the sword eighty-five priests and all the other living inhabitants of Nob: men, women, children, and animals. The midrash, as we shall see, devotes much attention to this terrible slaughter. We shall see how the midrash describes the extent of the horror of Nob, how this crime is linked to the slaughter of the Gibeonites, and finally, how the Rabbis manage to clear Saul of responsibility.

Most of the material linking Saul to the destruction of Nob does so in a way that emphasizes the horror of the crime. For the most part the material does not dwell on Saul's evil, nor does it focus in on what led Saul to issue such horrendous orders. We have already seen in Chapters One and Two material which does seek to explain Saul's evil command. In Chapter Two we learned from a number of midrashim that the Rabbis postulate a connection between Saul's showing mercy to cruel Amalek and his lack of mercy for the priests of Nob who were deserving of compassion.¹ In Chapter One we reviewed one midrash which connects the sin of Nob to Saul's arrogance:

Saul, the king of Israel, had a spirit of arrogance in him...What he was not commanded he did do: he slew Nob, the city of priests.²

1 Note: See Chapter Two, footnotes 14-17

2 Seder Eliyahu Rabba Chap. 31
Note: For the complete text see Chap. One, footnote 59.

The crime of Nob is so terrible that, when challenged by Moses to justify the death of Israel's first king, God suggests that Moses speak to the priests. The murdered priests of Nob stand before God accusing Saul and God throws this in Moses' face. This material comes at the conclusion of a long midrash detailing Saul's act of necromancy and the reasons for his downfall.³ Leviticus Rabba Chapter Twenty-six then draws a connection between Lev. 20:27 which is the commandment against necromancy and the very next verse, Lev. 21:1 which instructs Moses to speak to the priests:

R. Joshua of Siknin said in the name of R. Levi: The text (Lev. 21:1, which is the over-all subject of Chap. 26 of Lev. Rabba) teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, showed Moses every generation and its wise men, each generation and its leaders, each generation and its scholars, each generation and its judges, each generation and its officers, each generation and its priests, each generation and its Levites, each generation and its kings. And when He showed him Saul, king of Israel, fall by the sword, he (Moses) said before Him: Master of the Universe, thus is the honor of Your children, that the first king to rule them should fall by the sword? The Holy One blessed be He replied: Me you speak to? SPEAK UNTO THE PRIESTS THE SONS OF AARON (Lev. 21:1) that accuse him. AND THE LORD SAID UNTO MOSES: SPEAK UNTO THE PRIESTS (Ib.).⁴

3 Note: See Chapter One, footnotes 1,12,19,20,21,23,24,25,26, 50 for reference to or selections of Lev. Rabba 26:7.

4 Lev. Rabba 26:7; Midrash Shmuel Chap. 24; Tanhuma Emor 2; Tanhuma Buber Emor 4; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, ^{ובי} Note: In Midrash Shmuel Chap. 24 God showed Adam instead of Moses. In Tanhuma Emor 2 the text includes the following explanation of the juxtaposition of Lev. 21:1 and 20:27: "What is the one matter next to the other matter for? Only to indicate that the Holy One, blessed be He, expected that in the future Saul would rule over Israel and murder the priests of Nob and inquire by means of a ghost, as it says: THEN SAID SAUL UNTO HIS SERVANTS: SEEK ME A WOMAN THAT DIVINETH BY A GHOST, THAT I MAY GO TO HER, AND INQUIRE OF HER (I Sam. 28:7)."

Adding to the dimension of the crime is the observation that everyone of the priests slaughtered was worthy of being a high priest:

AND HE (Doeg) SLEW ON THAT DAY FOURSORE AND FIVE PERSONS THAT DID WEAR (זָבִיחַ) A LINEN EPHOD (1 Sam. 22:18). R. Chiya taught: And not just this but one does not count two high priests as one. Rather, this (singular form of wear - זָבִיחַ) teaches that all of them were worthy of being high priests.⁵

It was the slaughter of the priests of Nob which removed the Urim and Thummim from Saul. He could not bear to use them as a means of communicating with God for they were used with the help of priests. Using them would thus remind him of the crime. We learn this from Saul's failure to mention the Urim and Thummim to the arisen Samuel when he tells Samuel of his abandonment by God:

...AND SAMUEL SAID TO SAUL, WHY HAST THOU DISQUIETED ME TO BRING ME UP? AND SAUL ANSWERED, I AM SORE DISTRESSED; FOR THE PHILISTINES MAKE WAR AGAINST ME, AND GOD IS DEPARTED FROM ME, AND ANSWERETH ME NO MORE, NEITHER BY PROPHETS NOR BY DREAMS; THEREFORE, I CALLED THEE THAT THOU MAYEST MAKE KNOWN UNTO ME WHAT I SHALL DO (1 Sam. 28:15). But he does not mention the Urim and Thummim because he had killed all /the inhabitants of/ Nob, the city of the priests.⁶

The sin of Nob caused Saul such agony that it was the cause of his wish to end his life:

And Saul was killed, as it says, SO SAUL DIED FOR HIS TRANSGRESSION WHICH HE COMMITTED AGAINST THE LORD (1 Chron. 10:13). And similarly Saul said (to the

5 Yalkut Shimon, Prophets, אב

6 Berakoth 12b; Lev. Rabba 26:7; Yalkut Shimon, Prophets, אב
Note: Rashi's interpretation of the last line is that Saul was ashamed Samuel would ask him about his murder of the priests. In Lev. Rabba 26:7 a similar midrash is attributed to R. Isaac son of R. Hiyya. It differs in that it included Prov. 14:10, THE HEART KNOWETH ITS OWN BITTERNESS.

Amalekite who found him in the battle on Mt. Gilboa): STAND, I PRAY THEE, BESIDE ME, AND SLAY ME, FOR THE AGONY (אֲנִי) HATH TAKEN HOLD OF ME (II Sam. 1:9). /What agony?/ The /agony/ of the accusation of the destruction of Nob, the city of priests. For there is no אֲנִי except as connected to priestly garments, as it says, AND THOU SHALT MAKE SETTINGS (תְּפִלִּי) OF GOLD (Ex. 28:13 where this instruction is one of many instructions on how to prepare the priestly garments -- obviously punning on אֲנִי).⁷

II

By itself the destruction of Nob stands out as a crime of some significance. It is used, as we have just learned, as a justification for Saul's punishment and as an explanation of his death. Yet another dimension of this crime is established in the midrash. The sin of Nob is linked to the murder of a group of proselytes known as the Gibeonites. The Bible (II Sam. 21:1,2) explains that a famine in David's time was caused by Saul and his family slaughtering these Gibeonites. The Rabbis, presumably puzzled by the lack of any previous mention of the murder of the Gibeonites in the Saul narratives, posit a connection between the crimes of Nob and the death of the Gibeonites. Two early midrashim establish the connection on the basis of a belief that the priests of Nob supplied the Gibeonites with sustenance:

HE THAT KILLETH AN OX IS AS IF HE SLEW A MAN, ETC. (Is. 66:3). R. Yohanan and R. Simeon b. Lakish offer different interpretations of this text. R. Yohanan says it means that whoever robs his neighbor of anything the value of a peruta (or more) it is regarded as if he killed him. There are sufficiently numerous texts that apply to him. HE THAT KILLETH AN OX IS AS IF HE SLEW A MAN (Ib.-implied that the ox is not his own but rather stolen);

7 Tanhuma Metzora 2; Tanhuma Buber Metzora 4; Yalkut Shimoni, Torah, תנ"ך

AND HE LEARNED TO CATCH PREY, HE DEVOURED MEN (Ezra 19:3 - Soncino: Thus by eating what is not theirs they are said to kill their victims, p. 284); SO ARE THE WAYS OF EVERY ONE THAT IS GREEDY OF GAIN; IT TAKETH AWAY THE LIFE OF THE OWNERS THEREOF (Prov. 1:19); FOR THE ROBBERY AGAINST THE CHILDREN OF JUDAH, BECAUSE THEY HAVE SHED INNOCENT BLOOD IN THEIR LAND (Job 4:19); AND THEY SAID UNTO THE KING: THE MAN THAT CONSUMED US, AND THAT DEvised AGAINST US, SO THAT WE HAVE BEEN DESTROYED FROM REMAINING IN ANY OF THE BORDERS OF ISRAEL (II Sam. 21:5--Gibeonites referring to Saul). Did he (Saul) kill them (the Gibeonites) or devise aught against them? It can only be that because he destroyed Nob, the city of priests, which provided them with sustenance, Scripture considers it as if he killed them.⁸

R. Yohanan said: To rob a fellow-man even of the value of a perutah is like taking away his life from him, as it says: SO ARE THE WAYS OF EVERY ONE THAT IS GREEDY OF GAIN; WHICH TAKETH AWAY THE LIFE OF THE OWNERS THEREOF, and it is also written, AND HE SHALL EAT UP THINE HARVEST AND THY BREAD /which/ THY SONS AND THY DAUGHTERS /SHOULD EAT/ (Jer. 5:17), and it is said again: FOR HAMAS (~~on~~ - violence) AGAINST THE CHILDREN OF JUDAH BECAUSE THEY HAVE SHED INNOCENT BLOOD IN THEIR LAND (Joel 4:19), and it is said further: IT (a famine) IS FOR SAUL AND FOR HIS BLOODY HOUSE BECAUSE HE SLEW THE GIBEONITES (II Sam. 21:1). But why cite the further statements? Because you might say that this applies only to his own soul but not to the soul of his sons and daughters. Therefore come and hear: THE FLESH OF HIS SONS AND HIS DAUGHTERS. So also if you say that these statements apply only where no money was given (by the robber for the misappropriated article) whereas where money was given, this would not be so (though the whole transaction was by threats and violence), come and hear: FOR HAMAS (violence) AGAINST THE CHILDREN OF JUDAH BECAUSE THEY HAVE SHED INNOCENT BLOOD IN THEIR LAND. Again, should you say that these statements refer only to a case where a robbery was directly committed by hand whereas where it was merely caused indirectly this would not be so, come and hear: IT IS FOR SAUL AND FOR HIS BLOODY HOUSE BECAUSE HE SLEW THE GIBEONITES; for indeed where do we find that Saul slew the Gibeonites? It must therefore be because he slew Nob, the city of the priests, who used to supply them (the Gibeonites) with water and food (Joshua 9:27). Scripture considers it as though he had slain them (since he stole their sustenance).⁹

⁸ Lev. Rabba 22:6

⁹ Baba Kamma 119a

Mishnat R. Eliezer presents a later and more direct account which explains the connection:

...Rather, the famine continues because of the spilling of blood /gone unpunished/. Immediately he (David) inquired of the Urim and Thummim, as it says, IT IS FOR SAUL, AND FOR HIS BLOODY HOUSE, BECAUSE HE PUT TO DEATH THE GIBEONITES (II Sam. 21:1). When did Saul kill them? When he destroyed Nob, the city of priests, who were hewers of wood and haulers of water for the Temple. You find that Saul killed even the ox and the ass, as it says, AND NOB, THE CITY OF THE PRIESTS, SMOTE HE WITH THE EDGE OF THE SWORD, BOTH MEN AND WOMEN, CHILDREN AND SUCKLINGS, AND OXEN AND ASSES AND SHEEP, WITH THE EDGE OF THE SWORD (I Sam. 22:19). And if he did not spare the ox and the ass, how much the more so did he not spare the hewers of wood and the carriers of water. If this be so, then he should have killed all the Gibeonites. But because not all of them were in Nob, but a small part of them were in the city of Yearim /therefore not all of the Gibeonites were killed/.¹⁰

The Rabbis posit a great sympathy on God's part for the Gibeonites and divine anger toward Saul and his house for murdering them. Additionally, they add many details to the Bible's brief linkage of the unpunished slaughter of the Gibeonites to the famine in David's time (II Sam. 21:1). In the following midrash we learn of God's acceptance of the Gibeonites despite their "inferior" status. This midrash also tells us that God killed Saul for his crime against the Gibeonites:

...(God is speaking:) The Gibeonites were inferior converts and were not true proselytes (Soncino note, p. 144: "i.e. who had attached themselves to Israel yet had not been fully accepted, and so might not intermarry with the Israelites") but rather converted from fear /of the Israelites/. Yet I accepted them. And because Saul sought to crush them and kill the priests who supplied them with sustenance, I killed him. And not only that but I brought three years of famine on their account, as it says, AND THERE WAS A

FAMINE IN THE DAYS OF DAVID THREE YEARS, ETC. (II Sam. 21:1). And if I did not reject the Gibeonites who came to be with you, shall I reject my own children?¹¹

In Exodus Rabba God's concern for proselytes is demonstrated by reference to His punishment of Saul for what Saul did to the Gibeonites:

God said to the proselytes: You are afraid because I disqualified you from the Passover celebration by commanding: THERE SHALL NO ALIEN EAT THEREOF (Ex. 12:43). Why don't you ask the Gibeonites how kindly I treated them, though they acted deceitfully out of fear and came to My children, so that they (the Israelites) swore to them /to preserve them/ (Joshua 9:3-15). /Why don't you ask the Gibeonites/ what I did to Saul and to his house because he (Saul) sought to kill them. /I brought it about/ that they slew seven of his (Saul's) children, as it says, BUT THE KING TOOK THE TWO SONS OF RIZPAH...AND THE FIVE SONS OF MICHAL...AND HE DELIVERED THEM INTO THE HANDS OF THE GIBEONITES (II Sam. 21:8). God said: If I received favorably the Gibeonites, who are Amorites, and out of fear wrought deceitfully with Israel, and I gave them satisfaction for their wrongs (by punishing) My children, shall I not favorably receive and promote the proselytes who come to serve Me out of love?¹²

The murder of the Gibeonites is considered to have been an intentional murder. God, so horrified at a murder of this kind, allows the Gibeonites to seek vengeance against Saul's family. The extent of the vengeance (the execution of seven of Saul's sons - II Sam. 21:6), though justified by reason of the nature of the crime, displeases God:

Similarly if someone slays a soul in Israel it is as if he removes images of the King and he is judged and he has no life (he is sentenced to death), for man was created in the form of the ministering angels. And if one kills accidentally God has given him a place of refuge to escape (Ex. 21:13). But if he kills intentionally, even if he is the High Priest,

11 Numbers Rabba 5:3

12 Exodus Rabba 19:4

he is to be killed. None was greater than Saul, as it says YE DAUGHTERS OF ISRAEL, WEEP OVER SAUL (II Sam. 1:24-Saul being the first to raise Israel's glory). Yet who claimed /vengeance/ of him for the bloodshed of which he was /still/ guilty at the time of his death? Not Israel, but the Gibeonites claimed /this blood vengeance/ from him, as it says, LET SEVEN MEN OF HIS SONS BE DELIVERED UNTO US (II Sam. 21:6). The priests had pardoned him, but the Gibeonites did not pardon him. For this reason did God thrust them off from afar, for it says, NOW THE GIBEONITES WERE NOT OF THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL (Ib.21:2). And it was from this thing that David was afraid, as it says, DELIVER ME FROM BLOODGUILTINESS, O GOD (Ps. 51:16-presumably the bloodguiltiness of having delivered Saul's sons over to the Gibeonites).¹³

It is to be remembered that this punishment of Saul and his house takes place in the context of a great famine. The following midrash explains both the connection of Nob to the Gibeonites and the connection of the murder of the Gibeonites to the famine in the days of David. Note that in this midrash David resigns himself to pacifying the Gibeonites and holds in abeyance any action designed to mollify God's other concern that, besides giving justice to the Gibeonites, David arrange for Saul to be properly mourned:

AND THERE WAS A FAMINE IN THE DAYS OF DAVID THREE YEARS, YEAR AFTER YEAR (II Sam. 21:1). In the first year he (David) said to them (the Gibeonites who are excluded from the Congregation of Israel): It is possible that there are idolaters among you, for it is written, AND SERVE OTHER GODS, AND WORSHIP THEM... AND HE WILL SHUT UP THE HEAVEN, SO THAT THERE SHALL BE NO RAIN, ETC. (Deut. 11:16). They instituted enquiries but could not discover any idolaters. In the second year he said to them: There may be transgressors among you, for it is written, THEREFORE THE SHOWERS HAVE BEEN WITHHELD AND THERE HATH BEEN NO LATTER RAIN; YET THOU HADST A HARLOT'S FOREHEAD, ETC. (Jer. 3:3). Enquiries were made but none was found. In the third year he said to them: There might be among you men who announce specified sums for charity in public but do not give them, as it is written, AS

13 Exodus Rabba 30:16

VAPORS AND WIND WITHOUT RAIN, SO IS HE THAT BOASTETH HIMSELF OF A FALSE GIFT (Prov. 25:14). Enquiries were made and none was found. The matter, he concluded, depends entirely upon me. Immediately, HE SOUGHT THE FACE OF THE LORD (II Sam. 21:7)...AND THE LORD SAID: IT IS FOR SAUL AND HIS BLOODY HOUSE, BECAUSE HE PUT TO DEATH THE GIBEONITES (II Sam. 21:1). FOR SAUL, because he was not mourned for in a proper manner; AND HIS BLOODY HOUSE, BECAUSE HE PUT TO DEATH THE GIBEONITES. Where, however, do we find that Saul PUT TO DEATH THE GIBEONITES? The truth is that, as he killed the inhabitants of Nob, the city of the priests who were supplying them with water and food, Scripture regards it as if he himself had killed them.

Justice is demanded for Saul because he was not properly mourned for, and justice is demanded because he put to death the Gibeonites? Yes; for Resh Lakish stated: What is meant by the Scriptural text, SEEK YE THE LORD, ALL YE HUMBLE OF THE EARTH, THAT HAVE EXECUTED HIS ORDINANCE (**קִשְׁפוּ פְּנֵי יְהוָה** - Zeph. 2:3). Where there is his ordinance (**הַשְׁוֵהוּ** - literally: his judgment) there are also his executions (**מַעֲלָיו** - his works, Saul's good deeds). David said: As to Saul, there have already elapsed the twelve months of the /first/ year /of mourning/ and it would be unusual to arrange for his mourning now. As to the Nethinim (Gibeonites), however, let them be summoned and we shall pacify them.¹⁴

We shall see in the next chapter that God will be quite insistent with David that he mourn Saul properly. A midrash in the Yerushalmi, similar to the preceding one, explains the famine as stemming from the murder of the Gibeonites and David's failure is explicitly mentioned as being a lack of mercy towards Saul:

14 Yebamot 78b, 79a; Pirke de R. Eliezer, Chap. 17; Yalkut Shimon, Prophets, **קנה**

Note: Rashi explains that the reason justice is demanded for Saul is that Saul is being judged (for the crime against the Gibeonites) and that "in a place where a man is judged they mention the works of his righteousness." Doing this, God comes to the conclusion that Saul was not mourned appropriately. In Pirke de R. Eliezer the third potential cause of the famine is said to have been the shedding of blood.

