

DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

PARSHAS VAYIKRA

Parshas Zachor – Remembering Amalek

INTRODUCTION: ZACHOR – A TRIP DOWN MEMORY LANE

The Shabbos that precedes Purim is known as *Shabbos Zachor*, named after the Torah reading which tells us to remember how Amalek attacked us when we had just left Egypt. Although we were defenseless at that time and posed no threat to them, Amalek attacked us anyway in an act of pure hatred. The Torah commands us to remember that event and, when the time comes, to wipe out Amalek. The reading of *Zachor* thus constitutes a fulfillment of the Torah mitzvah to “remember Amalek.” Accordingly, the *ba’al koreh* typically takes particular care in enunciating each word of this section clearly and correctly while the congregation pays extra close attention to the reading.¹

AMALEK AND THE PURIM STORY

The reason the Shabbos before Purim was chosen as the time to remember Amalek publicly is because Haman, our arch-enemy in the Purim story who sought our complete destruction, was descended from Amalek. This connection is not merely historical. It means that our confrontation with Haman in the Purim story represented *another chapter* in the ongoing conflict between Amalek and Israel, and that this aspect of the story is intimately bound up with the parallel theme of Jewish survival itself. Indeed, according to the commentators, the reading of the *Megillah* on Purim actually serves two functions:

1. Publicizing the miracle of our salvation.
2. Remembering how Amalek tried to wipe us out — again!²

In other words, reading the *Megillah* represents a Rabbinic expansion on the Torah mitzvah of remembering Amalek. The Torah commands us to remember how Amalek tried to destroy us when we left Egypt, and the Rabbis further commanded us to remember how he was still trying hundreds of years later. This underscores the idea mentioned in the Torah itself that the war with Amalek is one that

1 Although the Sages instituted that the mitzvah be fulfilled once a year through a public Torah reading, the opinion of numerous authorities is that the basic Torah mitzvah can be fulfilled simply by the individual talking about it, and is ongoing in nature (see e.g., *Rambam, Sefer HaMitzvos*, positive mitzvah 189). Indeed, remembering the episode with Amalek is one of the “Six Remembrances” printed in most siddurim after *Shacharis*.

2 Rabbi Leib Mintzberg, *Ben Melech*, pp. 64–65. The Gemara (*Megillah* 3b) places the mitzvah of reading the *Megillah* in the category of *pirumei nisa* — mitzvos whose goal is to publicize a miracle, in this case, the miracle of our salvation. At the same time, the requirement of telling the story specifically through reading the *Megillah* is derived by the Gemara (ibid. 18a) from the verse “כָּתֹב זֶאת זְכוֹרֹן בְּסֵפֶר” — Write this as a remembrance in a book,” which was stated concerning the war with Amalek. This further highlights the presence of these two elements within the mitzvah of reading the *Megillah* (*Ben Melech* ibid.)

continues “from generation to generation.”³

WHY REMEMBER?

The Torah insists that we continually remember what Amalek did to us, expressing this not only as a positive commandment to remember — *zachor* — but also as a negative prohibition not to forget — *lo tishkach*.⁴ The basic reason for the mitzvah is that it is in order to preserve that event in our memory so that when the time comes to wipe Amalek out, we will remember to do so.

Why does Amalek need to be wiped out?

On a national level, Amalek embodies a pure and pathological hatred of the Jewish People. As mentioned above, Amalek attacked us without any possible motive other than the fact that we were there. The Midrash states that there is a “halachah” that Esav hates Yaakov, i.e., it is ingrained in his very nature.⁵ This halachah has been fulfilled with great dedication throughout the ages by Esav’s grandson, Amalek. Indeed, the commentators tell us that any nation or individual who seeks to destroy the Jewish People simply because they exist is a spiritual heir of Amalek and part of his “adopted family.”

TAKING THE WAR TO THE HIGHEST LEVELS

However, there is a deeper level to the mitzvah of remembering Amalek. The Torah states that the war with Amalek exists not just between him and the People of Israel, but also between him and Hashem.⁶ What is the nature of this war?

