

## The Royal Prophet

### The Accusing Finger - Eli's Sons

Understanding Sin in the Tanach<sup>1</sup>

How many people have asked why the simple reading of the words of Tanach often creates an image so different from that sketched by our sages. The text might sharply criticize this or that famous figure but the talmud or midrash will then recast the story in a hugely different light; adding unverifiable details or seemingly speculative assumptions.<sup>2</sup> What appears as the most evil sin is thus transformed into an act of virtue and a sentiment you'd think is among the noblest becomes self-serving cruelty. Thus questions follow questions:

What were Chazal (our sages) trying to accomplish? Were the narratives of the heroes of Tanach revised to manufacture a saintliness not truly there? Are we reading a cleansed and neatened version of history?

I can't imagine that there are many students of Tanach who haven't considered these questions. These are questions, therefore, that deserve answers.

We'll begin our discussion by examining a related example from the book of Shmuel.

*"And the sons of Eli were immoral men; they did not know G-d."* (I Shmuel 2; 12)

This description does not seem to point to any single improper act, but rather, gives us a broad-based perspective on the sons of the generation's greatest Torah leader. These aren't sins, but attitudes. And the attitudes couldn't seem to be much worse.

"...Were immoral men." The Maharsha<sup>3</sup> interprets the word "immoral" (luylb) to imply sexual impropriety. This, therefore, would correspond to the later verse (ibid., verse 22) "And (Eli) heard...that which they consorted with the women gathered at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting [i.e., the tabernacle]."

"...They did not know G-d." It seems unlikely that the sons of Eli were completely ignorant of the existence of a Creator - even the Philistines at the time were painfully aware of the Jewish G-d and His powerful involvement in history (see I Shmuel, 4; 7 - 8). Rather, we can understand Chofni and Pinchus as does the Targum: "they did not know to serve with fear before G-d" - perhaps implying that the motivation behind their divine service was flawed.

We might also note a striking similarity between "they did not know G-d" and words written about the young Shmuel in the very next chapter: "And Shmuel, before he knew G-d." (I Shmuel, 3; 7) This latter passage clearly describes a stage of growth immediately preceding prophecy and has no critical overtone. Could this not also serve to qualify our understanding of the Tanach's understanding of Chofni and Pinchus?<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> From the book "The Royal Prophet and other thoughtful essays on the book of Shmuel" by Boruch Clinton. [www.marbitz.com](http://www.marbitz.com).

<sup>2</sup> The truth is that careful examination of the text (with an eye for the big picture only available to someone familiar with large areas of the Tanach) will, more often than not, reveal the same conclusions reached by Chazal. This book contains many such examples. But the *perception* remains among many that the interpretations of Chazal are somewhat contrived, and it is this perception that we here address.

<sup>3</sup> TB Shabbos 55b

<sup>4</sup> עיין פרשיות בספרי הנביאים לשמואל א' עמ' מג

Still, for the sons of the righteous Eli, there was clearly something wrong.

But immorality and a failure in their Divine service were not the only complaints registered against Eli's two sons. The brothers, it seems, would help themselves to some of the sacrificial meat being prepared by Jewish pilgrims (I Shmuel 2; 13 - 14). Furthermore, they seem to have eaten the meat before the completion of the sacrificial service (ibid, verse 15) - a flagrant abuse of halacha.

When rebuked in G-d's name, Eli himself, the nation's leader and high priest, was also implicated in these sins:

*"Why have you cast off my peace offerings and meal offerings that I commanded (to be brought) in the tabernacle; and you have honored your sons more than me by fattening them by (taking) the first (portion) of every gift from the Jews..."* (I Shmuel 2; 29)

Shmuel, in his very first prophecy, was instructed to inform his teacher Eli that G-d will

*"judge (Eli's) house forever for the sin of knowing that his sons were cursing (Me) and not stopping them."* (I Shmuel 3; 13)

What had Eli done to deserve that the Tanach should so closely associate him with such terrible sins? Why does he seem to be an equal partner in his sons' evil? And how did his sons become so rotten in the first place? Didn't their scholarly<sup>5</sup> and devout father educate them in the basics of decent behavior?

