

Thinking Torah

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Parshat Zachor

The Evil of Amalek

Purim is just around the corner. We fill our synagogues to read the Megilla (Book of Esther) and re-tell the nail-biting story of Esther and Mordechai in which we react vociferously to the name of the evil Haman. We remember the saving hand of God, seemingly absent and hidden from view, and we too obscure ourselves by donning costume and masquerade. We celebrate our very survival by emphasizing the power of communal life through contributions to the poor and the sending of food packages. All in all, this is the most exuberant, the most expressive and outwardly joyous of all our festivals.

The Megilla story stands as if in an isolated historical vacuum. We are not told how this relates to the wider issues of Jewish history; the return to Judea and the rebuilding of the second Beit HaMikdash (although these ideas are also hinted to.) .But in Chazal, Purim has roots which travel back in history long before Shushan and the Persian empire. Haman is perceived as the heir to an infamous line. He is an “Aggagi” descended from Agag, the king of Amalek (Esther 3:1 and I Samuel 15:8,33). Amalek - the embodiment of evil itself, the antithesis of morality. Haman carries the genes of Amalek in his very DNA. Haman is not a new adversary. He is a familiar to us; we have met him before [1]. He is but a latter manifestation of an old enemy, the insidious nation known as Amalek.

Hence, we have Shabbat Zachor, the yearly reminder of our national obligation to destroy Amalek and its memory. Why do we have this law? Why should we destroy Amalek? - Just because 3000 years ago they attacked us in the desert? Are we so driven by revenge? Why not let the whole thing drop? What is it about Amalek that causes us to have an eternal vendetta, and a yearly act of remembrance to this day?

CHAVRUTA STUDY

1. The command to destroy AMALEK: Shemot 17:8-16 (particularly 14-16)

- Can you divide this parsha into two sections?
- Do the sections match or is there some disparity between them?
- Is it G-d or Am Yisrael who have a war against AMALEK?

2. Parshat Zachor : Devarim 25:17-19

- What is mentioned in this parsha that we have not seen before?
- Who is responsible here for the battle against Amalek?

3. A deeper analysis:

Note the phrase used in this parsha... "He did not fear God." What does this phrase mean? What ethical behaviour is suggested by this phrase?

Here are some other instances in Tanach where this phrase is used. Look them up.

- i Bereshit 20:11
- ii Bereshit 42:18
- iii Shemot 1:17

What unites all of these instances?

- In connection with what does the idea of “*yirat elokim*” seem to repeatedly appear?

so... what is Amalek being accused of by the use of this phrase?

4. Amalek elsewhere in Tanach.

- ◇ See Shoftim 3/13, 6/33.
- ◇ Shmuel I 15/18,33
- ◇ Read also Shmuel I 30/1-5 and 10-17. [The background to the story : David, not yet king, goes out to war and returns to find his home base raided and looted by AMALEK]

What does these stories add to our image of the moral stature of AMALEK?

How has the Egyptian boy been treated? Why has he been left there?

IN SUMMARY: Can we pinpoint exactly what makes AMALEK so extremely objectionable to the point of warranting total destruction? Are AMALEK particularly immoral? Are they particularly anti-Jewish?

THE SHIUR SECTION:

“ Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey, after you left Egypt - how, undeterred by fear of God, he surprised you on the march, when you were tired and weary, and cut down all the stragglers at the rear. Therefore when the Lord grants you safety from all your enemies around you, in the land that the Lord your God is giving you... you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under the heaven. Do not forget.” (Deut 25:17-19)

The reading of this passage from the Torah is seen by many as one the fulfilment of one of the 613 laws of Judaism. The Talmud analyses the first and last phrases of this section:

“How do we know that this remembrance involves a reading, maybe thinking about it will suffice? The verse says ‘remember’. Could this indicate simply thinking about the topic, a mental note? - when it says ‘Do not forget’ we have already covered the requirement of memory. So the phrase ‘remember’ can only be fulfilled by a verbal statement.” (Talmud Megilla 18a)

What this tells us is that we are obligated on an annual basis to verbally express our collective memory of Amalek. More precisely, we are to recall an event in which Amalek attacked us after the exodus from Egypt over three thousand years ago.