David searched throughout his generation but could not find one of them (the sins that were suspected of causing the famine). He began to inquire of the Urim and Thummim, as it is written, AND DAVID SOUGHT THE FACE OF THE LORD (II Sam. 21:1) by means of the Urim and Thummim. Said R. Eliezer: SEEK YE THE LORD, ALL YE HUMBLE OF THE EARTH, THAT HAVE EXECUTED HIS ORDINANCE (Zeph. 2:3). What is the meaning of THAT HAVE EXECUTED HIS ORDINANCE? Whose justice and deeds are as one. Said God (to David concerning the reason for the famine): FOR SAUL AND FOR HIS BLOODY HOUSE. For Saul, for you (David) did not behave mercifully with him. And for his bloody house, for it (Saul's house), killed the Gibeonites.¹⁵

The Gibeonites themselves provide us with the most thorough description of the crime and its dimensions:

What, David asked, is amiss between you (Gibeonites) and the house of Saul? They (the Gibeonites) answered him: He cut off our sustenance, and put to death seven of our men: Two hewers of wood, two drawers of water, a superintendent, a scribe, and an attendant. Said he (David) to them: What do you wish now? Accordingly it is written, AND DAVID SAID UNTO THE GIBEONITES: WHAT SHALL I DO FOR YOU? AND WHEREWITH SHALL I GIVE RANSOM, THAT YE MAY BLESS THE INHERITANCE OF THE LORD (II Sam. 21:3)? What benefit, he asked them, will you obtain if you slay some member of the house of Saul? Tell me rather what reparation I can make you so that you may be pacified, and how much silver and gold I should give you as your ransom...AND THE GIBEONITES SAID UNTO HIM: IT IS NO MATTER OF SILVER AND GOLD BETWEEN US (יָ) AND SAUL, OR HIS HOUSE (II Sam. 21:4). The written form is יָ (me) and it is read lanu (us)! Why is this? David said to them: What benefit will it be to you if they are killed? Take silver and gold! Said they: We do not seek silver or gold from Saul or from his house. He owed us no money, that we should take money from him. It is lives that he owes us and lives we demand. David thought: Perhaps one half of them is afraid of the other. So he took each one of them aside and tried to talk to each separately, saying: What benefit will you have if they are killed? Take the money! The one addressed would answer: It is no matter of silver and gold between me (יָ - hence li, to me, is written, while lanu, to us is read, to show that he spoke to them both collectively and individually) and Saul, or his house, nor should

¹⁵ Yerushalmi Kiddushin Chap. 4, p. 65c; Midrash Shmuel Chap. 28; Numbers Rabba 8:4

we go in search of others but himself. For his servants refused to put forth a hand either against the priests or against us; as it says, BUT THE SERVANTS OF THE KING WOULD NOT PUT FORTH THEIR HAND TO FALL UPON THE PRIESTS OF THE LORD (I Sam. 22:17). This is what is meant by NEITHER IS IT FOR US TO PUT ANY MAN TO DEATH IN ISRAEL (II Sam. 21:4). When David saw that they would not accept his suggestion he said to them: What do you propose that I should do for you? If it is lives that you demand, I shall comply with your desire. For so it is written, AND HE SAID: WHAT SAY YE THAT I SHOULD DO FOR YOU (Ib.)? When David told them this they said: We have no desire to pay him back in accordance with the full measure of his act. Though he consumed us and meant to destroy us so that we might have no footing in the whole Land of Israel, we demand only seven of his sons to compensate for the seven of our men whom he slew. Hence it is written, AND THEY SAID UNTO THE KING: THE MAN THAT CONSUMED US (אֲשֶׁר קָלַנוּ) AND THAT DEvised AGAINST US, ETC. (Ib. 21:5). ASHER KILLANU (אֲשֶׁר קָלַנוּ) consists of seven letters (in the Hebrew), alluding to the seven persons whom he slew (and not to the whole people, as the literal rendering of the word would imply). THEREFORE LET SEVEN MEN OF HIS SONS BE DELIVERED UNTO US, AND WE WILL HANG THEM UP UNTO THE LORD IN GIBEAH OF SAUL, THE CHOSEN OF THE LORD, ETC. (Ib. 21:6) in order that the whole world may see and be afraid and not again do evil to proselytes. The reason why it is written UNTO THE LORD is because He had commanded that the proselytes should be treated well and Saul had done evil to them. Why IN GIBEAH OF SAUL? In order that people might know that if the Holy One, blessed be He, showed no favor to a king, much less would He do so to ordinary men. THE CHOSEN OF THE LORD: This is strange! Here are these people denouncing him, yet calling him, THE CHOSEN OF THE LORD! The fact is that they only said, IN GIBEAH OF SAUL, and a heavenly voice came forth and added, THE CHOSEN OF THE LORD.¹⁶

Radak interprets this last line as meaning that Saul's sins had been forgiven. Thus, next to material which elucidates the horror of the slaughter of the Gibeonites, we learn of God's forgiveness of Saul. This startling juxtaposition is a fitting

16 Numbers Rabba 8:4

Note: Translation and explanations of the text are from the Soncino English publication Numb. Rabba, 8:4

transition to those numerous midrashim which come to absolve Saul for the slaughter of the priests of Nob and the Gibeonites.

III

The Rabbis succeed in clearing Saul's name by making it very clear that God forgave Saul for murdering priests and Gibeonites and, as if this were not enough, by indicating that the real blame for the slaughter of Nob must fall on others. They therefore assign the blame to Doeg, Abner, Ahimelech, David, Jonathan, and to Saul's relatives.

Our last midrashic citation, from Numbers Rabba, gave us an initial indication that God forgave Saul. We see from other material in that same chapter of Numbers Rabba (8:4) evidence of divine displeasure with the Gibeonites and even a statement that Saul had not actually slain any Gibeonites:

AND SAUL SOUGHT TO SLAY THEM (the Gibeonites) IN HIS ZEAL FOR THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL AND JUDAH (II Sam. 21:2). Even though he (Saul) had not /actually/ slain them, they were cruel to him. This teaches you that it was not for nothing that David removed them /from the Congregation of Israel/. IN HIS ZEAL FOR THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL AND JUDAH: Even though Saul had only shown anger against them because of the resentment he felt against Israel and Judah, and had not acted out of any hatred which he entertained against them, they showed no mercy to his children. What was this resentment (of Saul's)? That they would not reveal where David was hiding.¹⁷

Another midrash makes it quite explicit that God forgave Saul for the crime of Nob:

Raba b. Hanina the elder further said in the name of Rab: If one commits a sin and is ashamed of it, all his sins are forgiven him, as it says, THAT THOU MAYEST REMEMBER AND BE CONFOUNDED, AND NEVER OPEN THY MOUTH ANY MORE, BECAUSE OF THY SHAME; WHEN I HAVE FORGIVEN THEE ALL THAT THOU HAST DONE, SAITH

17 Numbers Rabba 8:4

THE LORD GOD (Ezra 16:63). Perhaps with a whole congregation the case is different? Rather /we derive it/ from here: AND SAMUEL SAID TO SAUL, WHY HAST THOU DISQUIETED ME TO BRING ME UP? AND SAUL ANSWERED, I AM SORE DISTRESSED; FOR THE PHILISTINES MAKE WAR AGAINST ME, AND GOD IS DEPARTED FROM ME, AND ANSWERETH ME NO MORE, NEITHER BY PROPHETS NOR BY DREAMS; THEREFORE, I CALLED THEE THAT THOU MAYEST MAKE KNOWN UNTO ME WHAT I SHALL DO (I Sam. 28:15). But he does not mention the Urim and Thummim because he had killed all /the inhabitants of/ Nob, the city of the priests. And how do we know that Heaven had forgiven him? Because it says, AND SAMUEL SAID... TOMORROW SHALT THOU AND THY SONS BE WITH ME (I Sam. 28:16,19), and R. Yohanan said: WITH ME means, in my compartment (in Paradise). The Rabbis say /we learn of God's forgiveness of Saul/ from here: WE WILL HANG THEM UP UNTO THE LORD IN GIBEAH OF SAUL, THE CHOSEN OF THE LORD (II Sam. 21:6). A divine voice came forth and proclaimed: THE CHOSEN OF THE LORD.¹⁸

In his commentary to Berakoth 12b Rashi states, "It certainly was not the Gibeonites who said that Saul was the Lord's chosen." Rashi thus stresses that the statement came from God. Saul clearly received divine forgiveness. R. Yohanan is quoted in another place as saying essentially the same thing as he did in Berakoth:

R. Yohanan further stated: Whence is it deduced that the Holy One, blessed be He, pardoned him (Saul) for that sin (Rashi: the sin of the murder of the priests of Nob)? From /Scripture/ where it says, TOMORROW SHALT THOU AND THY SONS BE WITH ME (I Sam. 28:19). WITH ME implies: in my (celestial) division.¹⁹

Saul is not only forgiven but he is removed altogether from culpability by a host of midrashim which cast blame for the crime of Nob onto others. The one to receive the most blame is Doeg. Doeg was called the Edomite (**הַדּוּגִי** - the

¹⁸ Berakoth 12b; Yalkut Shimoni Prophets, קח

¹⁹ Erubin 53b

bloody one, the red one) because he not only slew the inhabitants of Nob but he and not Saul was ultimately responsible for the bloody crime:

R. Abba b. Kahana maintained: Doeg was called the Edomite (the bloody one) because he so turned matters as to have decreed the shedding of the blood of Nob, the city of priests, as is said, **DOEG THE EDMITE TURNED, AND HE FELL UPON THE PRIESTS, AND HE SLEW ON THAT DAY FOUR SCORE AND FIVE PERSONS (I Sam. 22:18).**²⁰

/Doeg was called the Edomite/ because he permitted the blood of Nob, the city of the priests.²¹

Doeg's slander is portrayed as the root cause of the crime:

FOR THE LEADER. MASCHIL OF DAVID; WHEN DOEG CAME AND TOLD SAUL: DAVID IS COME TO THE HOUSE OF AHIMELECH (priest of Nob-Ps. 52:1). These words are to be read in the light of the verse, SUFFER NOT THY MOUTH TO BRING THY FLESH INTO GUILT (Eccles. 5:5).../this verse/ refers to slander, for with their mouths people make their flesh suffer guilt. By what they let escape from their mouths they are stricken by leprosy... When Doeg slandered David, he became leprous, as it says, GOD WILL LIKEWISE BREAK THEE FOR EVER...AND ROOT THEE OUT OF THE LAND OF THE LIVING FOR EVER (Ps. 52:7). What is the meaning of HE WILL BREAK THEE? That he was made leprous, just as it is said of a leprous house, HE SHALL BREAK THE HOUSE (Lev. 14:45 where it says **וַתִּפֹּץ אֶת הַבַּיִת**, which is parallel to Ps. 52:7 **גַּם אֶל וְתִפֹּץ לַנֶּצֶחַ**). And what caused Doeg's leprosy? Because he slandered David, as it is said, WHEN DOEG THE EDMITE CAME AND TOLD SAUL, AND SAID UNTO HIM: DAVID IS COME TO THE HOUSE OF AHIMELECH.²²

Doeg's slander which lead to the destruction of Nob caused him to be banished to Gehinom:

And similarly Doeg is banished (to Gehinom) because of his tongue. When? The time David fled to the city of Nob, to Ahimelech the priest who accepted

20 Midrash Tehilim 52:4

21 Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, קלא

22 Midrash Tehilim 52:1

him. And Saul perceived /this/ and gathered all his servants and said to them: You are all treating me in a beautiful way - David does whatever he wants and not one of you tells me, as it says, ALL OF YOU HAVE CONSPIRED AGAINST ME, AND THERE WAS NONE THAT DISCLOSED IT TO ME WHEN MY SON MADE A LEAGUE WITH THE SON OF JESSE, AND THERE IS NONE OF YOU THAT IS SORRY FOR ME (I Sam. 22:8). Doeg began to speak slander, as it says, THEN ANSWERED DOEG THE EDMITE, WHO WAS SET OVER THE SERVANTS OF SAUL, AND SAID: I SAW THE SON OF JESSE COMING TO NOB, TO AHIMELECH THE SON OF AHITUB (Ib. 22:9). And by his (Doeg's) hand eighty-five priests were killed, that did wear a linen ephod and Ahimelech the high priest and Nob the city of priests was destroyed by the edge of /his/ sword.²³

Midrash Tehilim provides us with a description of this slander. We learn of God's anger at Doeg:

... Doeg began speaking to Saul, saying: I SAW THE SON OF JESSE COMING TO NOB, TO AHIMELECH...AND HE... GAVE HIM VICTUALS (I Sam. 22:9,10). The Holy One, blessed be He, asked Saul: Was it from your victuals that Ahimelech gave to David? Was it not from the showbread that is placed before Me that he gave David /food to eat/? Doeg said further to Saul: HE ALSO GAVE HIM THE SWORD OF GOLIATH THE PHILISTINE...AND HE INQUIRED OF THE LORD FOR HIM (Ib. 22:10). Immediately the Holy One, blessed be He, silenced the mouth of this evil one and of him it is said, LET THE LYING LIPS BE PUT TO SILENCE, WHICH CRUELLY, DISDAINFULLY, AND DESPITEFULLY SPEAK AGAINST THE RIGHTEOUS (Ps. 31:19).²⁴

The midrash graphically portrays Doeg's slanderous provocation and his carrying out of the murder at Nob:

AND (Doeg) TOLD SAUL (Ps. 52:1). What did he say? Thus spoke Doeg: David has been made king while you still live. For though inquiry may not be made of the Urim and Thummim on behalf of anyone except the king, the Beth Din, or one upon whom the needs of many people depend, yet inquiry has been made of the Urim and Thummim on behalf of David! When he was told this a spirit of envy entered Saul. How do we know this? Because Saul said to Ahimelech: THOU HAST GIVEN HIM BREAD, AND A SWORD (I Sam. 22:13), and as if this were not enough for you, THOU HAST ALSO INQUIRED OF GOD FOR HIM (Ib.). Therefore, THOU SHALT

²³ Tanhuma Metzora 1; Tanhuma Buber Metzora 1

²⁴ Midrash Tehilim 7:15

SURELY DIE, AHIMELECH (Ib. 22:16). When he saw the face of Saul seething with anger at him, immediately AHIMELECH ANSWERED THE KING, AND SAID: AND WHO AMONG ALL THY SERVANTS IS SO TRUSTED AS DAVID, WHO IS THE KING'S SON-IN-LAW (Ib. 22:14). /Therefore, impute nothing to me/ either because of the giving or because of the inquiring. Indeed, was this the first time that David called upon me? HAVE I ONLY TODAY BEGUN TO INQUIRE OF GOD FOR HIM? BE IT FAR FROM ME (Ib. 22:15). This was not the first time, for it is my custom to inquire on behalf of David. Therefore, LET NOT THE KING IMPUTE ANYTHING UNTO HIS SERVANT, NOR TO ALL THE HOUSE OF MY FATHER (Ib.). Saul said to him: So all along you were inquiring for David! And you are not deserving of death?! When Saul brought forth the sentence of death against Ahimelech, THE KING SAID UNTO THE GUARD THAT STOOD ABOUT HIM: TURN, AND SLAY THE PRIESTS OF THE LORD (Ib. 22:17). But the guards did not heed him. As Solomon said: WHOSO KEEPETH THE COMMANDMENT SHALL KNOW NO EVIL THING (Eccles. 8:5). It was Abner and Amasa who (acting as guards) would not permit /themselves/ to touch the priests, as it says, BUT THE SERVANTS OF THE KING WOULD NOT PUT FORTH THEIR HAND TO FALL UPON THE PRIESTS OF THE LORD (I Sam. 22:17). When Saul saw that the guards did not obey him, he said to Doeg: Why do you just stand there? You, who smote them with your tongue -- rise now and smite them with the sword. As it says, THE KING SAID TO DOEG: TURN THOU, AND FALL UPON THE PRIESTS (Ib. 22:18). Immediately Doeg stood up and smote them, as it says, HE SLEW ON THAT DAY FOURSORE AND FIVE PERSONS THAT DID WEAR A LINEN EPHOD (Ib.).²⁵

The Rabbis remind us of who was responsible for the actual bloodshed:

Said R. Isaac: Doeg was an Edomite (**אֱדוּמִי**, bloody, red). As it says AND DAVID SAID UNTO HIM: THY BLOOD BE UPON THY HEAD (II Sam. 1:16-connecting Doeg with the man who informed David of Saul's death). It is written THY BLOOD --much blood was shed at Nob, the city of priests /by Doeg/.²⁶

It is written, BUT THE SERVANTS OF THE KING WOULD NOT PUT FORTH THEIR HAND TO FALL UPON THE PRIESTS OF THE LORD (I Sam. 22:17). But Doeg killed them, as it

25 Midrash Tehilim 52:5; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, **קל**

26 Pesikta de R. Kahana 28a, 29b; Pes. Meyucheset 1e R. Kahana 28b

says, AND DOEG THE EDMITE TURNED, AND HE FELL UPON THE PRIESTS (Ib. 22:18).²⁷

Mishnat R. Eliezer informs us that it was Doeg and Saul's relatives who destroyed Nob:

And who killed them (the inhabitants of Nob)? You find that eighty-eight (probably an error-it should read eighty-five) of them were killed by Doeg. Nob, the city of priests, its men and its women and its herds and its flocks and its hewers of wood--who killed them? If you say the servants of Saul--were they not righteous ones? As it says, BUT THE SERVANTS OF THE KING WOULD NOT PUT FORTH THEIR HAND TO FALL UPON THE PRIESTS OF THE LORD (I Sam. 22:17). So who killed them? Saul's relatives killed them, as it says, IT IS FOR SAUL AND FOR HIS BLOODY HOUSE (II Sam. 21:1).²⁸

This same source earlier puts the blame for Nob on Ahimelech:

And the spilling of blood did not come to Nob except because of Ahimelech.²⁹

An early midrash declares that Abner was punished because he had it in his power to prevent the destruction of Nob but did not do so. It is perhaps significant that this statement re-appears frequently in many other midrashic sources:

And why was Abner killed?...Some say that Abner was punished because while he was provided with the opportunity to prevent Saul from /murder in/ the matter of Nob, the city of priests, he did not prevent him.³⁰

There is a dispute recorded in Sanhedrin as to whether or not Abner attempted to halt the violence in Nob:

27 Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets תולא ; Yerushalmi Sanhedrin 10:4

28 Mishnat R. Eliezer Chap. 9

29 Mishnat R. Eliezer Chap. 9

30 Lev. Rabba 26:2; Yerushalmi Sotah Chap. 1, Hal. 8; Yerushalmi Peah Chap. 1, Hal. 1; Pesikta de R. Kahana 32a, 32b; Pesikta Meyucheset le R. Kahana 32b; Numbers Rabba 19:2; Tanhuma Hukat 4; Tanhuma Buber Hukat 8; Tanhuma Buber מסייעי קלג 9; Mishnat R. Eliezer Chap. 9; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, קלג

Rab Judah said in Rab's name: Why was Abner punished? Because he should have protested to Saul (Rashi: for putting the priests of Nob to death) but did not. R. Isaac, however, said: He did indeed do so, but was not heeded. Both derive their views from the same verse, viz., AND THE KING LAMENTED FOR ABNER AND SAID: SHOULD ABNER DIE AS A CHURL DIETH, THY HANDS WERE NOT BOUND NOR THY FEET PUT INTO FETTERS (II Sam. 3:33). The one who says that he did not protest, interprets it thus: THY HANDS WERE NOT BOUND NOR THY FEET PUT INTO FETTERS; why then didst thou not protest (for you were thus in a position to protest)? /Therefore, / AS A MAN FALLETH BEFORE THE CHILDREN OF INIQUITY SO DIDST THOU FALL. The other who maintains that Abner did protest but was not listened to, /holds that/ he (David) expressed his astonishment: SHOULD HE HAVE DIED AS A CHURL DIETH? Seeing that thou didst indeed protest to Saul, WHY, THEN, DIDST THOU FALL AS A MAN FALLETH BEFORE THE CHILDREN OF INIQUITY? But on the view that he did protest, why was he punished? R. Nahman b. Isaac says: Because he delayed the accession of David's dynasty by two and a half years (by his act of appointing Ish-Bosheth, Saul's only surviving son, as king of Israel).³¹

Even David and Jonathan are blamed for the crimes at Nob! The following two midrashim assign the blame for Nob to Jonathan for his failure to provide David with bread for his travels. This necessitated David's stop in Nob for sustenance:

Had but Jonathan given David two loaves of bread /for his travels/, Nob, the city of priests would not have been massacred, Doeg the Edomite would not have been destroyed, and Saul and his three sons would not have been slain.³²

Come and see how great the punishment can be because of /failure to give/ bread. It can kill the leaders of Israel and the Shechinah will administer /this punishment/ to false prophets. From where do we know that the punishment can be the slaying of Israel's leaders? Come and learn from the incident of Nob and Saul and Ahimelech the son of Ahitub. They were punished on account of David's /not

31 Sanhedrin 20a

32 Sanhedrin 104a

receiving bread at the hand of Jonathan/ a great punishment.³³

God holds David responsible for the crime of Nob. It should also be noted that David, like Jonathan, is held responsible for Doeg's punishment and for Saul's death:

AND ISHBI-BENOB, WHO WAS OF THE SONS OF HA-RAPHA, THE WEIGHT OF WHOSE SPEAR WEIGHED THREE HUNDRED SHEKELS OF BRASS IN WEIGHT, HE BEING GIRDED ANEW, THOUGHT TO HAVE SLAIN DAVID (II Sam. 21:16).
What is the meaning of ISHBI-BENOB (יִשְׁבִּי בִּנְבּוֹ)?
Rab Judah said in Rab's name: a man (אִישׁ) who came on account of the business of Nob (נֹב - as an avenger of the crime of Nob). Said the Holy One, Blessed be He, to David: How long will this crime be hidden in your hand? Because of you Nob, the city of priests, was massacred; because of you Doeg the Edomite was banished; and because of you Saul and his three sons were killed.³⁴

The dynamic described in the Digest has now been fully portrayed. There is an effort to clear the name of Israel's first king. His character is dominantly viewed as being of the finest quality. The vast majority of his sins and faults are rejected or need to be viewed in the light of material which comes to praise his actions. His great sin of ordering the destruction of Nob and thus of the Gibeonites is pardoned by God and blame for this sin is assigned to a host of his contemporaries. In the biblical text Saul forthrightly orders the execution of the priests of the Lord. That he could be granted such complete exoneration for this act is further evidence of a rabbinic attempt to reject all justifications

³³ Seder Eliyahu Rabba Chap. 12

Note: The commentary to Seder Eliyahu Rabba Chap. 12 states that the punishment was on account of David not receiving bread at the hand of Jonathan.

³⁴ Sanhedrin 95a

for his fate except for the sin of Amalek. With this dynamic now fully elucidated, we turn to Saul's relationship with David. We shall see that here, too, the dynamic is reflected.