So how are these events portrayed by the Talmud and commentaries? Let's take each accusation separately:

## The Immorality

The Talmud<sup>6</sup> relates:

*"Anyone who says that the sons of Eli sinned<sup>7</sup> is surely mistaken...so how, then, does one understand the words 'that they consorted with the women...' (I Shmuel 2; 22)? Since they (the sons of Eli) delayed processing the women's offerings such that they (the women) couldn't (immediately) return to their husbands, it is considered by the Tanach as though they had consorted with the women."*

So they weren't so quick in their work. But how does that explain the text's harsh language? Is it reasonable to compare these administrative delays to adultery?

It's reasonable. If nothing else, such a comparison highlights the sanctity of a Jewish marriage and how inappropriate it is for anyone to come between a man and his wife...even inadvertently and even briefly. The privacy and independence of a Jewish family are considered of prime importance in Jewish thought. Compromising the private nature of a marriage is therefore tantamount to stepping between a man and his wife.

The Ralbag<sup>8</sup> further explains that Eli's sons' laziness, besides causing inconvenience and disruption for Jews visiting Shilo (the site of the tabernacle), also demonstrated a profound lack of respect for, and understanding of, the Divine service with which the two had been entrusted. A priest who lacks sensitivity for the significance of his job is a very poor priest indeed. What kind of an image does he present to the many Jews looking to him for guidance?<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See Tosafos (מורה הלכה: מורה לא) where we see that Eli was the generation's pre-eminent scholar and the natural choice as mentor for the young Shmuel.

<sup>6</sup> TB Shabbos 55b

<sup>7</sup> "...Concerning immoral conduct with married women one would be mistaken to ascribe sin. Nevertheless, concerning the disgrace to the holy sacrifices, they did indeed sin." (Rashi) It should be noted that one opinion (that of Rav) in the above-mentioned passage of Talmud does indeed hold Chafni (but not Pinchus) guilty of the sin mentioned explicitly in the text.

<sup>8</sup> I Shmuel 2; 22 - 25

<sup>9</sup> The Talmud tells us (Bava Basra 21a) that the first public system for the teaching of Torah was intentionally placed in Jerusalem, so that the image of busy priests could have a positive influence on the students (Tosafos "כי מצוין"). A priest was primarily a teacher (see Deut. 33; 10) and much of the best teaching is accomplished through example.

Alright. Perhaps, then, our sages' "re-interpretation" doesn't openly *contradict* the text, but is there anything in the text itself to *support* this approach? Aren't the words of the Tanach too clear to "force" upon them such an awkward scenario?

According to the Da'as Sofrim, the text itself indeed does support the strong possibility that there *never was an actual sin of immorality!*

*"Don't, my sons, for it is not good the rumor that I hear spread by the people of G-d."* (I Shmuel 2; 24)

"...The rumor." Perhaps the talk of immorality was nothing more than baseless rumor. Improper behavior there certainly was - the Talmud is clear enough about that - but where does it actually say that *such disgusting acts* ever took place?

## **The Stolen Food**

*"...(when) any man would slaughter an offering, a young priest would come - as the meat was cooking - with a three pronged fork in hand. And he would hit (the side of) the pot...and then take whatever (piece of meat) his fork brought up."* (I Shmuel, 2; 13 - 14)

Forced confiscation of sacrificial meat from the very pots in which it was being cooked! Could decent people act this way? Could a priest really steal meat meant for a Jewish family's consumption?<sup>10</sup>

The Da'as Sofrim observes that the event is prefaced by the words "and the custom of the priests (concerning) the people was..." It seems that this behavior wasn't restricted to Eli's sons, Chofni and Pinchus, and might even have been the practice for some time previous. If many priests acted this way, why are just these two singled out for "honorable" mention?

Let's first discuss the behavior itself:

*"And that man (Elkana - the father of Shmuel) goes up from his city from time to time to bow and to offer sacrifices to G-d in Shilo."* (I Shmuel, 1; 3)

Why "goes" - in the present tense? Chazal (see Rashi) tell us that each year Elkana would take a different route. While traveling, he would stop often to ask directions to Shilo, explaining that he was on his way to the pilgrimage festival and that his listeners should come too.

