

Amalek and Yitro: What's the connection?

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On Shabbat Zachor, the Shabbat preceding the holiday of Purim, we read the Torah portion from Deuteronomy which describes the attack of Amalek upon the Israelites:

Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey, after you left Egypt—how, undeterred by fear of G-d, he surprised you on the march when you were famished and weary, and cut down all the stragglers in your rear... "

Deut. 25: 17-18¹

זְכוֹר אֶת אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה לְךָ עַמְלֵק בַּדֶּרֶךְ
בְּצֵאתְכֶם מִמִּצְרָיִם: אֲשֶׁר קָרַךְ בַּדֶּרֶךְ
וַיִּזְנֹב בְּךָ כָּל הַנְּחָשָׁלִים אֲחֵרֶיךָ וְאִתָּה עָגַר
וַיִּגַע וְלֹא יָרָא אֱלֹהִים:
דְּבָרִים כה: יז-יח

This was an unprovoked attack, an ambush, on the defenseless weary Israelites lagging at the rear of the camp; this attack showed that the Amalekites lacked even the most elementary decency.

Rashi, based on midrashic literature, emphasizes that Amalek was the first nation to attack Israel and embellishes Amalek's wickedness to include divination, sorcery and mutilation.²

The Amalekite attack was initially recorded in the book of Exodus (Ex. 17: 8-16). Immediately following the Amalekite ambush we read of the arrival of Yitro (Jethro) at the Israelite camp:

Jethro Priest of Midian, Moses' father-in-law, heard all that G-d had done for Moses and for Israel His people, how the Lord had brought Israel out from Egypt ... Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, brought Moses' sons and wife to him in the wilderness where he was encamped at the mountain of G-d...

Ex. 18:1-5

וַיִּשְׁמַע יִתְרוֹ כֹּהֵן מִדְיָן חֹתֵן מֹשֶׁה אֵת כָּל
אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה אֱלֹהִים לְמֹשֶׁה וּלְיִשְׂרָאֵל עַמּוֹ
כִּי הוֹצִיא ה' אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרָיִם: ...
וַיָּבֵא יִתְרוֹ חֹתֵן מֹשֶׁה וּבָנָיו וְאִשְׁתּוֹ אֶל
מֹשֶׁה אֶל הַמַּדְבָּר אֲשֶׁר הוּא חֹנֶה שָׁם הַר
הַאֱלֹהִים:
שְׁמוֹת יח: א-ה

Yitro will propose to Moshe recommendations for reorganizing the judicial system in Israel (verses 1-27). *Mekhilta Yitro* 1:1 questions whether the Yitro narrative is in its proper chronological place:³

¹ All English biblical translations are taken from the New JPS Tanakh (Jewish Publication Society: Philadelphia 2003).

² First Nation: see Rashi to Ex. 17:14, Num. 24:20, Deut. 25:18; Divination: see Rashi to Ex. 17:12; Sorcery: see Rashi to Ex. 17: 9, 1 Sam. 15:3; Mutilation: see Rashi to Deut. 25:18, 1 Sam. 15:33.

And he heard. What information did he hear that caused him to come? He heard about the war with Amalek and came, as we find that the two stories are juxtaposed one after the other. This is the opinion of R' Joshua. R' Elazar of Modi'im says: He heard about the revelation at Sinai and that caused him to come...

וישמע. מה שמועה שמע ובא?
מלחמת עמלק שמע ובא, שהיא
כתובה בצדו, דברי ר' יהושע. ר'
אלעזר המודעי אומר, מתן תורה
שמע ובא...

The *Mekhilta* brings two opinions. The first opinion of R' Yehoshua views the narratives as being in their proper chronological sequence. The second opinion of R' Elazar believes that Yitro's arrival took place after the revelation at Sinai, and the narratives are, therefore, not in chronological order.

