

Rabbi David Etengoff

*Who was and is Amalek?*

Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Sarah bat Rachel, Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, and Sheva bat Sarah Rivka.

Amalek arrived and attacked Israel there in Rephidim... G-d said to Moses, "Write this as a reminder in the Book and repeat it carefully to Joshua. I will totally obliterate the memory of Amalek from under the heavens." Moses built an altar, and he named it G-d-is-my-Banner. He said, "The Hand is on G-d's Throne. G-d shall be at war with Amalek for all generations." (*Sefer Shemot* 17:8, 14-16)

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, translations, *The Living Torah*, Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan *zatzal*)

The above-quoted passages are the only sections in the five books of the Torah that speak about Amalek and his actions. Allow me to briefly explicate the essential ideas found therein:

1. The section from *Sefer Shemot* tells us that Amalek arrived and attacked our ancestors in Rephidim. The Hebrew word "*vayavo*" is used for "arrived" as found in our translation. *Vayavo* connotes premeditation, a planned journey with a particular end in mind. In other words, Amalek traveled to Rephidim with the avowed purpose of attacking our nation. In contrast, the passage from *Sefer Devarim* contains the words: "When they encountered you (*asher karecha*) on the way," indicating to Rashi (1040-1105) and others, that this was a mere chance encounter instead of a planned attack. Thus we find that a clear textual tension obtains between these two passages.
2. Amalek's attack, and the subsequent battle that ensued, must never be forgotten from the annals of Jewish history, and must forever be an active part of the Jewish collective consciousness and world-view. Therefore, Moshe was commanded to "Write this as a reminder in the Book and repeat it carefully to Joshua." We, in turn, are commanded as part of the *Taryag Mitzvot* (613 Biblical Commandments): "Remember (*Zachor*) what Amalek did to you on your way out of Egypt," and "You must not forget."

3. Amalek's pernicious actions are deemed to be so heinous that "G-d shall be at war with Amalek for all generations." This is a war that mandates complete and absolute destruction of Amalek on the part of G-d and man: "I [G-d] will totally obliterate the memory of Amalek from under the heavens," and "Therefore, when G-d gives you [i.e. the Jewish people] 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." This verse is the source for another one of the *Taryag Mitzvot* – namely, the complete annihilation of Amalek.

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? 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 that, "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. None-the-less, 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.” 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 a ceaseless enemy of our people since the moment we left Egypt. In our own time, one need only look to Iran and its leader, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, or to Osama bin Laden, (*yemach shemamam*, may their names be obliterated) to see crystal clear examples of Haman born anew.

*Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 20b* teaches us that three mitzvot became incumbent upon our ancestors when they entered the Land of Israel: “It has been taught: R. Jose said: ‘Three commandments were given to Israel when they entered the land; to appoint a king; to cut off the seed of Amalek; and to build themselves the chosen house [i.e. the Temple...]’” (Translation, *Soncino Talmud*) The Rambam (1135-1204) accepts Rabbi Yossi’s formulation as definitive halacha:

Three commandments were commanded to the Jewish people at the time they entered the Land: To appoint a king, as it states: “You should certainly place a king over you” [*Sefer Devarim 17:15*], to cut off the offspring of Amalek, as it states: “Obliterate the memory of Amalek” [*Ibid. 25:19*], and to build for themselves the *Beit Habechirah* (the Chosen House, i.e. the Temple), as it states: “the place where Hashem will cause His presence to dwell – search it out and go there [*Ibid. 12:5*]” (*Mishneh Torah, Sefer Shoftim, Hilchot Melachim 1:1*, translation my own)

The immutability of the Torah is an essential principle of Judaism. Its laws will never be altered nor will they be added to or subtracted therefrom. The Rambam formulates this tenet of faith in the following manner: “The essence of the matter is as follows: This

Torah – its *chukim* [laws whose reasons we do not yet understand] and its *mishpatim* [laws whose reasons are rationally apprehensible] will never change for ever and ever. And [one] may neither add nor subtract from them...” (Ibid., 11:3) It follows, therefore, that the laws of establishing a king, destroying Amalek, and building the *Beit Hamikdash* remain in effect – even though the implementation of these commandments will not be possible until the coming of *Mashiach Tzidkeinu* (the one and true Righteous Messiah).

May we all be *zocheh* (merit) to see the imminent crowning of *Melech Hamashiach* (King Messiah), the eradication of Amalek, anti-Semitism, and man’s inhumanity to his fellow man, and the glorious rebuilding of the *Beit Hamikdash* - soon and in our days.  
*V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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[http://home.mindspring.com/~rdbe/parashat\\_hashavuah/index.html](http://home.mindspring.com/~rdbe/parashat_hashavuah/index.html).

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