Why did Elkana, a leading figure in Israel at the time, feel obliged to encourage others to follow his example? The Da'as Sofrim feels safe in the observation that the commandment to thrice yearly go up to the tabernacle was not universally observed and that Elkana was trying to popularize it.<sup>11</sup>

Now consider that a Jewish farmer could mostly avoid the priestly tithes (teruma - the Torah itself only requires the smallest token amount of a crop to be given to priests and separating a full two percent is only a custom, albeit wide-spread). Consider also that the tribe of Levy (of which the kohanim were members) were given no share when the land of Israel was divided up (see Deut. 10; 9) and, by and large, relied upon temple offerings and tithes for their very income. So if many Jews weren't traveling to the tabernacle as they should have and the tithe-income for priests was weak...with what will they feed their families?

It was with all this in mind that the Da'as Sofrim suggests that it was out of hunger that the priests of Eli's generation rudely grabbed Jews' meat! Couldn't these young priests have resented what they perceived as poor treatment at the hands of their countrymen? After all, they were working on behalf of the entire nation and yet went hungry! Some meat from these offerings would eventually be theirs anyway, why not take it now - before it is cooked to someone else's taste - and present a half-decent meal

<sup>10</sup> Much of the meat from many of the Temple offerings was eaten by those who had brought them, with some designated for priests and some parts burnt. It is worth noting that the text also suggests (verse 15) that the priests *took* the meat before the necessary fats had been burned on the altar. While impolite (at the very least!), we don't, however, find explicit mention of the meat actually being *eaten* before the burning - and it's the premature eating which would create the greatest halachic problems.

<sup>11</sup> It must be noted that abandoning one's farm and possessions for upwards of two months a year (considering travelling time in addition to the weeks spent at the tabernacle) must have ranked among a Jew's most difficult tests. Of course, we were guaranteed that our properties would be protected and our livelihood unhurt (TB Pesachim 8b), but that, for many people anyway, doesn't eliminate the doubt.

to one's needy family?

Decent behavior? Certainly not. But by the same token, it wasn't quite so corrupt as a superficial reading might have suggested.

Nevertheless, what was the special role played by Eli's family in all this?

## The Rebuke Against Eli

*"Why have you (shown contempt for) my sacrifices and my meal offerings that I commanded (to be brought) in this place? And you have honored your sons more than me by (showing too much concern about your) health (by taking) from the first (portion) of every one of the Jews' meal offerings."* (I Shmuel 2; 29)

Here, the "man of G-d" sent to rebuke Eli (see verse 27) implies that Eli himself was actually involved. But wasn't it his sons (among other priests) who were responsible for the desecration of the Temple service?

In Shmuel's first experience of prophecy we see what seems to be the same rebuke, but from a different perspective:

*"And I (G-d) told him (Eli) that I would judge his house forever; for the sin that he knew that his sons were disparaging (the divine service) and he didn't restrain them."* (I Shmuel 3; 13)

It was the sons who sinned, but the father, Eli, was implicated for not having stopped them. But didn't he try? Doesn't the text show us his rebuke ("Don't, my sons..." 2; 24)? And if he didn't actually rebuke, was that really such a huge sin? Eli was no young man: could failing to criticize actions (performed during his declining years), of which he seemed to have no knowledge, be so bad?

The Radak (verse 13) observes that Eli surely rebuked his sons. His fault, however, was in waiting until he was an old man lacking the energy and authority to back his rebuke. The rebuke came, but too little, too late. This neglect carried great consequences.

Nevertheless, if Eli's own sin lay in neglecting his responsibilities as a father, why was he *personally* accused of "casting off...sacrifices...?"

The mishna<sup>12</sup> states that the cow belonging to Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah went out into a public place on Shabbos with a decorative strap between its horns. According to the Gemara, however,

*"this would suggest that Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah had only one cow, but didn't Rav (and some say Rav Yehuda in the name of Rav) say that Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah tithed twelve thousand calves from his herd each year? We are taught (by way of an answer): this wasn't his own cow, but that of his neighbor and since he (Rabbi Elazar) didn't restrain her, the event was recorded in his name....Anyone who is capable of rebuking the members of his household but doesn't will be punished (for the sins of) his household; (if he's capable of rebuking) the people of his city (but doesn't) he will be punished (for the sins of) the city; (if he's capable of rebuking) the whole world (but doesn't) he will be punished (for the sins of) the whole world."*

A person is responsible not only for his own actions, but for actions completed within his sphere of influence. If Eli's sons sinned and if those sins could have been prevented, then Eli himself has sinned.