The verse describes Amalek’s attack on the Jewish People with the words:

אֲשֶׁר קָרָה בְּדַרְךָ

*Who happened upon you on the way.*⁷

Amalek subscribes to the idea that nothing in life is supervised by any higher power; things simply “happen.” When the Jewish People came out of Egypt accompanied by a series of breathtaking miracles, they represented living refutation of Amalek’s credo and hence Amalek attacked them to literally bury the evidence.

We might ask, innocently, why should the existence of the Jewish People provoke such a virulent response from Amalek? If you believe that there is no Divine supervision in the world and a people come along and demonstrate that there is, why not simply change your credo accordingly?

Of course, the answer is that credos don’t work that way. Awareness of Divine supervision and involvement in the world brings with it the notion of accountability to a Higher Power. One can no longer act as he pleases. This idea is unacceptable to Amalek and they are prepared to go to war over it, ironically, with religious dedication. They represent denial in its capacity as an active force.

3 *Shemos* 17:16.

4 See *Devarim* 25:19.

5 *Sifri, parshas Naso*.

6 *Shemos* 17:16.

7 *Devarim* 25:18.

Amalek is not merely a nation of skeptics; if they were, they wouldn't care one way or the other. Denial is not the refusal to recognize something in the *absence* of evidence attesting to its existence; it is the refusal to recognize something in the *presence* of such evidence.

We can learn a great deal about the power of denial from a phenomenon that relates to the unspeakable horrors perpetrated by Amalek in our time — denial of the Holocaust. It is almost impossible to comprehend how such a nefarious phenomenon can exist in the face of so much incontrovertible evidence of every kind. The answer, terrifyingly, is that when it comes to denial, evidence is of secondary concern. The primary concern is whether it suits the observer to recognize whether it occurred. Curiously, it is rare to find Holocaust denial among people who actually like Jews and feel they should have a homeland of their own, and that is not a coincidence.

AMALEK AND HASHEM'S NAME

After Amalek had been successfully subdued during that first attack on the Jewish People, Hashem says:

כִּי יָד עַל כִּסֵּי מִלְחָמָה לֵהּ בְּעַמְלֵק מִדֹּר דָּר

*It is a hand raised against the throne of God, a war between Hashem and Amalek, from generation to generation.*⁸

Rashi, commenting on that verse, notes that the Name of Hashem (יה-יה), as well as the word for throne (כס), are written in a truncated form:

שֵׁאִין שְׁמוֹ שְׁלֹם וְאִין כְּסָאוֹ שְׁלֹם עַד שִׁימְחָה שְׁמוֹ שֶׁל עַמְלֵק

For neither Hashem's Name nor His throne are complete until Amalek's name is erased.

Why is Hashem's name cut in half, as long as Amalek exists?

The concept of Hashem's name represents His interaction with His creation. The first two letters (יה-) represent His interaction with the higher realms, while the final two letters (-יה) represent His interaction with the lower realms.⁹ Amalek has no issue with the existence of Hashem or with His involvement in the higher realms. Their war is with the final two letters that reflect His supervision of affairs in this world. Amalek wishes to live without any sense of higher accountability. They therefore subscribe to a credo of disconnect between the two realms.¹⁰

Taking all of the above on board, we can gain some understanding regarding Amalek's war with Hashem and his implacable hatred of the Jewish People: We represent Hashem's active involvement and message in this world, a message Amalek will do anything it can to avoid hearing.

8 Shemos 17:16.

9 This idea is alluded to in the verse (*Tehillim* 96:11), “שִׂמְחוּ הַשָּׁמַיִם וְתִגַּל הָאָרֶץ” — The heavens will be glad and the earth will rejoice.” The beginning letters of the words that refer to the heavens are “יה-” and those of the words that refer to the earth are “-יה” (Rabbi Nosson Shapiro, *Megaleh Amukos, derashah* for Purim).