CHAPTER FIVE

I

Saul's relationship with David was a troubled one. From the day they met until the day Saul died the tension between them darkened both their lives. Even after Saul's death David was not free of the consequences of their difficult relationship. In this chapter we shall examine material which compares the two men to each other, Saul's wronging of David, David's mixed behavior towards Saul, the role Saul's family played in the drama, the effort by the Rabbis to clear Saul's name, and midrashim which attribute their fates to the Fate assigned them by God.

Saul and David are very often compared to one another. For the most part the comparisons seem to be prompted by a rabbinic desire to explain David's supplanting of Saul as King of Israel. One midrash, in the course of comparing the two, explicitly tells us that because of differences cited in the comparison David stands to rule while Saul was cut off from his kingship. This midrash asserts that whereas David returned good for evil dealt him (by sparing Saul who was pursuing him), Saul returned evil for good dealt him (by pursuing David who had killed Goliath and had soothed Saul's nerves by harp playing):

Behold, it says: one who returns evil for good, evil will not move from his house. It does not move from his house unless it came to him first (presumably this means before the person initiated the evil in return for another's good). Thus you learn that even one who returns evil for an evil, an evil will come to his house but that evil will

move, while in the former case the evil will not move. Against this is the following: one who returns good in place of evil, good will not move from his house. And you can not say that one who returns good in place of good that good leaves, for the attribute of goodness is great. And thus /you learn this whole lesson from the case of/ Saul who said to David: AND NOW, BEHOLD, I KNOW THAT YOU SHALT SURELY BE KING (I Sam. 24:21). And from where did Saul know at that moment that David would in the future rule that he /could/ say to him: BEHOLD: I KNOW (Ib.). Well, thus spoke Samuel: THE LORD HATH RENT THE KINGDOM OF ISRAEL FROM THEE THIS DAY, AND HATH GIVEN IT TO A NEIGHBOR OF THINE, THAT IS BETTER THAN THOU (Ib. 15:28). And when he saw that David was better than him, that he (Saul) was delivered into his (David's) hand but did not kill him, he knew that David was the one Samuel referred to. And there are those who say that when the skirt of Samuel's coat was torn, he said to Saul: He who tears the skirt of your garment will rule in your place.¹

Since the Rabbis are primarily trying to explain the fate of both Saul and David, most midrashim where the two are compared portray David in a positive light and Saul negatively. We read in Chapter One a midrash explaining that a famine due in Saul's time was delayed until the time of David. For David was strong and could bear such a burden but Saul, being weak, could not.² Saul is portrayed as being jealous of David (see the section on jealousy in Chapter One) whereas David is portrayed as responding to Saul's jealousy with kindness and thoughtfulness:

When he (David) went to fight with Goliath Saul said to him: THOU ART NOT ABLE TO GO AGAINST THIS PHILISTINE TO FIGHT WITH HIM; FOR THOU ART BUT A YOUTH (I Sam. 17:33). Said David to him: THY SERVANT KEPT HIS FATHER'S SHEEP; AND WHEN THERE CAME A LION, OR A BEAR, AND TOOK A LAMB OUT OF THE FLOCK, I WENT OUT AFTER HIM, AND SMOTE HIM, AND DELIVERED IT OUT OF HIS MOUTH: AND WHEN HE AROSE AGAINST ME, I CAUGHT HIM BY HIS

1 Mishnat R. Eliezer Chap. 4

2 Note: See Chapter One, footnote 57

BEARD, AND SMOTE HIM, AND SLEW HIM. THY SERVANT SMOTE BOTH THE LION AND THE BEAR; AND THE UNCIRCUMCISED PHILISTINE SHALL BE AS ONE OF THEM (Ib. 17:34). Saul asked him: who told you that you will be able to slay him? Thereupon David answered him: THE LORD THAT DELIVERED ME OUT OF THE PAW OF THE LION, AND OUT OF THE PAW OF THE BEAR, HE WILL DELIVER ME OUT OF THE HAND OF THIS PHILISTINE (Ib. 17:37). Straightway SAUL CLAD DAVID WITH HIS APPAREL (Ib 17:38), though it is written of Saul, FROM HIS SHOULDERS AND UPWARD HE WAS HIGHER THAN ANY OF THE PEOPLE (Ib. 9:2). When he clothed him in his garments and saw that they fitted him, he instantly cast an evil eye upon him. When David perceived that he had offended Saul he said to him: I CANNOT GO WITH THESE, FOR I HAVE NOT TRIED THEM. AND DAVID PUT THEM OFF HIM (Ib. 17:39).³

David's faith in God is contrasted with Saul's lack of faith and with irascible behavior on Saul's part which betrays, presumably, a lack of faith in God. We have seen that David's trust in the Urim and Thummim was quite unlike Saul's tendency to break off the use of such means of communication with God in times of danger.⁴ In the following midrash David's trust in God is set next to a portrayal of Saul's attempt on David's life and his unseemly use of Michal to ensnare David:

His (David's) strength trusted in the Holy One, blessed be He. When? at the time that he became engaged to Michal. What was Saul considering for it says: AND SAUL SAID: I WILL GIVE HIM HER, THAT SHE MAY BE A SNARE TO HIM (I Sam. 18:21). It is not seemly for a king to either hasten or delay (his daughter's engagement). And if you say that (David) would not have been affected (by this suspicious behavior on Saul's part) did Saul not just previously seek to kill him (I Sam. 18:11)? Despite this, he (David) trusted in the Holy One, blessed be He, and went out /for God/ as it says, AND DAVID AROSE AND WENT, HE AND HIS MEN, AND SLEW OF THE PHILISTINES TWO HUNDRED MEN (Ib. 18:27).⁵

³ Lev. Rabba 26:9; Midrash Shmuel Chap. 21; Tanhuma Emor 4; Tanhuma Buber Emor 1; Yalkut Shimon, Prophets, 137

⁴ Note: See Chapter One, footnote 16

⁵ Mishnat R. Eliezer Chap. 7

Saul covered his transgressions whereas David admitted his:

Another interpretation of: HE THAT COVERETH HIS TRANSGRESSIONS SHALL NOT PROSPER; BUT WHOSO AVOWETH AND FORSAKETH THEM SHALL OBTAIN MERCY (Prov. 28:13). This (first part of the verse) refers to Saul, to whom Samuel said: WHAT MEANETH THEN THIS BLEATING OF THE SHEEP IN MINE EARS, AND THE LOWING OF THE OXEN WHICH I HEAR (I Sam. 15:14, which follows Saul's claim to Samuel: I HAVE PERFORMED THE COMMANDMENT OF THE LORD, I Sam. 15:13. Saul "covered his transgression" for he had not exterminated all that belonged to Amalek.) The end of the verse, BUT WHOSO AVOWETH AND FORSAKETH THEM SHALL OBTAIN MERCY refers to David, of whom it is said: AND DAVID SPOKE UNTO THE LORD...AND SAID: LO, I HAVE SINNED AND I HAVE DONE INIQUITOUSLY (II Sam. 24:17); and of whom it is also said: AND DAVID SAID UNTO THE LORD: I HAVE SINNED GREATLY IN WHAT I HAVE DONE (Ib. 24:10). Immediately the prophet (Nathan) said to David: THE LORD HATH PUT AWAY THY SIN; THOU SHALT NOT DIE (II Sam. 12:13). Thus, WHOSO AVOWETH AND FORSAKETH THEM SHALL OBTAIN MERCY.⁶

In the following midrash Saul's willingness to hear slander is contrasted to David's sparing of Saul:

And he (David) said: MOREOVER, MY FATHER, SEE, YEA, SEE THE SKIRT OF THY ROBE IN MY HAND (I Sam. 24:12). See what you are to me and see what I am to you. Said Saul to David: AND NOW, BEHOLD, I KNOW THAT THOU SHALT SURELY BE KING (Ib. 24:21). From this it is known that when Samuel said to Saul: THE LORD HATH RENT THE KINGDOM OF ISRAEL FROM THEE THIS DAY, AND HATH GIVEN IT TO A NEIGHBOR OF THINE, THAT IS BETTER THAN THOU (I Sam. 15:28), Saul asked him: who is this? Samuel replied: I will not tell you but I will tell you this hint: he who tears your garment will in the future tear your kingdom. And when he (David) tore his garment, Saul knew what Samuel had told him. He began to say: AND NOW, BEHOLD, I KNOW THAT THOU SHALT SURELY BE KING (Ib. 24:21)...AND SAUL WENT HOME (Ib. 24:23). When Saul went home his warriors said to him: Because he didn't kill you in the cave he is righteous? He knew that if he did anything to you we would have entered (the cave) and devoured him as roasted meat. And Saul listened to them.⁷

6 Midrash Tehilim 100:2

7 Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, **לד**
Note: The reader may wish to review the section on slander, Chapter One, footnotes 27-40

Saul's active participation in the slander of David is also contrasted to David's turning to God for understanding and assistance:

HEAR MY PRAYER, O GOD; GIVE EAR TO THE WORDS OF MY MOUTH (Ps. 54:4). According to R. Hoshaya, David said to the Holy One, blessed be He: Master of the Universe, Doeg came and slandered me, and Saul accepted the slander from him and listened to him. The Ziphites came, and Saul heeded them also. I shall not go to Saul, but to Thee. Hear me. Give ear unto me. HEAR MY PRAYER, O GOD. FOR STRANGERS HAVE RISEN UP AGAINST ME...THEY HAVE NOT SET GOD BEFORE THEM. SELAH (Ps. 54:5). They have not set their minds on what is written in the Torah: CURSED BE HE THAT SMITETH HIS NEIGHBOR IN SECRET (Deut. 27:24). But what have they set their minds on? On what Saul said to them: BLESSED BE YE OF THE LORD (I Sam. 23:21). But of what avail is Saul's blessing, if they are accursed men? They have long been accursed, for Moses cursed them, saying: CURSED BE HE THAT SMITETH HIS NEIGHBOR IN SECRET (Deut. 27:24). Hence it is said: THEY HAVE NOT SET GOD BEFORE THEM. SELAH (Ps. 54:5).⁸

In a quaint legend Saul is portrayed as something of a concerned but dull bumpkin whereas David is portrayed as a wise wonder-worker. Saul, at the end of the tale, is amazed at David's talents and like the rest of Israel, convinced that God is with David:

It happened once that there was a man who lived in the days of King Saul. He had an exceedingly beautiful wife. And he was rich and prominent and the man was older than most and the time arrived for him to die. And because the woman was very beautiful a prince of the country laid eyes on her and wanted to take her with a forceful hand. But she did not want /him/ for any reason and fear entered her heart to no end. And she took all her wealth and put it in vessels. And in the vessels she /also/ put honey and she deposited them with a man who was an acquaintance and good friend of her husband, but there were no witnesses. Then she fled the country. After some time the prince died and the woman returned to her house. Meanwhile the man with whom she had deposited the vessels made an engagement feast for his son and

⁸ Midrash Tehilim 54:3

he was in need of honey. He went and found the vessels with the honey and took the little honey that he found in the vessels. In the end he found that all of the vessels were full of gold. Immediately he took the money and filled the vessels with honey. When the woman returned home she went to the man's house and said to him: Give me the deposit that I placed with you. He said to her: Go and bring me witnesses /to verify/ the return of your vessels with honey in them and then you can take your vessels. She went and she brought witnesses and he then brought all the vessels and returned them to her in front of the impressionable witnesses. When she came to her home she found all the vessels full of honey. She began to scream and to cry. She went to a judge of the state and he received her /case/. He said to her: Do you have witnesses? She said to him: No. He said to her: My daughter, what will I do with you? Go to King Saul and he will judge you. She went to Saul and he sent her to the Sanhedrin. They (the judges of the Sanhedrin) said to her: Do you have witnesses that you deposited money with this man? She said to them: I have no witnesses for I did the thing in secret out of fear of the prince. They said to her: My daughter, we have no permission to judge /this case/ unless we have witnesses for we are not able to judge judgments of the heart. She went from them with a despairing soul. She began to return to her house when she met David, King of Israel, when he was a small, young shepherd of a flock and he was playing with /other/ boys. She immediately cried and said: My son, I have received /a hearing/ but they did not judge the man that cheated me. Hear my words and judge me with your kindness. He (David) said to her: Go to the King that he give me permission to bring justice to the light. She returned to the King and she said: My Lord, I have found a youth who knows, according to his words, how to bring forth my judgment to the light. He (Saul) said to her: Go. And she brought David before Saul and introduced him to the king. Saul said to David: Is it true that you are able to bring forth judgment to the light? He replied: If I have permission from you, trust me that I can achieve it. Saul said to her: Go with him. David said to her: Bring the vessels that you deposited with this man. She brought the vessels. He said to her: Do you recognize that these are the same vessels that you deposited with that man? She said: Yes, my Lord. He asked the man also and he acknowledged that they were the vessels. Said David to her: Go and bring me other empty vessels. She went and brought them and she emptied the honey into those vessels (the ones just brought) and he took those vessels and broke them before the eyes of the community. He examined and he

found amidst the broken vessels in one place two gold pieces attached and hanging from the vessels. Immediately David spoke and said to the one who had the vessels (the one they were deposited with): Go and return the deposit to this woman. Immediately when Saul and all Israel heard this they were greatly amazed by the matter. And they knew that the spirit of God was there.⁹

There are midrashim which, when comparing Saul and David, portray Saul favorably. In Chapter Three we read a series of midrashim that compare Saul's outstanding modesty in the cave to David's lack of modesty in his dancing before the ark.¹⁰ Saul merited to rule immediately whereas David did not:

Another interpretation of HOPE DEFERRED MAKETH THE HEART SICK; BUT DESIRE FULFILLED IS A TREE OF LIFE (Prov. 13:12). HOPE DEFERRED MAKETH THE HEART SICK -- this refers to David who was anointed but had to wait two years to rule. BUT DESIRE FULFILLED IS A TREE OF LIFE -- this refers to Saul who was anointed and ruled immediately. Through what merit? Through the merit of the good deeds he accumulated, for being meek and humble, for observing the Levitical precautions of purity even when he ate common food, because he spent his own wealth freely in order to save Israel's wealth, and he considered the honor of his servant to be of equal weight to his own honor. Taught R. Judah b. Nahman in the name of R. Simeon b. Lakish: Saul was a scholar in Torah: BY ME, says Torah, PRINCES COME TO REIGN (Prov. 18:16); BY ME KINGS COME TO REIGN (Prov. 8:15).¹¹

From one midrash we receive the opinion that Saul and David were alike in that evil issued forth from both of them:

(Commenting on Ps. 144:14, WHOSE OXEN ARE WELL LADEN; WITH NO BREACH, AND NO GOING FORTH, AND NO OUTCRY IN OUR BROAD PLACES.) THERE IS NO BREACH (ib.): /that is/ may our company (of scholars) be not like that of

9 Bet Ha-Midrash Vol. 4, p. 150,151

10 Note: See Chapter Three, footnotes 26-31

11 Pesikta de R. Kahana 5:3; Midrash Shmuel Chap. 17; Pesikta Rabbati Chap. 15

David from which issued Ahitophel (who made a "breach" in the kingdom of David). AND NO GOING FORTH: /that is/ may our company not be like that of Saul from which issued Doeg the Edomite (who went forth from Saul to do the evil of slaughtering the priests of Nob).¹²

In the midrashim which compare Saul and David a majority clearly portray David in a more positive way. We turn now to material which presents Saul wronging David.

II

One of Saul's most serious sins was his pursuance of David. The Rabbis hold Saul accountable as a "pursuer" and therefore grant David the legal right of killing him in self defense:

David said: NOW THEREFORE, I PRAY THEE, LET MY LORD THE KING HEAR THE WORDS OF HIS SERVANT...FORASMUCH AS THE LORD DELIVERED THEE INTO MY HAND TODAY (I Sam. 26:19,23). (David was alluding to what) Moses taught: IF A THIEF BE FOUND BREAKING IN, AND BE SMITTEN SO THAT HE DIETH, THERE SHALL BE NO BLOODGUILTINESS FOR HIM (Ex. 22:1). (He was trying to say to Saul:) You, Saul, are with me in the cave and according to the Torah, your life and your blood are forfeited. David was also alluding to the words, THOU SHALT NOT STAND IDLY BY THE BLOOD OF THY NEIGHBOR (Lev. 19:16)--that is, if a man comes at you to slay you, and you overcome him, tarry not, and say not: shall I be guilty of his blood? But taking no counsel of your heart, kill him immediately. As the proverb says: slay him before he slays you. Thus in saying, AND SOME BADE ME KILL YOU (I Sam. 24:11), David meant: According to the Torah, it is permitted to kill you.¹³

In a number of midrashim we find a picture of a harassed, fleeing David, continually pouring out his heart to God, and a Saul busily chasing and thus "oppressing" him:

BE MERCIFUL UNTO ME, O GOD, FOR A MAN PANTETH AFTER ME (Ps. 56:2). PANTETH AFTER (פָּנֵת אַחֲרַי) only means

¹² Berakoth 17b

¹³ Midrash Tehilim 56:1; Berakoth 62b; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, **ל**

"oppresses," for the verse HEAR THIS, O YE THAT PANT AFTER THE NEEDY (Amos 8:4) is translated in the Aramaic Targum as "that oppress" (**דורשין**). So, too, "pant" in THEY THAT LIE IN WAIT FOR ME PANT (Ps. 56:3), is read "oppress" in the Aramaic Targum, which says, "They that scorn me oppress me." Thus David was saying: If Saul had not oppressed me, I would not have had to flee to Achish. Though GREAT ONES FIGHT AGAINST ME, O MOST HIGH (Ib.), even so, IN THE DAY THAT I AM AFRAID, I WILL PUT MY TRUST IN THEE (Ib. 56:4).¹⁴

David is repeatedly pursued:

Another interpretation of A PRAYER OF DAVID: HEAR THE RIGHT, O LORD (Ps. 17:1). (This was spoken) when he fled from Saul the first time (I Sam. 19:18). ATTEND UNTO MY CRY (Ps. 17:1). (This was spoken) when he fled from Saul into the cave (I Sam. 22:1). GIVE EAR UNTO MY PRAYER (Ps. 17:1). (This was spoken) within the barricade, when he was afraid of Abner (I Sam. 26:7). NOT OUT OF FEIGNED LIPS (Ps. 17:1). (This was spoken at the time of) the Ziphites, who CAME AND SAID TO SAUL: DOETH NOT DAVID HIDE HIMSELF WITH US (Ps. 54:2).¹⁵

Saul gives David no rest:

(Commenting on Ps. 142) Said David: I desire to sit /and pray to God/ but Saul gives me no rest. Rather, FOR THEY HAVE DRIVEN ME OUT THIS DAY THAT I SHOULD NOT CLEAVE UNTO THE INHERITANCE OF THE LORD (I Sam. 26:19). Therefore, I CRY UNTO YOU, O LORD (Ps. 142:6).¹⁶

David, repeatedly harassed, has only God to turn to:

O GOD, SAVE ME BY THY NAME AND RIGHT ME BY THY MIGHT (Ps. 54:3). Said R. Benjamin the son of Yafet in the name of R. Yishmael: David said: Master of the Universe, if a magistrate pursues a man, the man may appeal to the proconsul. If the proconsul pursues him, he may appeal to the king. If the king pursues him, to whom may he appeal? Only to You. Thus spoke David: Master of the Universe, Saul is king, to whom may I appeal? Only to You! O GOD, SAVE ME BY THY NAME AND RIGHT ME BY THY MIGHT (Ps. 54:3).¹⁷

¹⁴ Midrash Tehilim 56:2

¹⁵ Midrash Tehilim 17:6

¹⁶ Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, **תנח**

¹⁷ Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, **תשנ**

The midrash effectively communicates an approval of what is taken to be David's steadfast and loyal praise of God despite the pressures he is under due to Saul's behavior. Saul's attitude towards David vacillates but nevertheless the pursuit continues. And throughout all, David keeps praising God:

Another interpretation of SHIGGAYON OF DAVID, WHICH HE SANG UNTO THE LORD CONCERNING THE MATTER OF CUSH THE BENJAMITE (Ps. 7:1). R. Tarfon said that David praised the Holy One, blessed be He, with many outpourings of praise (taking שִׁגְיוֹן -SHIGGAYON- as meaning "outpourings of song" --Braude, p. 421). David said: Master of the Universe, after you brought Israel out of Egypt and brought them up from the /Red/ Sea, they sang to you. But as for me, despite the fact that Saul still pursues me, my song of praise to You does not cease.

Why did David call Saul Cush? Because (as David puts it:) His attitude towards me changes (taking כוּשׁ to mean different, usually as to skin coloring) constantly but he continues to pursue me (taking כוּשׁ as being from כָּשָׁה, meaning to cause injury by contact --or here, one who pursues with intent to cause injury).¹⁸

The following midrash finds Saul's chasing of David parallel to gentiles and robbers who pursue Jews. Just as one may flee from evil edicts and evil people on the Sabbath, so David fled from Saul on the Sabbath:

Halacha: If one is pursued by gentiles or by robbers, what is the law as regards his profanation of the Sabbath? Thus taught our Rabbis: One who is pursued by gentiles or by robbers may desecrate the Sabbath in order to save his life. And thus we find in the case of David. When Saul sought to kill him he fled from him and escaped (implied: on the Sabbath).

