

CHUKAS

AMALEK ATTACKS

Parashas Chukas is often associated with one of three well-known topics: the *parah adumah* (red heifer), the incident of Moshe drawing water from the rock (*Mei Merivah*), and the deaths of Miriam and Aharon. These important subjects dominate the *parashah*. As a result, the following three *pesukim* (verses) found near the conclusion of the *parashah* may seem comparatively inconsequential and are thus often overlooked:

The Canaanite king of Arad, who dwelled in the south, heard that Israel had come, by the route of the spies, and he warred against Israel and took captive from it. Israel made a vow to Hashem and said, “If You will deliver this people into my hand, I will consecrate their cities.” Hashem heard the voice of Israel, and He delivered the Canaanite, and it [Israel] consecrated them and their cities. It [Israel] named the place Chormah.¹

Before formulating questions for discussion, let us place this event in historical context. Before this incident was the battle with the king of Arad when *Bnei Yisrael* were approaching *Eretz Yisrael*. Immediately preceding this section, the text describes how *Bnei Yisrael*'s travels were interrupted by the death of Aharon and that

¹ *Bamidbar* 21:1-3.

Aharon was mourned by the community for thirty days. Mention of this mourning period is in the *pasuk* immediately preceding the account of this battle with the king of Arad.

What happened immediately after this war? The succeeding verses relate that the physical strain of the journey distressed *Bnei Yisrael*: “*Vatiketzar nefesh ha’am badarech* (And the spirit of the people grew short on the way).”² Consequently, they spoke out against Hashem and Moshe. They complained about a lack of food and water, fearing that they would die in the *midbar* (wilderness). The people declared, “*Nafsheinu katzab balechem haklokeil* (our soul is disgusted with the insubstantial food).”³

Before delving into an in-depth study, additional background information is necessary for our analysis of these *pesukim*. Rashi reveals the true identity of the “king of Arad.”⁴ The verses cited above include a seemingly superfluous phrase in describing this king: “who dwelled in the south.” Rashi explains that these words are an allusion to Amalek, as the text previously described, “*Amalek yoshev be’eretz hanegev* (Amalek dwells in the area of the south).”⁵ But if the king of Arad was an Amalekite, why does the Torah label him as a “Canaanite”? Rashi quotes the *midrash* to explain the inconsistent description of Amalek as Canaanite. Although the king of Arad was indeed an Amalekite descendent, he did not want to be identified as such during the attack. He knew *Bnei Yisrael* would pray for heavenly assistance in the battle, so he tried to avoid being recognized by ordering his army to speak the Canaanite language. *Bnei Yisrael*, he thought, would pray for salvation from the Canaanites, and since the attackers were not

² *Bamidbar* 21:4.

³ *Bamidbar* 21:5.

⁴ Rashi on *Bamidbar* 21:1, quoting *Tanchuma*.

⁵ *Bamidbar* 13:29.

Canaanites, the prayers would not be answered. Rashi explains that *Bnei Yisrael* saw that the attackers spoke the Canaanite language but wore Amalekite uniforms, and they therefore prayed using only a generic reference to the enemy – “If You will deliver this people into my hand.” And, indeed, they won the battle.

Rashi’s explanation requires further analysis. While Amalek’s reason for trying to confound *Bnei Yisrael* and misguide their prayers seems like a viable plan, why did they alter only their speech and not their clothing? Changing both language and uniform would, in all likelihood, have been a more successful deception. Moreover, why did Amalek specifically speak in the Canaanite language, as opposed to that of any other nationality?

Even more questions arise when we explore this account within its historical context. As mentioned above, this incident occurred immediately after the death of Aharon. What is the connection between these two events? Furthermore, why did the people’s complaints arise after this battle? Their discontent seems unfounded and out of place, given that Hashem had answered their prayers and awarded them a swift victory against the king of Arad. What do the people’s grievances against God reveal about what really happened in that war?

Several seemingly small details in this account also seem confusing or unnecessary and require further study. The text tells us that Amalek took a captive. If Amalek initiated the attack unprovoked, why didn’t they launch a full-fledged battle to kill? For what purpose did they take a prisoner-of-war? Another mundane fact appears to be mentioned in passing: after the war, *Bnei Yisrael* consecrated the spoils. Why is this detail noteworthy? Lastly, the verse writes that the king of Arad heard that *Bnei Yisrael* had come “by the route of the spies.” What is the significance of this detail? Why does it appear to contribute to Amalek’s motivation to attack *Bnei Yisrael*?

Explanation of the Impersonation

What motives can explain the puzzling behavior of the Amalek descendant called “the Canaanite king of Arad”? In the Torah, family lineage often speaks volumes about an individual character. Amalek was born to Elifaz, who was a son of Eisav.⁶ What spiritual DNA did Amalek inherit from his grandfather Eisav?

Eisav’s feelings toward Yaakov solidified into eternal hatred, especially after Eisav relinquished both privileges of the firstborn – the birthright and the primary *berachah* (blessing) from their father Yitzchak.⁷ Yitzchak’s prophecy revealed that Eisav would forever live by his sword and Yaakov would live in the Holy Land benefitting from Divine Providence and blessing. As a result, an enduring historical pattern was established; the eternal battle that originated from Yitzchak’s *berachah* was destined to continue throughout the generations.⁸ Thus, when *Bnei Yisrael* (the descendants of Yaakov) attempted to approach *Eretz Yisrael*, the Amalekites (descendants of Eisav) attacked in order to prevent their entry.