Abraham Ibn Ezra (longer commentary to Ex. 18:1) accepts the opinion of R' Elazar, that Yitro came after the Sinai revelation;⁴ the following are a number of his arguments:⁵

- A. The Bible states that Yitro offered burnt offerings to G-d (Ex. 18:12) but does not state that he built an altar on which to sacrifice them. This indicates that he sacrificed on the altar that he found in existence, the altar of the Tabernacle.⁶
- B. Moshe tells Yitro, "and I make known the laws and teachings of G-d" (v. 16); this indicates that the Sinai revelation, the giving of the laws and teachings, had already occurred.⁷
- C. When Yitro arrives at the Israelite camp, the biblical text states, "where he was encamped, at the mountain of G-d" (v. 5). The use of the participle *choneh*/חונה (encamped) indicates that Moshe had been encamped there for an extended period of time.⁸

³ See *Zevahim* 116a.

⁴ The longer commentary was composed during 1153-1156 in Rouen, Northern France. The same idea is expressed in his shorter commentary as well; the shorter commentary was completed in the year 1145 in Lucca, Northern Italy.

⁵ Generally, Abraham Ben Ezra uses the phrase "אין מוקדם ומאוחר בתורה" to express the idea that paragraphs are not written in chronological order; this phrase appears eight times in his *Commentary to the Pentateuch* (Gen. 6:3; 11:29; Ex. 4:19; 16: 15; 32:11; 33:7; Lev. 25:1; Deut. 31:15). Yet in our case the idea is expressed without the use of this term. See I. Gottlieb, *Order in the Bible* [Hebrew], (Magnes Press: Jerusalem 2009). Nahmanides disagrees and believes that the juxtaposition of the Amalekite attack and the arrival of Yitro is in chronological order; see Nahmanides' commentary to Ex. 18:1. Rashi's opinion is unclear; compare Rashi's commentary to Ex. 18:1 with his commentary to Ex. 18:9.

⁶ "However, I believe that Jethro came to Sinai in the second year, after the erection of the tabernacle. For the chapter speaks of a burnt-offering and sacrifices for God (v. 12), and it does not mention that he built a new altar." "ולפי דעתי, שלא בא רק בשנה השנית אחר שהוקם המשכן, כי כתוב בפרשה 'עולה וזבחים לאלהים' (שמות יח יב), ולא הזכיר שבנה מזבח חדש."

⁷ "Furthermore, Scripture writes, and I make them know the statutes of God, and His laws (v. 16). Now this took place after the giving of the Torah."

"ועוד, כתיב 'והודעתי את חקי האלהים ואת תורותי' (שמות יח טז), והנה זה אחר מתן תורה."

⁸ This explanation of the Ibn Ezra's words (as well as the translations of these words) is taken from: *Ibn Ezra's Commentary to the Pentateuch, Exodus*, translated by H. N. Strickman & A.M. Silver, (Menorah: New York 1996), p. 343, n. 21.

"True proof that my words are correct is the fact that Scripture clearly states, where he was encamped at the mount of God (v. 5)"

"והעד הנאמן על דברי, כי כן כתיב, 'אל המדבר אשר הוא חונה שם הר האלהים' (שמות יח ה)."

D. In Deuteronomy, Moshe states, "The Lord our G-d spoke to us at Horeb, saying: You have stayed long enough at this mountain. Start out and make your way ..." (Deut. 1 6-7). These words were stated before the Israelites left the Sinai Desert (they are still at Horeb, the mountain of G-d). In Deuteronomy, immediately after this directive, Moshe recounts his concern of judging the people alone and the advice given to him to appoint additional judges. This was Yitro's advice given to him the day after his father-in-law's arrival in the Israelite camp. Thus we see that Yitro arrived just before the Israelites left the Sinai desert.⁹

Why is the biblical narrative not in order? What is the cause of deviation from chronological sequence? Abraham Ben Ezra posits that the Biblical text purposely wished to juxtapose the wickedness of Amalek with the friendliness of Yitro. The juxtaposition of these two narratives highlights the contrast in their behavior towards the Israelites.