So we have a command to remember and never to forget this incident. In addition, the passage in Deuteronomy indicates that at some time when we are secure in our land, we will have an obligation of “blotting out” Amalek. The intense and implacable hostility that we are asked to direct towards Amalek is rather puzzling. It all seems a little strange! Why have we not forgiven this people after all this time? After all Egypt enslaved us for many decades and we are not obligated to remember the evil of Egypt or to demonstrate any revenge! Are Amalek so bad? In the entire Jewish tradition, there is no other people who we are commanded to oppose so vehemently. Is the command to “blot out the memory of Amalek from under the heaven.” a fair response to a single desert attack? Let us investigate Amalek a little further.

GOD’S WAR

In the book of Shemot, after the description of the attack by Amalek, Moses is told to record the event for posterity.

“And the Lord said to Moses, ‘inscribe this in a scroll

and read it aloud to Joshua: I will utterly blot out the name of Amalek from under the heavens...’ He said...’The Lord will be at war with Amalek throughout all future generations.’” (17:14-16)

We have already established that we are to remember Amalek and blot them out, but now we read that God is at war with Amalek. What can this all mean? Why would God wage war with Amalek? Have they attacked Him? Rashi (Deut 25) quotes the Midrash:

“Asher karcha - (karcha is related to the Hebrew word ‘kar’ - cold) : Amalek cooled you down from your boiling state. When you came out of Egypt, all the nations were terrified. They dared not initiate an attack against you. But this one (Amalek) took the plunge and led the way for others. It may be compared to a bath of boiling water that no being can enter due to its heat. One lunatic jumped in. Though he gets scalded he has cooled the bath for others.

What is the meaning of the imagery of this Midrash? Nechama Leibowitz explains:

“All the wonders and miracles of Egypt and the Red Sea had come to publicize the exclusive power of God... Indeed when the Children of Israel went out of Egypt... all the nations of the world with the exception of Amalek were seized with dread and awe: ‘The people have heard, they tremble...the mighty men of Moav are seized by fright, all the people of Canaan melt away. Terror and dread fall upon them...’ (Ex 15:14-16)

Mankind as a whole might have taken one great step forward and acknowledged the sovereignty of the God of Justice and Truth. But then along came Amalek - unrestrained by the dread and awe that kept all the nations of the world in check - jumped as it were, to use the midrashic expression, into the boiling cauldron.... What was there to fear?... they were wandering in the wilderness, weary and struggling. Why should they not be attacked and spoiled? This is the way of the world! In this manner the moment of awe at the mighty hand of God passed away and the atmosphere of astonishment at His miracles evaporated. The world returned to ... the idols of gold and silver, its faith in mortal power and brute force. The opportunity had been lost. And who was responsible? - Amalek.” [2]

This is why God has a war against Amalek. Amalek do not fear God. They are not inspired by his power. They believe in their own power; the power of weapons and human force. They cannot recognize the Divine. They attack Israel even though they will be hurt, scolded by the boiling heat. Why do they attack? Because Israel carry the name of God with them as they march triumphantly away from the Red Sea. Amalek cannot withstand this Theistic worldview. They wish to tarnish this pristine image of God in the world. God holds it against them forever.

DESERT PIRATES

But we might be able to suggest a further reason for God’s antipathy towards the people of Amalek. This relates not so much to their attitude towards God, but rather to their attitude to man, to human suffering and pain and to the disadvantaged. This approach will examine Amalek’s long history with the Jewish people.

In Devarim, we note how they attacked when the people were “tired and weary”. Who do they attack? They pick on “ all the stragglers at the rear”. Amalek stage a surprise attack just when we are physically at our lowest point. We will demonstrate how this action is a classic expression of the primary Amalekite national trait.