Why is Amalek, of all of Eisav’s descendants, the perennial attacker? On his deathbed, Eisav endowed Amalek with a permanent mission: *I did not succeed in defeating Yaakov, but you will avenge my defeat!*⁹ Amalek prolongs Eisav’s grudge; his people’s attack was timed to coincide with *Bnei Yisrael’s* imminent entrance into the Land.

The family history also reveals why Amalek waged war unprovoked. The king of Arad’s assault without instigation is signature Amalekite behavior. Rashi highlights this maliciousness

⁶ See *Bereishis* 36:16.

⁷ See *Bereishis* 25:34 and 27:41.

⁸ See also Chizkuni on *Shemos* 17:8.

⁹ *Midrash* quoted by Rabbi Eli Munk, *Call of the Torah*, p. 247.

as further proof that the “Canaanite king of Arad” is really Amalek: “And Amalek has always been a lash of chastisement, ready at all times to cause calamity.”¹⁰

While Amalek’s lineage explains this war’s timing and impetus, the battle strategy in this particular incident remains somewhat baffling. The skirmish with Amalek described in these *pesukim* was not their only attack on *Bnei Yisrael*. The first confrontation with Amalek appears in *parashas Beshalach*.¹¹ After *Yetzi’as Mitzrayim* (the Exodus from Egypt), they launched a ruthless sneak attack in Refidim. The second conflict with Amalek is recorded in *Parashas Shelach* in the aftermath of the incident of the spies, when Amalek joined forces with the Canaanites and ambushed *Bnei Yisrael* as they attempted to approach the Land.¹² In both cases, Amalek fought to kill. Why did Amalek use a different war tactic in the *parashas Chukas* episode? What was Amalek’s objective in taking a captive?

Amalek had learned from past conflicts that a frontal attack against *Bnei Yisrael* would ultimately fail. This time, therefore, Amalek did not attempt to blatantly cause bodily harm to *Bnei Yisrael*. Instead, they took a captive – and that captive was not even a Jew! The hostage was a *shifchah* (non-Jewish slave-woman) taken by *Bnei Yisrael* during a previous battle with the Canaanites.¹³

Rabbi Dovid Hofstedter scrutinizes both of Amalek’s battle tactics in this case, explaining that taking a captive and speaking the Canaanite language were planned to achieve the same goal. Rather than a physical assault, the king of Arad attempted psychological

¹⁰ Rashi on *Bamidbar* 21:1, quoting *Tanchuma*.

¹¹ *Shemos* 17:8.

¹² *Bamidbar* 14:45.

¹³ Rashi on *Bamidbar* 21:1.

warfare. Amalek's mission was to instill dread in the Jewish heart. Taking a captive would make *Bnei Yisrael* feel vulnerable. To this same end, the king of Arad ordered his army to speak specifically in the Canaanite language in order to arouse the "fear of Canaan" among the Jewish People.¹⁴

Taking a hostage and using the Canaanite language was Amalek's two-pronged, cunning plan to lure *Bnei Yisrael* into repeating their past failure. He "heard that Israel had come by the route of the spies."¹⁵ Amalek examined the Jewish People's error at the time of the *meraglim* (spies). Among other mistakes, the spies dreaded an encounter with the physically superior Canaanite nations. The king of Arad aimed to re-arouse and reinforce their trepidation about conquering the Land of Canaan, since that apprehension is precisely what had previously prevented the Jewish People's entry. *Bnei Yisrael* had doubted their ability to prevail and had allowed fear to enter their calculations. Doubt is result of a weakness in *emunah* (faith in God). Not surprisingly, the *gematria* (numerical value) of "Amalek" is 240, the same as that of the word *safek* (doubt).

The Torah demonstrates an obvious correlation between weakness in *emunah* and Amalek's attacks. A lack of faith was the root cause of the incident of the *meraglim*, which was immediately followed by Amalek's attack in *parashas Shelach*.¹⁶ This same uncertainty is unmistakable in *Parshas Beshalach*, where we find the juxtaposition of two *pesukim*. "He called the place *Masah Umerivab*... because of their test of Hashem saying, 'Is Hashem among us or not?' Amalek came and battled Israel in Refidim."¹⁷ The link

¹⁴ Rabbi Dovid Hofstedter, *Dorash Dovid*, pp. 164-166.

¹⁵ *Bamidbar* 21:1.

¹⁶ *Bamidbar* 14:45.

¹⁷ *Shemos* 17:8.

between doubting Hashem and battling Amalek remains consistent, as is evident in the encounter with Amalek in *parashas Chukas*. Taking a hostage and speaking the Canaanite tongue were therefore the tools of Amalek's wicked ploy to manipulate Jewish emotions. Through instilling fear and doubt, Amalek was hoping to weaken the Jewish People's *emunah*.

Rabbi Hofstedter analyzes these verses further by explaining why Amalek did not succeed in this case.¹⁸ This time, *Bnei Yisrael* withstood the test of faith, overcoming their fear by strengthening their *emunah*. Their trust in God was proven by their actions: "*Bnei Yisrael* made a vow to Hashem and said, 'If You will deliver this people into my hand, I will consecrate their cities.'" In essence, the Jewish People declared, *This war is in Hashem's control!* They demonstrated their complete trust in and dependence on God, as described in the *pasuk*, "*kegamul alei imo* (like a nursing infant of his mother) *kegamul alai nashfi* (like a nursing infant is my soul)."¹⁹ An infant knows intuitively that his mother is the source of his sustenance. This relationship is analogous to *Bnei Yisrael* understanding and articulating their complete reliance on Hashem.

