

Destroying Our Internal Amalek

By Rabbi Naphtali Hoff

Hashem said to Moshe, "Write this for a memorial in a book, and recite it in the ears of Yehoshua; for I will completely erase the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven."
(Shemos 17:14)

There are three *mitzvos* associated with the nation of Amalek. Two (one positive and one negative) relate to remembering Amalek's attack against our nation after the Exodus from Egypt. The third requires us to completely destroy the entire nation, including women, children and the elderly, as well as to eradicate any vestige of Amalek from our collective memory.

What made this attack of Amalek so significant as to warrant multiple commandments in its regard? After all, countless nations have oppressed the Jewish people in our long history, and have inflicted great pain and loss of life, often to a far greater degree than that of Amalek. Furthermore, while Amalek is not the only nation that we are required to exterminate – the seven nations of Canaan fall into that same category – it is, for some reason, the only people whose *memory* we are obliged to destroy. What is it about Amalek that necessitates such a complete assault against its very essence?

Defiance at All Costs

The answer to these questions lies in the fact that Amalek's attack was unlike any other in our history. Amalek opened battle with the Jewish people at a time historically when no one else would have dared to even consider it. Our nation had just experienced a series of open, supernatural miracles, including the Ten Plagues and the splitting of the Yam Suf. All of the other peoples were well aware of this awesome display of Hashem's might, and were deeply fearful of this upstart nation.

*People heard, they trembled, a shudder seized the inhabitants of Philistia.
Then the chieftains of Edom were startled, (as for) the powerful men of
Moav, trembling seized them, all the inhabitants of Canaan melted.*
(Shemos 15:14-15)

The Jewish people were enveloped in an aura of invincibility. It was clear to all of the nations that the Jewish G-d was truly Almighty, to the exclusion of all others. "Who is like You, amongst the mighty ones, O Hashem!" (Shemos 15:11) In addition, they saw that He was prepared to wage war and perform miracles on His people's behalf – the most awesome and far-reaching that world had ever witnessed. Such open revelation, if properly channeled, could have easily served as the basis for universal recognition of Hashem and His special mandate for mankind.

Somehow, however, Amalek remained unimpressed and unafraid. More significantly, they felt a compelling urge to go on the offensive, despite the obvious physical suffering that they would experience in the process. Though they were defeated, Amalek still succeeded in causing the other nations to quickly "forget" what they had

heard and experienced. The Jews' singular opportunity to transmit their unique message was lost.

He cooled you off and made you (appear) tepid, after you were boiling hot. For the nations were afraid to fight with you, but (Amalek) came forward and started and showed the way to others. This can be compared to a bathtub of boiling water into which no living creature could descend. Along came an irresponsible man and jumped headfirst into it! Although he scalded himself, he (succeeded to) make other (nations) think that it was cooler (than it really was). (Rashi to Devarim 25:18, quoting Midrash Tanchuma, Ki Seitzei 9)

Atheism: No Purpose, No Limits

What gave Amalek the temerity to attack at the very hour that the entire world recognized Hashem's might and splendor? Furthermore, what motivated this extreme degree of self-sacrifice, going into battle for no apparent reason while knowing full well that it could very well be their last?

Before we attempt to respond to these questions, let us first take a closer look at three of most prevalent religious outlooks existent in the world at that time, so as to gain a deeper appreciation of the unique struggle which existed between Amalek and *B'nai Yisrael*.

Most of the world's inhabitants at that time were polytheistic, believers in a host of various powers who collectively ran the world. Their gods operated over specific areas or natural forces, and were not particularly interested in individual human behavior and moral conduct. Many were themselves conceived as being human in form and interests.

The Jews were uniquely monotheistic, maintaining a belief that there is only one G-d over mankind, and that His primary concern is the ethical behavior of man. ("O man, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your G-d" – Micha 6:8) The Jewish G-d *was* interested in human affairs, rewarding good behavior and punishing misdeeds. He was incorporeal, possessing no physical attributes or limitations. He was perfect and holy, His Torah the source of virtuous behavior.

Amalek introduced a third ideology, that of atheism. Unlike the other two views, an atheist believes in nothing. There are no gods or supreme beings that control the world. As such, nothing in particular is capable of validating life, of infusing it with special meaning. Morals are intrinsically fluid and highly mutable, based on the needs and whims of the dominant society or culture.

In truth, this last point can be made for many of the world's pagan societies as well, as they were typically not governed by strict moralistic codes. The key difference between atheism and paganism is the fact that atheism, in its essence, is far worse than idol worship. Atheists, unlike pagans, cannot progress to a belief in one G-d, as did Avraham *avinu*, Yisro and many other pagan converts to Judaism, as well as thousands if not millions of converts to other monotheistic faiths throughout the centuries. To the atheist, life is blind, coincidental, happenstance. Fate, if it exists at all, is predetermined; human actions cannot impact its forces.

More so than any other nation, Amalek had a vested interest in attacking the Jewish people. The Jews, beneficiaries of countless supernatural acts, were living proof of Hashem's existence, His direct involvement with our world and, by extension, His teachings and guidelines. Amalek's commitment to a life free from moral restriction was of such a degree that it was willing to sacrifice its very essence to preserve that freedom, and acted swiftly to undermine these Jewish conduits of the divine before they could impose their heavenly doctrine on the rest of humanity.