Our Rabbis said: It happened once that evil edicts from the government were brought to the chiefs of Zepphoris (on the Sabbath). They went and they said to R. Eliezer b. Perata: Master, evil edicts have been brought to us from the government. What do you advise? Shall we flee? He was afraid to tell them, "Flee," so he spoke to them in veiled language: Me you ask? Go and ask Jacob and Moses

¹⁸ Midrash Tehilim 7:13

and David! What is written of Jacob? AND JACOB FLED (Hosea 12:13). And also Moses: BUT MOSES FLED (Ex. 2:15). And so with David: NOW DAVID FLED, AND ESCAPED (I Sam. 19:18).¹⁹

Saul is linked to Esau and Pharoah since all three were pursuers. David is linked again to Jacob and Moses:

Esau sought to slay Jacob, as it says, LET THE DAYS OF MOURNING FOR MY FATHER BE AT HAND; THEN WILL I SLAY MY BROTHER JACOB (Gen. 27:41). But he (Jacob) fled from him and was saved, as it says, AND JACOB FLED INTO THE FIELD OF ARAM (Hosea 12:12). Pharoah sought to kill Moses but Moses fled from him and was saved, as it says, AND MOSES FLED FROM THE FACE OF PHAROAH (Ex. 2:15). Saul sought to slay David but David fled from him and was saved, as it says, AND DAVID FLED AND ESCAPED (I Sam. 19:18). /This comes/ to teach you that all who flee are saved.²⁰

In another midrash Saul is linked to Esau and David's steadfast loyalty to God is linked to Jacob's similar behavior:

He (Jacob) informed him (Esau): If you are prepared for peace, I am with you; and if for war, I am ready for you. I have stalwarts, strong men, for I make a request of the Holy One, blessed be He, and He fulfills it, as it says, HE WILL FULFILL THE DESIRE OF THEM THAT FEAR HIM; HE ALSO WILL HEAR THEIR CRY, AND WILL SAVE THEM (Ps. 145:19). For that reason David came to utter praise and glory to God who helped him when he fled from Saul, as it says, FOR, LO, THE WICKED BEND THE BOW, THEY HAVE MADE READY THEIR ARROW UPON THE STRING, THAT THEY MAY SHOOT IN DARKNESS AT THE UPRIGHT IN HEART (Ps. 11:2), which is followed by WHEN THE FOUNDATIONS ARE DESTROYED, WHAT HATH THE RIGHTEOUS WROUGHT (Ps. 11:3)? He (David) said to Him: Sovereign of the Universe! Hadst Thou been wroth and forsaken and not helped Jacob, who was a pillar and a foundation of the world, as it says, BUT THE RIGHTEOUS IS A FOUNDATION OF THE WORLD (Prov. 10:25), then WHAT HATH THE RIGHTEOUS WROUGHT? In reference to that incident was it said, SOME TRUST IN CHARIOTS, AND SOME IN HORSES, BUT WE WILL MAKE MENTION OF THE NAME OF THE LORD OUR GOD (Ps. 20:8).²¹

19 Numbers Rabba 23:1; Menachot 95b; Tanhuma Buber א'ע"ב

20 Pirke de R. Eliezer Chap. 29; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, 10

21 Gen. Rabba 75:11

Saul not only pursued David but he is accused of sending talebearers to help him ensnare David:

Another interpretation of, BY NIGHT ON MY BED I SOUGHT HIM WHOM MY SOUL LOVETH (Song of Songs 3:1). Said R. Judah: This refers to the time when David fled from Saul. I SOUGHT HIM, BUT I FOUND HIM NOT (Ib.). This refers to the time that Saul went down after David to the wilderness. I WILL RISE NOW, AND GO ABOUT THE CITY (Ib. 3:2). This refers to Saul's sending of talebearers to the land of Israel that said to him (to Saul): DOTH NOT DAVID HIDE HIMSELF WITH US (I Sam. 23:19-the Ziphites are speaking)?²²

Saul threatened David's family and forced David to take his parents to Moab for safety:

MOAB IS MY WASHPOT (Ps. 60:10). When David fled from Saul he led his father and mother to the king of Moab. For he was afraid of Saul but he trusted them (the Moabites) because he was descended from Ruth the Moabitess, as it is written, AND DAVID WENT THENCE TO MIZPEH OF MOAB; AND HE SAID UNTO THE KING OF MOAB: LET MY FATHER AND MY MOTHER, I PRAY THEE, COME FORTH, AND BE WITH YOU, TILL I KNOW WHAT GOD WILL DO FOR ME (I Sam. 22:3).²³

By forcing David to flee, Saul put him in the position of one who will be regarded as a worshipper of other gods. Though not expressly naming Saul this midrash nevertheless informs us that David was wronged in this manner when forced to flee the land of Israel (which was, of course, ruled by Saul):

Our Rabbis taught: One should always live in the land of Israel, even in a town most of whose inhabitants are idolaters, but let no one live outside the land, even in a town most of whose inhabitants are Israelites; for whoever lives in the land of Israel may be considered to have a God, but whoever lives outside the Land may be regarded as one who has no God. For it is said in Scripture, TO GIVE YOU THE

22 Song of Songs Zuta Chap. 3, par. 2

23 Numbers Rabba 14:1

Note: The word for WASHPOT (**וַשְׁפֹּטִי**) has in Aramaic the meaning of trusting. Thus Moab is a place David trusts.

LAND OF CANAAN, TO BE YOUR GOD (Lev. 25:38). Has he, then, who does not live in the Land, no God? But /this is what the text intended/ to tell you, that whoever lives outside the land may be regarded as one who worships idols. Similarly it was said in Scripture in /the story of/ David, FOR THEY HAVE DRIVEN ME OUT THIS DAY THAT I SHOULD NOT CLEAVE TO THE INHERITANCE OF THE LORD, SAYING: GO, SERVE OTHER GODS (I Sam. 26:19). Now, whoever said to David, SERVE OTHER GODS? But /the text intended/ to tell you that whoever lives outside the land may be regarded as one who worships idols.²⁴

Saul wronged David in other ways besides chasing him.

Saul twisted words when speaking to David and is considered wicked for this. An example of this word-twisting has Saul claiming credit for David's rise to greatness:

The wicked ooze (**הנכבב** meaning ooze or drip) for they do not stand by what they say. They say something and then twist it. Thus was Saul the oozier. One night he said to David this one thing, as it says, HE SAID TO DAVID: THOU ART MORE RIGHTEOUS THAN I (**נדין אתה ממני** - I Sam. 24:18). What is the meaning of **ממני**? If the wheat is not bad it is considered good wheat. Thus you are considered righteous because of me (**ממני** - which is interpreted as meaning "because of me" though literally it means "from me"). I am he who made you a righteous man, because I went forth to seek your life. If I had found you I would have killed you. But because I have fallen into your hand and you did not kill me, therefore YOU ARE A RIGHTEOUS MAN BECAUSE OF ME.²⁵

Saul used lies against David and is compared to another liar, Potiphar's wife:

What is the meaning of CONCERNING THE MATTER OF CUSH THE BENJAMITE (Ps. 7:1)? Said R. Hanina b. Papa: (David said:) Just as the wife of Joseph's master accosted Joseph saying, LIE WITH ME (Gen. 39:7) and then said: THE HEBREW SERVANT, WHOM THOU HAST BROUGHT UNTO US, CAME IN UNTO ME TO MOCK ME (Gen. 39:14), so Saul said: MY SON HATH STIRRED UP MY SERVANT AGAINST

²⁴ Kethuboth 110b

²⁵ Midrash Tehillim 58:1

ME TO LIE IN WAIT (I Sam. 22:8). Just as the Cushite woman, the master of Joseph, used lies against him, so Saul the Benjamite came and used lies against me.²⁶

Saul and Doeg mock David by calling him "the son of Jesse" instead of using the name "David":

HOW LONG WILL YE TURN MY GLORY INTO SHAME (Ps. 4:3)? How long will you share my glory by calling me "the son of Jesse," as when Doeg says: I SAW THE SON OF JESSE (I Sam. 22:9); or as when Saul says: HEAR NOW, YE BENJAMITES; WILL THE SON OF JESSE GIVE EVERY ONE OF YOU FIELDS, ETC. (Ib. 22:7,8), or (when Saul says to Jonathan): DO NOT I KNOW THAT THOU HAST CHOSEN THE SON OF JESSE TO THINE OWN SHAME, ETC. (Ib. 20:30); or (as when Saul says to Jonathan again): AS LONG AS THE SON OF JESSE LIVETH UPON THE EARTH, THOU SHALT NOT BE ESTABLISHED (Ib. 20:31). Have I no name of my own?²⁷

Saul's hatred of David was apparently of sufficient strength as to cause David to refer to himself as "young and despised." The midrash comes to explain the expression **נָעִיר אֲנִי** found in Ps. 119:141. **נָעִיר** is normally taken to mean the youngest, yet David had a younger brother. The solution to this problem is that Saul's hatred accounts for David's self-abnegation:

I AM YOUNG AND DESPISED; YET HAVE I NOT FORGOTTEN THY PRECEPTS (Ps. 119:141). /David says/ that he was the youngest (**נָעִיר אֲנִי**). But wasn't Elihu the eighth (and therefore the youngest)? And thus it says: DAVID THE SEVENTH, ELIHU THE EIGHTH (Kimhi's addition to I Chron. 2:15), so Elihu was after him. Rather David referred to himself as the youngest, saying: I AM YOUNG AND DESPISED /because he meant/, great is Saul's hatred (for me), and thus it says, BUT IT CAME TO PASS AT THE TIME WHEN MEREB, SAUL'S DAUGHTER, SHOULD HAVE BEEN GIVEN TO DAVID, THAT SHE WAS GIVEN UNTO ADRIEL THE MEHOLATHITE TO WIFE (I Sam. 18:19), and Scripture also says, NOW SAUL HAD GIVEN MICHAL HIS DAUGHTER, DAVID'S WIFE, TO PALTI THE SON OF LAISH (Ib. 25:44). Therefore it says, I AM YOUNG AND DESPISED.²⁸

26 Midrash Tehilim 7:3

27 Midrash Tehilim 4:8

28 Midrash Tehilim 119:72

The apparent motivation of all of this wronging of David by Saul was Saul's jealousy of David. We reviewed in great length in Chapter One Saul's sin of jealousy.²⁹ Here is one midrash which communicates that much of the trouble between Saul and David stemmed from the jealousy Saul felt from the very beginning of David's success:

R. Levi, or some say R. Jonathan said: The following remark is a tradition handed down to us from the men of the Great Assembly: wherever in the Scripture we find the term וַיְהִי / Va-Yehi (and it was, and it came to pass), it indicates /the approach of/ trouble (Va-Yehi וַיְהִי - וַיְ read as וַיְ woe and וַיְ there will be)...AND DAVID HAD GREAT SUCCESS IN ALL HIS WAYS (וַיְהִי דָוִד - I Sam. 18:14), AND SAUL EYED DAVID (Ib. 18:9).³⁰

For his jealousy, his pursuance, and his harassment of David, Saul is classified as an "enemy" of David. It is important to keep in mind that being an enemy of David, head of the House of David and forerunner of the Messiah, is a most serious charge against Saul. Saul is one of ten enemies of David and the reader will note that Saul is not in very good company:

MY GOD, MY ROCK IN WHOM I TAKE REFUGE (Ps. 18:3). The Rabbis said: According to the ten enemies who fell before David did David sing ten words of praise. And these are the enemies: Saul, Doeg, Ahitophel, Sheba the son of Bichri, Shimei the son of Gera, Shobach, Goliath and his three brothers of whom it is said, THESE FOUR WERE BORN TO THE GIANT IN GATH; AND THEY FELL BY THE HAND OF DAVID (II Sam. 21:22). Five were of the nations of the earth, and five were of Israel...³¹

There is midrashic comment to the effect that David's

²⁹ Note: See Chapter One, footnotes 42-46 for midrashim portraying Saul's jealousy of David.

³⁰ Megillah 10b; Numbers Rabba 10:5

³¹ Midrash Tehilim 18:8; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, נין

enemies were great men and that Saul was the greatest of them. Here Saul is described as being great in stature:

MANY (**רַבִּים**) ARE THEY THAT RISE UP AGAINST ME (Ps. 3:2 -- taking **רַבִּים** as great rather than as many). Great in Torah and great in stature...And thus Saul, as it is written, FROM HIS SHOULDERS AND UPWARD HE WAS HIGHER THAN ANY OF THE PEOPLE (I Sam. 9:2).³²

Here are two different ways Midrash Tehilim describes Saul as being the greatest of David's enemies:

The reason David said: SHIGGAYON (an outpouring of song) OF DAVID CONCERNING THE MATTER OF CUSH THE BENJAMITE (Ps. 7:1) was that Saul was equal to all of his enemies and thus he said: FOR THE LEADER, A PSALM OF DAVID THE SERVANT OF THE LORD, WHO SPOKE UNTO THE LORD THE WORDS OF THIS SONG IN THE DAY THAT THE LORD DELIVERED HIM FROM THE HAND OF ALL HIS ENEMIES, AND FROM THE HAND OF SAUL (Ps. 18:1).³³

David said: Master of the Universe, many enemies I had and all were great men, but not one stood against me like Saul. Therefore David SPOKE UNTO THE LORD THE WORDS OF THIS SONG IN THE DAY THAT THE LORD DELIVERED HIM FROM THE HAND OF ALL HIS ENEMIES, AND FROM THE HAND OF SAUL (Ps. 18:1). /To show you/ that Saul was considered as being equal to all of his enemies put together.³⁴

Finally, the following midrash describes Saul as being harder on David than all his other enemies. It additionally suggests by analogy that Saul's wronging of David was as burdensome as the suit a Jew brings against a fellow Jew (i.e. harder than the suit of the gentile against the Jew):

IN THAT DAY THAT THE LORD DELIVERED HIM FROM THE HAND OF ALL HIS ENEMIES, AND FROM THE HAND OF SAUL (Ps. 18:1). Does this mean that on one day God delivered David from his enemies and from Saul? No, rather it means that Saul was equal in weight to all of David's

32 Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, **תורה**

33 Midrash Tehilim 7:18

34 Midrash Tehilim 7:13

enemies and troubles. When one Jew brings another Jew into court he is harder on him than are our enemies among the gentiles. Thus it says, AMONG MY PEOPLE ARE FOUND WICKED MEN; THEY SET A TRAP, THEY CATCH MEN (Jer. 5:26)...And Solomon said: A BROTHER OFFENDED IS HARDER TO BE WON THAN A STRONG CITY (Prov. 18:19).³⁵

Having examined Saul's wronging of David we turn to David's behavior towards Saul.

III

In the last section we saw David turning to God when pressed by Saul. In addition to this response (prayer) David responded to Saul in quite contradictory ways. He displayed great compassion and yet also reacted with cruelty and displayed what to the Rabbis was improper behavior. Let us look first at David's hurtful behavior towards Saul.

David cursed Saul and God expresses displeasure at the cursing of the Lord's anointed. David pleads with God to accept that he cursed in error and impulsively and not in pre-meditation or presumptuously:

SHIGGAYON (**שִׁגְיֹן**, here taken as "impulsive speech") OF DAVID WHICH HE SANG UNTO THE LORD, CONCERNING THE MATTER OF CUSH THE BENJAMITE (Ps. 7:1 --Braude, p. 418: "David uses CUSH THE BENJAMITE as a circumlocution for King Saul because of the danger in cursing the king by name."). Consider this verse: CURSE NOT THE KING, NO, NOT IN THY THOUGHT (Eccles. 10:20). That is, do not curse the king who lives in your generation. AND CURSE NOT THE RICH IN THY BED-CHAMBER (Ib.). That is, do not curse the rich man who lives in your generation, FOR A BIRD OF THE AIR SHALL CARRY THE VOICE (Ib.). For even the walls have ears (for such curses).

The Holy One, blessed be He, asked David: Why do you curse Mine anointed (Saul) by saying: LET ALL MINE ENEMIES BE ASHAMED AND SORE VEXED (Ps. 6:11)? And did you not call Saul an enemy? As it says, DAVID... SPOKE...THE WORDS OF THIS SONG IN THE DAY THAT THE

LORD DELIVERED HIM FROM THE HAND OF ALL HIS ENEMIES, FROM THE HAND OF SAUL (Ps. 18:1)? Replied David: Master of the Universe, You have attributed to me presumptuous words, /rather attribute to me/ words /spoken/ in error (i.e. impulsive), as Scripture says, WHO CAN UNDERSTAND HIS IMPULSIVE WORDS (**שִׁיאוֹת**, very close to **שִׁגִּיּוֹן**).³⁶

SHIGGAYON (**שִׁגִּיּוֹן**) OF DAVID, WHICH HE SANG UNTO THE LORD CONCERNING THE MATTER OF CUSH THE BENJAMITE (Ps. 7:1). When did David speak impulsively (**שִׁגִּיּוֹן** - **שִׁגָּה**) of Saul? When Saul was pursuing him, as it says, THEN SAUL AROSE, AND WENT DOWN TO THE WILDERNESS OF ZIPH, HAVING THREE THOUSAND CHOSEN MEN OF ISRAEL WITH HIM, TO SEEK DAVID IN THE WILDERNESS OF ZIPH (I Sam. 26:2). Now as Saul was coming after him to kill him Abishai said to David: Let me go and I will kill Saul, for GOD HATH DELIVERED UP THINE ENEMY INTO THY HAND THIS DAY; NOW THEREFORE LET ME SMITE HIM (I Sam. 26:8). But David did not permit him to kill Saul, but said (impulsively): AS THE LORD LIVETH, NAY, BUT THE LORD SHALL SMITE HIM (Ib. 26:10). When Saul (the Buber text reads: "David" but Braude, p. 422 says that it is an error and that the text only makes sense reading it as "Saul") went down to the battle (of Gilboa), David, beseeching God concerning the imprecation which he had let slip, said: Master of the Universe, judge me not as one who spoke willfully, but as one who spoke impulsively (**שִׁגָּה**), as it says, SHIGGAYON (**שִׁגִּיּוֹן** meaning impulsive speech) OF DAVID.³⁷

The imprecations David expressed resulted in great evil befalling Saul:

SHIGGAYON (**שִׁגִּיּוֹן** - impulsive speech) OF DAVID (Ps. 7:1). R. Judah said in the name of R. Levi: David brought forth from his mouth three imprecations against Saul. And each one of the three afflicted Saul. David said: AS THE LORD LIVETH, NAY, BUT THE LORD SHALL SMITE HIM (I Sam. 26:10) and so it befell Saul. David said, OR HIS DAY SHALL COME TO DIE (Ib.), and so it befell Saul. And David said: OR HE SHALL GO DOWN INTO BATTLE AND BE SWEEPED AWAY (Ib.), and so it befell Saul: SO SAUL DIED AND HIS THREE SONS (Ib. 31:6).³⁸

36 Midrash Tehilim 7:1; Eccles. Rabba 10:1

37 Midrash Tehilim 7:18

38 Midrash Tehilim 7:2; Midrash Shmuel Chap. 25; Yalkut Shimon, Prophets, **קלח**

David is held responsible for preventing Saul from the fulfillment of the commandment to wear fringes. This occurred when David cut Saul's garment in the cave (I Sam. 24:5):

THEN DAVID AROSE, AND CUT OFF THE SKIRT OF SAUL'S ROBE PRIVILY (I Sam. 24:5). What is written right after this? DAVID'S HEART SMOTE HIM, BECAUSE HE HAD CUT OFF SAUL'S SKIRT (Ib. 24:6). R. Judah says: David said: What difference is there between cutting off a man's show-fringes (depriving him of the privilege of religious observance and offending his modesty) and cutting off his head? Said R. Nehemiah: /David/ prevented Saul for a time from the commandment of wearing knotted fringes.³⁹

David was punished in old age for the contempt he displayed for Saul's garment. David's garment would bring him no warmth in his old age because of this deed:

THEN DAVID AROSE AND CUT OFF THE SKIRT OF SAUL'S ROBE PRIVILY (I Sam. 24:5). R. Jose son of R. Hanina said: Whoever treats garments contemptuously will in the end derive no benefit from them; for it says, NOW KING DAVID WAS OLD AND STRICKEN IN YEARS; AND THEY COVERED HIM WITH CLOTHES, BUT HE COULD GET NO HEAT (I Kings 1:1).⁴⁰

David failed to mourn Saul according to the dictate of the law and according to the standards appropriate for Israel's first king. As we learned in Chapter Four one of the two reasons for the famine that occurred in David's time was on account of this failure:

Said God to David: David, you would be delivered /of this famine/ but for Saul and for his bloody house. As it is written, AND THE LORD SAID: IT IS FOR SAUL, AND HIS BLOODY HOUSE (II Sam. 21:1). FOR SAUL, for you have not shown kindness to him and have not mourned (him) in accordance with the law. The Holy One, blessed be He, further said: David! Is he not Saul who was anointed with the anointing oil? Is he not Saul, in whose days idolatry was not practiced in Israel: Is he not Saul whose lot was with Samuel

39 Midrash Tehilim 7:4

40 Berakoth 62b; Yalkut Shimoni, Torah, יס; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, נל

the prophet? And you are in the land (of Israel) and he is /buried/ outside the land (in Jabesh-gilead)!

