

Parshiot Tetzaveh-Zachor 5772, 2012:

Overcoming Amalek

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, my sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, and Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam and Yehonatan Binyamin Halevy ben Golda Friedel, and in honor of the joyous birth and *brit milah* of my grandson, Lavi ben Asher Dovid, *nairo yair*.

What is a hero? American media bombards us with images of sports and media figures that supposedly represent the definition of this term. As a result, we are ceaselessly presented with the most picayune details regarding the lives of these individuals. Indeed, an entire industry has arisen with the sole purpose of “Sports and Entertainment News.” Unfortunately, many of these people lead lives that are the polar opposite of the standards contained in our holy and eternal Torah. Clearly, these “cultural icons” cannot be our heroes. In short, their “morals” do not reflect our values.

Let us return to my opening question. What is a hero? Two of the suggested definitions found at Merriam-Webster.com are: “a man admired for his achievements and noble qualities” and “one that shows great courage.” In my opinion, the crucial words here are “noble qualities” and “great courage.” In other words, like many contemporary sports figures and Hollywood actors, it is possible to have universally recognized achievements and nonetheless be totally lacking in noble qualities and authentic courage. In stark contrast, Jewish history is replete with genuine heroes who achieved magnificent goals that required tremendous moral rectitude and courage. Our heroes, in the broadest sense, are the *Avot* (Patriarchs) *Emahot* (Matriarchs), Moshe, Aharon, the *Neviim* (Prophets),

and *Chazal* (the Torah Sages throughout the ages). As a group, they created the Jewish world in which we live, and demonstrated the ethical values that we must emulate.

In my estimation, one of the truly great heroes of the spirit was the Chasidic Master, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak ben Meir of Berdichev, Russia (1740-1810). “The Berdichever,” as Jews fondly and respectfully have always known him, is famous for advocating on our behalf before *HaKodesh Baruch Hu*. In doing so, he followed in *Avraham Avinu*’s (Our Father Abraham) footsteps. When Hashem informed Avraham, in *Sefer Bereishit* (18:23-25), of the imminent destruction of *S’dom* and *Amora*, the first Patriarch challenged the Almighty with these unforgettable words:

He came forward and said, “Will You actually wipe out the innocent together with the guilty? Suppose there are fifty innocent people in the city. Would You still destroy it, and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty good people inside it? It would be sacrilege even to ascribe such an act to You - to kill the innocent with the guilty, letting the righteous and the wicked fare alike. It would be sacrilege to ascribe this to You! Shall the whole world's Judge not act justly?” (Translation, Rav Aryeh Kaplan *zatza*)

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak learned from Avraham’s approach to Hashem. As a result, he prayed for and pursued truth, justice, and mercy for our people at all times – even when it meant challenging the Master of the Universe Himself. The following vignette illustrates the depth of love the Berdichever had for the Jewish people and the extent to which he was willing to challenge the Creator of the Universe on our behalf:

Master of the World, I have several complaints – four in number – to register against the legal decisions of your Court, for I am Rav in Israel and acquainted with Your laws.

First, it is written in the Talmud, tractate Ketubot, “You may acquit the accused in his absence, but you may not convict him in his absence.” How then is the Heavenly Court able to find us guilty when we do not appear before them?

Second, our Sages have written in *Pirkei Avot*: “Do not judge your fellow man until you have been in his place.” How then can those who abide in Heaven judge those who abide on earth, since they have never experienced earthly life?

Third, our Sages decreed in the Talmud, tractate Sanhedrin, that “no man may be appointed a member of the *Sanhedrin* [religious court] who is childless, for children teach a father to have compassion.” How then can angels, who have no children, qualify as judges?

Fourth, there is a paragraph in our laws of jurisprudence that “the accuser must come to the accused.” Since they above are the accusers, and we below are the accused, let the Heavenly Judges come down to us and render judgment in our courts of justice according to the law! (Samuel Dresner, *The World of a Hasidic Master: Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev*, pages 82-83)

It should be noted that this encounter of Rav Yitzhak Levi with the Master of the Universe took place before his entire congregation – on Yom Kippur.

The Berdichever’s most famous work is the *Kedushat Levi*. Herein, this towering personality unflinchingly examines our holy Torah with his legendary depth and insight. His explanations are often novel and always thought provoking. One such example occurs in reference to Parashat Zachor. Rabbi Levi Yitzchak was challenged by a straightforward conceptual and psychological problem in reference to Amalek: How can we maintain such a strong emotional revulsion against a people that no longer exists and regarding events that took place in the 13th century BCE? After all, according to *Mishnah Yadaim* 4:4, Sennacherib, the King of Assyria (720-683 BCE approx.), completely destroyed the ethnic cohesiveness of nearly all the nations of his time. They were decimated and their members were “cast to the wind.” Thus, as a result of Sennacherib’s marauding evil, Amalek ceased to exist as a tribal entity. Since this is the case, why does the Torah instruct us to “Remember what Amalek did to you” and give us a total of three separate and eternal mitzvot regarding a tribe and people that is no more? How are we to understand this seeming anomaly?

In his analysis of these issues, the Berdichever suggests that remembering what Amalek did to us and blotting out his accursed memory is only a part of the obligation that is incumbent upon us. He adroitly takes the concept of Amalek out of the historical realm and transfers it to the personal realm, thereby rendering the mitzvah all the more relevant: “Each and every individual among the Jewish people is mandated to wipe out the evil portion [of his personality] that is called ‘Amalek’ that is hidden in his heart.” Suddenly, the commandment is relevant to us all, since it is no longer historically bound. Instead, Amalek suddenly becomes quite personal that we each need to encounter. Therefore, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak stresses the dangers that Amalek continues to represent:

As long as the “seed of Amalek” is found in the world, since man is considered to be a “small world [unto himself],” there, therefore, exists the reality of Amalek [behind] the power of evil in each person. This [power] awakens anew to cause a person to sin. It is concerning this that the Torah has the reminder of [“Remember what Amalek did to you...”] (Brackets my own)

Sadly enough, Amalek lurks within each of us. True, as the Berdichever continues, while we are involved with Torah study and heartfelt prayer, Amalek can do us little harm. We are protected, so to speak, by Hashem’s divine light and by His holy presence. When, however, we are not immediately protected by Hashem’s *chane v’chesed v’rachamim* (favor, kindness, and mercy), we run the risk of falling under Amalek’s hypnotic spell. Thus, the Berdichever teaches us that we must never deviate from our path of serving Hashem. By remaining true *ovdei Hashem* (servants of Hashem), we will have: “a powerful reminder to not allow the power of Amalek to cause us to err.”

May the Master of All give us the wisdom to understand what it means to be true Jewish heroes and to follow the *mesilat hayesharim* (the path of the just) of our *Gedolim*. May

He give us the strength to recognize the Amalek that lies within, and to overcome this personification of evil through Torah study, heartfelt prayer and honestly performed *gemilut chasadim* (acts of loving kindness). *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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