In light of this extraordinary display of *emunah* and the fact that Hashem granted a swift victory, what happened next is astounding. The verse immediately following this episode states, "*Vatiktzar nefesh ha'am badarech* (and the spirit of the people grew short on the way)."²⁰ Why did *Bnei Yisrael* suddenly complain about insufficient food and water? Where did their faith go?

Rabbi Hofstedter returns to this episode's chronological context, exploring the origin of their unfathomable discontent at this

¹⁸ *Dorash Dovid*, pp. 164-166.

¹⁹ *Tehillim* 131:2.

²⁰ *Bamidbar* 21:4.

time.²¹ *Bnei Yisrael* had just witnessed irrefutable proof of their complete dependence on Hashem for their survival. However, while the triumphant outcome of the battle might have been a source of encouragement and inspiration, *Bnei Yisrael* had not emerged unscathed from this encounter with Amalek.

The people were faced with a daunting reality: the Jewish nation is not bound by natural laws. Our existence is one of spiritual – not physical – cause and effect. This necessitates being focused on Hashem all the time. The battle scars that remained after this conflict with Amalek were traces of doubt – not about Hashem’s omnipotence, but about the Jewish People’s capacity to meet Hashem’s expectations. This explains why the Jewish People complained about the heavenly bread called manna, which is soul food. (*Man* is etymologically related to the word *emunah*.) When they said, “*nafsbeinu katzav balechem haklokeil* (our soul is disgusted with the insubstantial food),”²² they meant, “We cannot maintain this high spiritual level.”

Protection and Prayer

At this point, we can perhaps better understand Amalek’s incentive and war tactics in this particular attack. Amalek exacted revenge on behalf of their ancestor, Eisav, by launching an offensive as *Bnei Yisrael* approached *Eretz Yisrael* to fulfill Yitzchak’s *berachah*. Furthermore, Amalek aimed to weaken our *emunah* by taking a hostage and speaking the Canaanite language in order to arouse fear and doubt. In fact, however, our analysis of Amalek’s behavior only partially explains the chronological

²¹ *Dorash David*, pp. 164-166.

²² *Bamidbar* 21:5.

context of this incident. We have yet to explain why the Torah presents this incident side by side with the death of Aharon.

Rashi's additional insights into this episode expose an even deeper aspect of Amalek's treachery, which provides chronological clarification. The *pasuk* immediately preceding this incident states, "The entire assembly saw (*vayiru*) that Aharon had perished, and they wept for Aharon for thirty days, the entire House of Israel."²³ The *Gemara* expounds on the word "*vayiru*" by altering the pronunciation to "*vayeira'u* (and they were seen)."²⁴ By changing "the entire assembly" from the subject to the direct object, a new interpretation emerges. After Aharon died, the people were "seen" – they were exposed and vulnerable. According to the *Gemara*, the death of Aharon was the direct cause of the people's sudden frailty. Rashi therefore explains that "the king of Arad heard" that Aharon had died and that the Clouds of Glory had disappeared.²⁵ Apparently, Amalek recognized the opportunity to attack the Jewish People when they were highly susceptible to harm.

Rabbi Elie Munk explores how Rashi's comment explains Amalek's timing for this unprovoked assault.²⁶ Amalek's eternal mission is to exact revenge for Eisav; as mentioned above, Amalek is ready to strike against *Bnei Yisrael* at any moment.²⁷ If Amalek is compared to a loaded gun, then the removal of our Divine protection enabled the pulling of the trigger.

Assault without provocation is only one aspect of classic Amalekite conduct. Another identifying feature of Amalek's behavior

²³ *Bamidbar* 20:29.

²⁴ *Rosh Hashanah* 3a.

²⁵ Rashi on *Bamidbar* 21:1.

²⁶ *Call of the Torah*, p. 247.

²⁷ Rashi on *Bamidbar* 21:1, quoting *Tanchuma*.

is exploitation of the weak. When the Torah's commands us to remember Amalek, it provides justification within the same verse: "Remember what Amalek did to you... and he struck those of you who were hindmost, all the weaklings at your rear, when you were faint and exhausted."²⁸ This most despised enemy always takes advantage of the Jewish People's most fragile moments and weakest elements. It was originally Eisav who advised Amalek to follow this cunning strategy of waiting in ambush until *Bnei Yisrael* were vulnerable.²⁹

As described above, all of Amalek's attacks correspond to a faltering in *emunah*. But what other disadvantage was produced by Aharon's death and the clouds' disappearance? Rabbi Yissocher Frand elaborates on the nature of the protection provided by these clouds and their connection to Aharon.³⁰ Aharon "loved peace and pursued it."³¹ He promoted harmony in the Jewish community. The *achdus* (unity) he produced created an environment conducive for the Clouds of Glory to shield *Bnei Yisrael* from enemy attack. When Aharon died, the Jewish People lost a primary and influential promoter of peace.³² Without Aharon to facilitate compromise, people began to argue. Divisiveness is a weakness; lack of peace can render the Jewish People vulnerable and defenseless.

