

The Book of Samuel I Chapter 3

Summary: During the night Samuel heard a voice calling his name. He thought Eli wanted something, so he ran to attend him. Yet the voice was not Eli's. This happened a second and third time, after which Eli understood that it was God was calling to Samuel and instructed him to respond. God relayed a prophecy to Samuel which described the downfall of Eli and his family.

A deeper look: Eli had two sons, Chofni and Pinchas who were responsible for carrying out the offerings in the tabernacle. Yet they abused their position of authority by misappropriating more than their fair share of the sacrificial meat (Samuel I 2:12-17) and indulging in promiscuity (ibid. 2:22).

There is a Torah command to rebuke those who are breaking Jewish law (Leviticus 19:17). Even though Eli was a righteous man, he was punished for not admonishing his sons in a fitting manner (ibid. 3:13). While this responsibility is restricted to certain individuals and circumstances, Eli was certainly in a position to reprimand his sons.

Yet the previous chapter stated that Eli had indeed rebuked them (ibid. 2:23-25). Rabbi David Kimchi (d. 1235) explained that Eli had initially had the power to stop them much earlier but had waited too long for his words to be effective. Had he done so at the time their behaviour was first reported he could have inspired them to repent.

Rabbi Avraham Sorotzkin explains that Eli did not want to embarrass his sons in public; when a person sins in private, he should be admonished in private, but if the sin is public one must admonish him in public (Rinat Yitzchak on Shmuel I 3:13).

This was a grave mistake on Eli's part due the very public chillul Hashem – desecration of God's name his sons had caused. Their behaviour had brought the religious establishment into disrepute and nothing short of public castigation would suffice to limit the damage. Yet the tragedy would not only leave the young prophet Samuel to take charge of the Tabernacle and lead the Jewish people. An ominous war with the Philistines was brewing, threatening to jeopardise the people and their land.

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