...Now although the Holy One, blessed be He, had spoken to David about Saul, about how he was not mourned according to the law and was buried outside the land, David was slack in the manner of mourning. For he (David) said: As far as Saul is concerned, twelve months have already elapsed and it is no longer proper to mourn for him.⁴¹

In another version of this material David appears to acknowledge his failure and to ask for mercy from God:

He (God) answered him (David): It (the famine) is for Saul. Replied David: Master of the Universe! I am not Saul that no idolatry is practiced in Israel and I am not Saul, anointed from the oil of consecration and I am not Saul whose portion is with Samuel the prophet (implied: therefore have mercy on me). Said the Lord to David: You are in the land (of Israel) and he is outside the land.⁴²

Though David committed these unkind deeds he is also responsible for much goodness to Saul. Chief among the kindnesses David did for Saul was his sparing of Saul in the cave. The midrash makes it very clear that though David was legally entitled to kill Saul in self-defense, he did not:

...You, Saul, are with me in the cave and according to the Torah, your life and your blood are forfeited. David was alluding to the words, THOU SHALT NOT STAND IDLY BY THE BLOOD OF THY NEIGHBOR (Lev. 19:16) -- that is, if a man comes at you to slay you, and you overcome him, tarry not, and say not: shall I be guilty of his blood? But taking no counsel of your heart, kill him immediately. As the proverb says: slay him before he slays you. Thus in saying, AND SOME BADE ME KILL YOU (I Sam. 24:11), David meant: According to the Torah, it is permitted to kill you. BUT IT (Saul's modesty) SPARED THEE (יָרָא - Ib.).

⁴¹ Numbers Rabba 8:4; Yebamot 78b; Pirke de R. Eliezer Chap. 17; Midrash Shmuel Chap. 28; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, יבג and יבר

⁴² Pirke de R. Eliezer Chap. 17

(By this David meant:) Your modesty leads me to spare you...David then said: MY FATHER, SEE, YEA, SEE (Ib. 24:12). See what you said to me (in your Torah, permitting me to slay Saul). Also see how I acted towards You (by refraining from killing Saul).⁴³

David prayed to God to help him control his evil inclination and to prevent Saul from falling into his hands lest he commit murder:

FOR THE LEADER; AL-TASHHETH. A PSALM OF DAVID; MICHAM; WHEN HE FLED FROM SAUL, IN THE CAVE. BE MERCIFUL UNTO ME, O GOD, BE MERCIFUL UNTO ME, FOR MY SOUL TAKETH REFUGE IN THEE (Ps. 57:1,2). Why did David twice say: BE MERCIFUL UNTO ME? BE MERCIFUL UNTO ME /the first time means/ may I not fall into the hand of Saul, for if I fall into his hand he will not spare me. BE MERCIFUL UNTO ME /the second time means/ may Saul not fall into my hand, so that the Evil Inclination will not entice me so that I kill him. Hence David said twice, BE MERCIFUL UNTO ME, O GOD, BE MERCIFUL UNTO ME. YEA, IN THE SHADOW OF THY WINGS WILL I TAKE REFUGE, UNTIL THESE CALAMITIES BE OVERPAST (Ib.), these calamities from Saul.⁴⁴

O LORD MY GOD, IN THEE DO I TAKE REFUGE; SAVE ME FROM ALL THEM THAT PURSUE ME, AND DELIVER ME (Ps. 7:2). What is the reason for both "save me" and "deliver me"? Do not the two mean the same thing? Rather, David said: SAVE ME (**הושיעני**) lest I fall into his hand and DELIVER ME (**והצילני**) lest he falls into my hand. If you do thusly ALL MY BONES SHALL SAY: LORD, WHO IS LIKE UNTO THEE, WHO DELIVEREST THE POOR FROM HIM THAT IS TOO STRONG FOR HIM, YEA, THE POOR AND THE NEEDY FROM HIM THAT SPOILETH HIM (Ps. 35:10)?⁴⁵

R. Isaac said: Just as David prayed that he would not fall into Saul's hand, so he prayed that Saul would not fall into his hand. Thus he said: IT IS HE THAT GIVETH SALVATION UNTO KINGS (Ps. 144:10)--referring to Saul and David. And later: WHO DELIVERETH DAVID HIS SERVANT FROM THE HURTFUL SWORD (Ib.)--referring to Saul/⁴⁶

⁴³ Midrash Tehilim 56:1

Note: For more of this text see footnote 13 of this chapter.

⁴⁴ Midrash Tehilim 57:1

⁴⁵ Midrash Tehilim 7:18

⁴⁶ Midrash Tehilim 7:13; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, **מנחם**

Note: In Yal. Shimoni a different proof text is cited, Ps. 18:1.

Throughout the entire cave incident David demonstrated a remarkable control and compassion. He spoke kindly and comfortingly to Saul:

WHEREFORE DOTH MY LORD PURSUE AFTER HIS SERVANT (David speaking to Saul, I Sam. 26:18)? It is the way of men to admonish those who are small and to reconcile with the great. Thus David did --when he spoke kindly and comfortingly /to Saul/ and he (David) reversed his countenance to Saul, and said: WHEREFORE DOTH MY LORD PURSUE AFTER HIS SERVANT (Ib.)?⁴⁷

David refrained from killing Saul who was in a deep sleep and thus totally vulnerable. He kept his servant Abishai from killing Saul. And David demonstrated his righteousness and good intentions by taking the spear and cruse of water, instead of Saul's life. Note that Saul's behavior, by comparison, is not generous. He is portrayed as being susceptible to the slander of David by his (Saul's) warriors:

As soon as Saul departed (from the cave), his mighty men said: Is David to be esteemed a righteous man because he did not slay thee in the cave? He knew that if he did anything to you, we would have entered (the cave) and devoured him immediately. And because David was aware of this he was afraid. When (Saul) heard this he rose, AND WENT DOWN TO THE WILDERNESS OF ZIPH HAVING THREE THOUSAND CHOSEN MEN OF ISRAEL WITH HIM, TO SEEK DAVID IN THE WILDERNESS OF ZIPH (I Sam. 26:3). Then DAVID AND ABISHAI CAME TO THE PEOPLE BY NIGHT; AND BEHOLD, SAUL LAY SLEEPING WITHIN THE BARRICADE (**יָשָׁן יִשָּׂא נֶחֱמָל** - I Sam. 26:7). But do not the words "lay" (**שָׁכַב**) and "sleeping" (**יָשָׁן**) mean the same thing? The use of both words implies that a deep sleep was cast upon Saul and his people/. Thus it is written, FOR THEY WERE ALL ASLEEP; BECAUSE A DEEP SLEEP FROM THE LORD WAS FALLEN UPON THEM (I Sam. 26:12). Thus it says SAUL LAY SLEEPING (**יָשָׁן יִשָּׂא**).

Then Abishai said to David: GOD HATH DELIVERED UP THINE ENEMY INTO THY HAND THIS DAY...AND DAVID SAID TO ABISHAI: DESTROY HIM NOT (**אַל תַּשְׁחִיתוֹ** - Ib. 26:8,9). Accordingly **אַל תַּשְׁחִית** in the Psalm (58:1) means "destroy not". DAVID SAID: DESTROY HIM NOT...AS THE LORD LIVETH, FOR IF NOT, BY THE LORD, HE WILL SMITE HIM (I Sam. 26:10).

⁴⁷ Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, **קלט**

Why did David utter twice the name of the Lord? Because he said to Abishai: As the Lord liveth, do not kill Saul. For if you kill Saul, as the Lord liveth, I will kill you. Another explanation /of the repetitive phrase/ AS THE LORD LIVETH--David adjured Satan and Satan rebuked him (Abishai).

SO DAVID TOOK THE SPEAR AND THE CRUSE OF WATER FROM SAUL'S HEAD...AND DAVID CRIED TO THE PEOPLE, AND TO ABNER THE SON OF NER, SAYING: ANSWEREST THOU NOT, ABNER (Ib. 26:12,14)? David said: What now can you /possibly/ say to answer me? Behold, the night before you said to Saul of the events in the cave: If David had done anything to you, we would have entered and devoured him immediately. Now, behold, the spear and the cruse of water! Now what do you say? Will you not answer, Abner? And he was not able to answer. He was as one stricken dumb and could not admit to the righteousness of David. Therefore David said: Shalt thou indeed be dumb towards righteousness? You should have spoken the truth. Instead, you made yourself out to be dumb and did not declare my righteousness.⁴⁸

David swore an oath in order to control his evil inclination to harm Saul:

And why did David swear, AS THE LORD LIVETH (I Sam. 26:10)? Said R. Eliezer: To resist his evil inclination by saying to it: AS THE LORD LIVETH, I shall not do this thing (kill Saul). Said R. Shmuel b. Nahmani: /David was speaking to/ Abishai, the son of Zeruiah, vowing to him: AS THE LORD LIVETH, if you touch the blood of this righteous man, I will mix your blood with his blood.⁴⁹

All the righteous ones swear such oaths to control their evil inclinations:

Not only Boaz, but all the righteous ones make oaths to control their (evil) inclination. And thus you find in the case of David when Saul fell into his hands. What did David say? AND DAVID SAID: AS THE LORD LIVETH, NAY, BUT THE LORD SHALL SMITE HIM; OR

⁴⁸ Midrash Tehilim 58:1

⁴⁹ Midrash Tehilim 7:2; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, **נב**

HIS DAY SHALL COME TO DIE, OR HE SHALL GO DOWN INTO BATTLE, AND BE SWEEPED AWAY (I Sam. 26:10). And why did he swear twice? R. Samuel b. Nahmani answered: His (evil) inclination came to him and said to him: If you had fallen into his hands he would not have had mercy upon you and would have killed you. You are permitted by Pentateuchal law to kill him. "If one comes to slay you, slay him first." For he is a pursuer. Therefore David hastened and took an oath twice saying AS THE LORD LIVETH, that he would not kill him (Saul).⁵⁰

Another kindness done for Saul was David's refraining from informing Saul that his (Saul's) house was doomed and that Saul would be replaced by him:

Subordinate your will to the will of your neighbor for so did Rachael to Leah and David to Saul...And David to Saul -- we have a tradition. Whoever is anointed from a cruse, his kingdom will be cut off, but whoever is anointed from a horn his kingdom will endure. Although he (David) knew that eventually he would become king, still he would not tell /Saul so as not/ to push him aside.⁵¹

Though the general impression one receives from the midrash is that with regard to Saul's death David did not behave properly, we do have midrashim which speak of David's mourning for Saul, his eulogizing Saul, and his willingness in the end (i.e. after God chastized him for being part of the cause of the famine) to bury Saul properly. The Yerushalmi informs us that David did mourn Saul who was the Nasi:

THEN DAVID TOOK HOLD ON HIS CLOTHES AND RENT THEM... AND THEY WAILED, AND WEPT, AND FASTED UNTIL EVEN, FOR SAUL (II Sam. 1:11,12), who was the Nasi, AND FOR JONATHAN HIS SON (Ib.), who was Ab Beth Din, AND FOR THE PEOPLE OF THE LORD, AND FOR THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL; BECAUSE THEY WERE FALLEN BY THE SWORD (Ib.), this was horrible news.⁵²

50 Numbers Rabba 15:16; Tanhuma **וּבְנֵי לֵוִי**; Tanhuma Buber **וּבְנֵי לֵוִי**; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, **וּבְנֵי לֵוִי**

51 Minor Tractates of the Talmud - Kallah 14

52 Mo'ed Katan 26a; Yerushalmi Mo'ed Katan Chap. 3, Hal. 7

In an interpretation of one line of David's eulogy for Saul (I Sam. 1:27) we learn that David mourns the falling of the righteous Saul and his sons:

AND WHEN THOU ART ATHIRST, GO UNTO THE VESSELS
(**גגלים** - Boaz is speaking to Ruth, Ruth 2:9).
These are the righteous who are called vessels, as
in the verse, HOW ARE THE MIGHTY FALLEN AND THE
VESSELS OF WAR (**גלי מלחמה** - here interpreted as the
righteous) PERISHED (II Sam. 1:27).⁵³

After God informs David that the famine is for the improper and disrespectful way in which Saul was buried, David has a change of heart and proceeds to have Saul honored and buried properly. In the fullest version of this midrash David is prompted by the actions of Rizpah who, after losing two sons to the Gibeonites, poured water continually on their bodies to keep the birds off:

When they told him (David) the deeds of Rizpah, the daughter of Aiah (after losing two sons to the Gibeonites she accepts God's decree by symbolically taking sackcloth and spreading it on a rock and then keeping birds off the bodies of her sons) he (David) applied to himself an a fortiori argument, as follows: If she, but a woman, has acted with such lovingkindness --surely I, who am a king, how much the more so /must I act with lovingkindness/. So he went to show them (Jonathan and Saul) kindness, as it is written, AND IT WAS TOLD DAVID WHAT RIZPAH THE DAUGHTER OF AIAH...HAD DONE. AND DAVID WENT AND TOOK THE BONES OF SAUL...AND HE BROUGHT UP FROM THENCE THE BONES OF SAUL, ETC. (II Sam. 21:11). What did David do? He rose and gathered all the elders of Israel and their most eminent men and crossed the Jordan. They came to Jebesh Gilead and found the bones of Saul and his son Jonathan. They put them into a coffin and recrossed the Jordan; as it says, AND THEY BURIED THE BONES OF SAUL AND JONATHAN HIS SON...IN ZELA, ETC. (Ib. 21:14). What is the meaning of IN ZELA, IN THE SEPULCHRE OF KISH HIS FATHER (Ib.)? It teaches that they brought them to the outskirts of Jerusalem and buried them there. That Zela is beside Jerusalem is known by what Scripture says, AND ZELA, ELEPH, AND THE JESUBITE - THE SAME IS JERUSALEM, ETC. (Joshua 18:28). AND THEY

⁵³ Ruth Rabba 4:12

PERFORMED ALL THAT THE KING COMMANDED (II Sam. 21:14). What had the king commanded? He commanded that Saul's coffin should be carried through the territory of each tribe. As Saul's coffin entered each territory the whole tribe would come out, the men with their wives and their sons and their daughters, and show loving-kindness to Saul and his sons. By this means all Israel fulfilled their obligation of showing loving-kindness. /This was done/ until they came to his final resting place at the border of Jerusalem. When the Holy One, blessed be He, saw that all Israel had shown lovingkindness to him (Saul) and had done justice for the Gibeonites, immediately He was filled with mercy and sent down rain upon the earth; as it says, AND AFTER THAT GOD WAS ENTREATED FOR THE LAND (Ib.).⁵⁴

One other kindness is recorded in the midrash. David is portrayed as promising to reward the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead for taking the bodies of Saul and his sons from the wall of Beth-shan and then burying their bones in Jabesh:

GILEAD IS MINE (Ps. 60:9). Another comment: Said the Holy One, blessed be He, it is incumbent upon Me to remedy that which Gilead did. And what did Gilead do? Every one who sought to hire a lying witness from them went ahead and so hired. As it says, GILEAD IS A CITY OF THEM THAT WORK INIQUITY (Hosea 6:8). And why did they merit to raise up Elijah the Righteous? Because they dealt kindly with the bones of Saul, as it says, AND THEY (the valiant men of Jabesh-gilead) TOOK THE BODY OF SAUL (I Sam. 31:12). And thus David said: AND I ALSO WILL REQUITE YOU FOR THIS KINDNESS (II Sam. 2:6).⁵⁵

Thus far in this chapter we have seen the Rabbis expressing sympathy for David. The sympathy is based on a desire to justify David's superceding Saul, an understanding of the kindness shown by David to Saul, and an empathy for the tribulations David suffered at the hands of the pursuing monarch. We have noted, however, that David did not always respond kindly to Saul and

⁵⁴ Numbers Rabba 8:4; Pirke de R. Eliezer Chap. 17

⁵⁵ Deut. Rabba (Lieberman) p. 73

exhibited some cruelty towards Saul which draws divine disapproval. We shall turn now to the role Saul's family played in the struggle between these two men.

IV

Saul's daughter Michal and his son Jonathan were loving and loyal to David, their father's enemy. They suffered on David's behalf and assisted David wherever possible. In one midrash they are spoken of as a pair:

Another interpretation of: TWO ARE BETTER THAN ONE ...FOR IF THEY FALL, THE ONE WILL LIFT UP HIS FELLOW, ETC. (Eccles. 4:9). This refers to Michal, the daughter of Saul, and to Jonathan. For both of them loved David. Of Michal it is written: AND MICHAL, SAUL'S DAUGHTER, LOVED HIM (I Sam. 18:28); Of Jonathan it is written, AND JONATHAN LOVED HIM AS HIS OWN SOUL (I Sam. 18:1). Michal saved him /from danger/ inside the house, and Jonathan saved him /from danger/ outside the house. Thus the TWO ARE BETTER THAN ONE (David needing to be saved both from danger inside and outside the house).⁵⁶

Michal loved her husband David more than her father Saul and saved David's life:

Another Interpretation of: WHOSO FINDETH A WIFE FINDETH A GREAT GOOD (Prov. 18:22). Such was Michal, the daughter of Saul, who loved her husband David more than her father, for she saved David from her father. When did she do this? When Saul sent /men/ to watch David's house (I Sam. 19). Thus it is written, TO THE ETERNAL GOD (who said): DO NOT DESTROY DAVID; MIGHTAM; WHEN SAUL SENT, AND THEY WATCHED THE HOUSE TO KILL HIM (Ps. 59:1).⁵⁷

Here is the story of how Michal saved David:

WHEN HE (David) FLED FROM SAUL IN THE CAVE (Ps. 57:1). How did David escape? R. Aibu and the Rabbis gave different answers. R. Aibu said: David had two gates in his house, one of which was locked; they watched

56 Midrash Tehilim 59:1

57 Midrash Tehilim 59:3

for him at this gate. Meanwhile he went out the other gate and fled. The Rabbis said: David had only one gate. They stood by the gate and watched that he not escape. What did Michal do? She lowered him (presumably by rope) from a window and he fled.

When the messengers of Saul came to the house, what did she do? She took the teraphim and laid them on the bed and put a quilt of goat's hair at its head, as is said, AND MICHAL TOOK THE TERAPHIM, ETC. (I Sam. 19:13). When they entered and asked for David Michal told them: He is sick and is lying in bed. They went /back/ and told Saul. He said to them: Bring him, in the bed, here. They went and brought the bed to him and he found the teraphim in the bed. And he began to get angry at Michal his daughter. He said to her: Why did you deceive me and let my enemy flee? She said to him: You married me off to a robber, and he stood over me with his sword as if to kill me, saying: If you don't help me escape, I will kill you. Whereupon I became frightened, so fearful of him that I helped him escape. As it says, /Michal said/ HE SAID UNTO ME LET ME GO; WHY SHOULD I KILL YOU (I Sam. 19:17)? Therefore is her name called Eglah (עגלה - which means calf), as it says, UNTO DAVID WERE BORN SONS...THE SIXTH, ITHREAM OF EGLAH, DAVID'S WIFE (II Sam. 3:2,5). Eglah refers to Michal. Why was the name "Eglah" given to Michal? Because like a heifer that will not take the yoke upon her neck, so Michal did not take the yoke from her father, but bucked against it.⁵⁸

Jonathan was willing to endure great reproof from Saul because of his love for David. The following piece is a somewhat technical discussion about how far one is to administer chastisement to a member of one's household. For our purposes the importance of this material is to be found in the ending which speaks of what Jonathan endured on David's behalf:

How far shall reproof be administered? Rab said: Until he (the reprover) be beaten. Samuel said: Until he be cursed. R. Yohanan said: Until he be rebuked. This is a point at issue between Tannaim. R. Eliezer said. Until he be beaten. R. Joshua

58 Midrash Tehilim 59:4; Song of Songs Zuta Chap. 4 par. 4; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, עגל

said: Until he be cursed. Ben Azzai said: Until he be rebuked. Said R. Nahban b. Isaac: All the three expounded one Scriptural verse; /It is written/ THEN SAUL'S ANGER WAS KINDLED AGAINST JONATHAN AND HE SAID UNTO HIM: THOU SON OF PERVERSE REBELLION, DO NOT I KNOW THAT THOU HAST CHOSEN THE SON OF JESSE TO THINE OWN SHAME, AND UNTO THE SHAME OF THY MOTHER'S NAKEDNESS (I Sam. 20:30)? And it is written: AND SAUL CAST HIS SPEAR AT HIM TO SMITE HIM (Ib. 33). The one who said (above) 'until he be beaten' /said so/ because it is written: TO THINE OWN SHAME AND TO THE SHAME OF THY MOTHER'S NAKEDNESS; the other who said 'until he be rebuked' /said so/ because it is written: THEN SAUL'S ANGER WAS KINDLED. But according to him who says: 'until he be shouted at' does not Scripture mention 'beating' and 'cursing'? That was different, because for his great love of David Jonathan risked his life even further.⁵⁹

The pro-David stance of Saul's children is presented in a rather straight-forward manner. We can not extrapolate from the material either rabbinic approval or rabbinic condemnation of their behavior. These midrashim do, however, fill in the picture we have of Saul. He is seen as quite isolated. His own children have abandoned him.⁶⁰ Perhaps an awareness of this isolation was one of the contributing factors to a rabbinic sympathy for Saul that shall become apparent in the next section of this chapter.

