

Parshiot Tzav-Zachor 5771, 2011:

“Obliterate the Memory of Amalek”

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, and the *refuah shlaimah* of 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 (*lo tishkach*).”

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 (*timcheh*) 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.

According to *Mishnah Yadaim* 4:4 Sennacherib, the King of Assyria (720-683 BCE approx.), completely destroyed the individual genetic identities of all the non-Jewish nations of his time. Therefore, the Bedouin tribe known as Amalek no longer exists, since its unique DNA-based markers were lost long ago in the sands of time through mass displacement and in the cauldron of assimilation. Nonetheless, the three mitzvot of *zachor* (remember), *lo tishkach* (do not forget), and *timcheh* (obliterate) remain in effect.

As *Chazal* (our Sages of blessed memory) note, *zachor* and *lo tishkach* are relatively easy to fulfill – simply read, concentrate upon, and comprehend either of the two Torah portions with which we began. The actions associated with *timcheh*, however, are an entirely different matter:

Obliterate the memory of Amalek: From men to women, from the young child to the nursing babe, from the ox to the sheep, in order that the name "Amalek" should never be remembered – even in regards to an animal. [Thus, no one will be able] to say: "This animal belonged to Amalek." (Rashi, 1040-1105, on *Sefer Shemot* 24:19, translation my own)

This mitzvah unquestionably mandates the complete and total destruction of Amalek. Therefore, it at once challenges our most basic conceptions of morality and Judaism's considered and consistent emphasis upon kindness and mercy (*chesed v'rachamim*):

It is a positive commandment of Rabbinic origin to visit the sick, comfort mourners, prepare for a funeral, prepare a bride, accompany guests, attend to all the needs of a burial, carry a corpse on one shoulders, walk before the bier, mourn, dig a grave, and bury the dead, and also to bring joy to a bride and groom and help them in all their needs. These are deeds of kindness that one carries out with his person that have no limit. Although all these mitzvot are of Rabbinic origin, they are included in the Scriptural commandment Leviticus 19:18: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” That charge implies that whatever you would like other people to do for you, you should do for your comrade in the Torah and mitzvot. (Maimonides, 1135-1204, *Sefer Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Avel*, 14:1, translation, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger)

In addition, *Chazal* straightforwardly noted: “... whoever is merciful to his fellow men is certainly of the children of our father Abraham, and whosoever is not merciful to his fellow men is certainly not of the children of our father Abraham.” (*Talmud Bavli, Beitzah* 32b, translation, *Soncino Talmud*) If this is the case, how can we possibly reconcile the obligation to annihilate Amalek with Judaism’s overarching pursuit of that which is noble, ethical, and moral? In my estimation, *Avraham Avinu* (our Father Avraham) provides us with just such a model for understanding the commandment of *timcheh* within the context of Judaism’s moral imperatives.

Avraham Avinu was the personification of *chesed* (kindness). The Midrash is replete with story after story of his *gemilut chasadim* (overflowing kindness). Whether it was his four-door open tent to welcome wayfarers, or his beseeching Hashem on behalf of the sinners of Sodom and Gomorrah, Avraham was the embodiment of *chesed* in action. Yet, it was he, and no other, who was presented with and successfully met the poignant drama and trial of the *Akeida* – the binding of Yitzhak. Let us not forget his choice for even a moment: Follow the direct command of Hashem to bring Yitzchak as a *korban olah* (completely burnt offering) or refuse to do so on the grounds that this divine imperative flew in the face of everything that G-d had taught him. The outcome of Avraham’s choice was to determine his ultimate judgment and reward – and the future of our people.

My rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as “the Rav” by his students and adherents, understood the *Akedah* from the perspective of our obligation to engage in sacrifice in the service of Hashem: “Of course, the idea of sacrifice is a cornerstone of Judaism, and the *Akedah* has inevitably introduced sacrificial action as part of our historical drama.” (*Abraham’s Journey: Reflections on the Life of the Founding Patriarch*, page 11) *Avodat Hashem* (the service of G-d), however, demands its own analysis if we are to ascertain how sacrifice fits into this aspect of the G-d - man encounter and relationship. In this context, the Rav explained *avodat Hashem* as “service awareness.” This means that our entire being is metaphorically in the palms of His “hands”:

Man is a servant of G-d. He belongs completely to G-d – body and soul. G-d owns human existence at every level, physical, spiritual, and social. Every movement of our muscles is related to G-d. Every thought that flashes through our minds belongs to Him. Every feeling, stirring of the soul, every joyful anticipation or sad expectation is not the property of man. (Ibid. , page10)

Moreover, as G-d’s servants, we need to keenly recognize His total mastery of the universe and of ourselves:

G-d is the Lord of the world and the master of man. Hence, G-d from time to time calls upon man to return to Him whatever is His. He demands that man give not a part but the whole of himself. He requires of man to return divine property to its rightful owner. (Ibid. , page 11)

In light of this last point, it is possible to understand how, and why, Hashem commanded Avraham to bring Yitzchak as a *korban olah*. In a certain sense, Avraham was returning to G-d that which was always His:

The supreme sacrifice is never too much, since G-d owns everything and man possesses nothing. “The soul is Yours, and the body is Your handiwork” (High Holy Day prayers). Total sacrifice was decreed by G-d when He summoned Abraham to offer Isaac on Mount Moriah. (Ibid.)

In a very real sense, the commandment of, and consequent actions associated with, *timcheh* demand the total sacrifice of our fundamental and normative standards of ethics and morality – precisely in order to serve Hashem. Like the *Akedah*, the commandment to exterminate Amalek is a “teleological suspension of the ethical” (Soren Kierkegaard, 1813-1855) that, by definition, supersedes our finite understanding of right and wrong. As we have seen, the Torah tells us in no uncertain terms, “G-d shall be at war with Amalek for all generations,” and adds: “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 (*timcheh*) the memory of Amalek from under the heavens.” Hence, just as Avraham stood ready to sacrifice his own beloved son – in violation of every law Hashem had taught him – we, too, have no choice except to serve as His soldiers and eradicate Amalek– even though the killing of women, babies, and children is inherently ethically and morally repugnant.

May Hashem soon send *Mashiach Tzidkeinu* (the Righteous Messiah) to our suffering world and bring true and everlasting peace to all mankind. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom and *Purim Sameach!*

Past drashot may be found at my new website:

<http://reparashathashavuah.weebly.com/>

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added please do not hesitate to contact me via email at rdbe718@gmail.com.