Cassuto points out subtle verbal associations which link our two narratives:¹⁰

Amalek (chapter 17)	Yitro (chapter 18)
And Amalek came and <u>fought</u> with Israel (v. 8)	And Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, came... (v. 5) And they asked each other of their <u>welfare</u> (v. 7)
Choose for us men (v. 9) [for war]	And Moses chose able men (v. 25) [to judge]
And he sat upon it (v. 12)	Moses sat to judge the people (v. 13)
And Moses' hands grew heavy (v. 12)	For the thing is too heavy for you (v. 18)
I will stand (v. 9)	While all the people stand about you (v. 14)
Until the sun set (v. 12)	Until evening (v. 13)
Tomorrow (v. 9)	Next day (v. 13)
<u>War</u> ... from generation to generation (v. 16)	And all this people will also go to their place in <u>peace</u> (v. 23)

The antithesis between the two episodes is heightened through the shared language. Cassuto notes that chronological order which is important in Greek and modern literature is less important in ancient Eastern writings including the Bible. He explains: "that does not mean that the Pentateuchal arrangement is arbitrary; there are rules and methods ... one of the methods is

⁹ "For Moses is quoted in the Torah portion, These are the words as saying, The Lord our God spoke unto us in Horeb saying, turn you and take your journey (Deut I:6,7) Now this was said close to their time of journey ... the time for you to inherit the land has come. However, since you are so numerous I was not able to carry you alone, and I had to place over you captains of thousands and captains of hundreds. Now this was the advice of Jethro on the morrow following his coming to the wilderness of Sinai."

"והנה דברי משה יוכיחו, שאמר בפרשת אלה הדברים: 'ה' אלהינו דבר אלינו בחרב לאמר, רב לכם שבת בהר הזה פנו וסעו לכם (דבר' א, ו - ז), והנה זה הזמן היה קרוב למסעם, והוא אמר ... והגיע זמן שתירשו את הארץ. ובעבור שהייתם רבים, לא יכולתי לבדי שאת אתכם לבדי, והוצרכתי לתת לכם שרי אלפים ושרי מאות (ראה שם, טו). וזאת היתה עצת יתרו, שנתן לו ממחרת באו למדבר סיני."

¹⁰ U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, (Magnes Press: Jerusalem 1967), p. 212.

to arrange the subject matter on the basis of association—both thematic and verbal association."¹¹ The juxtaposition of the Amalek and Yitro narratives for a thematic reason was more significant than the chronological sequence.

There is lack of clarity regarding the tribal association of Moshe's father-in-law. In the Pentateuch, his father-in-law is designated as a Midianite (Ex. 18:1; Num. 10:29), yet in the Book of Judges he is identified as a Kenite (Jud. 1:16; 4:11). Perhaps Midian was composed of a number of tribes/clans and the Kenites were one of these tribes. Sarna proposes that the name Kenite is not an ethnic designation but a description of the occupation of metalworking.¹²

The pairing of Amalek and Yitro's descendants, the Kenites, is found later in the Bible. In Balaam's final oracle we read:

He saw Amalek and, taking up his theme he said: A leading nation is Amalek; But its fate is to perish forever. He saw the Kenites and taking up his theme, he said: Though your abode be secure, And your nest be set among cliffs, Yet shall Kain be consumed, When Asshur takes you captive.

Num. 24: 20-22

כ וַיֵּרָא אֶת עַמְלֵק וַיִּשְׂא מִשְׁלוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר
 רֵאשִׁית גּוֹיִם עַמְלֵק וְאַחֲרֵיתוֹ עַדִּי
 אֲבָד: כֹּא וַיֵּרָא אֶת הַקֵּינִי וַיִּשְׂא מִשְׁלוֹ
 וַיֹּאמֶר אֵיתָן מוֹשְׁבֵךְ וְיָשִׁים בְּסַלְעַ
 קַנָּה: כִּב כִּי אִם יִהְיֶה לְבַעַר קִנּוֹ עַד
 מָה אֲשׁוּר תִּשְׁבֶּךְ:
 בַּמִּדְבָּר כֹּד: כ-כב

Balaam's ability to view Amalek and the Kenites almost simultaneously indicates that they were dwelling close to one another. Whereas Balaam clearly states that the nation of Amalek would perish- in contrast, the Kenites would be temporarily exiled by Assyria.¹³

Later in the Bible, once again we will find Amalek and the Kenites in close proximity. In the Book of Samuel I, chapter 15 King Saul is commanded by the Prophet Samuel to war against and destroy the nation of Amalek.¹⁴ This command is a punishment for the Amalekite's heinous attack on the Israelites as they left Egypt. King Saul gathers his troops and preceding the battle we read:

Saul said to the Kenites, "Come, withdraw at once from among the Amalekites, that I may not destroy you along with them; for you showed kindness to all the Israelites when they left Egypt." So the Kenites withdrew from among the Amalekites.