10 Similarly, the idea of Hashem's throne being incomplete reflects a lack of awareness of His sovereignty over the world. In a verse that we recite often, the prophet Zechariah (14:9) foretells of a time when Hashem's dominion will be recognized by all, “וְהָיָה ה' לְמֶלֶךְ עַל כָּל הָאָרֶץ בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא יְהִי ה' אֶחָד וְשְׁמוֹ אֶחָד” — Hashem will be King over the entire world, on that day Hashem will be One and His name will be one.” Regarding the words הַיּוֹם הַהוּא — on that day, commentators point out that the word הוּא is comprised of the letters *hei*, *vav*, and *aleph*. These represent the three missing letters from Hashem's name and His throne, which will be restored in the future when the entire world recognizes His kingship.

MOCKERY IS THE NEW DENIAL

A deeper insight into the nature of Amalek can be gleaned by considering another of his defining characteristics, the trait of *leitzanus* — mockery. Commenting on the verse in *Mishlei* that states “לֵץ תִּכֶּה — smite the scoffer,”¹¹ the Midrash comments: “זה עמלק — this refers to Amalek.”¹²

What is the meaning of referring to Amalek as “scoffers”?

The reason a person mocks something is in order to devalue it. If something is looked upon as important and that puts a person in an uncomfortable situation, he can simply poke fun at it and it no longer poses a threat. In a sense, therefore, mocking something serves the same purpose as denying it. Awareness of Hashem’s interaction with the world brings with it a certain sense of accountability for one’s behavior. This is something Amalek cannot tolerate, hence they resort to mockery.

It is interesting to note, however, that the mockery of Amalek does not take the form that we would associate with that idea. We have no tradition regarding any of Amalek’s jokes about Hashem or His people. What we do know is that they engaged in what they must have suspected would be a suicidal attack against the Jewish People. That doesn’t sound as if they were joking around. It actually sounds as if they were deadly serious. Where, then, is the mockery?

The Midrash provides us with a parable through which to understand the goal of Amalek in attacking the Jewish People. The word the Torah uses to describe the attack is קרר, which is normally translated as “they happened upon you.” However, the Midrash relates it to the word קר — cold:

This can be compared to a boiling hot bath that no one could enter. Along came a lawless individual and jumped inside. Although he was scalded, he cooled it down for others. Similarly here, when the people of Israel left Egypt and the Holy One, Blessed Be He, split the sea before them and drowned the Egyptians inside it, their awe descended upon all the nations, as it says, “Then the chieftans of Edom were confounded, trembling gripped the strong ones of Moav.”¹³ [Yet] once Amalek came and engaged them [in battle], even though he experienced his defeat at their hands, he cooled them down before the nations of the world.¹⁴

When the People of Israel left Egypt, people were in awe of them and of the God Whom they represented. This situation was unbearable for Amalek, for it represented awareness of the Divine Presence in this world, which he would do anything to avoid. The only recourse for Amalek was to try and “break the spell” by doing the unthinkable — attacking them. Although he surely expected to sustain serious losses, Amalek was prepared to endure them if the result would be to “cool down” the aura that had developed around the Jewish People and its message of Godliness. This was the mockery of Amalek, and for them it was no laughing matter.

IN THOSE DAYS — IN OUR TIMES

All of this should serve to give us due notice as we take a look at the mockery in its more recognizable form in the world that surrounds us. We live in a climate where every precious Godly value is the target of derision and ridicule. It is important to realize that this is an integral part of Amalek’s war against Hashem, and as we stand up for our values and fight for our ideals, we are playing our part in the centuries-old war against Amalek.

11 *Mishlei* 19:25.

12 *Shemos Rabbah* 27:5.

13 *Shemos* 15:15.

14 *Midrash Tanchumah, parshas Ki Seitzei*, sec. 9, quoted in *Rashi to Devarim* 25:18.

Beyond thus, Amalek's spiritual heirs who seek the eradication of the Jewish People are also present and are unabashedly vocal in their aims. They serve, in a sense, as a living reminder and embodiment of Amalek's goals. Yet the story of Purim reminds us of the eternity of the Jewish People, and of the ultimate downfall of Amalek. As we move from Zachor to Purim, we celebrate the unbreakable bond that exists between Hashem and His people, and we look forward to the time when His kingship will be recognized by all.

Shabbat Shalom and Purim Sameach!