This incident is not the only time that we encounter Amalek in our long history. The Bible records many other examples of the work of Amalek. In the book of Judges we find that Amalek is a frequent aggressor against the Israelites:

“(Eglon the King of Moab) brought the Ammonites and the Amalekites with him and they went and defeated Israel and occupied the City of Palms.” (3:13)

Later, another nation - Midian - attack Israel:

“After the Israelites had sown their crops, Midian and Amalek ... would come up and raid them. They would attack them and destroy the produce of the land all the way to Gaza and would not leave anything for the sustenance of the Israelites, not a sheep or an ox or an ass. For they would come up with their livestock and their tents , swarming as thick as locusts... Thus they would invade the land and ravage it.” (6:3-6)

Amalek would appear to be comfortable invading the land of Israel, looting and taking advantage of the fact that larger nations have invaded the land of Canaan. Hundreds of years later, in the reign of King Saul, we see a more detailed description of the Amalekite methods. David (not yet king) returns to his home town (Ziklag) to find that it has been raided by Amalekite warriors.

“The Amalekites had made a raid into the Negev and against Ziklag. They stormed Ziklag and burned it down. They had taken the women captive ... they did not kill any but carried them off and went their way. David and his men came to the town and found it burned down, and their wives and sons and daughters taken captive... So David and six hundred men set out they came upon an Egyptian in the desert They gave him food to eat and water to drink... He ate and regained his strength for he had eaten no food for three days and three nights. Then David asked him, “To whom do you belong and where are you from?” “I am an Egyptian boy,” he answered, “the slave of an Amalekite. My master abandoned me when I fell ill three days ago. We had raided the Negev of the Kereti and the Negev of Judah and the Negev of Caleb and we burned Ziklag”. (I Samuel 30:1-14)

The boy leads David to the Amalekite force and he catches up with them:

“...spread over the landscape, eating and drinking and making merry with the vast spoil that they had taken.” (30:16)

So who is Amalek? Let us digest the material in these passages. Amalek are depicted as a tribe with no land to produce their own food needs [3]. They are desert nomads, who function as pirates and highwayman. Amalek frequently join invading forces, going along “for the ride” as “extras” when the enemies of Israel need reinforcements. After all, there is a reward; the spoils of war and the crops of Israel. We see how they attack areas throughout southern Israel on raids of pillage and kidnap. It is most likely that the women and children of David’s town were destined for sale on the slave market.

Amalek are a people who are happy to steal and murder, as long as there is the promise of some financial gain. That is how they survive! They will kidnap people and sell them. And if someone in their care gets sick, they will abandon him in the wilderness letting them starve to death rather than burden them, slowing them down. They have no land, they practice no particular craft or trade. They do not plant fields and trees. They do not have any means of making an honest living. They are professional parasites.

When they attack Israel in the wilderness, they attack as simple opportunists looking for a quick profit by attacking the weak stragglers. This is their hallmark. This is what Amalek do for a living!

FEAR OF GOD

This way of life - living off the suffering of others - has a very specific name in the Torah. Our "Parshat Zachor" establishes Amalek as "undeterred by fear of God" (Deut 25:17). What does this phrase - "fear of God" indicate? What does this expression imply?

Prof. Nachum Sarna [4] explains that this term is used by the Bible in very precise circumstances. It is used in situations that involve positive ethical behaviour or moral activity. In fact we can be even more precise. Whenever a person has an opportunity to take advantage of the weak or defenceless and decides instead to exercise moral integrity, that is "Fear of God".

There are many examples in the Bible. Abraham pretends that his wife is his sister because he is afraid that as a lonely defenceless traveller "they will kill me for my wife." His logic? - "I said to myself, there is no fear of God in this place." (Genesis 20:11)

Another example: Pharaoh, wishing to rid himself of the Israelites issues an order to the midwives to kill all Jewish males as they are born. The Egyptian midwives defy Pharaoh and save the newborn Israelite children. Once again we are told (Ex 1:17) that they are motivated by "fear of God". When Joseph sought to assure his brothers of his integrity telling them that he would not lead them to any harm, despite his unlimited authority, he tells them "I fear God" (Genesis 42:18). And finally, the case of a blind man: the command in Leviticus warns us not to put a "stumbling block", not to mislead or take advantage of the person who cannot find his way. This is stressed (Lev 19:14) by the cautionary phrase reminding us to "fear God".