Keeping Hashem in our Focus

We now better understand how it is that Amalek possessed the fortitude to attack, even at great personal risk. Still, we must ask ourselves why it is that *B'nai Yisrael* deserved to be assailed in this manner. Certainly, there must have been some internal justification for this to have transpired.

Prior to Amalek's attack the Jews were encamped at Refidim, a place which lacked suitable quantities of drinking water. Quickly, they began clamoring to Moshe, as if dismissing Hashem's ability to provide for them.

(Moshe said) "Why do you contend with me, why do you test Hashem?"... (Moshe) called the place Massah U'Meriva, because of the contention of B'nai Yisrael, and because of their test of Hashem, saying, "Is Hashem with us or not?" (Shemos 17:2, 7)

The absurdity of the situation begs explanation. How is it possible that *B'nai Yisrael*, who had just experienced a series of the most unbelievable miracles in history, could challenge Hashem's ability to provide even the most basic elements to sustain life? After all, have not *chazal* declared that, "a maidservant witnessed more at Yam Suf than even the prophet Yechezkel"? (Mechilta, Parshas HaShira, 3)

This insensitivity surely needed to be addressed. Enter Amalek. Why did Hashem specifically choose Amalek to be the one to deliver this important lesson? The answer is because in the Jews' own behavior, the doubtful seeds of Amalek were discernable. *B'nai Yisrael* knew that Hashem was more than capable of executing stunning, supernatural miracles. He had done so repeatedly and would continue in such fashion throughout their years in the desert. The question was whether He was willing to lower himself, so to speak, to interfere with the natural order which He has set in place, for a relatively small matter such as providing drinking water.

In that sense, they had already begun to succumb to Amalek's philosophy (although Amalek, no doubt, denied even the larger, more obvious miracles). Amalek was therefore chosen as the vehicle with which to deliver the message, so as to remind *B'nai Yisrael* of the full extent of Hashem's involvement in this world.

(Hashem) juxtaposed this section (regarding Amalek's attack) to this verse ("Is Hashem in our midst or not?"), implying, "I am always among you, and (I am) always prepared for all your necessities, but you say, 'Is Hashem in our midst or not?' By your life, the dog (Amalek) will come and bite you, and you will cry out to Me, and (then) you will know where I

am.” This can be compared to a man who mounted his son on his shoulder and set out on the road. Whenever his son saw something, he would say, “Father, take that thing and give it to me,” and (the father) would give it to him. They met a man, and the son said to him, “Have you seen my father?” So his father said to him, “You don’t know where I am?” He threw (his son) down and a dog came and bit him. (Rashi to Shemos 17:7, based on Midrash Tanchuma, Yisro 3; Shemos Rabbah 26:2)

Completing the Divine Throne

Earlier we noted that Amalek is not the only nation that we were commanded to physically exterminate. However, it is the only people whose *memory* we are obliged to destroy. And while the former is a *mitzvah* which we are currently unable to fulfill, the latter remains as applicable today as it was when it was first communicated. What is it about Amalek that necessitates such a complete annihilation against its very essence for all subsequent generations?

The answer is that Amalek’s commitment to an amoral existence continues to threaten the very essence of the Jewish people – even Hashem Himself! – millennia after the original attack.

Moshe ... said, “The hand is on the throne (kase) of G-d (yud-hey); Hashem maintains a war with Amalek from generation to generation.” (Shemos 17:16) Hashem’s throne is not complete as long as Amalek exists in this world. Nor is His name complete. (Rashi, ibid)

It is noteworthy that the *pasuk* uses the term “*kase*” to express the heavenly throne, rather than the usual “*keesay*”. *Kase* also means covered, as if Hashem’s existence is concealed and his rule called into question as long as Amalek exists. Of note is the fact that the *gematria* of the word “Amalek” (240) is equal to that of the word “*safek*”, meaning doubt.

The complete name of “*yud-hey-vav-hey*” indicates that Hashem controls all facets of time: past, present and future. By using the fragmented, two-letter Name “*yud-hey*”, the Torah is indicating that as long as Amalek is a reality, our perception of Hashem remains incomplete. We can identify His role in the past as well as assume His future involvement and direction. However, to perceive Him in the present, with the doubt generated by Amalek implanted in our hearts, is a mightily difficult task. Until the challenge is met, Hashem’s name, as representative of His revelation to this world, will remain, as it were, incomplete.

Eradicating the Amalek Within Us

Rav Chaim Freidlander, *zt”l*, (Sifsei Chaim, Vol. 2, p. 171-172) writes that before we can eliminate any form of external Amalek, we must first attempt to identify and remove any vestiges of that nation from within our own selves. To the extent that we see matters in our personal lives as happenstance, or the consequence of purely natural events, we are guilty of harboring a piece of Amalek within our own hearts. Even more

so, if we go so far as to downplay valid attempts to infuse the world with additional holiness, we are removing any possibility of truly fulfilling this vital mandate.

It is impossible for us to properly fulfill the *mitzvah* of physically destroying Amalek today. However, we are certainly required to attempt to destroy its memory, the intellectual and emotional Amalek which affects us all. In so doing, we will bring Hashem's throne that much closer to its completed state, and take meaningful steps towards fulfilling Zechariah's prophecy, "and Hashem shall be king over all the earth; on that day the Hashem shall be one and his name one." (Zechariah 14:9)