

The Royal Prophet: Saul: A Spiritual Giant Stumbles¹

“...And the spirit of G-d will come upon you (Saul) and you will prophesy with them and you will be changed into another man” (I Shmuel 10; 6)

“And the spirit of G-d departed from Saul; and an evil spirit from G-d terrified him.” (I Shmuel 16; 14)

Saul’s transition from private citizen to Israel’s first king seems to have included a sudden elevation to the status of prophet. Why? Wasn’t his personally-achieved greatness (see I Shmuel 9; 2) enough? Didn’t kings and prophets represent two separate institutions, aspiring to two separate (if parallel) goals?

And what about the cost? We will soon see that it was his meteoric spiritual leap that contributed to Saul’s later instability. Prophecy, like all things worth having, comes with great risks. What was the greater good that justified that risk?

Perhaps examining what we know about prophecy in general will help put Saul’s many accomplishments and eventual failure² in some context.

The Road to Prophecy:

G-d doesn’t talk to just anyone. Judaism emphatically teaches that prophecy will only come to a man or woman who has worked long and hard to eliminate character failings and to develop a singular and all-consuming focus on the Divine aspects of life.³

Maimonides writes:⁴

“Among the religious fundamentals one should know (is) that G-d gives prophecy to human beings. But the prophecy does not come except upon a man of great wisdom, powerful in his character, whose inclination does not overpower him in any worldly matters, rather, with his knowledge, he controls his inclination constantly....”

The Talmud⁵ describes the step-by-step process needed to approach the holiness and intensity demanded for prophecy:

“(the study of) Torah brings (a person) to (the exercise of) caution, caution brings to zealotness, zealotness brings to cleanliness, cleanliness brings to abstinence, abstinence brings to purity, purity brings to piety, piety brings to humility, humility brings to fear of sin and fear of sin brings

¹ From the book “The Royal Prophet and other thoughtful essays on the book of Shmuel” by Boruch Clinton. www.marbitz.com.

² It would be a terrible mistake to label Saul a *general* failure. He was a truly great man who achieved truly great things in both his private and public lives. Exactly where our first king fell short will be discussed in this chapter, but his many accomplishments have, no doubt, glorious echoes in Jewish life even to our own day.

³ See TB Shabbos 113b where the verse “give to the wise man and he will become still wiser” (Proverbs 9) is applied to Shmuel, implying that his initial wisdom led, at least in part, to his ascension to prophecy.

Bila’am (see Numbers, chapter 22), however, was to a certain extent an exception to this rule. Nevertheless, while he had achieved no distinction in divine service, he did climb to significant intellectual heights and was thereby a useful tool in G-d’s overall plan for the world.

⁴ Mishna Torah, Yesodei HaTorah, Chapter 7; paragraph 1

⁵ See Yerushalmi Shekalim 3; 3, TB Avodah Zarah 20b and other sources. Since there are more than a few possible versions of the exact order, I have used that of the Mesilas Yesharim - possibly the best known. This general discussion can be found in Rabbi Gershon Weiss’ book, Samson’s Struggle.

to holiness.”

The small but enormously influential work, Mesilas Yesharim,⁶ uses this structure as the backbone of an exhaustive regimen for self-demanding spiritual growth. With each step, the reader is shown an increasingly difficult and lofty level of G-dliness. One cannot realistically expect to complete the course in a normal lifetime. Tradition has it that even the Gaon of Vilna reached only the third level of the Mesilas Yesharim’s program.

And yet the final step, holiness, is still one step below that needed for prophecy.

From this we can clearly see that reaching the level of Divine revelation is not a job for a quiet summer afternoon but the result of a lifetime of energetic effort.⁷

And guidance too. In the Tanach we see reference to groups of students called “bnei hanevi’im” (literally: sons of the prophets - see, for example, II Kings, 2; 3). It seems that there were many Jews throughout the nation’s early generations who attached themselves as disciples to acknowledged prophets so as to emulate their success.

Even once one has reached his goal, according to the Talmud, actual prophecy was not assured.

“the Divine presence didn’t rest on a person (in a mood of) depression, laziness, laughter, light-headedness...or (unnecessary) speech but only in the midst of the joy of (performing) a mitzvah.”⁸

“Anyone who becomes arrogant, if he is a wise man, his wisdom will leave him if he is a prophet, his prophecy will leave him...anyone who becomes angry, if he is a wise man, his wisdom will leave him if he is a prophet, his prophecy will leave him...”⁹

Ignorance, lack of self-control, poor character and even a bad mood will each prevent the revelation of G-d’s presence. It may be assumed, then, that the many prophets mentioned in Tanach - including Saul - rose above *all* of these failings.