In short, opportunism, power and quick profit at the expense of the weak and helpless is seen as an affront to God. Moreover, in many of these cases (Abraham, midwives..) the very lives of the weak are in question. In these situations it is only an awareness and consciousness of a higher authority that can assure the human being of acting in the moral and just way. The "fear of God" leads a person to exercise their moral sense over and above any personal profit or gain.

Amalek do not fear God. They are the classic opportunists. They kill and steal from the poor and helpless to fill their insatiable materialistic needs. They are amoral and anti-God.

A SUMMARY

What we have established through the very verses of the Bible, is a portrait of the Amalekite way of life. It is a life of violence and lawlessness. It is a way of life that God abhors. As a nation we have to remember Amalek because they are the antithesis of what we stand for. If the Jewish nation seek to "to repair the world under the banner of the kingdom of God," then Amalek are situated as the opposition to that ideal. They show no

interest in God nor in the improvement of the world. They are masters of crime and wanton violence. It is for this reason that they are an affront to God and a constant reminder to us of that which we oppose. Our war with Amalek is not national or racial, it is moral and ideological.

The Rambam in his Hilchot Melachim (laws of Kings) 6:4 (and see the kesef mishna) notes that our war with Amalek is not racial. If an Amalekite accepts the seven Noachide laws - the basic code of theistic morality - (not to steal, murder, commit adultery, sensitivity to animal life, belief in God, not to blaspheme, a Judicial system) then we have no obligation to wage war against him. It is only the Godless amoral Amalek which is our enemy. [5]

POWER POLITICS

God commands us that when we become secure in our land, and precisely at that point:

"...when the Lord grants you safety from all your enemies around you, in the land that the Lord your God is giving you...."

We must wage a war against Amalek. Maybe God is telling us this. At the point when Israel enter into the association of nation states, at the point that we are secure within our borders and enter the arena of national power politics, then is the correct time to internalise the lessons of the war with Amalek. We must learn that power and strength can be used to destroy and uproot, or they can be used to repair, to build and protect. As a nation we must abhor the power that destroys and love the power that gives us strength to redeem the world.

It is the abuse of power [6], the greedy materialistic pursuit of wealth at the expense of the needy and weak that which we must eradicate and "blot out". That is the lesson of Amalek.

Happy Purim!

Footnotes:

[1] According to the Yalkut Shimoni, the argument between Haman and Mordechai expressed himself in the following way:

"Haman : Why are defying the order of the king?

Mordechai: Because I am a Jew

Haman: But did your ancestor (Jacob) not bow down to my ancestor (Esau) - "And he bowed to the ground seven times" (Genesis 33:3)?

Mordechai: My ancestor Benjamin was not yet born. He did not bow and I am his descendant. Just as my "father" did not bow, neither will I...."

The midrash explains that Mordechai refused to bow to Haman in the megilla story as a response to a historical precedent. This is an argument which reaches into the very origins of these two nations.

[2] Nechama Leibowitz: Studies in Devarim.

[3] In all the Bible we do not see any particular tract of land which is attributed to them although it is clear that they are located in the southern part of Canaan - See Bamidbar 14:45 and I Samuel 15:7 and at the time of King Saul they did have a town - I Samuel 15:5.

[4] Exploring Exodus pg. 25-26

[5] Note too that TODAY, we have no idea who Amalek might be. The Talmud views the ancient identities of nations as having been lost. "Sanhereb came and confused the identities of the

nations." The Assyrian king Sanhereb had a policy of population transfer. After he conquered a nation he would move them to another region/land. In this way he de-stabilised the occupied nation, breaking certain tribal structures and town affiliation. This policy meant that the ancient nations were lost to us. In the same way, the 10 tribes of Israel lost their connection to Judea.

[6]The megilla is a story about a man, descended from Amalek, who decides to destroy an entire nation just because his over-inflated sense of pride is hurt. See the Megilla - Esther 3:2-6.