This same concept is apparent in *parashas Lech Lecha*. When Avraham and Lot came to Canaan, a quarrel erupted between their shepherds. The *pasuk* relating this incident adds a seemingly irrelevant detail, stating that "the Canaanites were in the land at

²⁸ *Devarim* 25:17-18.

²⁹ *Call of the Torah*, p. 247.

³⁰ *Rabbi Frand on the Parashah*, pp. 228-231.

³¹ *Pirkei Avos* 1:12.

³² Rabbi Frand, quoting *Ateres Mordechai*, *Rabbi Frand on the Parashah*, pp. 228-231.

the time.”³³ In fact, however, this detail is quite noteworthy. The text mentions the threat of the Canaanites to highlight that there is indeed a causal and direct relationship at play. Since there was strife between Avraham and Lot, they were vulnerable to the invasion of the Canaanite enemy.

Amalek formulated a battle strategy based on observations from past conflicts with *Bnei Yisrael*. They knew that the Jewish nation’s unique connection to Hashem is what makes it invincible. But they also knew that as a result of flawed *emunah* or interpersonal discord, *Bnei Yisrael* become distanced from Hashem, and thus completely defenseless.

The power of the Jewish People’s Divine connection was something that Amalek understood. Why else would the king of Arad have been so concerned about being cited in their *tefillos*? Amalek had witnessed the power of Jewish prayer during the battle at Refidim: “When Moshe raised his hand, Israel grew stronger, and when he lowered his hand, Amalek was stronger.”³⁴ Our Sages comment on the symbolism of a raised hand: “As long as Yisrael looked heavenward... they would prevail.”³⁵

Amalek was privy to the secret of the Jewish-Divine connection long before the war at Refidim. Rabbi Zalman Sorotzkin underscores that Amalek is the only hostile nation among our adversaries that fears our prayers.³⁶ He traces this fear back to Amalek’s family roots, to the source of Eisav’s hatred of Yaakov. When Yaakov approached his father dressed in Eisav’s clothing in order to receive the first *berachah*, Yitzchak sensed incongruity,

³³ *Bereishis* 12:6.

³⁴ *Shemos* 17:11.

³⁵ *Mishnah Rosh Hashanah* 3:8.

³⁶ Rabbi Zalman Sorotzkin, *Oznayim LaTorah*, p. 248.

and declared, “The voice is the voice of Yaakov, and the hands are the hands of Eisav.”³⁷ The *midrash* interprets Yitzchak’s seemingly simple observation as a prophetic eternal truth regarding his sons’ descendants. When Yaakov raises his voice in prayer, Eisav’s hands are powerless to harm his brother.³⁸ The king of Arad knew that *tefillah* is the Jewish People’s most powerful weapon against Eisav’s descendants. Therefore, the king of Arad misrepresented his nation’s Amalekite identity in an effort to weaken “the voice of Yaakov” and misdirect *Bnei Yisrael’s* prayers.

The king of Arad expected *Bnei Yisrael* to pray for Divine assistance. He directed his people to speak the Canaanite language, because he assumed that a prayer for victory over the Canaanites would not be answered. But how could Amalek presume that Hashem would not save *Bnei Yisrael* simply because of mistaken identity in their *tefillah*? Of course Hashem would have known they were misled! Rabbi Mordechai Druk explains that Amalek was not just aiming to disrupt the accuracy of Jewish prayer, but more specifically to diminish its effectiveness.³⁹ The name “Amalek” aroused an intense terror among the Jewish People. The king of Arad knew that detection would cause panic and subsequently inspire *Bnei Yisrael* to pray more fervently for salvation. Therefore, the Amalekite people pretended to be Canaanites. If *Bnei Yisrael* could not recognize their perennial attacker, they would not pray for deliverance with emotional intensity.

Rabbi Druk elaborates on this concept of emotions contributing to the effectiveness of prayer. The *Gemara* teaches that the mother of the *Cohen Gadol* would supply food and give gifts to the accidental murderers who were residents of the *arei miklat* (cities

³⁷ *Bereishis* 27:22.

³⁸ *Bereishis Rabbah* 65:20.

³⁹ Rabbi Mordechai Druk, *Darash Mordechai*, pp. 198-199.

of refuge).⁴⁰ What did the mother hope to accomplish? Jewish law states that when the *Cohen Gadol* dies, accidental murderers go free. It was thus only natural for these prisoners to hope he would die so that their freedom would be granted. Therefore, the mothers of the *Cobanim Gedolim* wanted to pacify the convicts, to the point of catering to them, to discourage them from praying that their sons, the *Cobanim Gedolim*, would die.

Did these women truly believe that food and gifts would prevent these unfortunates from praying for freedom? Of course they still prayed to be released from the *arei miklat!* Nevertheless, the mothers of the *Cobanim Gedolim* tried to placate the accidental murderers in order to cool the fiery passion of their prayers. The *Gemara* is teaching us a profound lesson: the real threat to our prayers is coldness! Such was Amalek's motive: "*asher karcha baderech* (who happened upon you on the way)."⁴¹ The word "*karcha*" hints to the word "*kar*" (cold).⁴² Amalek tried to cool off our fire and passion for Hashem.⁴³

Despite the importance of passion and zeal in davening, the quality of prayer is not measured solely by emotional expressions. Rabbi Mattisyahu Salomon explains that tearful prayer is not always indicative of the type of request to which Hashem responds.⁴⁴ It depends on why the supplicant is crying. Someone tearfully reciting *Tebillim* for a sick person might be already imagining this person's passing, *chas veshalom!* Tears of despair are the wrong vehicle through which to communicate with Hashem. There is no place for hopelessness in prayer.