Living With Prophecy:

What was the purpose of prophecy? That depends on which prophet we’re discussing. The message of Moshe was the direct, word-for-word dictation of G-d and forms the total content of the Five Books. The authenticity of the Written Torah rests entirely on the perfect accuracy of that direct transmission. Moshe’s prophecy, therefore, forms the very foundation of Judaism.¹⁰

But what about the others?

“The rabbis taught: 48 prophets and seven prophetesses prophesied to the Jews... Was that all?... (We learn that) many prophets stood (and prophesied to) the Jews; double those that came out of Egypt.”¹¹ Rather, prophecies needed for (all) generations were written down (in Tanach), those that were not needed, were not written down.”¹²

So we see that words of those 55 prophets recorded in Tanach hold eternal importance. Some were written as a warning to us not to repeat the mistakes of our ancestors, some as inspiration to grow closer to G-d and others to give us hope in the eventual redemption.

But we also see that there were countless other prophets and countless other prophecies. Their role was to change the immediate world in which they then lived. How?

⁶ “Path of the Just” by the 18th Century scholar Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato.

⁷ There was a time, obviously, when this level of spiritual accomplishment was relatively common - in the age of prophecy.

⁸ TB Shabbos 30b

⁹ TB Pesachim 66b

¹⁰ For a discussion of the uniqueness of Moshe’s prophecy, see Maimonides’ Mishnah Torah, Yesodei HaTorah chapter 7, paragraph 6.

¹¹ i.e., double the 600,000 men between the ages of 20 and 60 who were counted as having left with the Exodus. It is possible that this number is given by the Talmud as a calculated exaggeration to emphasize the point and may not be literal. For a discussion of exaggeration in the Talmud, see the Essay on Aggados by Rabbi Avraham ben HaRambam printed at the beginning of sefer Ayn Yakov.

¹² TB Megilla 14a

*“It is possible that a prophecy (is intended) for the prophet himself to widen his heart and to add to his knowledge that which he does not already know....And it is (also) possible that he was sent (for the benefit of) a particular nation or for the people of a city...to teach them what to do or what to avoid doing...”*¹³

Beyond that, G-d would send prophets to provide assistance even for individuals. The Talmud relates that prophets would “tell the Jews what was in the cracks and crevices.”¹⁴ From the textual context of these words, we see that a Jew would often turn to a prophet for help in resolving many types of problems; if there was a doubt of ownership or guilt hanging on some hidden detail or disputed event, a prophecy could bring the case to a quick end.

Saul himself, when he’d lost his donkeys, accepted the suggestion to “visit the man of G-d” - meaning Shmuel - to ask which way they should search (I Shmuel 9; 6). Now it might be true that this particular chain of events was contrived by G-d to bring the future king into contact with his mentor, and that the specific request for directions wasn’t something Saul might normally have put to a prophet,¹⁵ nevertheless, the event does suggest that using a prophet in such a way wasn’t especially unusual.

A prophet would also have provided valuable advice concerning many of life’s problems. This might be the intention behind the wording of the eleventh blessing of the amidah: “Return our judges as in the old days and our advisors as originally....” Might not the authors of the siddur, the men of the Great Assembly - who were active in just that period of history which saw the last prophets - have used the word “advisors” to refer to prophets?

Perhaps most of all, though, the prophet was sent to rebuke. More than one prophet was killed and many (or all) of them suffered terrible mistreatment at the hands of those who were disturbed by G-d’s unsettling message. But many, many were the Jews woken from spiritual slumbers and brought back to spiritual life by the prophets.

Theirs was a society that didn’t openly tolerate injustice, corruption and immorality. If there was sin, it was generally hidden away behind closed doors. Israel of that era was a better place. It has been argued¹⁶ that the general inability to accept properly delivered rebuke was one of the very causes for the suspension of prophecy: why bother if it won’t have much effect?

But perhaps prophecy has one more goal and perhaps this goal might be wrapped up with G-d’s plan for the monarchy....

Saul As Prophet:

The Jewish monarchy has been described as an earthly extension of G-d’s heavenly rule. A Jewish king might well lead his people to war, impose a unifying system of laws and practices upon his people and make the kinds of decisions all governments make, but he is first and foremost a Torah-leader. He is to bring the Divine Torah down to his subjects and to bring his subjects up to G-d.