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Both history and experience show us that a simple and casual reading of a passage in Tanach will not reveal its true meaning. But why shouldn't it? Couldn't the greatest book ever authored have been made more easily accessible? Why riddles?

Perhaps the answer lies in its very profundity and greatness: complex ideas and huge, world-

<sup>12</sup>

TB Shabbos 44b

encompassing issues don't lend themselves to intelligent expression in brief narrative passages (don't believe me? Just read a newspaper or observe the electronic media as they torturously relate what can't - or shouldn't - be related). In a practical and finite world, how does one transmit a message as vast as that of Tanach?

The authors of the books of the prophets (like their successors, the rabbis of the Talmud) had great things to say; deep and wonderful observations about life, human frailty and man's relationship to his G-d. And like the Talmud, the prophets are most noteworthy for their brevity and precision. We can only assume that this brief written text embraces a flexibility great enough to permit many levels of meaning...and that it is accompanied by a set of keys allowing entry to each level.

Here, then, are some of the keys.

Sometimes the treasures of Tanach can be revealed by a more careful reading of the text itself. This method requires a solid familiarity with the narrative's "big picture" and a good working knowledge of Hebrew grammar. One must also possess enough respect for the text to give it that second (and third and fourth) look: For the most practical reasons, Tanach, as with all Torah, can never, ever be reviewed enough.

The Abarbanel and, in our own generation, the Da'as Sofrim are perhaps among the better-known practitioners of this art.<sup>13</sup>

Let's see some examples.

Elkana, we wrote above, was a man concerned with his people. Through personal example he encouraged Jews to leave their homes to attend the pilgrimage festivals in Shilo. How did we know this? From the unusual (present tense) grammatical form "ועלה" found in I Shmuel, 1; 3 - Elkana, it seems, would regularly travel in such a way as to spread news of the impending festival to as many people as possible. The Tanach is absolutely replete with hints of this style.

It was our knowledge of Elkana's pilgrimage-promotion that allowed us a glimpse into the financial lives of the priestly tribe (i.e., that poor attendance at the pilgrimage festivals would mean weak "receipts" of priestly donations). With that knowledge, the Da'as Sofrim was able to suggest that economic pressures might have played a role in the poor behavior of young priests.

How many times might we have read this passage and never stopped to consider the meaning of the word "השמועה" - "the rumor" (I Shmuel, 2; 24 - see above)? Yet "rumor" has a very different meaning from "news" or "testimony," doesn't it?

Here, as in countless examples throughout Tanach, we find new and vital insights into the meaning of the text from hints in the text itself.

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A tiny wine stain is much more visible (and annoying) on a perfectly clean, snowy-white tablecloth than it would be if viewed against a darker, dirtier background. The Da'as Sofrim offers this analogy to illustrate how even the minor sins of the righteous, of whom so much is expected, are often characterized by the Tanach as coarse and crude acts. G-d, the Talmud<sup>14</sup> tells us, is far more demanding of a tzadik than of anyone else and therefore a tzadik's behavior may be described in a way that reflects G-d's *perception* rather than the absolute gravity of the act.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> I, personally, have no fonder fantasy than of discovering a complete commentary to the prophets by Rabbi S.R. Hirsch. Rabbi Hirsch showed himself to be a master of just this style of discovery in his brilliant work on the Chumash.

<sup>14</sup> "הקב"ה מדקדק עם סביביו כחוט השערה" TB Yevamos 121b

<sup>15</sup> See Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler's Michtav M'Eliyahu (Hebrew edition), volume 1, page 161 et. seq. where he explains how the Torah was written from G-d's perspective and that we have to understand the Torah's descriptions and judgements from within that context: "How would G-d react to this sin?" See also Ben Yehoyada to Sanhedrin 38b ("Baram ana avda") who suggests that the Tanach is describing a sin's impact on the sinner...the impact of a relatively mild sin might be as catastrophic for a great individual as a more obviously serious sin on a regular person.