V

It was the goal of the first four chapters of this thesis to demonstrate a dynamic that one becomes aware of when considering the over-all image of Saul in rabbinic literature. The dynamic is a propensity to justify Saul's fate and to clear his

59 Arakin 16b

60 Note: The one exception to this was presented in Chapter Three where we saw Michal favorably comparing her father's modesty to David's lack of modesty. See Chap. Three, footnotes 26-31. Also see Chap. Six, Section 1, for midrashim relating to Saul's family.

name wherever it is possible to do so. Given this dynamic one would expect to find that when considering his relationship with David the Rabbis would find a way to mitigate Saul's culpability for pursuing and oppressing David. This is indeed what one finds. The Rabbis mitigate Saul's culpability in four ways: 1) As we have seen in regard to many of Saul's sins, the Rabbis blame others for the evil; 2) While not forgiving Saul the Rabbis express a sympathetic understanding of his actions vis a vis David; 3) Saul is portrayed as willing to conciliate with David, as actively working at containing his desire to hurt David, and as placing Israel's security over his personal feud with David; 4) The Rabbis mount a scathing attack on David's attitude and behavior towards Saul and express an awareness of David's true intentions; namely, the unseating of Israel's first king.

Abner is blamed for preventing Saul from reconciling with David:

And why was Abner killed?...The Rabbis say: because he did not permit Saul to reconcile himself with David, as it is written, MOREOVER, MY FATHER, SEE, YEA, SEE THE SKIRT OF THY ROBE IN MY HAND (I Sam. 24:12). Abner then said to Saul: What do you care for this man's boastful talk? The thing (Saul's skirt) was caught in a thorn bush (and not taken by David).⁶¹

In Chapter One we saw that Saul was surrounded by slanderers. Doeg was especially active slandering David in front of Saul.⁶² When Saul asked about David's background Doeg questioned

61 Lev. Rabba 26:2; Tanhuma Buber **מסעי ט**; Mishnat R. Eliezer Chap. 9; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, **קלג** and **קלז**

62 Note: See the section on slander in Chapter One.

David's right to enter the Congregation of the Lord.⁶³ Doeg
(and Ahitophel) taunted David:

NOW KORAH...TOOK MEN; AND THEY ROSE UP IN THE FACE OF MOSES (Num. 16:1,2,etc.). His heart carried him away. FOR IT WAS NOT AN ENEMY THAT TAUNTED ME, THEN I COULD HAVE BORNE IT; NEITHER WAS IT MINE ADVERSARY THAT DID MAGNIFY HIMSELF AGAINST ME, THEN I WOULD HAVE HID MYSELF FROM HIM. BUT IT WAS THOU, A MAN MINE EQUAL, MY COMPANION, AND MY FAMILIAR FRIEND (Ps. 55:13,14). This refers to Doeg and Ahitophel who taunted him (David). They were not, he said, my enemies, but they taunted me. They did not call me by name but rather said WHEREFORE COMETH NOT THE SON OF JESSE (I Sam. 20:27)? Or, I SAW THE SON OF JESSE (Ib. 22:9), or BEHOLD, I HAVE SEEN A SON OF JESSE (Ib. 16:18).⁶⁴

David cried out against their dangerous slander:

SAVE ME...LEST THEY TEAR MY SOUL LIKE A LION, RENDING IT IN PIECES, WHILE THERE IS NONE TO DELIVER (Ps. 7:2,3). (David said:) Just as a lion sits over his prey and then tears it to pieces, so do Doeg and Ahitophel crouch over me to tear me into pieces. RENDING IT IN PIECES, WHILE THERE IS NONE TO DELIVER. There is not one in all the hosts of Saul who pleads for my merit.⁶⁵

Doeg permitted David's blood and allowed another to take his wife:

AND THE WHOLE EARTH WAS OF ONE LANGUAGE, ETC. (Gen. 11:1). R. Elazar commenced his discourse in the name of R. Jose b. Zimra with the text: SLAY THEM NOT, LEST MY PEOPLE FORGET, MAKE THEM WANDER TO AND FRO BY THY POWER, AND BRING THEM DOWN, O LORD, OUR SHIELD (Ps. 59:12). The Rabbis relate the verse to Doeg and Ahitophel: David said: SLAY NOT Doeg and Ahitophel, LEST MY PEOPLE FORGET, i.e. lest the generations that followed them forget /their sin and their punishment/. MAKE THEM WANDER TO AND FRO BY THY POWER, i.e. cast them about; AND BRING THEM DOWN from their greatness; but for us let THE LORD BE OUR SHIELD. FOR THE SIN OF THEIR MOUTH AND THE WORDS OF THEIR LIPS (Ps. 59:13): this one permitted incest and bloodshed, and that one permitted incest and bloodshed.

63 Yebamoth 76b; Ruth Rabba 4:6; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, 103

64 Numbers Rabba 18:17

65 Midrash Tehilim 7:4

This one (Ahitophel) permitted them, /for he counselled/, Go IN UNTO THY FATHER'S CONCUBINES (II Sam. 16:21); (while he further said), AND I WILL COME UPON HIM WHILE HE IS WEARY AND WEAK-HANDED...AND I WILL SMITE THE KING (II Sam. 17:2). And the other (Doeg) permitted them: Nahman b. Samuel said: He annulled his (David's) citizen rights and declared him an outlaw and as one dead, so that his blood was permitted and his wife permitted.⁶⁶

It was this Doeg who goaded Saul into jealousy of David, as well as "swallowing" David's rights. He is portrayed as being hateful, vengeful, and as holding a grudge against David. It was this goading of Saul that led to the atrocities of Nob:

R. Nehemiah the son of R. Shmuel b. Nahman said: He (Doeg) permitted David's blood and his wife he permitted to another. Bar Kafra said: He prevented Saul from /taking/ the blood of Agag...R. Haninah said: Just as Edom swallowed the rights of Israel, so Doeg swallowed the rights of David. Our rabbis said: Just as Edom was vengeful and held a grudge and hated so Doeg behaved in relation to David. What did he say to Saul? He said: I will tell you. He continued: You are making David king in your life -- does he not inquire of the Urim and the Thummim? Only to become king does he inquire of the Urim and Thummim /and you permit this/! When Doeg said this to Saul the spirit of jealousy entered Saul.⁶⁷

The following midrash informs us of Doeg's motive: envy. It speaks also of others who were envious of David, of Doeg's permitting of David's blood and David's wife for another, of Doeg's lessening of David's merit, and it too parallels Doeg's hostility toward David to Edom's hostility toward Israel:

R. Shmuel b. Nahman said: Doeg was called the "Edomite" because he was envious of David who was called "Edomite" (**אדומי** - ruddy), as it says, NOW HE WAS RUDDY (**אדמוני**) AND WITHAL OF BEAUTIFUL EYES (I Sam. 16:12). And Doeg was not alone in his envy of David: All the members of Doeg's tribe, the Ziphites, Nabal the Carmelite, and the men of Keilah (I Sam. 23:25), were envious of him. R. Nahman said: Doeg was called the Edomite because he permitted the

66 Gen. Rabba 38:1

67 Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, **קל**; Midrash Tehilim 52:5

shedding of the blood of David, for he said to Saul concerning David, HE DESERVETH TO DIE (I Sam. 20:31), /meaning/ that David's blood was permitted and that David's wife was permitted to marry another man. R. Hanina said: Doeg was called the "Edomite" because just as Edom lessened the merit of Israel, so did Doeg lessen the merit of David. Our masters taught: Just as Edom bore a grudge and was hostile /to Israel/ in the heart, so Doeg bore a grudge that was hostile to David in the heart.⁶⁸

Thus the Rabbis convey a situation where others goad Saul, add fuel to the fire by their own antagonistic actions against David, create a slanderous, hostile climate, and actually prevent a reconciliation between Saul and David. The midrash also reveals an acute understanding of Saul's plight. Once in power it is not easy to graciously step down:

R. Judah used to say: Everyone who used to say to me before I entered into high office, "Enter it," I wanted to hound him to death. Now that I have entered it, everyone who tells me to step down from it -- I want to pour a kettle of boiling water on him! For it is hard to rise to high office and just as it is to rise to, so is it hard to come down from. For thus we find with Saul. When he was told, "Rise to kingship," he hid, as it says, AND THE LORD ANSWERED, BEHOLD, HE HATH HID HIMSELF AMONG THE BAGGAGE (I Sam. 10:22); but when they told him, "Get down from there," he turned /and pursued/ after David to kill him.⁶⁹

Saul is portrayed as actively seeking to conciliate David and to contain his desire to hurt him:

...there was in his (Saul's) heart a tender willingness to repent. You find that when David reconciled with Saul in the cave, immediately Saul became reconciled, as it says, THEN SAID SAUL: I HAVE SINNED;

68 Midrash Tehilim 52:5

69 Avot de R. Natan Chap. 10; Menahoth 109b
Note: Menahoth puts the statement in the mouth of R. Joshua b. Perakiah and instead of hounding to death one who suggested high office, he says he would blind him and place him before a lion.

RETURN, MY SON DAVID (I Sam. 26:21). Were it not for the slanderers who came and informed on him (David), Saul would not have pursued him.⁷⁰

Saul contained his desire /to hurt David/. You find that when David reconciled with Saul in the cave, immediately Saul became reconciled, as it says, THEN SAID SAUL: I HAVE SINNED; RETURN, MY SON DAVID (I Sam. 26:21).⁷¹

In Chapter Three we saw that when faced with a choice between pursuing David and responding to a new Philistine threat, Saul chose the latter. He made this choice despite advice to the contrary from half of his men.⁷² The midrash has presented thus far a sympathetic understanding of Saul's plight, a portrayal of others who aggravated the tense situation, and a suggestion that Saul was amenable to conciliation. The midrash also attacks David; God is angry with David for rejoicing at Saul's downfall:

AND DAVID SPOKE UNTO THE LORD THE WORDS OF THIS SONG IN THE DAY THAT THE LORD DELIVERED HIM OUT OF THE HAND OF ALL HIS ENEMIES AND OUT OF THE HAND OF SAUL (II Sam. 22:1). Had you been Saul and he David, I would have annihilated many a David out of regard for him. Hence it is written **שִׁגְגָּאִיִן** SHIGGAION OF DAVID, WHICH HE SANG UNTO THE LORD, CONCERNING CUSH A BENJAMITE (**שִׁגְגָּאִיִן** is here taken to mean "an error" - Ps. 7:1).⁷³

What is the meaning of CONCERNING THE MATTER OF CUSH THE BENJAMITE (Ps. 7:1)? Said R. Hanina b. Papa: (David said:) Just as the wife of Joseph's master accosted Joseph saying, LIE WITH ME (Gen. 39:7) and then said: THE HEBREW SERVANT, WHOM THOU HAST

70 Mishnat R. Eliezer Chap. 10
Note: For the entire text see Chap. 3, footnotes 4,5

71 Reishit Hohma **שער הענוה** Chap. 7
Note: For the entire text see Chap. 3, footnotes 4,5

72 Note: See Chap. Three, footnote 45 for the text of this midrash.

73 Mo'ed Katan 16b

BROUGHT UNTO US, CAME IN UNTO ME TO MOCK ME (Gen. 39:14), so Saul said: MY SON HATH STIRRED UP MY SERVANT AGAINST ME TO LIE IN WAIT (I Sam. 22:8). Just as the Cushite woman, the master of Joseph, used lies against him, so Saul the Benjamite came and used lies against me. Said R. Aha: But is it not true that he who asks /God/ to resent the insult offered to him will not be punished for it, why then should David have spoken of his request as Shiggaion (impulsive speech)? R. Hanina answered: Because he sang a song at Saul's downfall, as it says, HE SANG UNTO THE LORD, CONCERNING THE MATTER OF CUSH THE BENJAMITE, yet it is written (in another place) REJOICE NOT WHEN THINE ENEMY FALLETH (Prov. 24:17). Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to David: If Saul's fate had been your fate or if your fate had been his fate, how many Davids would I have caused to perish for his sake!⁷⁴

These midrashim reveal a most positive attitude towards Saul. Another midrash which attacks David for comparing himself to Saul also shows this rabbinic respect for Saul, even when compared to David:

The Lord said to David: SAUL HAD ONE CONCUBINE (**וְיָלֶגֶשׁ** - PILEGESH). Pilegesh is spelled here without /the customary/ yod - **וְיָלֶגֶשׁ** (Braude, p. 418 "signifying Saul's habitual self-denial"). Even after Saul was made king, he continued to be a humble man. But you, /of you Scripture says:/ DAVID TOOK MORE CONCUBINES...OUT OF JERUSALEM (II Sam. 5:13). And you liken yourself to Saul?! Saul renounced ownership of his wealth for the sake of Israel's war, as it says, HE TOOK A YOKE OF OXEN AND CUT THEM IN PIECES AND SENT THEM THROUGHOUT...ISRAEL (I Sam. 11:7). And you liken yourself to Saul! Of Saul it is said: SWIFTER THAN EAGLES...STRONGER THAN LIONS (II Sam. 1:23). R. Levi said: Saul ran sixty miles in one day. R. Simon said: One hundred and twenty miles /ran Saul in one day/. And the Rabbis say: one hundred and eighty miles. When? When the ark was captured by the Philistines. As it says, THERE RAN A MAN OF BENJAMIN OUT OF THE ARMY, AND CAME TO SHILOH THE SAME DAY WITH HIS CLOTHES RENT, AND WITH EARTH UPON HIS HEAD (I Sam. 4:12). This was Saul! And you liken yourself to Saul! A man goes to a house where a feast is taking place and does not take his sons with him because of the fear of the /evil/ eye. Yet Saul goes out to battle, taking his sons with him, even though he knew that the Attribute of Justice

⁷⁴ Midrash Tehilim 7:3; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, **נב**

would strike him (I Sam. 31:2). But your men said to you: THOU SHALT GO NO MORE OUT WITH US TO WAR, THAT THOU QUENCH NOT THE LIGHT OF ISRAEL (II Sam. 21:17). And you liken yourself to Saul? Saul observed the Levitical precautions of purity even when he ate common food, as it says, AND THE COOK TOOK UP THE THIGH AND THAT WHICH WAS UPON IT (הַעֲלִיף) AND SET IT BEFORE SAUL (I Sam. 9:24). The word הַעֲלִיף according to R. Johanan has the same meaning as in the phrase 'the thigh together with the fat-tail' (הַעֲלִיף) but according to R. Eliezer הַעֲלִיף means 'that which was upon it'. This teaches that Saul used to observe the Levitical precautions of purity even when he ate common food. And you liken yourself to Saul?!⁷⁵

David is even blamed for Saul's death:

AND ISHBI-BENOB WHO WAS OF THE SONS OF HA-RAPHA, THE WEIGHT OF WHOSE SPEAR WEIGHED THREE HUNDRED SHEKELS OF BRASS IN WEIGHT, HE BEING GIRDED ANEW, THOUGHT TO HAVE SLAIN DAVID (II Sam. 21:16). What is the meaning of ISHBI-BENOB (יִשְׁבִּי בְנוֹב)? R. Judah said in Rab's name: A man (אִישׁ) who came on account of the business of Nob /as an avenger/. Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to David: How long will this crime be hidden in your hand? Because of you Nob, the city of priests, was massacred; because of you Doeg the Edomite was banished; and because of you Saul and this three sons were killed.⁷⁶

Why this attack on David and the sympathy for Saul?

Perhaps the answer may be located in what seems to be rabbinic insight into David's true intentions. David did not seek merely to fend off Saul and save his life. He wished to unseat Saul and take his place as King of Israel. The evidence for such insight is admittedly scant. Yet it exists. And it assists us in unlocking part of the basis for the dynamic that this paper has proposed. The following midrash portrays David

75 Midrash Tehilim 7:2

Note: For an explanation of Saul's observing Levitical purity see Chap. 3, footnote 36

76 Sanhedrin 95a

postponing the moment of his conquest. His moment of conquest came when Saul acknowledged that David would rule Israel (I Sam. 24:21). Prior to this midrash the material refers to Moses, Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham as all being men who surrendered temporarily and fled their enemy, only to return when the moment was right to conquer the one who made them flee. David likewise returns to conquer. His conquering (in the midrash this conquering is expressed by the euphemism of "the moment falling into his hand") involves becoming king in Saul's place:

...And David gave recognition to the /needs of the/ moment as it says, AND DAVID FLED FROM NAIOTH IN RAMAH (I Sam. 20:1) and it is written, WHEN HE FLED FROM ABSALOM HIS SON (Ps. 3:1) and it is written, WHEN HE FLED FROM SAUL, IN THE CAVE (Ps. 57:1). And the moment returned and fell into his hand, for Saul said to him: BEHOLD, I KNOW THAT THOU SHALT SURELY BE KING, AND THAT THE KINGDOM OF ISRAEL SHALL BE ESTABLISHED IN THY HAND (I Sam. 24:21).⁷⁷

In another midrash David seeks forgiveness for killing Saul. Additionally David is said to have witnessed Saul's descendants being put to death and is charged with not being sorry "for even one hour." It is logical to assume that David's lack of grief might well have been due to his relief at seeing the end of any threat to his rule:

DELIVER ME FROM BLOODGUILTINESS, O GOD, THOU GOD OF MY SALVATION (Ps. 51:16). DELIVER ME FROM BLOODGUILTINESS - R. Joshua of Sichnin in the name of R. Levi said: that I not be killed for the blood-guiltiness of /having killed/ Saul. Three things David brought against the Lord's anointed (Saul) and these three came against him (Saul). AS THE LORD LIVETH, NAY, BUT THE LORD SHALL SMITE HIM (I Sam. 26:10) -it happened to him. OR HIS DAY SHALL COME TO DIE: OR HE SHALL GO DOWN INTO BATTLE, AND BE SWEPT AWAY (Ib. 26:10). It happened to him.

/DELIVER ME/ from the blood of Nabal. He was not killed for me, as it says, AND IT CAME TO PASS ABOUT TEN DAYS AFTER, THAT THE LORD SMOTE NABAL, SO THAT HE DIED (I Sam. 26:38). /DELIVER ME/ from the blood of Saul for he (David) saw his (Saul's) plantation cut down (i.e. his descendants put to death) and was not sorry about it for even one hour.⁷⁸

It is certainly possible that rabbinic comment and insight critical of David (or for that matter of Abner and Doeg) was intended not so much to clear Saul's reputation as it was to criticize their reputations lest they (particularly David) come across as something less than human. However, when one adds up all the various pieces--Abner's blocking of reconciliation, Doeg's slander, Saul's efforts on behalf of Israel and to effect conciliation, the rabbinic understanding of Saul's dilemma, and finally David's arrogance and desire to rule in Saul's place--one is hard pressed not to conclude that Saul's culpability for oppressing David stands mitigated in the eyes of the Rabbis.