Sam. I 15:6

וַיֹּאמֶר שְׂאוּל אֶל הַקֵּינִי לָכוּ סְרוּ רְדוּ
 מִתּוֹךְ עַמְלֵקִי פֶן אֲסַפֶּךָ עִמּוֹ וְאַתָּה
 עָשִׂיתָה חֶסֶד עִם כָּל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
 בְּעֵלְוֹתָם מִמִּצְרַיִם וַיִּסֶר קֵינִי מִתּוֹךְ
 עַמְלֵק:
 שְׂמוּאֵל א טו:ו

Due to the friendly and helpful behavior of Yitro, the Kenite's ancestor, following the Exodus from Egypt, the Kenites are now warned to separate from the Amalekites.

Once again, the contrast between the Amalekite and Kenite tribes is heightened through the use of shared language:

¹¹ Ibid, p. 186.

¹² N. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus*, (Schocken: New York 1986), p. 36.

¹³ This explanation is based on Rashi's commentary to verse 22. The exact meaning of this verse is obscure. The name *Ashur* might not be referring to Assyria but to a tribe descended from *Keturah*—see Gen. 25:3.

¹⁴ Samuel I chapter 15 serves as the Haftorah for Shabbat Zachor.

Amalekite	Kenite
<p>ב פה אָמַר ה' צָב-אוֹת פְּקֹדֹתַי אֶת אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה עֲמֶלֶק לְיִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר שָׂם לוֹ בְּדַרְךְ בְּעֵלְתוֹ מִמִּצְרַיִם: שְׂמוּאֵל א ט:ב</p>	<p>וַיֹּאמֶר יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל הַקֵּינִי לָכוּ סָרוּ רַדּוּ מִתּוֹךְ עֲמֶלְקִי פֶן אֶסְפָּף עִמּוֹ וְאַתֶּם עֹשִׂיתֶם חֶסֶד עִם כָּל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּעֵלּוֹתֵם מִמִּצְרַיִם וַיִּסַּר קֵינִי מִתּוֹךְ עֲמֶלְקִי: שְׂמוּאֵל א ט:ו</p>
<p><i>Thus said the Lord of Hosts: I am exacting the penalty for what Amalek did to Israel, for the assault he made upon them on the road, on their way up from Egypt.</i> Sam. I 15:2</p>	<p><i>Saul said to the Kenites, "Come, withdraw at once from among the Amalekites, that I may not destroy you along with them; for you showed kindness to all the Israelites when they left Egypt." So the Kenites withdrew from among the Amalekites.</i> Sam. I 15:6</p>

The treacherous attack of the Amalekites is contrasted to the kind behavior of Yitro the Kenite. What Kenite *chesed* is the text referring to? Ostensibly, the text is referring to Yitro's advice to Moshe to appoint judges. Luria proposes an additional *chesed* based on the commentaries of Ibn Ezra and Nahmanides to Num. 10:31. There they note that Yitro guided the Israelites through the desert. Whereas Yitro guided the Israelites while they were on the way, the Amalekites attacked them while they were on the way.¹⁵

The pairing of the Amalekite and Kenite tribes throughout the Bible emphasizes the fundamental difference in their attitudes to the Children of Israel. From the dawn of Israelite history, Amalek's anti-Israelite behavior stands in stark contrast to Yitro's (Kenites) pro-Israelite behavior.

It was my honor to have known Mr. Herb Smilowitz for over 40 years. He was the epitome of a family man: loving, caring, concerned and supportive of his own immediate family and the family of Israel. Sitting on the board of many Jewish institutions, offering support and donating generously, he certainly was a follower of the Yitro tradition.

¹⁵ *Pirkei De Rebbe Eliezer*, explained by Rabbi David Luria [Hebrew], (Warsaw 1852; Jerusalem 1963), p. 106, n. 9.