

Amalek and the Stunning Power of Spiritual Genetics

The mitzvah to destroy Amalek is one that may leave an inquisitive mind with more questions than answers. This article will not focus on the broader issues raised by a seeming obligation to wipe out an entire nation, but rather on one, narrow aspect that seems to conflict with an established Torah principle. In *Parashat Ki Teitzei* we are taught:

לֹא יוּמְתוּ אָבוֹת עַל בְּנֵים וּבָנִים לֹא יוּמְתוּ עַל אָבוֹת אִישׁ בְּחֻטְאוֹ יוּמְתוּ.
A person dies for his/her own sins, not for the sins of his/her parents or children.
Devarim 24:16

This is both intuitive and just; why should my children be punished for my misdeeds? Yet just a few verses later we learn of the obligation to destroy Amalek. The reason given is:

אֲשֶׁר קָרַךְ בְּדֶרֶךְ וַיִּזְנֶב בְּכָל הַנְּחֻשְׁלִים אַחֲרָיו וְאַתָּה עִיף וַיִּגַע וְלֹא יָרָא אֱלֹקִים.
That they [Amalek nation] happened upon you on the way [out of Mitzrayim] and attacked the exhausted stragglers in the rear, and he [Amalek nation] did not fear G-d.
Devarim 25:18

All Jews are then obligated to continue this reprisal for all generations in response to a sin committed by the Amalekite's ancestors in previous generations. This example of vicarious liability seems to fly in the face of the rule of individual accountability articulated in the previous chapter.¹ While Amalek is the case where the



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stakes are highest, it is by no means the only instance in the Torah that seems to penalize children for their parents' misdeeds. A mamzer's status is the direct result of a parent's (or ancestor's) forbidden relationship (Devarim 23:3). K'na'an's children seem to have been condemned to eternal slavery for his and his father's sin (Bereishit 9:25). We are all still accountable for significant historical sins like the sale of Yosef or the sin of the Golden Calf; even for the sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge. Descendants of Amon and Moav still pay the price for the lack of hospitality exhibited many generations ago (Devarim 23:4). While it does not offend our sensibilities as much, the same question exists in the other direction. The concept of *zechut avot* means that each Jewish person still benefits from the righteousness of our forefathers and foremothers. Kohanim and Leviim did not earn their exalted, inherited status, and while Mashiach will certainly need to have his own resume, it will be his membership in the Tribe of Yehuda and the Kingdom

of David that grants him eligibility for the position. Does G-d work on the same legacy system people disdain in elite universities?

Perhaps a key to understanding this issue is the following distinction: Children are not punished for their parents' actions. This is both intuitively unfair, and refuted by the verse cited above. No one disputes, however, that the actions of parents can affect the circumstances into which their children are born, and in which they grow up. As an extreme example, a woman who smokes crack cocaine throughout her pregnancy will harm her innocent child. The same with parents who choose to waste all their money on lottery tickets rather than properly feed their children. Actions have consequences that extend beyond the actors themselves to the people around them. This does not make these consequences "fair," but it at least puts them into a framework that is easier to recognize.

Perhaps what seems normal to us in the physical, natural world may also be true in the spiritual, supernatural realm as well. We are used to the realization that our world is bound by science; that our lives are governed

by the rules of physics, chemistry and biology. The Torah teaches that in addition to these, there is another, religious dimension, invisible even under a microscope, but no less real. These rules govern the world of purity and impurity or ritual sanctity of the Beit Hamikdash and its offerings.

