

Parshiot Tetzaveh - Zachor, 5773, 2013:

*“Amalek: Evil and Hatred Personified”*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

Remember what Amalek did to you on your way out of Egypt. When they encountered you on the way, and you were tired and exhausted, they cut off those lagging to your rear, and they did not fear G-d. Therefore, when G-d gives you peace from all the enemies around you in the land that G-d your L-rd is giving you to occupy as a heritage, you must obliterate the memory of Amalek from under the heavens. You must not forget. (*Sefer Devarim 25:17-19*, translation, *The Living Torah*, Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan *zatzal*, underlining my own)

One of the most widely accepted concepts within Rabbinic thought is that of the existence of *Taryag Mitzvot* (the 613 Mitzvot). There are a number of sources that discuss this idea. The most famous one is found in *Talmud Bavli, Makkot 23b*: “Rabbi Simlai expounded: 613 mitzvot were stated to Moshe. 365 negative precepts corresponding to the days of the year and 248 positive commandments corresponding to the number of limbs in the human body.” Unfortunately, while Rabbi Simlai taught us the concept of the *Taryag Mitzvot*, he did not reveal its content. The daunting task of determining exactly which utterances of the Almighty are Biblical mitzvot was left to the group of Torah sages who have become collectively known as the *Monei Hamitzvot*. This group of luminaries includes, but is not limited to, such intellectual giants as the Baal Halachot Gedolot (9<sup>th</sup> century), the Rambam (1135-1204), the Ramban (1194-1270), and the Sefer Hachinuch (probably 13<sup>th</sup> century). These sages often utilized different criteria in making their determinations as to exactly which commandment was to be considered part of the *Taryag Mitzvot*. As a result, no two lists of the 613 Mitzvot are exactly the

same. Most of the *Monei Hamitzvot*, however, count three separate and distinct commandments in our Biblical passage: “Remember what Amalek did to you on your way out of Egypt,” “You must obliterate the memory of Amalek from under the heavens,” and “You must not forget.”

The Bedouin tribe known as Amalek no longer exists. Its genetic individuality was lost long ago in the sands of time through mass displacement, and in the cauldron of assimilation. Given that this is the case, how can we understand the persona of Amalek in our own historical moment so that we may engage in the correct approach to three above-mentioned commandments? In other words, is Amalek “still relevant” in our day and age? My rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as “the Rav” by his students and followers, answered both of these questions by noting, “Amalek is not a race, nor is it a people, a nationality.” What then is “Amalek?” For the Rav, it is a state of mind and behavioral orientation that endows its proponent with the status of having reached the nadir of the personification of evil:

I once heard from my father, [Rav Moshe Soloveitchik *zatzal*] of blessed memory, in the name of my grandfather [Rav Chaim Soloveitchik *zatzal*], that any people or group committed to destroy the Jewish people is to be classified as Amalek. One who writes on his banner “Come let us cut him off from being a nation; that the name of Israel be no more in remembrance” (Ps. 83:5) acquires the status of Amalek, and the commandment of “You shall blot out the remembrance of Amalek” (Deut 25:19) is applicable to him or to them. (Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Days of Deliverance, Essays on Purim and Chanukah*, p. 16, from the manuscript of his 1974 public lecture)

Amalek hates all mankind. Nonetheless, his greatest vitriol is consistently reserved for our holy nation, since our very existence is perceived as antithetical to his being:

Of course Amalek or man-Satan hates everybody. He is the enemy of man, and enjoys causing misery and injury to all people. Yet, man-Satan or Amalek is particularly preoccupied with the Jew. He hates the Jew more than anybody else. In hating the Jew, in causing suffering and pain to the Jew and inflicting harm on him, Amalek finds his greatest delight. No matter what economic-sociopolitical program man-Satan adopts –

socialist, capitalist, fascist, progressive, reactionary, agnostic-secular, or religious-clerical – the hatred of the Jew is his central preoccupation. (Ibid.)

Now we understand why “G-d shall be at war with Amalek for all generations.” (*Sefer Shemot* 17:16) As the Haggadah so poignantly states: “*B’chol dor v’dor omdim aleinu l’kaloteinu*” (“In each and every generation someone stands over us and attempts to destroy us.”) Amalek, in the guise of “man-Satan,” has been the ceaseless enemy of our people since the moment we left Egypt. Indeed, in our own time, one need only look to Iran and its leader, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (*yemach shemo*, may his name be obliterated), to see a crystal clear example of Haman born anew.

There is another aspect to Amalek that I believe is referenced in the section of the verse, “you must obliterate the memory of Amalek from under the heavens.” At first glance, it seems that the phrase “from under the heavens” is extraneous, since if Amalek’s memory were to be eradicated, it would certainly include both heaven and earth. Why, then, did Hashem include this expression? The Jerusalem Torah scholar, Rabbi Jacob Moshe Charlap *zatzal* (1882-1951), offered a trenchant answer to this question:

The essential orientation of Amalek was to bring about a separation between the Jewish people and their Father in Heaven – and to destroy their faith in Hashem. Amalek sought to do this in such a way as to sever any association and divine flow [of influence] between the Jewish people and [their Father in} heaven. In doing so, there would no longer be any manner of connection for the Jewish people between the heaven and earth. Therefore, the commandment is precisely worded to include the annihilation of the memory of Amalek from “under the heavens” so that there could not be anything to prevent the Heavenly flow upon the earth [and upon the Jewish people]. (Translated from Aharon Yaakov Greenberg’s *Itturei Torah*, end of Parashat Ki Tetze, brackets my own)

Rav Charlap’s analysis adds another dimension to understanding the puzzle of evil represented by Amalek. The latter’s purpose was, and is, nothing other than to cause an irreparable tear in the fabric of the Jewish people’s connection to, and belief in, Hashem.

This, G-d forbid, would prevent any Divine flow and protection from *Shamayim* (Heaven). Therefore, our Creator commanded us to “obliterate the memory of Amalek from under the heavens,” to ensure that our holy connection with Hashem, and His celestial influence upon us, would forever remain intact.

May Hashem grant us the wisdom, discernment, and ability to vanquish the Amaleks of the world, so that Zechariah’s vision may finally be realized, soon and in our time: “And the L-rd shall become King over all the earth; on that day shall the L-rd be one, and His name one.” (*Sefer Zechariah* 14:9) *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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