⁴⁰ *Makkos* 11a.

⁴¹ *Devarim* 25:17.

⁴² Rashi on *Devarim* 25:17, referencing *Bereishis* 8:22, "hot and cold."

⁴³ See *Torah Tapestries, Vayikera, parashas Tzav*.

⁴⁴ Rabbi Mattisyahu Salomon, *With Hearts Full of Faith*, pp. 92-93.

Rabbi Salomon quotes a *gemara* that presents a scenario of two people faced with death and praying to stay alive; one survives and one dies. They both prayed to live, but the prayers of only one of them were answered. Why? The *Gemara* offers an enigmatic reply: “This one prayed a complete prayer (*tefillah sheleimah*) and the other did not.”⁴⁵ Rashi comments on the ambiguity of the expression *tefillah sheleimah* with one word: “*niskaven* (lit. he was deliberate, focused).” This remark is unclear. Did the survivor concentrate on his *tefillos* better than the victim?

Rabbi Elya Lopian clarifies the difference between “being *niskaven*” and not “being *niskaven*” – a genuine belief in the power of prayer.⁴⁶ A *tefillah sheleimah* is rooted in deep *emunah*. When a person sincerely entreats Hashem for his needs, it demonstrates his complete dependence on Hashem.⁴⁷ The power of *Bnei Yisrael’s* prayers is predicated on the unalterable belief that Hashem can accomplish anything. He can save a sick person with even the gravest prognosis. No matter how dire a situation seems, *tefillah sheleimah* is motivated by complete and perfect trust that He will turn it around.

Total Trust: *Teshuvah, Tefillah and Tzedakah*

Trusting in Hashem does not absolve us of the obligation of *hishtadlus* (effort). True *emunah* is not about shirking personal responsibility and saying, “Hashem will take care of it.” This being the case, what is the genuine *emunah* that is manifest in *tefillah*

⁴⁵ *Rosh Hashanah* 18a.

⁴⁶ As quoted in *With Hearts Full of Faith*, p. 93.

⁴⁷ Rabbi Menachem Nissel, *Rishgei Lev*, p. 52.

sheleimah? If *Bnei Yisrael's* prayers were answered in this war with Amalek, it behooves us to uncover their secret. What aspect of their *tefillos* should we be aiming to emulate? How do we pray successfully?

The key lies in the knowledge that authentic *emunah* is not a passive emotion. In fact, unqualified trust in Hashem is a very active undertaking.

Rabbi Gamliel Rabinowitz illustrates how this episode with Amalek teaches us the fundamental elements that comprise effective prayers.⁴⁸ First, we must believe unequivocally that nothing happens by coincidence. Amalek, by contrast, championed the ideology of *mikreh* (happenstance) – they were the ones “*asher karcha baderech* (who happened upon you on the way).”⁴⁹ When the king of Arad took a hostage, *Bnei Yisrael* interpreted this incident as a message from Above. Although the captive was just one non-Jewish slave-woman, *Bnei Yisrael* recognized Hashem’s hand. *Emunah* means complete and absolute belief that no event is inconsequential. Every occurrence, no matter how small, is directed by *hashgachah pratis* (Divine Providence) for a higher purpose.

Bnei Yisrael not only identified the fact that the captive was seized as a sign from Hashem, but also accepted direct responsibility for this occurrence. Instead of ignoring the kidnapping as a minor, inconsequential incident, they perceived it as a message from God and blamed themselves.

Rabbi Rabinowitz relates this idea to the story of Yosef in *parashas Miketz*. When Yosef demanded that his brothers bring Binyamin down to Egypt, they linked their present predicament to

⁴⁸ Rabbi Gamliel Rabinowitz, *Tiv HaTorah*, pp. 348-349.

⁴⁹ *Esther Rabbah* 8.

their past mistakes: “Indeed we are guilty concerning our brother – when we saw his heartfelt anguish, when he pleaded with us and we did not listen; that is why this anguish has come upon us!”⁵⁰ They understood the causal relationship between their chosen actions and consequential experiences, and they therefore felt directly responsible for their own pain. Because they had endangered Yosef, they were now being pressured to endanger Binyamin. The anguish they were now feeling was connected to how Yosef felt when they betrayed him. With this same sense of responsibility, the Jewish People recognized that losing a hostage was part of Hashem’s purposeful design. They acknowledged their own accountability for the circumstances.

However, *Bnei Yisrael* went one step further. They promised to consecrate the spoils. Very importantly, *Bnei Yisrael’s* promise was not an attempt to broker a deal with God, but rather an active response to their predicament. As mentioned above, Rabbi Rabinowitz explains that vowing to consecrate the spoils exhibited a strengthening of *emunah baHashem*. *Bnei Yisrael* had already demonstrated their total trust in God. But more than simply relying on Hashem, the Jewish People chose to overtly exhibit their desire to grow even closer to Him through consecrating the spoils. This incident teaches us the importance of both steps: identifying Hashem’s hidden messages as personal rebukes and responding with positive action to strengthen the connection with Him.

