

Dr. Michelle Friedman is an Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at Mount Sinai Medical Center in New York City and the Chair of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School's Department of Pastoral Counseling.

## A CASE OF UNUSUAL HOSPITALITY: SAMUEL, SAUL, AND THE WITCH OF EIN DOR<sup>1</sup> Michelle Friedman, M.D.

Towards the end of I Samuel (28:1-25), the tragic descent of King Saul is interrupted by the mysterious and touching story of his visit to the witch of Ein Dor. The narrative prompts an exploration into the role of hospitality earlier in *Tanakh* and invites the reader to compare the meal described in I Samuel 28 with other great biblical meals of welcome. Yet why does the text cast a female witch as the heroine of the story? Furthermore, how might the reader interpret the story of Saul's visit to the hospitable witch of Ein Dor in the larger context of *Tanakh*?

To briefly review, the story begins after the death of the prophet Samuel, a time of spiraling crisis for King Saul. Saul's earlier failure to eradicate all of Amalek as commanded resulted in complete estrangement from his mentor, Samuel. Contemporaneous with formal mourning of Samuel's death, Saul banishes all mediums and witches in his domain but then, in the face of imminent battle with the Philistines, becomes frantic with terror. Failing to get any sign of contact with God, Saul disguises himself and journeys to Ein Dor to consult the reluctant witch. Saul's encounter with the spirit of his dead mentor unfolds into a worsening nightmare. Samuel's first words rebuke the distraught Saul for disturbing the dead prophet's rest. Samuel goes on to foretell a series of devastating events: the forthcoming battle will be disastrous, and Saul, together with his sons, will die. Hearing this news in his already depleted state, Saul loses all hope and falls to the floor:

At once Saul flung himself prone on the ground, terrified by Samuel's words. Besides, there was no strength in him, for he had not eaten anything all day and all night. (I Sam. 28:20)<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> All biblical translations are from *Tanakh: A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures According to the Traditional Hebrew Text* (Philadelphia & Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society,

Suddenly, the action shifts to a detailed description of tender, yet firm, hospitality extended by the witch:

The woman went up to Saul and, seeing how greatly disturbed he was, she said to him, “Your handmaid listened to you; I took my life in my hands and heeded the request you made of me. So now you listen to me: Let me set before you a bit of food. Eat, and then you will have the strength to go on your way.” He refused, saying, “I will not.” But when his courtiers as well as the woman urged him, he listened to them; he got up from the ground and sat on the bed. (I Sam. 28:21-23)

Taking charge of the situation, she prepares an elaborate menu of dressed calf and freshly baked bread and commands the unwilling king to eat:

The woman had a stall-fed calf in the house; she hastily slaughtered it, and took flour and kneaded it, and baked some unleavened cakes. She set this before Saul and his courtiers, and they ate. Then they rose and left the same night. (I Sam. 28:24-25)

Saul obeys, regains some strength, and exits. Though he will die the next day, he will fall with dignity, a king in battle.

Stories of hospitality occur frequently in *Tanakh* and, like other repeated motifs, invite interpretation. At a most basic level, providing nourishment is the starting point for welcoming strangers and creating relationship. True hospitality implies acceptance of otherness and affirms the core value of shared humanity. The openhearted host serves before asking questions. This is demonstrated in what is perhaps the most famous of biblical meals of welcome in which Abraham, despite the pain of his recent circumcision, together with his wife Sarah, hurries to prepare a meal of bread and calf meat for the three visitors at Mamreh:

Looking up, he saw three men standing near him. As soon as he saw them, he ran from the entrance of the tent to greet them and, bowing to the ground, he said, “My lords, if it please you, do not go on past your servant. Let a little water be brought; bathe your feet and recline under the tree. And let me fetch a morsel of bread that you may refresh yourselves; then go on – seeing that you have come your servant’s way.” They replied, “Do as you have said.” Abraham hastened into the tent of Sarah, and said, “Quick, three *se’ahs* of choice flour! Knead and make cakes!” Then Abraham ran to the herd, took a calf, tender and choice, and gave it to a servant-boy, who hastened to prepare

it. He took curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared and set these before them; and he waited on them under the tree as they ate. (Gen. 18:2-8)

Abraham's spontaneous hospitality finds a skewed echo in Genesis 19:3 where his nephew Lot prepares a feast for the two angels visiting Sodom. Lot's generosity goes awry when he tries to placate the depraved mob outside his door clamoring for the guests. By offering them his daughters, Lot makes his children into commodities and perverts hospitality. Judges 19 reprises the story of Lot where in the incident of the concubine thrown to the rabble at Gibeah—once again, misplaced hospitality leads to vicious brutality.