So it doesn't mean, for example, that Eli's sons actually stole or were adulterous as we might picture such sins, but that relatively speaking, they were judged as harshly as a normal person would be were he to commit such gross transgressions.

The Talmud says as much: "Anyone who says that the sons of Eli sinned is surely mistaken..." Here (as we noted above from the words of Rashi), the Talmud doesn't claim that Eli's sons were blameless, but that they weren't guilty of the terrible things suggested by the superficial text. Knowing *who* the Tanach is discussing, therefore, becomes as important as *what* was actually described as having happened.

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Drop a stone into a still pond and watch the ripples work towards shore. Drop a speeding meteor into the ocean and wait (in fear) for the destructive tidal waves. The greater the force, the greater the consequences.

If a simple Jew sins privately in the quiet of his home it is a great tragedy, but if someone looked upon for guidance and leadership should commit the very same sin in full public view, how much greater is the impact! How would you describe the publicly destructive act in a way that would accurately depict its importance? Might you not want to "exaggerate" the sin and paint it in the darkest possible colors?

*...But (for) one who has the desecration of G-d's Name (on his account), repentance hasn't the power to suspend (punishment), Yom Kippur hasn't the power to atone and suffering hasn't the power to cleanse, rather all of them hang suspended and death (eventually) cleanses...*

*What is (considered) desecrating G-d's Name? ...Rabbi Yochanan said (by way of example): "if I were to walk four steps without (studying) Torah and without (wearing) tefilin."*<sup>16</sup>

Is spending a few short moments without Torah and tefilin such a serious sin that only a death preceded by repentance, Yom Kippur and suffering can atone? For the average person, of course, these are not so deadly serious (although it can't be said that they're insignificant either). But for a public leader and Torah sage, the act earns a new name: in this case, desecration of G-d's Name.

The sons of Eli, as we've described above, committed sins of only relative severity, but were "accused" of doing much more. It seems reasonable to attribute that to the *effect* of their sins rather than the sins themselves. In fact, the Ralbag (I Shmuel 2; 25) writes that Chofni and Pinchus were later killed (in battle, but through the will of G-d)...

*"...for these sins in order to distance from them (i.e. from Chofni and Pinchus) those (i.e. future priests) who would come afterwards so that the goals of the Torah in the area of sacrifices shouldn't be lost, just as Nadav and Avihu were killed for this reason as we explained on the Chumash."*<sup>17</sup>

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Tanach, according to the Rashbam,<sup>18</sup> is essentially a vehicle for transmitting (by way of hints and the use of hermeneutic rules) the many laws and moral lessons of the Oral Torah. That there is also something to be learnt from the stories' narrative is delicious icing on top of the cake but the simple meaning nevertheless plays only an incidental role to the Torah's main purpose - and that purpose is

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<sup>16</sup> TB Yoma 86a

<sup>17</sup> We might similarly attribute the harsh judgement passed by the Tanach on the sons of Shmuel (I Shmuel 8; 3 - 5. See also our chapter that deals with this whole issue in greater depth) to the *impact* of their acts: Because the people lacked confidence in the ability of Shmuel's sons to successfully lead them as had their father, they prematurely sought to appoint a king. The long-term (if somewhat indirect) results of this included the complete loss of the ten tribes and a serious backslide into paganism.

<sup>18</sup> Commentary of the Rashbam to Chumash, Gen. Ch. 37, verse 2. The Rashbam (Rabbi Shmuel ben R' Meir) was the grandson of Rashi. In this passage, he records a debate he once held with his grandfather on the issue. I came across this Rashbam in *מעין בית שמואל* - commentary to *שמות* ט"ג.

inseparably wrapped up with the Oral Torah.

This thought can greatly soften the apparent clash between the text and the interpretations of Chazal: If the written Torah is essentially “only” a medium of communication for the Oral Torah’s limitless content, then most of what we are meant to learn from it doesn’t *need* to fit in precisely with the narrative and the fact that it generally does is testament to the infinite greatness of the Author.

Whether through careful and caring textual analysis, consideration of larger context, awareness of a particular action’s ultimate impact, or sensitivity to the subtle relationship between the Oral and Written Torah, the tools to achieve greater clarity in Tanach are available. Our job is only to provide all the intelligent and respectful attention needed to open the gates.