These insights should speak very loudly to us in our efforts to formulate effective prayers. When we face challenges, like *Bnei Yisrael* struggling with Amalek, our *tefillos* need to be accompanied by deeds. Why was consecrating the spoils so critical to the equation? Surely Hashem has no need for physical objects! It was the act of consecration that was essential for the *tefillah* to be

⁵⁰ *Bereishis* 42:21.

accepted. It is common knowledge that actions speak louder than words. Why is this so? Speech is simply the start-up process; words are merely the articulation of our thoughts. It is only through our deeds that our thoughts and words are actualized! Actions are the proof of the sincerity of our convictions. *Tefillah* without action is merely lip service.

There is a widespread custom of giving *tzedakah* before praying.⁵¹ The importance of actions accompanying *tefillos* explains the origin of this practice. Donating money – or in this case, the spoils of war – is an overt demonstration of spiritual striving. Our Sages teach us the three part formula for salvation: “*Uteshuvah, utefillah, utzedakah* (Repentance, prayer, and charity) *ma'avirin es ro'a hagezeirah* (remove the evil of the decree).”⁵² This three-part formulation is at the very heart of the *Yamim Noraim* (High Holy Days) davening. And these three elements, in this order, are found in this episode.

When the *shifchah* was kidnapped, *Bnei Yisrael* responded with introspection and accepted responsibility; this was *teshuvah*. Then, through *tefillah*, *Bnei Yisrael* pleaded to Hashem for deliverance. Finally, they vowed to dedicate the spoils to Hashem; this was *tzedakah*. From this we learn that our spiritually-oriented actions are the necessary vehicles to deliver our *tefillos* straight to *Shamayim* (Heaven). We must remember that without spiritual actions, our prayers are unlikely to fulfill their purpose.

Language and Lip Service

As mentioned above, words without actions can become hollow and meaningless. Sometimes speech does not accurately

⁵¹ *Tiv HaTorah*, pp. 348-349, quoting *Yoreh Deah*.

⁵² *Rosh Hashanah* 16b.

portray the true intentions of the speaker. Such was the case in our story with Amalek, as explained by Rabbi Moshe Price.⁵³ He notes that Amalek's efforts to imitate the Canaanites appear half-hearted. If Amalek's army truly wanted to impersonate the Canaanites, why did they alter only their language and not their clothing?

It is critical to remember that the battle with Amalek is essentially a spiritual war, not a physical one. As discussed, the king of Arad was waging psychological warfare. As we already noted, Rabbi David Hofstedter interprets the use of Canaanite language as an attempt to frighten the Jewish People and weaken their *emunah baHashem*.⁵⁴ Perhaps the playing of "mind games" through language change was a secondary objective, not a primary one.

Rabbi Moshe Sternbuch suggests that it had to do primarily with a pretense of compromise.⁵⁵ According to Rabbi Sternbuch, the Amalek army changed its language, but not its uniform, primarily to convey a message of phony closeness. Amalek aimed to defile the minds of *Bnei Yisrael* with their deceptive philosophy: *You can have it both ways! We can speak a different "language" from our native one, and you too can do so. Compromise is possible!*

Amalek's partial and insincere Canaanite impersonation proves the deceit inherent in their attack methodology. The phrase "taking a captive" is a symbolic euphemism for Amalek's efforts to trap *Bnei Yisrael*. This characteristic deceptive behavior was inherited from their ancestor Eisav, whom the Torah describes as an "*ish yodei'a tzayid* (a man who knows hunting [how to ensnare])."⁵⁶

⁵³ Rabbi Moshe Price, *MiZekeinim Esbonan*, p. 112.

⁵⁴ *Dorash David*, pp. 164-166.

⁵⁵ Rabbi Moshe Sternbuch, *Ta'am VaDa'as*, p. 102.

⁵⁶ *Bereishis* 25:27

The Torah relates that Yitzchak loved Eisav “*ki tzayid befv* (because his trapping was in his mouth).” Rashi explains this expression homiletically: “Eisav would trap Yitzchak and deceive him with words.”⁵⁷ The Amalek nation spoke the Canaanite language as mere lip service, but they hadn’t changed their clothes nor, even more importantly, their true essence.

Rabbi Price states simply and powerfully: “Clothing makes the man.”⁵⁸ A person’s attire represents his identity. Amalek’s soldiers wore their own uniforms because they did not change their essence. If the king of Arad had ordered them to wear Canaanite clothing, they would have assumed the Canaanite character. *Bnei Yisrael* would have prayed for deliverance from Canaan and their prayers, surprisingly enough, would have been accepted.

The Hebrew verb for wearing clothing is “*libosh*.” In Jewish thought, donning a garment reveals one’s spiritual essence much more than it conceals the physical body. This concept is found in many places, such as *Megillas Esther*: “*Vatilbash Esther malchus* (and Esther clothed herself in royalty).”⁵⁹ Rashi notes the use of the verb “to wear” in relation with the abstract concept of “royalty,” and interprets the phrase to mean that *Ruach HaKodesh* (prophecy) was manifest through Esther.⁶⁰ Many *pesukim* in *Tebillim* describe Hashem “wearing” different attributes.⁶¹ While the human mind cannot accurately understand Hashem, our comprehension can be guided by character traits that are likened to Hashem’s “garments.”

⁵⁷ Rashi on *Bereishis* 25:28, quoting *Tanchuma* 8.

⁵⁸ *Mizakeinim Esbonan*, p. 112.

⁵⁹ *Esther* 5:1.

