

New Perspectives
Beth Shalom Cambridge
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“Perspective” is a word that we use to describe an important technique of painting, introduced in the Renaissance, which allows the artist to create the illusion of *depth* on a flat canvas. When we look at such a painting, we have the feeling of moving from a two-dimensional to a three dimensional scene, and therefore understanding what is depicted more fully.

Perspective is also used with regard to narratives of literature and of history. Do you remember the Tom Stoppard play and film, “Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern are Dead”? These were two of the most minor characters in *Hamlet*, and the narrative is presented from their perspective. I remember one scene where the two of them are heatedly arguing over a totally trivial point, while in the background, Hamlet is pacing back and forth muttering to himself, “To be or not to be, that is the question,” to which they are totally oblivious. From the perspective of Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern, the most celebrated soliloquy in English literature never occurred.

One of the clearest examples is of course the 1950 Kurosawa motion picture “Rashomon”, in which we are exposed to a narrative of a heinous crime, but that narrative is then followed by three other perspectives on the event, which undercut every certainty we have about its dynamics. This obviously raises serious issues with regard to a legal process that often relies on witnesses who may have very different perspectives on an event, yet needs to come to a conclusion about what actually happened and why.

Historical narrative may involve perspective as well. Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address begins evoking the time in July 1776, when “our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” I vividly recall more than 40 years ago hearing the Rev Martin Luther King on the radio giving a speech in which he said, “This is a nation conceived in *genocide*, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are *not* created equal.” That was shattering to me, because it dramatized new perspectives on my country: the perspective of the native populations of North America, and the population of African slaves.

Today those of us on the left wing of the political spectrum pertaining to Israel frequently talk of the importance of hearing, understanding, and taking seriously the Palestinian perspective of the events of late 1947 and 1948, a narrative very different from the dominant Zionist narrative we grew up with, which they call the *Nakba*, the catastrophe. I would argue that proper understanding of any historical event requires trying to analyse a specific narrative from an alternative perspective.

Well today, I would like to introduce new perspectives to familiar material, beginning with our Haftarah, 1 Samuel 15. I want to suggest that the text we heard is from one perspective, highly sympathetic to Samuel. If I were teaching this chapter in a course on the history of the biblical period, I would ask students to re-write the chapter from a new perspective: the perspective Saul, the recently anointed King of the Israelite tribes. Let's give it a try.

First, Saul hears Samuel bearing a message from God: go to war against the Amalekites, slay men and women, children and infants, and all of their animals. Can we imagine Saul asking himself something like the following: "Is that really what God wants me to do? If so, why did he not communicate that to me directly? Do I need to rely on Samuel for decisions about serious matters such as leading our soldiers in an aggressive war? And the *mass murder*, including women and children: that seems rather extreme, in response to something done by their ancestors 250 years earlier. Is that really what God said? What if Samuel misunderstood what God wants? But—he is the one who anointed me; I'd better not question him at this point.

And then, somewhat later: "The military operation was totally successful; I succeeded in moulding these tribal militias into the beginnings of an Israelite army. I did, however, depart from Samuel's instructions in two respects. I spared the Amalekite king, whose name was Agag. I don't like the idea that in time of war, the king of an enemy country can be killed not on the battlefield, but as a prisoner. That's not a precedent that I or indeed any king would like to establish.

"And secondly, I spared the best of the enemy's animals, in response to the desires of the soldiers who had fought bravely for me. These soldiers wanted to take the best animals and bring them to the shrine at Gilgal, to offer them as a sacrifice of thanksgiving to God. That made good sense to me; requiring them to kill every last animal, leaving nothing for a sacrifice, seemed pointless and irrational.

"And now Samuel comes to me with another message from God. He claims that God has changed His mind about me, thinks it was a mistake to have appointed me King, despite this glorious victory over the former enemies of our people, because I departed in these few details from the instructions that Samuel gave me.

"When I tried to explain my rationale, Samuel replied, "Behold, to *obey* is better than sacrifice, to *comply* better than offering the fat of rams" (1 Sam 15:22). Well, if I were absolutely certain that it was obedience and compliance to God, I would agree. But what Samuel really seems to be saying is that I have to obey *him*, Samuel, that *he* is the only one entitled to hear what God wants and communicate it to me. It looks as if he wants to leave me no discretion of my own, even in military matters. This is a dangerous pattern for any king—to allow another leader to have first and final say in articulating what God wants. That's not a kingdom, it's a theocracy, except

that it's not clear to me that God is actually ruling, but rather that Samuel is ruling, claiming that it is on God's behalf.

"And his final message to me, after I apologized and repented for what seemed to me the right decision. Yet Samuel says that God has "torn the kingship" from me and given it to someone else! Is that not that *lèse majesté*? Isn't it high treason? And his final act, taking a sword and personally hacking the Amalekite king Agag to death. Is that the way a man of God should behave?

"I'm afraid that bad times are ahead."

This, as I say is a different perspective on our Haftarah, one departing from the fundamentalist reading that accepts every biblical *report* of what God says as decisive evidence that this is indeed what God actually said. I believe that the new perspective helps us to understand that the issues at stake in this chapter were significantly more complex than the simple reading would suggest.

Let's now look at one more perspective: the *Amalekite* narrative. Imagine King Agag in prison. "My people were indeed responsible for attacking some of the Israelites more than 200 years ago. I don't know the details; it seems clear that these were the stragglers, so weak that the Israelite army did not think it was worthwhile protecting them. But for the past 10 generations, we have lived in peace. Not in friendship, but in peace. Suddenly, without warning and without explanation, a massive attack by the army led by their new king. Violating every traditional principle of proper conduct, they slaughtered not only our soldiers, not only our men, but our women and children, even tiny infants. And who knows how long my own life will be protected.

"My one consolation is that my son, Agag Jr., is away with his wife and children studying at the University of Shushan in Assyria, and that they are all safe from this massacre. I pray to the god of the Amalek that some day they may take vengeance on this people who showed no mercy upon us."

And let's take a further step of the imagination: that Agag Jr. received reports of what happened, including the brutal murder of his father while a prisoner by a man named Samuel. Changing his name to Agag II, he decided to remain in the lands of the Fertile Crescent rather than returning to the site of the catastrophe for his people. And let's imagine that Agag II taught his children the following words: "*Zakhor et asher asah lekha Yisrael*, remember what Israel did to you, when unprovoked they went to war against our people, and slaughtered men, women and children. Blot out the memory of Israel from under the heavens, do not forget."

And the children of Agag II taught these words to their children, and so forth down through the generations, during which Assyria and Babylonia were conquered and Shushan, or Susa, became the capital of the new Persian Empire. Until there was a child named Haman, the son of Hammedatha the

Agagite, a direct descendant of King Agag, who grew up hearing these words at least twice every year: *Zakhor*, Remember what Israel did to you . . . Blot out the memory of Israel from under the heaven, do not forget”. And when this child reached full maturity, and had a position of influence in the royal court of Persia, he realized that he had an opportunity to fulfil this injunction that he thought to be a sacred responsibility, a commandment from his God.

A new perspective on the narrative in the Book of Esther that we will read and hear tonight. Is this just *Purim Toyrah*, a half serious mockery of traditional texts in the spirit of Purim fun? No, I would suggest that there are serious issues raised by these narratives. And that new perspectives can enrich our understanding.