In contrast, the striking similarity of specific foods and the string of action verbs used in the narratives of Mamreh and Ein-Dor suggest that the witch's ministrations follow in the admirable tradition of Abraham's unambivalent generosity. The situation at Ein-Dor is desperate. Saul, at the nadir of his life, desperately needs guidance and tenderness. He is utterly lost without Samuel, the stern prophet who plucked young Saul from the simple life of a shepherd, made him Israel's first king, and then abandoned him.

Samuel's background and his development as a prophet inform the kind of mentorship he provides to Saul as king. Samuel comes by his harsh and unforgiving nature honestly. His mother Hanah, in fulfillment of her vow, left him with the high priest Eli when little Samuel is newly weaned. She visits him but yearly, bringing her son a coat at pilgrimage time, and then returns home to care for her other five children.

Samuel's first call to prophecy comes in boyhood when he hears God saying his name twice. The classic divine double call followed by young Samuel's response "*Hineni*"—"here I am"—alerts the reader that an event of monumental importance in *Tanakh* is taking place. At this moment, when God calls to Samuel, the institution of the prophet is established. As God recedes from direct communication with humankind, the prophets serve the emerging nation as religious and moral compass, advising, rebuking, and inspiring the people and their kings.

Prophecy exacts a terrible toll on Samuel. At the beginning, and then again at the end of his lonely life with Saul, Samuel has to tell a man whom he loves that he and his sons will perish.

The Lord said to Samuel: "I am going to do in Israel such a thing that both ears of anyone who hears about it will tingle. In that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I spoke concerning his house, from beginning to end. And I declare to him that I sentence his house to endless punishment for the iniquity he knew about – how his sons committed sacrilege at will – and he did not rebuke them." (I Sam. 3:11-13)

“Further, the Lord will deliver the Israelites who are with you [Saul] into the hands of the Philistines. Tomorrow your sons and you will be with me; and the Lord will deliver the Israelite forces into the hands of the Philistines.” (I Sam. 28:19)

Samuel’s first prophetic assignment comes at excruciating cost. He must tell his surrogate father Eli that the high priest will be destroyed together with his sinful sons. Aside from his bearing the pain of Eli’s delinquent children, Samuel also must face the impact of his own two sons’ corrupt lives, which prompts the people’s demand for a new form of leadership—the Israelite nation wants a king (I Sam. 8:1-5). Samuel reluctantly searches out and anoints Saul and comes to care for him so deeply that, when the time comes, God has to shake the prophet out of mourning over his failed monarch Saul in order that Samuel install a new king in his stead (I Sam. 16:1). Samuel dutifully obeys. He selects David, anoints him, and then effectively exits the text. Without Samuel’s direction, however, Saul unravels completely—and so we find him collapsed on the floor at Ein Dor.

Whether the reader believes that the apparition conjured at Ein Dor was truly the spirit of the dead prophet or rather a deception perpetrated by a masterful illusionist, Saul is devastated by the encounter. Enter the witch. Up to this point in the story, she has been in the background, serving to procure Samuel for the distraught Saul. She now moves into center stage as a principal actor. Her character takes on a whole new dimension—counterbalancing Samuel’s scathing rejection with a diametrically opposite manner—of compassionate hospitality. This arresting juxtaposition of the nameless witch with the great prophet Samuel dominates the scene.

But why a witch? Why does a woman sorceress who should be in exile along with her banished peers appear in King Saul’s darkest hour to offer him food and comfort? Perhaps only a character entirely different from Samuel could take on the challenge of contradicting the prophet’s stern dictate. The witch of Ein Dor, as a woman and as a practitioner of the dark arts, meets ample criteria that establish her outsider status *vis-à-vis* the power base of early Israel. First, as a woman, she assumes a familiar role as facilitator. Women in *Tanakh* typically serve as conduits for insight and understanding and are often portrayed as having an ability to perceive important meanings in private surroundings and then translate their wisdom into the action sphere. Sarah, for example, sets the banishment of Hagar into motion; Rebecca determines which blessings will go to each of her twin sons; and so on.