The Ramban writes repeatedly about the fundamental principle of “*ma’aseh avot siman labanim*” — the actions of the father are a sign for the children. He views this as going far beyond a simple mandate for us to learn the lessons of history. He quotes the midrash that *kol mah she’ira la’avot siman labanim* — anything that happened to the Avot was a sign to the children as a cosmic historical determinant. When the forefathers performed an action — good or bad — it infused a power or deficiency into their descendants that would surface repeatedly throughout history.² The choices made by Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov deeply affected the religious DNA they passed on to the Jewish nation. We are chosen not because of any inclination embedded into Avraham’s genetic code, but because of the concrete actions he took and the decisions he made. Presumably, this is not a miraculous aberration of nature but the way the world works. Our ancestors chose to say *na’aseh v’nishmah*, we will do and (then) we will listen, and we retain the benefits of that choice far beyond the transaction of *kabalat Hatorah*. While subsequent actions are more limited in their scope, as Yaakov was our last shared forefather, the heroic behavior of Yehuda and Aharon also impacted their spiritual genetic legacy to create the *malchut* and *kehunah* respectively.

Amalek’s children are condemned through no fault of their own, but that is an inherited status based on the

decisions made by their ancestors, the same way that our status as Jews is based on our parents’ response of *na’aseh v’nishmah*, or Avraham finding Hashem. A person’s circumstance won’t determine whether or not he gets to the World to Come — it will just determine the challenges he will have to face to get there.

We are, of course, still far from fully grasping the mitzva to annihilate Amalek. The nexus between crime and punishment seems harsh, and our reward for the good acts of our ancestors, generous. Still, it is valuable to recognize that the same way that the natural world has consequences that extend outside of the actors themselves, the metaphysical world is no less real and has its own systematic rules in which actions lead to results that strike us as less than fair to the victims.

This seems to point to a difference between the mechanics of physical genetics as opposed to spiritual genetics. Since Darwin, scientists have assumed that our biological genetics are determined at conception. Nothing we do can alter the genetic legacy we pass on to our children.³ Even a mother, who during pregnancy can still influence the health of her child, is unable to affect the “nature” part of her maternal contribution after birth. The Torah seems to be teaching us that spiritual genes work differently.

The message of all of these examples is that unlike biology, the religious genetic legacy that we each leave our children is in constant flux, changing based on our every deed. Amalek is not our enemy because they were inclined to attack us, but because they acted on that inclination — a decision in their adult lives that had a profound impact on their offspring. So too, we are a chosen nation not

due to Avraham’s impulses, but for his choices. This has implications that are comforting and terrifying, raising the stakes of our own religious choices. No longer are the consequences of our actions limited to ourselves, but with every choice we make we leave a deep, lasting impact on our children, grandchildren and all of our future generations. On Purim we celebrate the defeat of Amalek and the ability to conquer the Amalek within ourselves, and set into motion a positive ripple effect into eternity with this victory.

Endnotes

1 See http://alhatorah.org/Are_Children_Punished_for_Parents%27_Sins/5 for dozens of sources on this subject. See also, Rabbi Hayyim Angel at <https://library.yctorah.org/files/2016/09/The-Person-Who-Sins-He-Shall-Die.pdf> for a comprehensive survey of different approaches to the problem, including other seemingly conflicting indications from elsewhere in the Torah, as well as the books of Yirmiyau and Yechezkel. Many of the commentaries he cites interpret the former verse as unrelated to vicarious liability, but instead follow a strand in Chazal that teaches that a family member may not, and is thus shielded from having to, testify against his relative.

2 Ramban’s *Commentary on the Torah*, Bereishit 12:6, 12:10, 14:1, 16:6, 26:20 and 29:2. See a helpful analysis from Rabbi Alex Israel at <http://www.alexisrael.org/lech-lecha--maaseh-avot> and <http://www.alexisrael.org/vayishlach-history-repeats-itself>.

3 Listen to <http://www.radiolab.org/story/251876-inheritance/> for the fascinating backstory of the ugly history and surprising resurrection of epigenetics as a serious field of scientific study, including experiments involving loving mother rats who lick their children and those involving starving pre-adolescent Swedes. See also, the controversial work of Dr. Rachel Yehuda and her research arguing that the trauma suffered by Holocaust victims made their children more susceptible genetically to PTSD.