

HAFTORAH FOR SHABBOS EREV ROSH CHODESH

SHABBOS “MOCHOR CHODESH” — “מחר חודש”

This Haftorah is read on the Shabbos which precedes a Sunday which is the First Day of Rosh Chodesh. The Haftorah is taken from the First Book of Shmuel, Chapter 20, verses 18 — 42

1. When our Chachommim instituted the reading of the Haftorah, they decided that they would also utilize this public reading to inform or remind the Jewish People of various upcoming events in the Jewish calendar. This Haftorah is a good example of this. By reading this Haftorah, which starts off with the Possuk, “Yonoson said to Dovid, ‘Tomorrow is Rosh Chodesh ...’” everyone is reminded that tomorrow, Sunday, is Rosh Chodesh.

2. After the period of leadership of the Jewish People by Yehoshua and then the Elders, the people had asked Shmuel HaNovvi for a king. In response, HaShem chose the first Jewish king, Shaul, and he was anointed by Shmuel. At the time of his crowning, King Shaul was the most righteous leader of the whole Nation and was the perfect figurehead, a true example of living Torah to all. If he had a fault, it was that he was too humble and therefore did not always assert himself as king and in fact, this did cause him to stumble twice in his career as King. The first time was when he should have stood self-assuredly firm but instead allowed himself to be pressured to start the battle against the Plishtim without waiting for Shmuel, as he had been told to do. The second time was after he had successfully waged war against Ammolayk and taken their king captive alive, together with a great number of sheep and cattle that the people intended to bring as Korbonnos — but HaShem has commanded the utter destruction of Ammolayk and everything connected with them. Once again, instead of Shaul standing up to the people, he humbly gave way to their wishes and allowed Aggag to live and Ammolayk to survive. After this second offence, Shmuel told him in the Name of HaShem, not only would Shaul’s kingship not continue through his descendants, but even he personally would no longer be king.

3. And so the kingship was taken from Shaul. The ריח הקודש, the Divine Spirit, which had guided him as king, left him. We can well understand that a person who has merited the Divine Spirit but then has it taken from him will experience a terrible loss of closeness with HaShem. This is what happened with Shaul, who indeed was smitten with deep depression and a dark melancholia with a violent hatred toward the one chosen by HaShem to take his place as king, Shaul’s own son-in-law, Dovid.

4. Matters were made worse by some of the unsavoury characters who surrounded Shaul and who helped to stir up the animosity and suspicions of Shaul concerning Dovid. They could so easily have eased the troubled king’s mind and placated his troubled spirit. But there will always be such nasty people who will place their own interests before anything else, who would even put another’s life in danger so as to protect their positions of power. It was because of these scheming troublemakers, too, that there

was distrust and intrigue at the royal court of Shaul and such real and grave danger to Dovid. Sad to say, some of these people were even very learned in Torah (one of them, Do'eg, was even Head of the Sanhedrin for a time) and this lent a certain credence to their advice to the king. But our Chachommim, of blessed memory, point out that even though these people had Torah, they had no fear of Heaven and they tell us that this shows that a person who has Torah but is without fear of Heaven is hateful indeed, for a person with Torah but without fear of Heaven — “a carcass is better than he.”

5. And yet, between the bouts of his mental illness, Shaul loved his son-in-law and readily acknowledged his goodness and righteousness. But eventually Dovid came to the sad realization that Shaul's unstable mental condition meant that it was dangerous to be near Shaul. This Haftorah describes one such episode.
6. Yonoson, son of Shaul, was a man of great noble character, a true son of his righteous father. He accepted that he would never be king after his father, for HaShem had decreed that Dovid, his brother-in-law, who came from the kingly Tribe of Yehudah, shall be the next king. Despite this, the two were very close friends and Shaul's violent hatred of Dovid saddened Yonoson greatly. Could Dovid rely on Shaul's solemn promise not to harm him when he was obviously unwell?
7. Dovid needed to know whether or not it was safe to return to the palace. “Tomorrow is Rosh Chodesh,” said Yonoson to Dovid. “As the king's son-in-law, you are expected to be at the Rosh Chodesh feast. If my father quietly accepts your absence then we can assume that he has no evil intent against you. If, however, he shows anger at your absence, then we will have to assume that he is angry because he intended to do you harm.” The two of them arranged a signal that would inform Dovid of what transpires at the banquet.
8. Sadly, the fears of Dovid were realized when the next day, Shaul, in an angry outburst, publicly demanded the reason for Dovid's absence from the table. His violent temper increased dangerously even against his own son when Yonoson tried to defend his friend. Yonoson knew then that his father would never be reconciled with Dovid and that Dovid's life was indeed in real danger.
9. Yonoson left the palace, sad and angry. As arranged between them, Yonoson went to the field where Dovid was hiding and ostensibly occupied himself with archery practice. The young servant lad who accompanied Yonoson, quite oblivious to the signal being communicated, responded to the called instructions of Yonoson. (“The arrow is close to you!” meaning to Dovid, who was hidden but within earshot, that it is safe to stay close; “The arrows are further away” meaning to Dovid that he must flee away.) Eventually, Yonoson told the boy to go back to the town with the retrieved arrows.
10. Dovid then came out of hiding and the two friends embraced in a sad farewell, not knowing when they would meet again, if ever, and promising to each other that their friendship shall last and continue even to their descendants. Indeed, the friendship of Dovid and Yonoson is held up for us by our Chachommim as the epitome of a pure and genuine friendship, not dependent on anything physical or material but simply based on the great qualities and nobility and goodness that each saw in the other.