⁶⁰ Rashi on *Esther* 5:1, quoting *Gemara Megillah* 15a.

⁶¹ For example, *Tebillim* 93:1: “*Hashem malach ge’us laveish* (Hashem reigned, He donned grandeur) *laveish Hashem oz bisazar* (Hashem donned might and girded Himself).”

In the same way, a person's clothing reveals his true identity. The king of Arad did not order his army to change out of Amalek-ite clothing because he had no intention of altering his devious character.

The Enemy Within

This account of the interaction with the king of Arad not only guides our response to external challenges or circumstances, but also teaches us that in reality, we are oftentimes our own worst enemy.

As Rabbi Moshe Goldstein notes, all of our battles with other nations are actually spiritual in nature, not physical.⁶² The psychological warfare launched by Amalek represents the eternal spiritual battle we wage within ourselves against the *yetzer hara* (evil inclination). Our *yetzer hara* employs Amalek's combat strategy of phony compromise. It speaks "our language," using false pretenses suggesting it is working for our benefit. Whenever we try to justify our wrongful or careless performance of *mitzvos*, we have fallen into Eisav's trap. The *yetzer hara* knows that a brazen and frontal approach will fail; a Torah observant person will recognize the voice of the enemy and avoid transgression. Thus, as was the case with Eisav and Amalek, the triumph of the *yetzer hara* is dependent on phoniness, deception, and illusion.

The core identity of the *yetzer hara* can be found in *parashas Vayishlach* in the struggle between Yaakov and the man identified as the ministering angel of Eisav.⁶³ After they wrestled at the

⁶² Rabbi Moshe Goldstein, *Sha'arei Chaim*, p. 283.

⁶³ Rashi on *Bereishis* 32:30, quoting *Bereishis Rabbah* 77:3.

Yabok River crossing, Yaakov asked, “Please tell me your name.” The name of a person, place, or object defines its essence; Yaakov requested that the angel reveal its true identity.⁶⁴ The angel of Eisav gave a puzzling response: “*Lama zeh tishal lishmi?* (Why do you ask for my name?)”⁶⁵ Using evasive speech, Eisav tried to avoid revealing his identity by responding to a question with a question!

Rabbi Chaim Shmulevitz explains that Eisav’s angel’s response can be interpreted in two ways.⁶⁶ First, the angel’s question was actually a response. *My existence is a result of people not asking my name. My power is fueled by those who neglect to examine my essence, because if they did, they would dispel my illusion.* Second, the angel’s response indicated that he had no name. The *yetzer hara* is not a tangible external reality. Eisav (as well as Amalek) is only an illusion and is therefore nameless.

The *yetzer hara*, as represented by Eisav and Amalek, is not an outside deceptive force with which we reckon. In our personal struggles with the voices of doubt and temptation, we often run the risk of actually fooling ourselves. The text reveals that Amalek fears the prayers of *Bnei Yisrael*; we know the secret of our Divine connection. So why does Amalek attack anyway? Why do we have the tendency to fall into their trap? Amalek represents those who understand the spiritual reality intellectually, but nevertheless frequently ignore that reality. As for why this happens, Rabbi Mordechai Druk focuses on our physicality.⁶⁷ Our physical drives are very strong. Without constant exertion in *avodas Hashem* by

⁶⁴ *Seforno* on *Bereishis* 32:30.

⁶⁵ *Bereishis* 32:30.

⁶⁶ *Reb Chaim’s Discourses*, pp. 81-82.

⁶⁷ *Darash Mordechai*, p. 199.

channeling physical desires properly, a person remains defenseless against his *yetzer hara*.

The Slonimer Rebbe explains that *emunah* has three levels, represented by the head, the heart, and the limbs.⁶⁸ He quotes the *Yesod HaAvodah*, who states that the distance between intellectual faith (the head) and emotional faith (the heart) is farther than the span between heaven and earth. It is a lifelong struggle to internalize cerebral belief emotionally and truly take it to heart. The task at hand, therefore, is to consistently make a high-level effort to neutralize the *yetzer hara*.

There are two ways to prevail over the *yetzer hara*. The first course is to be on constant guard so that we can disarm Amalek when he approaches. Our only hope against the *yetzer hara* is to identify it swiftly and accurately, and to subdue it forthwith. The heart is subjective and easily misled, but the intellect is objective. Let the head instruct the heart; we can use our knowledge of Amalek's trickery to our advantage. The *Gemara* states, "A person does not sin unless a spirit of foolishness enters into him."⁶⁹ Let us not be fooled! Uncovering the scheming ploy of Amalek empowers us to withstand temptation to sin.

We must subject every inner voice to intense intellectual scrutiny to reveal its true identity. *Is this a choice that is really beneficial for me or is this a trick? Even if it seems at first glance to be in my best interests, will it hold up under careful scrutiny? What is your name? Are you Canaan or Amalek?* We need to *daven* for *siyata diShmaya* (Heavenly assistance) in dispelling illusions employed by the *yetzer hara*.

The second direction we should follow is to set ourselves up for success. The *yetzer hara* is conniving and deceitful, but quite

⁶⁸ *Nesivos Shalom*, vol. 2, p. 181.

⁶⁹ *Sotah* 3a.

often, it is also very predictable. We need to admit and recognize our own weaknesses so that we understand which settings to avoid and which circumstances are likely to lead to our failure. Someone who is dieting probably should not walk into an ice-cream store! We need to avoid risky situations and environments that are conducive to temptation.