The second striking feature of the hostess of Ein Dor’s identity that sets her beyond the normative pale is her profession. Witches are the most marginalized of women. Throughout classical literature, witches are single females. No man neutralizes her power or controls her, but at the same time, she has no chil-

dren.<sup>3</sup> Witches typically live on the outskirts of the community and are feared by regular citizens. The witch of Ein Dor is sufficiently disconnected from the people and traditions of Israel that she can call Samuel's final methods into question. Her straightforward speech and unhesitant food preparation challenge the prophet's rejection of Saul. She not only feeds the defeated king bread and meat, she absorbs his fear and extends hope. Her mission is to bolster Saul's failing spirit and to help him complete his kingly trajectory.

The books of I and II Samuel introduce prophecy and monarchy. From Genesis onward, biblical narrative develops literary cycles of creation, destruction and revision. The creation of the world is followed by the flood after which the pattern repeats in the re-creation of the world by the inhabitants of Noah's ark. The patriarchs go back and forth between Israel and Egypt, each journey adding experience and wisdom to the individual and collective community that will become Israel. *Tanakh* traces the spiraling religious and moral development of humankind as well. Stories of conflict and resolution between parents and children and between siblings illustrate the progressive evolution of a family, tribe, and nation.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, God's presence becomes more hidden. As God retreats from direct communication with mankind, prophecy arises to guide the fledgling people.

Samuel and Saul are the first prophet-king dyad. Their partnership produces greatness but also tragic misery; it is a template for a relationship that requires further development. When Saul spares the Amelekite king Agag, along with the best spoils, he demonstrates a misplaced notion of compassion. When Saul compounds his sin of disobedience by shirking responsibility for his action, he further confirms that he is inadequate to be king. Samuel, on the other hand, in refusing Saul's effort at repentance, displays a different failure of compassion. The prophet lacks tolerance for human imperfection. Rather than support the vulnerable king whom he created, Samuel abandons Saul, his protégé.

The witch of Ein Dor, however, has no investment in Saul. Outsider that she is, the witch models a critical value: compassion. Saul, after all, was God's chosen king. He should not end his life crawling out of a witch's hut or dying on the floor. Recall that Saul descends from the tribe of Benjamin whose mother, Rachel, also possesses a passionate and sometimes desperate nature that leans over the normative edge. In her frantic attempts to bear children, she makes a deal to borrow her sister's presumably fertility-enhancing mandrakes and then later ignites Jacob's wrath by charging him with the double responsibility of her infertility and her mortality, "Give me children or else I will die" (Gen. 30:1). Finally, while preparing to leave her father's house, Rachel steals Laban's

<sup>3</sup> Shaul Stampfer, "How Jewish Society Adapted to Change in Male/Female Relationships by 19<sup>th</sup>/ Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Eastern Europe" (paper presented at Orthodox Forum, New York, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Devora Steinmetz, *From Father to Son: Kinship, Conflict, and Continuity in Genesis* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991).

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idols, the *teraphim*. She dies giving birth to Saul's ancestor, Benjamin, and is buried *ba-derekh*, on the road, to Efrat: "Thus Rachel died. She was buried on the road to Ephrath—now Bethlehem" (Gen. 35:19).

The witch of Ein Dor feeds and comforts Saul in his worst hour, giving him the strength to go on his way, "*ba-derekh*" (I Sam. 28:22). In using this word, the witch recognizes the mythological connection between Saul and his ancestress, Rachel. Neither for Rachel nor Saul is death the end of their legacy. Both characters evoke poignant feelings despite, or even because of, their flawed humanity. Rachel stirs deep love as an eternal protective mother of Israel, and her descendant, Saul, retains nobility as the first king of Israel.

In making a meal and consoling Saul with her own hands, the witch also reminds the reader of Hanah's tender act of bringing a home-made coat to her little son Samuel when she made her annual pilgrimage to the high priest. The unusual hospitality demonstrated by the witch of Ein Dor teaches us that in a most desperate hour, compassion has a special place. The spark of hope kindled by simple, direct kindness can revive the spirits of nobles and commoners alike, and thus allow for the dignity befitting God's creation.