A successful Jewish king, Rabbi E. Dessler¹⁷ writes, rules neither through the force of his personality nor his sword. Instead, he works to teach all of his subjects to recognize on their own that G-d is the true King of all the world and that a man’s success and happiness come only when he immerses himself in Divine service. It is, however, only through eyes brightened by Divine inspiration that a king can “see” the spiritual greatness hidden in each of his subjects and in everything in his kingdom. Only when he “sees” this potential, can he properly work for its realization.

¹³ Maimonides’ Mishnah Torah Yesodei HaTorah chapter 7, paragraph 7

¹⁴ TB Yoma 75a

¹⁵ The Da’as Sofrim suggests that G-d might have specifically wanted Saul anointed by way of a seemingly trivial and embarrassing event to stress His reluctance to give the Jews a king too early in their national history.

¹⁶ Rabbi Avigdor Miller

¹⁷ Michtav M’Eliyahu, volume 3, page 22. Rabbi Dessler here draws on the writings of the Maharal and others.

Perhaps this, then, is the point where prophecy and monarchy intersect.¹⁸

In the case of King Saul, however, the Da'as Sofrim suggests that it was the very exposure to prophecy that triggered his collapse!

“And it was that all who had known (Saul) previously and saw that, behold, he was prophesying with the prophets, and the people said, one man to his fellow, ‘what is (happening) to the son of Kish? Is Saul also among the prophets?’” (I Shmuel 10; 11)

That was the incredulous (not to mention disrespectful) popular response to the quick spiritual rise of the new king. Saul was not a young man (probably close to fifty) when he became king. Even if they recognized his humility and Torah knowledge, those who had known him all along could perhaps be forgiven for their surprise at his sudden rise to prophecy: after all, they had missed many of the intervening steps.

And so had Saul. For Saul had been rushed into prophecy, skipping past the normal preparatory levels. Notice the great speed with which huge changes fell upon the simple, humble and private farmer: Within hours or perhaps minutes, he was transformed from a man searching for his donkeys to the king-elect of Israel. That very same day he underwent a complete makeover:

“And it was when he turned his shoulder to go from Shmuel, and G-d switched for him a new heart...” (I Shmuel 10; 9)

A short time later, there would be an even greater change, as Shmuel had predicted:

“And the spirit of G-d will fall upon you and you will prophesy with them, and you will be changed to a different man.” (I Shmuel 10; 6)

The Jews wanted a king. Their first king, at the very least, had to possess that special ability to “see” things through G-d’s eyes. Therefore, Saul *had* to become a prophet. Right then.

But growth quickly and “easily” attained is growth in danger of being quickly lost. The Da’as Sofrim maintains that the abrupt changes in his life actually helped to destabilize Saul when things began going bad.

“And the spirit of G-d departed from Saul; and an evil spirit from G-d terrified him.” (I Shmuel 16; 14)

The Da’as Sofrim observes that the terror and evil spirit came specifically *from* G-d. Why should G-d want Saul terrorized? Wouldn’t that place him in still greater risk? Perhaps the distress was meant to amplify Saul’s own fears for the nation and concerns about his own performance - and thereby help him work harder to become an even greater inspiration. But these fears could, if not properly managed, also serve to confuse the king’s proper judgment. To an extent, and at some times more than others, Saul became incapable of calmly and logically assessing potential dangers; most notably, those presented by his son-in-law David.

“And it was the next morning and a spirit of G-d that was evil fell upon Saul and he prophesied within the house...” (I Shmuel 18; 10)

“...words of hints that weren’t clear.” (Rashi)

What was this prophecy? We can only guess at its contents and wonder how much was garbled prophecy and how much simply mad ravings. But the possibility strongly suggests itself¹⁹ that the tone was one of deep foreboding and fear and that, somehow, David was singled out as a possible cause of that fear.

Saul must have wondered what horrible fate awaited his beloved nation and whether this strange²⁰ man, David, was somehow behind it.

¹⁸ In addition, I would venture to suggest that Saul, specifically, stood to gain from prophecy: the humility that helped make Saul great - but that eventually contributed to his downfall (see I Shmuel, 15; 17) - might have been tempered by the intensely elevating experience of prophecy.

¹⁹ Da’as Sofrim. Other commentaries consider this whole “prophecy” to have been from physical and not divine sources.

²⁰ See the chapter “David: Through Critical Eyes” for a discussion of how David must have appeared to many around him.

So Saul had to be king...Jews demanded it and their G-d gave in. The foundation-building king had to be a prophet...the job demanded it and Saul's G-d "broke the rules" to make him one. But the nation had gambled and, in the end, they lost the bet.