VI

In a number of ways the midrash conveys the impression that Saul's fate vis a vis his successor has little to do with his character or deeds or with David's character or deeds. Their fates, rather, are tied to the destiny God has fashioned for them. Some are chosen by God, then rejected, and then brought near again. And some simply are not brought near again but remain rejected. Saul was not brought near again while David was:

R. Nehemiah in the name of R. Samuel b. R. Isaac said: Not all who are close to God are /permanently/ close, nor are all who are distant /permanently/ distant. There are those who are chosen and rejected and then brought near; and there are those

who are chosen and then rejected and then not brought near. Aaron was chosen: AND I DID CHOOSE HIM OUT OF ALL THE TRIBES OF ISRAEL TO BE MY PRIEST (I Sam. 2:28). And he was rejected: MOREOVER THE LORD WAS VERY ANGRY WITH AARON (Deut. 9:20); and again it is written, AND BRING THOU NEAR UNTO THEE AARON THY BROTHER (Ex. 28:1-proving that he was brought near again). Saul was chosen: SEE YE HIM WHOM THE LORD HATH CHOSEN (I Sam. 10:24). And he was cast off: IT REPENTETH ME THAT I HAVE SET UP SAUL TO BE KING, ETC. (Ib. 15:11). And he was not brought near: SEEING I HAVE REJECTED HIM FROM BEING KING OVER ISRAEL (I Sam. 16:1). David was chosen: HE CHOSE DAVID ALSO HIS SERVANT (Ps. 78:70). And he was rejected: AND THE KING WENT FORTH, AND ALL THE PEOPLE AFTER HIM; AND THEY TARRIED IN BETH-MERHAK (II Sam. 15:17-the key here is **רחק** taken from **המרחק**, meaning to be far or here, to be distanced, which is taken to mean placed under a ban). R. Joshua b. Levi said: They excommunicated him and despite this /blow/ he accepted the ban, as it is written, AND DAVID WENT UP BY THE ASCENT OF THE MOUNT OF OLIVES, AND WEPT AS HE WENT UP; AND HE HAD HIS HEAD COVERED (II Sam. 15:30 - a person under the ban was obliged to cover his head). And he was brought near. R. Judan said: Ira the Jairite, David's teacher, brought him near...⁷⁹

God wounds and God binds up wounds. It was Saul's fate to be wounded but an ancestor of his would be the beneficiary of God's binding up of wounds:

R. Hanina the son of R. Abbahu said: It is written, FOR HE MAKETH SORE, AND BINDETH UP; HE WOUNDETH, AND HIS HAND MAKES WHOLE (Job 5:18). With the same expression with which the kingdom of her (Esther's) ancestor (Saul) was taken away --when Samuel said to him, AND /the Lord/ HATH GIVEN IT (the kingdom) TO A NEIGHBOR OF THINE (David) THAT IS BETTER THAN THOU (I Sam. 15:28), with that same expression was the kingdom restored to him, as it is written, AND GIVE HER ROYAL ESTATE UNTO HER NEIGHBOR THAT IS BETTER THAN SHE (Esther 1:19).⁸⁰

It is suggested that the key to the fate of Saul and David as rulers is in the manner in which each was anointed:

...I AM ANOINTED WITH RICH OIL (Ps. 92:11-David is speaking). R. Jose b. Nehorai and R. Joshua b. Levi differed. One said that the shield of Saul was

79 Numbers Rabba 3:2; Midrash Shmuel Chap. 8; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, נב

80 Esther Rabba 4:9

anointed but he was not anointed. The other said that neither Saul or his shield was anointed, as it says, THE SHIELD OF SAUL, NOT ANOINTED WITH OIL (II Sam. 1:21). /On the other hand David/ was anointed with oil. Hence, I AM ANOINTED WITH RICH OIL.⁸¹

MY HORN IS EXALTED IN THE LORD (I Sam. 2:1). MY HORN IS EXALTED but not my flask. The kingdoms of David and Solomon who were anointed with a horn endured; the kingdoms of Saul and Jehu who were anointed with a flask did not endure.⁸²

Another explanation of their fate is the destiny of their respective tribes. Powerful Judah was destined to rule forever while weaker Benjamin could only rule for a short time:

...If a wolf attacks a lion can come and rescue.
But if a lion attacks a wolf cannot come and rescue.
Thus Judah and Benjamin: Let Benjamin take /power first/ for his /reign/ is for a moment and afterwards let Judah /take power/ for his /reign/ is forever.⁸³

Another midrash traces their fortune to the destiny granted to Leah and Rachael:

NOW LABAN HAD TWO DAUGHTERS: THE NAME OF THE ELDER WAS LEAH, AND THE NAME OF THE YOUNGER WAS RACHAEL (29:16). Now the name of the great one (סַרְסָרָה - taking גְּדוֹלָה as great as opposed to elder) was Leah-- she was great in her gifts /and was rewarded by receiving/ the priesthood for all time and royalty for all time (via Judah and Levi). Now the name of the small one (קַטְנָה taken as small instead of younger) one was Rachael --small in her gifts, Joseph /bearing sway/ for but a time, and Saul for but a time.⁸⁴

God rewards both their tribes for the sacrifices Judah and David made on behalf of Joseph and Saul. The following midrash stresses the good fortune of both Judah and Benjamin:

81 Midrash Tehilim 92:9; Midrash Shmuel Chap. 19
Note: Midrash Shmuel Chap. 19 is attributed to R. Yehudah b. Giron and R. Joshua of Sichnin in the name of R. Levi.

82 Horayoth 12a; Kerithoth 6a; Tosefta Sanhedrin 4:11;
Lev. Rabba 10:8
Note: We learn of the manner of Saul's anointment in I Sam. 10:1

83 Gen. Rabba 95

84 Gen. Rabba 70:16

Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to David (after defeating Goliath): By your life, just as you gave (risked) your life for Saul, he being from the tribe of Benjamin, just as Judah your ancestor did, as it says, LET THY SERVANT, I PRAY THEE, ABIDE INSTEAD OF THE LAD A BONDMAN TO MY LORD (Gen. 44:33), so will I give the Temple to the portion of Judah and Benjamin. And not just this, but all the tribes will be exiled but the tribes of Judah and Benjamin will not be exiled with them. Why? For these two tribes trusted in Me and sanctified My name at the Sea, as it says, THERE IS BENJAMIN, THE YOUNGEST, RULING THEM, THE PRINCES OF JUDAH THEIR COUNCIL (Ps. 68:28--the proof text comes as an example of Benjamin and Judah ruling, not as evidence that they trusted and sanctified God's name at the Sea).⁸⁵

God chooses the right person for the right historical situation. Saul was right for one situation but circumstances developed which demanded that God provide a person more fitting to the new situation: that person was, of course, David:

AND LET THE MAIDEN THAT PLEASETH THE KING BE QUEEN INSTEAD OF VASHTI (Esther 2:4). Who was the right person for this situation? Mordecai /for right next to the verse announcing the opportunity we find: /THERE WAS A CERTAIN JEW IN SHUSHAN THE CASTLE, WHOSE NAME WAS MORDECAI (Ib. 2:5). Similarly (we find that in the following historical circumstances the right person for the situation appears in the text next to the comment which describes or sets up the opportunity to help Israel), AND GOD SAW THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL, AND GOD TOOK COGNIZANCE OF THEM (Ex. 2:25). Who was the right person for this situation? Moses--NOW MOSES WAS KEEPING, ETC. (Ib. 3:1). Similarly, AND SAMUEL SAID UNTO THE MEN OF ISRAEL: GO YE EVERY MAN UNTO HIS CITY (I Sam. 8:22). Who was the right person for this situation? Saul--NOW THERE WAS A MAN OF BENJAMIN, WHOSE NAME WAS KISH, ETC (Ib. 9:1). Similarly, AND WHEN SAUL AND ALL ISRAEL HEARD THOSE WORDS OF THE PHILISTINE, THEY WERE DISMAYED, AND GREATLY AFRAID (Ib. 17:11). Who was the right person for this situation? David--NOW DAVID WAS THE SON OF THAT EPHRATHITE, ETC. (Ib. 17:12).⁸⁶

85 Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, נב

86 Esther Rabba 5:4

It seems that some are just simply favored by God. Such a favored one will be supported despite what might be a lack of ethicality. God favored David over Saul, and Saul's superior character (i.e. fewer sins) made no difference in God's favoritism:

R. Huna said: How little does he whom the Lord supports need to grieve or trouble himself! Saul /sinned/ once and it brought /calamity/ upon him. David /signed/ twice and it did not bring /calamity/ upon him.⁸⁷

Another midrash explains God's siding with David in terms of God's penchant for supporting the pursued:

AND GOD SEEKETH THAT WHICH IS PURSUED (Eccles. 3:15). R. Huna said in the name of R. Jose: God always seeks that which is pursued. You find that when a righteous one pursues a righteous one, God seeks him who is pursued. When a wicked one pursues a righteous one, God seeks him who is pursued. When a wicked one pursues a wicked one, God seeks the pursued. In every place God seeks the pursued...David was pursued by Saul and the Holy One, blessed be He, chose David. As it says, HE CHOSE DAVID ALSO HIS SERVANT, AND TOOK HIM FROM THE SHEEPFOLDS (Ps. 78:70). Saul was pursued by the Philistines and the Holy One, blessed be He, chose Saul. As it says, SEE YE HIM WHOM THE LORD HATH CHOSEN (I Sam. 10:24).⁸⁸

It is God that determines when kings shall rule. At some point God determined that it was David's time to rule and Saul's reign had to end. In order to do this without upsetting Samuel, God had Samuel prematurely aged and had him die at the age of fifty-two. God, according to Rashi (commenting upon Taanith 5b) eventually put both Samuel and Saul away in order to make room for David:

R. Nahman further said to R. Isaac: What is the meaning of the verse, AND IT CAME TO PASS WHEN

⁸⁷ Yoma 22b; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, נאך

⁸⁸ Eccles. Rabba 3:1

SAMUEL WAS OLD (I Sam. 8:1). Did Samuel ever reach old age? He lived only for fifty-two years. For a Master said: If a man dies in his fifty-second year he is said to have died at the age reached by Samuel, that Ramathite. He replied: Thus said R. Yohanan: Old age came prematurely upon him, for it is written, IT REPENTETH ME THAT I HAVE SET UP SAUL TO BE KING (I Sam. 15:11). Samuel complained before Him: Sovereign of the Universe! You have made me equal to Moses and Aaron, for it is written, MOSES AND AARON ARE AMONGST HIS PRIESTS, AND SAMUEL AMONG THEM THAT CALL UPON HIS NAME (Ps. 99:6). As in the case of Moses and Aaron, the work of whose hands did not come to nought in their lifetime, so too let not the work of my hands come to nought in my lifetime. The Holy One, blessed be He, replied: How shall I act? Shall Saul die? Of this Samuel will not approve. Shall Samuel die young? People will speak ill of him (saying that he died young on account of his sins). Shall neither Saul nor Samuel die? The time has come for David to reign and one reign may not encroach on another even by a hair's breadth. Thereupon the Holy One, blessed be He, said: I will make him prematurely old and this is what is written, NOW SAUL WAS SITTING IN GIBEAH, UNDER THE TAMARISK TREE IN RAMAH (I Sam. 22:6). How comes Gibeah to Ramah (Gibeah being in Benjamin while Ramah is in Ephraim)? This is to teach you that it was the prayer of Samuel the Ramathite that was the cause of Saul's two and a half year's sojourn as king in Gibeah. Should then one man be put aside because of another? Yes, for R. Samuel b. Nahman said in the name of R. Jonathan: What is the meaning of the verse, THEREFORE HAVE I HEWED THEM BY THE PROPHETS, I HAVE SLAIN THEM BY THE WORDS OF MY MOUTH (Hosea 6:5). Scripture does not say, "by their words" but, BY THE WORDS OF MY MOUTH; this proves that one may be put aside because of another.⁸⁹

The following midrash begins by praising Saul for the manner in which he engaged in ritual slaughtering. His reward was that he was to be credited by Scripture as if he had built the first altar to the Lord. Then it informs us that in this world some do not eat what they plant or inhabit what they

89 Taanith 5b

build. This is an expression of profound sympathy for Saul who, despite his outstanding character and deeds, simply was not allowed to live in the house he built:

It is written: AND SAUL BUILT AN ALTAR UNTO THE LORD; HE WAS THE FIRST THAT BUILT AN ALTAR UNTO THE LORD (I Sam. 14:35). How many altars the ancients built! Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Joshua /all built altars/ and you say it (Saul's) was the first?! The Rabbis say: It was the first, meaning first among the kings. Said R. Judah: Because he (Saul) put his soul into the thing (the ritual slaughtering which accompanies the setting up of an altar) Scripture credits him as if he built the first altar to the Lord. Said R. Shimon b. Yosi b. Lakunya: It is a fact that in this world a man may build a house and someone else use it, a man plants a crop and another eats it, but in the future to come, THEY SHALL NOT BUILD, AND ANOTHER INHABIT, THEY SHALL NOT PLANT, AND ANOTHER EAT...THEY SHALL NOT LABOR IN VAIN, ETC. (Is. 65:22), and it is written, AND THEIR SEED SHALL BE KNOWN AMONG THE NATIONS (Ib. 61:9).⁹⁰

David inherited and inhabited the house that Saul built. That David merited such fortune has been shown, in this section, to be largely a matter of divine fiat. This conclusion is buttressed by the previous section which demonstrated that to a great extent the Rabbis clear Saul of much of the responsibility for the harassment and oppression suffered by David.

⁹⁰ Lev. Rabba 25:8

CHAPTER SIX

This final chapter is devoted to those midrashim which did not readily lend themselves to the categorization established in this work. There are three sections which I will treat: Saul's family, his death, and other miscellaneous midrashim. The beginning of the first two sections will present midrashim which have not yet been presented. This will be followed by a summary of those midrashim which were presented in an earlier chapter(s) but which contain material relevant to the theme of the section. Next to each summary will appear the chapter and footnote number where the midrash appeared and the source of the midrash so the reader will have easy access to the full text.

I

For the most part the image of Saul's family in the midrash is very positive. The family members share Saul's good characteristics. They are portrayed, above all, as pious and humble. Saul merited kingship because of his grandfather who used to light lamps in the public domain to aid those traveling at night, particularly those on their way to the house of study:

R. Simeon b. Lakish said: Saul merited kingship only through the fact that his grandfather used to light lamps (**נירות**) in the public domain /for the benefit of the public/. It is said that there were dark passages from his house to the house of study, and he used to light lamps in them, in order to make it light for the public. One verse says, AND NER (**נר**) BEGOT KISH (I Chron. 8:33) while another verse says, KISH, THE SON OF ABIEL (I Sam. 9:1). How is this possible? His name was Abiel, but because he used

to light lamps for the public, he earned the privilege of being called by the name Ner (נר, meaning lamp).¹

Saul's son Jonathan was said to be one of three who were humble:

To this Rabbi alluded when he said: Three were humble; viz., my father, the Bene Bathyra, and Jonathan, the son of Saul. R. Simeon b. Gamaliel, as has been said, the Bene Bathyra, as a master said: They placed him at the head and appointed him Nasi over them. Jonathan, the son of Saul, for he said to David, AND THOU SHALT BE KING OVER ISRAEL, AND I SHALL BE NEXT UNTO THEE (1 Sam. 23:17). But how does this prove it? Perhaps Jonathan the son of Saul /spoke thus/ because he saw that the people were flocking to David? The Bene Bathyra too, because they saw that Hillel was their superior /in learning/? But R. Simon b. Gamaliel was certainly very modest.²

Jonathan is one of three permitted the crown in this world and in the world to come:

Three were permitted their crown in this world and inherited the world to come. And they were: Jonathan the son of Saul, Eliezer b. Azariah, and the grandfathers of both.³

Saul's daughter Michal wore tefillin:

Michal the daughter of the Cushite (Saul) wore tefillin and the sages did not attempt to prevent her.⁴

Here is a listing and description of midrashim which contain reference to Saul's family:

- 1 Lev. Rabba 9:2; Yerushalmi Shiviit (שביעית) Chap. 3, Hal. 7; Tanhuma, Tetzavay 8
- 2 Baba Mezia 84b, 85a
Note: Soncino notes, p. 486, that "though the action of the other two (Jonathan and the Bene Bathyra might be explained away as not due to humility, that of R. Simon b. Gamaliel could not."
- 3 Yerushalmi Pesachim Chap. 6, p. 33a
- 4 Erubin 96a; Yerushalmi Berakoth 4c; Mekilta de R. Ishmael, Chap. 17

- A) There is no blight on the reputation of Saul's family: Chap. 1, footnote 60 -- Yoma 22b; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, **וי**.
- B) Saul's house played a role in the killing of the Gibeonites, the slaughter of Nob, and thus in causing the famine in David's time: Chap. 4, footnotes 15, 28 -- Yerushalmi Kiddushin Chap. 4, p. 65c; Midrash Shmuel Chap. 28; Numbers Rabba 8:4; Mishnat R. Eliezer Chap. 9.
- C) Saul's sons die with him on Mt. Gilboa: Chap. 6, footnotes 5-7 -- Lev. Rabba 26:7; Tanhuma Emor 2; Tanhuma Buber Emor 4; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, **טל**.
- D) Jonathan sins by failing to give David bread for his travels: Chap. 4, footnotes 32, 33 -- Sanhedrin 104a; Seder Eliyahu Rabba Chap. 12.
- E) Jonathan endures Saul's wrath because of his love for David: Chap. 5, footnote 58 -- Arakin 16b.
- F) Jonathan's love for David is an example of FOR LOVE IS AS STRONG AS DEATH (Song of Songs 8:6): Chap. 1, footnote 50 -- Song of Songs Rabba 8:6; Tanhuma Buber Vayashev 19; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, **תתקצג**.
- G) Jonathan was the Ab Beth Din: Chap. 3, footnote 18 -- Mo'ed Katan 26a; Yerushalmi Mo'ed Katan Chap. 3, Hal. 7; Sheiltot Chap. 35.
- H) Jonathan is almost killed by Saul because of the power of the oath sworn by Saul which was unknowingly violated by Jonathan: Chap. 3, footnote 39 -- Pirke de R. Eliezer Chap. 38; Tanhuma Vayashev 2; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, **וי**.
- I) By Jonathan's merit Israel was saved in a most dangerous moment: Chap. 3, footnote 40 -- Mishnat R. Eliezer Chap. 15.
- J) Jonathan and Michal aided David in his struggle with Saul: Chap. 5, footnotes 55-58 -- Midrash Tehilim 59:1; Midrash Tehilim 59:3; Midrash Tehilim 59:4; Song of Songs Zuta Chap. 4, par. 4; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, **טק**; Arakin 16b.
- K) Michal compares David's lack of modesty to the modesty of her father and her father's house (thus defending the honor of her father and his house): Chap. 3, footnotes 26-29 -- Yerushalmi Sanhedrin Chap. 2, Hal. 4; Yerushalmi Sukkah Chap. 5, Hal. 4; Numbers Rabba 4:20; Midrash Shmuel Chap. 25.
- L) Michal gave birth in pain and had a child on the day of her death: Numbers Rabba 4:20; Midrash Shmuel Chap. 11. (This section of the midrash was not introduced as it adds nothing to Saul's image in the midrash. The incident has to do with Michal's relationship with David.)

- M) Saul uses Michal to ensnare David: Chap. 5, footnote 5 -- Mishnat R. Eliezer Chap. 7.
- N) Ish Bosheth is said to be one of two kings coming from Benjamin's loins: Chap. 3, footnote 13 -- Tanhuma Buber Vayishlach 29.

II

Much of the material on Saul's death has been reviewed in earlier chapters. This is due to the fact that, as has been pointed out repeatedly, the over-arching concern of the midrashim dealing with Saul is the justifying of his tragic fate. In the second part of this section the reader will therefore note the large number of midrashim justifying Saul's death -- each offering a different reason.