Rabbi Chaim Yaakov Goldvicht underscores this concept in exploring the influence of *Bnei Yisrael's* past mistakes on their present circumstances.⁷⁰ He addresses our question regarding the seemingly superfluous words in the *pasuk* that *Bnei Yisrael* had come “by the route of the spies.” As mentioned above, this detail indicates Amalek’s attempt to instill the same fear of the land of Canaan that *Bnei Yisrael* experienced at the time of the *meraglim*. Amalek’s most successful attack, as recorded in *parashas Shelach*,⁷¹ occurred in the aftermath of Moshe’s sending the spies: “[Amalek] struck them and pounded them until Chormah.”⁷² The phrase “the route of the spies” indicates more than Amalek’s motivation to attack; this reference to *Bnei Yisrael's* past defeat is a warning signal that the Jewish nation was entering dangerous spiritual territory. The sin of the *meraglim* demonstrated a lack of *emunah* akin to idol worship.⁷³ Therefore, this “spy route” reference seems to be cautioning *Bnei Yisrael* that they could be at risk of diminishing their *emunah* in *Hashem*.

Rabbi Goldvicht points out a fundamental concept – our actions make an indelible impression on our surroundings.⁷⁴ The

⁷⁰ Rabbi Chaim Yaakov Goldvicht, *Asufas Ma'arachos*, p. 211.

⁷¹ *Bamidbar* 14:45.

⁷² Rashi comments that the word “pounding” indicates repeated blows and extensive damage.

⁷³ Rabbi Moshe Yechiel Epstein, *Be'er Moshe*, p. 137.

⁷⁴ *Asufas Ma'arachos*, p. 209.

implications of this phenomenon are both positive and negative. On the positive side, Rabbi Moshe Reiss examines the idea that when *Mashiach* comes, “the lion will lie down with the lamb.” How can it be that animals without free choice will change their nature? Rabbi Reiss explains that when human war ceases, peace will actually be infused into the environment! The serene atmosphere will even affect the behavior of the animals.⁷⁵

Our deeds can either improve or degrade the world around us. Rabbi Goldvicht illustrates our ability to damage the environment with an example.⁷⁶ A *mishnah* reads: “Two who sit and do not have among them words of Torah, this is a place of scoffers....”⁷⁷ Is a lack of Torah equivalent to scoffing? Rabbi Goldvicht presents the novel interpretation that the two people described in this *mishnah* are, in fact, speaking words of Torah! However, their Torah study is a superficial intellectual exercise. “The letters [of Torah] are flying in the air” and not affecting them internally. Why? Because they are sitting in “a place of scoffers” – their location was desecrated by the transgressions of the previous residents. The mockery and corrupt behavior of other individuals tainted that particular environment permanently, so that it is no longer conducive to Torah learning.

The text alludes to the spiritual desecration of a physical place with the phrase “by the route of the spies.” The sin of the *meraglim* left a tainted trail. Therefore, when *Bnei Yisrael* came “by the route of the spies,” they entered an environment that still reeked of sin. They could not emerge unaffected.

We learn from this mistake that we must select our environment carefully. Our community, our neighborhood, our social

⁷⁵ *MeiRosh Tzurim*, p. 184.

⁷⁶ *Asufas Ma'arachos*, p. 209.

⁷⁷ *Pirkei Avo*s 3:2.

circles, and our synagogue influence our ability to prevail against the Amalek within ourselves. We cannot delude ourselves into thinking that as grown adults we are immune to the atmosphere and external pressures. If we put ourselves into inappropriate situations or environments, we will almost certainly fall prey to negative influences. To maximize our potential, we must avoid the “route of the spies.” Just as the dieter must avoid the ice-cream store to succeed in losing weight, we must seek out the right places and situations. We should avoid questionable territory, choosing instead the environments that promote spiritual growth. Furthermore, we must be conscious of how our actions affect the people and places around us. We must ask ourselves: *What kind of an impression am I leaving on the people I meet and the places I go?*

Our eternal struggle with Eisav is fighting the “enemy within” – the foe living inside our own selves. Amalek continuously wages psychological warfare by attempting to take a captive and instill fear in our hearts. Our most dangerous enemy is the inner voice of doubt that weakens our *emunah*. The antidote to fear and doubt is remembering that we are completely dependent on Hashem, *kegamul alei imo* – like an infant is dependant on his mother. *Emunah* is the confidence that everything is divinely orchestrated for a purpose and that nothing that happens can be subsumed into the Amalekite mindset of happenstance or coincidence.

Amalek feared our most powerful defense: our *tefillos*, the channel through which we cultivate and reinforce our *emunah* in Hashem. Genuine *tefillos* are imbued with a passion and conviction of their effectiveness, unlike the lip service of the “Canaanite” king of Arad. Let us not fool ourselves with meaningless words, *tzayid befin* – the deceitful language of Eisav. *Uteshuvah, utefillah, utzedaka ma'avirin es ro'a bagzeirah*. Taking action with repentance and giving charity unlocks the transformative power of our prayers.

May we strengthen our *emunah* so that it can permeate our minds and our hearts. May we respond to challenges with spiritual fortitude and always consecrate our actions to God. Most importantly, may Hashem accept all of our *tefillos* in our efforts to triumph over the enemy that holds us back from the achieving the ultimate closeness with our Father in Heaven.