**Zechirat Amalek**

Every year, on the Shabbat before Purim, we read Parshat Zachor, emphasizing our obligation to remember what Amalek did to us. This is based on the halachic assumption that the obligation to remember and not forget requires regular reading from the Torah in public (see Terumat HaDeshen 108). While it is true that Amalek was the first nation to attack the Jews as they left Egypt, we must analyze the nature of our perpetual commemoration of this crime and the enmity it engenders.

From several Rishonim, it seems that the Torah demands that we remember the personal affront to the Jewish people, either generically that they attacked us (*Smag, Mitzvat Aseh* 116), or specifically the fact that they attacked us first, when we were vulnerable, opening up the doors for others to attack (Rambam, Sefer HaMitzvot, Aseh 189 and Lo Taaseh 59, Chinuch 603).

However, at some level, this vengeance seems odd. Consider, for example, Rambam’s theological explanation for the prohibition to seek revenge or hold a grudge:

He who takes vengeance of his fellow violates the prohibitive commandment of, "Thou shalt not take vengeance" ([**Lev. 19.18**](https://www.sefaria.org.il/Leviticus.19.18).); and, even though he is not flogged for the violation, it is an extremely evil tendency. Forsooth, it becomes man to be indulgent in his ethical conduct in all temporal matters, for, to those who can reason all worldly matters are vanity and absurdity, unworthy to call forth vengeance on their account. (Deot 7:7)

Rambam argues that vengeance is not an interpersonal crime, but rather reveals a lack of perspective. One who truly understands that the cosmos are greater than the problems of one individual will find that his problems are relatively meaningless.

Yet, there, we are commanded to harbor such a grudge against Amalek. Of course, one could argue that in this case it is worth holding a grudge as God commanded it, and the affront was not personal, but rather national.

However, I think there is more. Other Rishonim focus not on the crime against the Jewish people, but the crime against God. Recognizing that as God’s people, an attack on the Jews, especially in the immediate aftermath of God’s choosing them and miraculously taking them as His own, their battle was against God’s name – the Jewish people were merely the means by which they attacked God. This is how Rabbi Yitzchak Arama (Akeidat Yitzchak, Beshalach, 42) explains it:

Normally, nations go to war in order to gain territory, prisoners, loot, or for their generals to make a name for themselves and for the country to gain glory. None of these motivations applied to Amalek when it attacked Israel. "He chanced on you on the way," i.e. he had no chance to rob you of territory since you yourself were wandering nomads. He did not attack frontally, only the stragglers that had trailed behind the main body (25,18) There was no glory to be gained from that! It was an act of cowardice, since Israel was tired as the Torah testifies. "He did not fear the Lord." The only motivation was to attack something precious to G-d.

In a cryptic comment, Rabbi Ezra of Gerona (Mitzvah 198) writes that we are commanded “to remember the actions of Amalek always, as it says ‘and they did not fear God.” Later (Mitzvah 315), he writes “do not forget from our hearts the issue of Amalek, about whom it says ‘and they did not fear God’, and this is included in *Anochi* [the first of the Ten Commandments – I am Hashem your God who took you out of Egypt.]” Following in the Medieval tradition that all commandments are branches of the Ten Commandments, he argues that in some sense the sin of Amalek contradicted God’s introduction of Himself!

Perhaps, therefore, we can argue that it not simply that God commanded us to harbor a grudge against Amalek and that is what makes it worthwhile, but rather this teaches us what matters most in this world. Most things are not worth getting angry about because they do not tap into ultimate value – namely God. However, God, unlike us, is described and being (legitimately) vengeful, at least at times. This is because God is truth – and therefore an affront to him is an attack on that will ultimately matters. The fact that it is worth “not letting go” of our anger against Amalek, regardless of what that means in practice, is a testament to our belief that the things that really matter, both for good and ill, and those that relate to God’s legacy in this world.

While we normally focus, and rightfully so, on God’s merciful attributes, to forget about his “capacity” for anger is to lose something. As a recent Christian thinker wrote:

Christians must “recognize divine anger not as an Old Testament problem that required a New

Testament solution but rather as a powerful claim of divine concern for human suffering…

When Christians distance themselves from “an angry God,” they fail to grasp that this image of

God has positive potential for causes of justice. (Julia O’Brien, *Challenging Prophetic Metaphor* (2008), p. 121)

It is specifically the ability of the Torah to describe God as angry that ensure that we understand that things matter, because God cares. If He cannot have justified religious indignation, then who can? The existence of this anomalous commandment reminds us that in the end, all emotions have their place in ensuring that we become people who identify with the goals that God has set for this world.