The Rabbis contend that Saul's death served as atonement for his sins. Given the tendency in the midrash to clear his name, this phenomenon makes good sense. That is to say, if the reader of the midrash has any doubt as to how Saul is to be judged, that doubt is utterly removed by God's response to the manner of his death. God offers Saul complete forgiveness and Saul is to dwell with Samuel in Samuel's celestial division. The following midrash establishes that Saul's place with Samuel was guaranteed by the manner of his death. The manner of his death was to be as follows: he was to face the Philistines in battle knowing full well that he would die in the course of the struggle. The midrash informs us that Saul sacrificed his three sons (by including them in the battle) and thereby won atonement for them as well. Finally, the midrash explains that Saul's courage brought God to praise him before the ministering angels:

MOREOVER THE LORD WILL DELIVER ISRAEL ALSO WITH THEE INTO THE HAND OF THE PHILISTINES; AND TOMORROW SHALT THOU AND THY SONS BE WITH ME (I Sam. 28:19, Samuel speaking to Saul). Said /Saul/ to him: And will I not have an opportunity to flee? He replied: If you flee you will be saved (i.e. physically saved but will not receive atonement). Said /Saul/ to him: And will I not have an opportunity to make battle arrangements? He replied: If you make battle arrangements you will be overpowered -- but if you submit yourself to judgment (implied: the attribute of justice) then TOMORROW SHALT THOU AND THY SONS BE WITH ME. R. Yohanan said: WITH ME /means/ in my /heavenly/ division. And when Saul heard the words of Samuel he was afraid. As it is written, THEN SAUL FELL STRAIGHT-WAY HIS FULL LENGTH UPON THE EARTH, AND WAS SORE AFRAID, BECAUSE OF THE WORDS OF SAMUEL; AND THERE WAS NO STRENGTH IN HIM; FOR HE HAD EATEN NO BREAD ALL THE DAY, NOR ALL THE NIGHT (Ib. 28:20). And when he came to Abner and Amasa they said to him: What did Samuel say to you? He said to them: He said to me, 'If you make war you will be victorious and not just this, but your three sons will be appointed chiefs.' Immediately he went to war and took his three sons with him, Jonathan, Avinadab, and Melchieshoua. Said R. Simeon b. Lakish: At that moment the Holy One, blessed be He, said to the ministering angels: Come and see the being whom I have created in my world and the form I have fashioned in my world. Usually if a man goes to a feast he does not take his children with him, fearing the evil eye; yet this man (Saul) goes out to battle, and though he knows that he will be killed, he takes his sons with him and faces cheerfully the judgment which is overtaking him.⁵

This next version emphasizes Samuel's prophesy that Saul's death would bring atonement for him and his sons. Samuel was considered the one prophet who prophesied after his death as well as during his life. He could do this because of the "power of the righteous":

You should know the power of the righteous...
 R. Nathan says: All the prophets prophesied in their lifetime but Samuel prophesied in his lifetime and after his death, for Samuel said to Saul: If you hearken to my advice, to fall by the sword, your death will serve as atonement for you and then your lot will be with me in the place that I abide. And Saul

5 Lev. Rabba 26:7

hearkened to his advice and fell by the sword, he and all his house, as it says, SO SAUL DIED, AND HIS THREE SONS (I Sam. 31:6). Why? So that his portion could be with Samuel the prophet in the future life, as it says, AND TOMORROW SHALT THOU AND THY SONS BE WITH ME (Ib. 28:19). What is the meaning of WITH ME? Said R. Yochanan: With me in my division (in heaven).⁶

Saul's death was more beloved to God than his life:

The students of R. Ami and Abba Tsidoni in the name of R. Shmuel b. Nachman said: The death of Saul was more beloved /to God/ than his life. For in his life he was never told: TOMORROW SHALT THOU AND THY SONS BE WITH ME (I Sam. 28:19). But in (or more accurately: just before) his death he was told: TOMORROW SHALT THOU AND THY SONS BE WITH ME, meaning, in my division of heaven.⁷

Given the way in which Saul's death is regarded it should not come as a surprise that the Rabbis find a justification for the specific manner in which he died; namely, that Saul committed suicide. Saul is not held culpable for the taking of his life. He is used to exemplify a limitation on culpability with regard to suicide: one who is in danger of a humiliating death has the right to end his own life:

Even one who kills himself, behold, this is /the crime of/ the shedding of blood, as it says, AND SURELY (וְאַךְ!) YOUR BLOOD OF YOUR LIVES WILL I REQUIRE (Gen. 9:5). And why is there a limiting particle (וְאַךְ)? One might suppose that in the case of one surrounded by enemies, like Saul, and they sought to make an abomination of him, that he would be culpable for killing himself. Scripture teaches, therefore, וְאַךְ -- limiting this to say that he is not culpable.⁸

6 Pirke de R. Eliezer Chap. 33; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, נחמ
Note: The midrash in Yalkut Shimoni is attributed to R. Yochanan instead of R. Nathan.

7 Midrash Shmuel Chap. 23

8 Mishnat R. Eliezer Chap. 9; Gen. Rabba 34:13

Here is a listing and description of midrashim which contain reference to Saul's death:

- A) Saul, along with 220,000 other men of Israel, was condemned to die for failing to blot out the name of Agag: Chap. 2, footnote 20 -- Pesikta Rabbati Chap. 11.
- B) Saul was overtaken by the attribute of justice. His death stemmed from showing mercy to cruel Amalek which led to cruelty to Nob (deserving of mercy) and this led to his death and the death of his three sons: Chap. 2, footnote 15 -- Eccles. Rabba 7:1; Eccles. Zuta 7:16; Midrash Shmuel Chap. 18; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, **קכ**.
- C) Saul died on account of the agony of the accusation that he destroyed Nob: Chap. 4, footnote 7 -- Tanhuma Metzora 2; Tanhuma Buber Metzora 4; Yalkut Shimoni, Torah, **תקנה**.
- D) God had Saul killed on account of his treatment of the Gibeonites: Chap. 4, footnote 11 -- Numbers Rabba 5:3.
- E) If Saul had prayed and performed teshuvah after learning of the decree against him he would have been saved: Chap. 1, footnote 17 -- Deut. Rabba Lieberman p. 45.
- F) Saul was killed because he had a spirit of arrogance in him: Chap. 1, footnote 63 -- Seder Eliyahu Rabba Chap. 31.
- G) Saul died as a result of his great jealousy: Chap. 1, footnote 49 -- Mishnat R. Eliezer Chap. 4.
- H) Saul died for his breach of faith which he committed against the Lord: Chap. 1, footnote 15 -- Numbers Rabba 8:5; Sifre Naso p. 5, par. 2; Yalkut Shimoni, Torah, **תשא**.
- I) Slander kills three: the slanderer, the one slandered, and the one who hears the slander. Saul received slander and was killed: Chap. 1, footnote 43 -- Lev. Rabba 26:2; Yerushalmi Peah Chap. 1, Hal. 1; Yerushalmi Sotah Chap. 1, Hal. 8; Numbers Rabba 19:2; Midrash Tehilim 52:2; Pesikta de R. Kahana 32a,b; Tanhuma Metzora 2; Tanhuma Buber Metzora 4; Tanhuma Chukat 4; Tanhuma Buber Chukat 8; Mishnat R. Eliezer Chap. 9; Yalkut Shimoni, Torah, **תקנה**.
- J) Saul died for these five sins: for destroying Nob, for sparing Agag, for not keeping the word of the Lord, for disobeying Samuel, and for asking counsel of a ghost: Chap. 1, footnote 13 -- Lev. Rabba 26:7; Tanhuma Emor 2; Tanhuma Buber Emor 4; Midrash Shmuel Chap. 24; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, **קכט**.

- K) The death of Saul and his sons was part of his Benjamite destiny -- they were destined to devour their prey in the morning and be divided as spoil (by the enemy) in the evening (based on Gen. 49:27): Chap. 1, footnote 61 -- Gen. Rabba 99:3; Tanhuma **ויחי יד**; Tanhuma Buber **ויחי טו**.
- L) Saul died with his three sons and all four were considered to be among the seven righteous descendants of Abraham destined to be slain by the Philistines: Chap. 3, footnote 15 -- Gen. Rabba 54:4; Pesikta de R. Kahana 11:9; Midrash Shmuel Chap. 12.
- M) Saul was one of those whose death causes the world to pass into an inferior state: Chap. 3, footnote 49 -- Gen. Rabba 62:4; Yalkut Shimoni, Torah, **ק**; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, **א**.
- N) Saul's neck was like Adam's (in some versions: like Saul's Creator) but he died by means of a sword through his neck: Chap. 3, footnote 7 -- Sotah 10a; Pirke de R. Eliezer Chap. 53; Midrash Hagadol Bereshit p. 66; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, **נא**.
- O) God disapproved of the manner in which David mourned Saul's death: Chap. 5, footnote 41 -- Yebamoth 78b; Numbers Rabba 8:4; Midrash Shmuel Chap. 28; Pirke de R. Eliezer Chap. 17; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, **קנג, קנד**.
- P) David did mourn for Saul: Chap. 5, footnotes 51, 52 -- Mo'ed Katan 26a; Yerushalmi Mo'ed Katan 3, Hal. 7; Ruth Rabba 4:12.
- Q) The daughters of Israel wept over Saul's death on account of his generosity towards them. Another interpretation is that the Sanhedrin wept over Saul's death because of his generosity and devotion to them: Chap. 3, footnote 24 -- Yerushalmi Nedarim 9, Hal. 9; Midrash Shmuel Chap. 25.
- R) David eventually had Saul mourned in a proper manner: Chap. 5, footnote 15 -- Numbers Rabba 8:4; Pirke de R. Eliezer Chap. 17.
- S) David brought forth three imprecations against Saul and all three came to pass -- including that God smite Saul: Chap. 5, footnote 38 -- Midrash Tehilim 7:2; Midrash Shmuel Chap. 25; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, **קלה**.
- T) David resisted his evil inclination which prompted him to kill Saul when given the opportunity in the cave: Chap. 5, footnotes 44-46, 48 -- Midrash Tehilim 7:2, 7:13, 7:18, 57:1; Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, **קלה, תגכה**.
- U) Gilead dealt kindly with the bones of Saul and was rewarded by God and David for doing so: Chap. 5, footnote 54 -- Deut. Rabba Lieberman p. 73.

- V) David prayed to be delivered from the bloodguiltiness of the death of Saul: Chap. 5, footnote 77 -- Midrash Shmuel Chap. 25.
- W) Saul was one of ten enemies who fell before David: Chap. 5, footnote 31 -- Midrash Tehilim 18:8; Yalkut Shimon, Prophets, נא.
- X) Saul's destiny after death was with Samuel in Samuel's celestial division. This destiny is marshalled as evidence that God forgave Saul for the destruction of Nob: Chap. 4, footnote 18 (see also Chap. 6, footnotes 5-7) -- Berakoth 12b; Yalkut Shimon, Prophets, נא.

III

Miscellaneous Midrashim Relating to Saul

Saul is one of four called "Cushite":

NOW WHEN EBED-MELECH THE CUSHITE HEARD (Jer. 38:7). Ebed-Melech was one of four who were called Cushites: Zipporah, Israel, Saul, and Ebed-Melech.⁹

Saul, like Abraham's servant Eliezer and Moses, prospered because he encountered maidens on the outskirts of a city:

R. Akiba said: Anyone who enters a city and finds maidens coming forth before him, his way will be prosperous (before him). How do you know this? Know that it is so. Come and see from Eliezer... from Moses... from Saul. For while he had not yet entered the city, he found maidens coming forth before him, as it is said, AS THEY WENT UP THE ASCENT TO THE CITY, THEY FOUND YOUNG MAIDENS GOING OUT (I Sam. 9:11). And he prospered his way and he acquired the sovereignty.¹⁰

Israel was counted ten times and two of those ten occurred in the days of Saul:

In ten places were /the children of Israel/ counted ...twice in the days of Saul, as it says, AND SAUL

9 Pesikta Rabbati Chap. 26

10 Pirke de R. Eliezer Chap. 36

...NUMBERED THEM IN BEZEK (Ib. 11:8). When they were rich /he numbered them/ with lambs. When they were poor /he numbered them/ with broken pieces of pottery.¹¹

When Ahasuerus found out that Esther was from the house of Saul he addressed her with more respect, referring to her as THE QUEEN:

THEN SAID THE KING AHASUERUS, AND HE SAID TO ESTHER THE QUEEN (Esther 7:5). Why 'said' and again 'said'? R. Abbahu replied? He first spoke to her through an interpreter. When she told him that she came from the house of Saul, forthwith, HE SAID TO ESTHER THE QUEEN.¹²

Hamen persuades the wise men of Persia to support his scheme of eliminating the Jews. They write a letter justifying their support of Hamen's scheme. In this letter they refer to Moses, Joshua, David, Saul, and others as being wicked Israelites. Here is the section on Saul. That Saul is condemned by the Persian wise men for destruction wrought against Amalek is not surprising. However it is interesting to note that they seem to join in the condemnation of Saul for his treatment of Agag (i.e. that he spared Agag). It is possible that this text therefore suggests, as was pointed out in Chapter Two, that even Saul's major sin was not viewed by the Rabbis with total abhorrence:

And the first king they (the Israelites) had was named Saul. And he went and made war against the land of my ancestor Amalek and he slew a hundred thousand horsemen of them in one day and also did not spare any man or woman or suckling or baby and

11 Pesikta de R. Kahana 18a; Numbers Rabba 2:11; Pesikta Rabbati Chap. 10; Tanhuma Ki Tesa 9; Tanhuma Buber Ki Tesa 8; Yalkut Shimoni, Torah, 190

12 Megillah 16a

I don't know with what (implied: terrible means) he killed them. And more, how he treated my ancestor Agag whom at first he spared, but in the end one of them named Samuel came and cut him in pieces and gave his flesh to be eaten by the fowl of the heaven, as it says, SO SAMUEL HEWED AGAG IN PIECES (I Sam. 15:33).¹³

Samuel's Beth Din set Saul up to rule:

Scripture declares: NOW SAUL WAS SITTING IN GIBEAH, UNDER THE TAMARISK-TREE IN RAMAH, WITH HIS SPEAR IN HIS HAND (I Sam. 22:6). If in Ramah how /could he be/ in Gibeah? Rather /to illustrate/ who was responsible for setting Saul up /to rule/ in Gibeah -- the Beth Din of Samuel that met in Ramah.¹⁴

For one year Samuel and Saul ruled jointly and for two years Saul ruled alone:

The tent of meeting at Nob and Gibeon lasted fifty-seven years. How do we know it? Because it is written, AND IT CAME TO PASS, WHEN HE MADE MENTION OF THE ARK OF GOD /that he fell off his seat and died/ (I Sam. 4:18 - referring to Eli). Now it was taught: When Eli the priest died, Shiloh was destroyed and they repaired to Nob; When Samuel the Ramathite died, Nob was destroyed and they went to Gibeon. As it is written, AND IT CAME TO PASS, FROM THE DAY THAT THE ARK ABODE IN KIRIATH-JEARIM, THAT THE TIME WAS LONG; FOR IT WAS TWENTY YEARS; AND ALL THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL YEARNED AFTER THE LORD (I Sam. 7:2). These twenty years /were made up as follows/: Ten years during which Samuel ruled alone, one year that Samuel and Saul ruled /together/, two years that Saul reigned, and the seven which David reigned /in Hebron/, for it is written, AND THE DAYS THAT DAVID REIGNED OVER ISRAEL WERE FORTY YEARS: SEVEN YEARS HE REIGNED IN HEBRON (I Kings 2:11). Now of Solomon it is written, AND HE BEGAN TO BUILD...IN THE FOURTH YEAR OF HIS REIGN (II Chron. 3:2). Thus 370 less one was left for Shiloh.¹⁵

A number of midrashim portray Saul rewarding Jethro for the great kindness Jethro paid to Moses. Saul repaid Jethro by sparing the Kenites who were among the Amalekites. The

13 Esther Rabba 7:13

14 Tosefta Eotah 11:12

15 Zebahim 118b, 119a

stress in these midrashim is not on Saul but on Jethro. Jethro's kindness is lauded and the ramifications of his kindness are described. Included in these midrashim is one which uses Saul's repayment of kindness to the Kenites as proof that a stranger coming to convert is to be considered as if he or she has done a kindness to all Israel:

R. Eliezer says: A stranger who comes to convert, behold, it is as if he has done a kindness to all of Israel. Thus Saul said to the children of Jethro: FOR YE SHOWED KINDNESS TO ALL THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL (I Sam. 15:6). And is one able to do a kindness for all those thousands and tens of thousands? Rather, since he (Jethro) had converted in their midst and said: BLESSED BE THE LORD, WHO HATH DELIVERED YOU (Ex. 18:10), it was as if he had done a kindness to all.¹⁶

R. Nehemiah began to speak in praises of hospitality, expounding the text, AND SAUL SAID UNTO THE KENITES, GO, DEPART, GET YOU DOWN FROM AMONG THE AMALEKITES, LEST I DESTROY YOU WITH THEM; FOR YE SHOWED KINDNESS TO ALL THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL WHEN THEY CAME UP OUT OF EGYPT (I Sam. 15:6). Have we not here an argument a fortiori: if such was /the reward of/ Jethro who befriended Moses only for his own benefit, how much more will it be for one who entertains a scholar in his house and gives him to eat and drink and allows him the use of his possessions.¹⁷

Who was it that showed kindness to one to whom he was indebted? Jethro to Moses, as it is written, AND HE SAID UNTO HIS DAUGHTERS...CALL HIM (Moses) THAT HE MAY EAT BREAD (Ex. 2:20). R. Eliezer said: Jethro certainly showed kindness to Moses, as it is written, WHY IS IT THAT YE HAVE LEFT THE MAN? CALL HIM, THAT HE MAY EAT BREAD. R. Simon explained that he gave him food as his wages; for it is written, AND MOREOVER HE DREW (**וַיִּשְׁכֹּחַ**) FOR US (Moses drew water for Jethro's daughters -Ib. 2:19). R. Judah, R. Nehemiah, and our Rabbis /differ on the interpretation of **וַיִּשְׁכֹּחַ**). R. Judah says: He raised us and our ancestors (to a higher religion, so says Soncino, p. 433). R. Nehemiah says: He drew (water) for us and for the shepherds. And our Rabbis say: He drew (water) for us through the merit of our

16 Mishnat R. Eliezer Chap. 16

17 Berakoth 63b

ancestors and for the shepherds in order to bring about peace. When did the Holy One, blessed be He, repay him (Jethro)? R. Eliezer the son of R. Jose the Galilean said: in the days of Saul. AND SAUL SAID UNTO THE KENITES (descendants of Jethro): GO, DEPART, GET YOU DOWN FROM AMONG THE AMALEKITES, LEST I DESTROY YOU WITH THEM; FOR YE SHOWED KINDNESS TO ALL THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL, WHEN THEY CAME UP OUT OF EGYPT (I Sam. 15:6). Did Jethro show kindness to all Israel? Did he not show kindness only to Moses alone? Yes, but it serves to teach you that if a person shows kindness to one of the great men in Israel it is considered as if he had shown kindness to all Israel. Now does this not afford an inference a minori ad majus? If in the case of a person who shows kindness to one to whom he is indebted, we see how the Holy One, blessed be He, repays him; how much the more so in the case of one to whom he is not indebted.¹⁸

A worthy leader will always rise from the seed of Benjamin. Saul was a worthy one who rose from the sons of Benjamin:

Said R. Yochanan: From Benjamin /a worthy one/ will always rise...And the proof: AND SAMUEL SAID UNTO THE MEN OF ISRAEL: GO YE EVERY MAN UNTO HIS CITY (I Sam. 8:22-*implied*: while I search for a king). And who was worthy for the thing? A man from the sons of Benjamin (Saul).¹⁹

18 Lev. Rabba 34:8; Song of Songs Rabba 2:5; Yalkut Shimoni, Torah, **קט, נב**

19 Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, **תנ"ך**

CONCLUSION

It has been shown that in the midrashim about Saul the Rabbis are concerned primarily with elucidating the underpinnings of Saul's fate. They struggle to determine the reasons Saul fell from power and lost his life. They reject out of hand most of the justifications for this fate. One justification, the sin of Amalek, is accepted. Having settled on Saul's one clear sin, they praise and defend him. They continually clear his name and uphold his reputation.

Their concern for Saul's fate is understandable. After all, he was the first of Israel's kings. But why are the Rabbis so generous with Saul? Why do they go to great lengths to clear his name, especially when clearing his name so often leads to the disparagement of others (David, Jonathan, etc.)? To answer this question it is necessary to engage in some speculation.

First, the Rabbis seem genuinely sorry for Saul and his house. They have compassion for a man who never had the power and riches of a David or Solomon. They have much compassion for a decent man who suffered much.

Secondly, through their eyes one sees a story of a tragic hero. For them Saul was neither crazy nor insanely jealous nor irrationally disturbed. He was rather a very good man caught up in difficult personal and political circumstances. He was a man with a very strict God and a mentor (Samuel) who could tolerate no infraction, no matter how slight. He had the misfortune of having a neighbor (David) with intentions of

replacing him. This neighbor was very powerful and popular. David even won over Saul's children. Isolated, harassed, and a victim of circumstances, Saul takes his life in order to win atonement from the God he so piously served.

Third, it is possible that there are reflections in the midrash of oral traditions critical of David and Judah. These oral traditions might stem from pro-Benjamin or pro-Joseph forces inside ancient Israel. This would explain the fondness for Saul and the harsh criticism of David. If this is true it might reflect a rabbinic awareness of possible Davidic editing of the Saul narratives. This would account for a total silence in rabbinic literature on the subject of Saul's insanity or loss of calm. That is to say, there may well be represented in this literature an echo of an ancient dissent against a power-hungry David usurping the throne from Saul.

The one sin Saul is held accountable for is the failure to kill Agag, King of Amalek. To comprehend why this of all of Saul's sins was seized upon to explain his fate, it is necessary to consider two factors. First, Amalek symbolized absolute evil. In rabbinic philosophy such evil must be recognized, pursued, and eliminated or it (the evil) will pursue and destroy. Secondly, it must be remembered that in Israel's experience every kingdom, every national experience, ended in disaster. Ancient prophets and sages and rabbis all grappled with this phenomenon. Reasons had to be found as to why the one God could allow Israel to suffer this repeated fate. In Saul's case the disaster could not be blamed on idolatry or

too many women or too much wealth or a failure to concern himself with the poor or a failure to sacrifice for Israel's benefit. The only explanation was that Saul failed to exercise the power he held. He wasn't ruthless enough when he needed to be. Thus Saul came to symbolize for the Rabbis Israel's failure to fully exercise her might when she had the opportunity.

Finally, there are hints in the midrash of a parallel between the fate of Saul (and his tribe Benjamin) and the fate of all Israel. Benjamin is the smallest of the tribes, Israel the smallest of the nations. Both failed to eliminate evil in their midst and therefore suffered tragic fates. Both would one day raise a redeemer to complete the task. By clearing Saul's name, upholding his reputation, and rewarding him with God's forgiveness and a place of honor in the world to come, the midrash may be expressing a judgment on all Israel.

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