

Parshat Zachor:

Learning to Hate

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Amalek attacked us at our most vulnerable moment. Viciously assaulting the newly freed slaves in an empty wilderness, the cruel guerrilla armies of Amalek were out for blood. Valiantly defending ourselves, we rebuffed their attack and reached a military stalemate. In the wake of this armistice, G-d commanded us to forever remember this war and the ongoing battle with the merciless nation of Amalek. We are instructed to eternally recall this battle and, also, to completely obliterate the Amalek nation- men women and children. Once a year, prior to the onset of Purim and prior to discussing the Purim phase of the Amalek battle, we review the Amalek section of parshat Zachor to remind ourselves of this stark mandate.

The actual legal mitzvah of crushing Amalek is morally challenging. The notion of executing "innocents" should trouble any moral conscience; systematic annihilation of an entire nation is morally atrocious and should appall our sense of decency. As Jews, who have frequently faced threats of genocide, this mitzvah seems every more incomprehensible. Yet, G-d commands us and at the core of religious identity lies obedience and the ability to submit to Divine command even when the human mind and the human heart cannot grasp those instructions. The very first Jewish king- Shaul- questioned the morality of eliminating Amalek. Unable to fathom the Divine logic and unable to justify this mitzvah he flinched, and he spared an older Amalek king named Agag. For this mistake

and, more significantly, for questioning Divine will, he forfeited his right to monarchy.

It is unlikely that the actual mitzvah of eliminating Amalek applies today. Firstly, we no longer enjoy halachik Jewish monarchy and the formal commandment only applies under those conditions. Furthermore, it is almost impossible to identify the descendants of the ancient nation of Amalek. Given the population re-shuffling throughout the centuries it is almost impossible to identify genealogical Amalek. In the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE the Assyrians redistributed the local populations of the Mideast, making it impossible to trace or identify the original 'races' of the Torah. Perhaps during Messianic times, the mitzvah may be rejuvenated, but it certainly doesn't occupy a central feature of historical Judaism. If this mitzvah is so historically peripheral, why do we annually read about our mitzvah to annihilate Amalek?

Beyond the actual mitzvah of eliminating Amalek, the story teaches us an important lesson about human history and the evolution of human society. As civilization evolves, people become more civil and society trends toward greater moral sensitivity. In the modern era, the brutality of ancient civilizations has been replaced by softer and more polite societies. Abusive institutions of the ancient world such as slavery have been eliminated or significantly reduced. Though racial and religious bigotry haven't completely subsided, much of the modern world frowns upon these discriminatory attitudes. It is safe to say that, in general, modern society is softer and more compassionate than ancient civilization; Man's moral conscience has definitely evolved.

It is easier than ever to believe in the inherent virtue of Man. Many would say that belief in human virtue is a religious mandate; G-d endowed humans with unique capabilities and

inner kindness and appreciating Man and believing in Man is part of appreciating G-d Himself. This is the basic 'case' for 'religious humanism'.

In this type of environment, it becomes difficult for some to imagine the existence of pure and unconditional evil. If Man is pure and the modern society he crafted so civil, can Man also be evil? Perhaps 'evil' isn't real, and doesn't truly exist; perhaps we need to better understand and appreciate the perspective of someone who acts criminally. Perhaps evil doesn't exist in absolute terms and every act must be judged from the legitimate perspective of the author. This attitude has created the position known as 'moral relativism' where no ideology or behavior can be branded as evil. By viewing it from the perspective of the other almost any behavior can be justified. Moral relativism blurs the distinction between right and wrong and between good and evil and erases all absolute moral values. Parshat Amalek reminds us that there are evil people in our world, and we must learn to despise evil. Our belief in humanity and in the ongoing moral evolution of the human spirit cannot blind us to the existence of evil. Germany of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the cradle of European culture, yet it perpetrated one of the most heinous crimes ever attempted by humanity. As Man evolves and moral behavior progresses, we sometimes abdicate the ability to recognize pure evil. The Amalek story reminds us that evil will always exist, and it will always rear its ugly face and threaten humanity. As the Torah stresses, the Amalek battle endures throughout all the generations of Man – m'idor dor. Even though we have lost the traces of actual Amalek the battle against evil is perennial.

The second message of the Amalek story is that part of the Jewish mission is to oppose and defeat the evil which threatens

the world. We aren't merely a nation of priests who model religious behavior to the entire human race. We are also the defenders of G-d in this world and when forces of evil attempt to erase the presence of G-d from our world we must stand tall and defeat those forces. In the past century, Soviet Communism attempted to build an ideology bereft of the presence of G-d. The "struggle of the working class" defined human experience rather than any religious or moral value. This Soviet empire appeared indomitable; only a few desperate Jews dared to defy this Soviet superpower by demanding free passage to Israel. In 1986, Natan Sharansky walked across 'Checkpoint Charlie' to his freedom and a few short years later the entire Soviet empire collapsed. Jews are always at the center-stage of history standing tall in the face of the dangerous forces of evil which seek to consume good men.

Finally, the section of Amalek reminds us that, although this struggle is perennial and rears its head throughout various stages of history, ultimate victory can only be achieved when the Jews return to the land of Israel. The Torah prefaces the Amalek challenge: When you live in your land and are relieved of foreign threats – eliminate Amalek. Even though this mission is universal – to protect humanity against the devouring forces of evil- it is anchored to our homeland. Only when Jews return to Yerushalayim will the ultimate conquest of "Amalek" be achieved and will humanity be fully protected. In fact, the first Amalek battle occurred on the 28<sup>th</sup> day of the second month of the year. Three thousand two hundred and seventy-nine years later, on the very same day that the Amalek battle was launched, the city of Yerushalayim was restored to the Jews. The battle of Amalek snakes through Jewish history and courses through Yerushalayim.

We must strive to be good human beings who respect humanity and appreciate the inner virtue of Man. This sensitivity cannot blur the differences between good and evil. Jews stand on guard opposing the evil which threatens our world. Parshat Zachor reminds us of these truths.