



Carnegie Shul Chatter

January 24, 2018



Candle lighting: 5:13pm

Sabbath services: 9:20am

Who Are These People?

This week's Torah portion, Beshalach, tells of the parting of the Red Sea to allow the children of Israel to escape Pharaoh's army (which subsequently drowns) and of the Israelites complaining of hunger and thirst in the wilderness (which G-d alleviates by giving them water from a rock and manna from the sky). Finally, the parsha tells us, during their travels, "*In Rephidim, the people are attacked by the Amalekites, who are defeated by Moses' prayers and an army raised by Joshua.*"

So, who were these Amalekites? And why are they important to this day?

The Israelites encounter many peoples in their travels through the desert, some G-d-fearing who treat them well, others who attack. But the first foe they meet after attaining their freedom is the people of Amalek. And the Amalekites stand out from other aggressors in many ways.

First, they trailed behind the Israelites to pick off their elderly and frail who lagged behind. Thus, we see an extraordinary inhumanity and deviousness on their part. Second, they attacked the Israelites for no other reason than to demonstrate they did not believe in G-d's power and sovereignty.

Having Faith

Ancient Jewish history tells of a place and time to which few of us can relate these days. And yet, our tradition says that the Torah is eternal and relevant even today.

This week's parsha is a perfect example. The Israelites are beset upon by a hostile nation soon after crossing the Red Sea and making their way into the desert. The attack is all the more horrible because it's initially perpetrated against the most vulnerable, those who are weakest and most weary and lag behind the others.

What does this have to do with us today? We're no longer wandering in the desert. We're not gathered as a People. Warfare is nothing like it used to be and, in our times, the once-vulnerable aren't necessarily vulnerable anymore. So, nu?

Ultimately, things haven't changed all that much. There are still evil, devious people looking to do harm. Jews are still, far too often, their target. And, even our material comforts and conveniences cannot shield us from everything.

It's a lesson in faith, of course. A reminder to place our confidence in G-d's protection. And a reminder that, only by living as Jews will we earn and deserve His blessings.

A lesson that never grows old – or irrelevant.

However, it all goes even deeper – or, as they say in the theatre, *the plot thickens*: the Amalekites are descendants of Esau. The same Esau who was tricked out of his birthright by our forefather Jacob. *Talk about carrying a grudge!* Again in the Torah, as well as in later books of scripture, we read of the Amalekites' hostility toward the Israelites – even in the *megillah*, as Haman is a descendent of Amalek.



Indeed, through the generations – and into modern times, many commentaries say – the Amalekites are still getting even.

Below are excerpts from two interesting articles about the Amalekites.

From Chabad.org

Remember what Amalek did to you on the road, on your way out of Egypt. That he encountered you on the way, and cut off those lagging to your rear, when you were tired and exhausted; he did not fear G-d. Therefore . . . you must obliterate the memory of Amalek from under the heavens. Do not forget. (Deuteronomy 25:17–19)

The Jewish people had just experienced one of the greatest manifestations of divine power in history. Ten supernatural plagues had compelled the mightiest nation on earth to free them from their servitude. The sea had split before them, and manna had rained from the heavens to nourish them. How could they possibly question, “Is G-d amongst us or not?”

Yet such is the nature of doubt. There is doubt that is based on a rational query. There is doubt that rises from the doubter’s subjective motives and desires. But then there is doubt pure and simple: irrational doubt, doubt more powerful than reason. Doubt that neutralizes the most convincing arguments and the most inspiring experiences with nothing more than a cynical shrug.

Such was the doubt that left the Jewish people susceptible to attack from Amalek. Amalek, in the spiritual sphere, is the essence of baseless, irrational indifference. In the words of the Midrash:

To what is the incident (of Amalek) comparable? To a boiling tub of water which no creature was able to enter. Along came one evildoer and jumped into it. Although he was burned, he cooled it for the others.

So, too, when Israel came out of Egypt, and G-d split the sea before them and drowned the Egyptians within it, the fear of them fell upon all the nations. But when Amalek came and challenged them, although he received his due from them, he cooled the awe of the nations of the world for them.

This is why Amalek, and what he represents, constitutes the archenemy of the Jewish people and their mission in life. As Moses proclaimed following the war with Amalek, “G-d has sworn by His throne; G-d is at war with Amalek for all generations.” Truth can refute the logical arguments offered against it. Truth can prevail even over man’s selfish drives and desires, for intrinsic to the nature of man is the axiom that “the mind rules over the heart”—that it is within a person’s capacity to so thoroughly appreciate a truth that it is ingrained in his character and implemented in his behavior. But man’s rational faculties are

powerless against the challenge of an Amalek who leaps into the boiling tub, who brazenly mocks the truth and cools man's most inspired moments with nothing more than a dismissive "So what?"

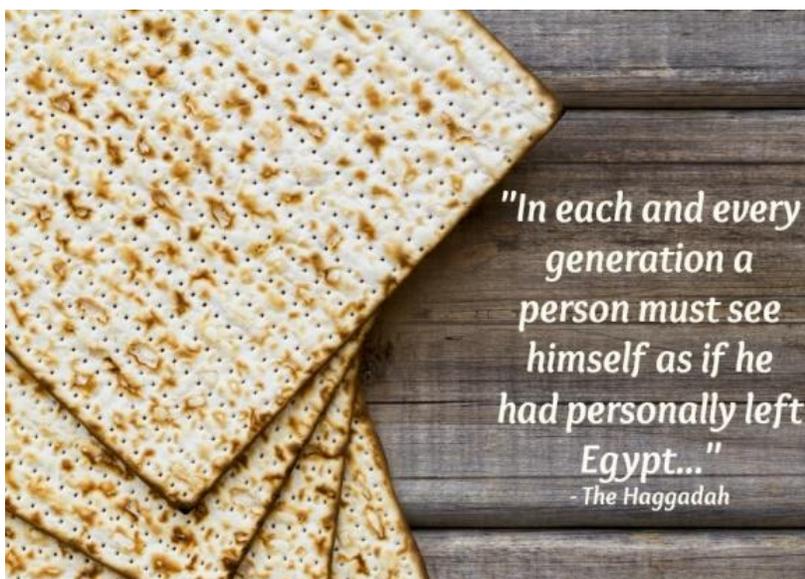
The Bottleneck

Amalek attacked Israel "on the road, on [the] way out of Egypt," as they were headed toward Mount Sinai to receive G-d's Torah and their mandate as His people. Here, too, history mirrors the inner workings of the soul: the timing of the historical Amalek's attack describes the internal circumstances under which the pestilence of baseless doubt rears its head.

In the Passover Haggadah we say: "In every generation one must see himself as if he personally came out of Mitzrayim." *Mitzrayim*, the Hebrew word for Egypt, means "narrow straits"; on the personal level, this refers to what chassidic teaching calls the "narrowness of the neck" which interposes between the mind and the heart.

Just as physically the head and the heart are joined by a narrow passageway, the neck, so it is in the spiritual-psychological sense. For while the mind possesses an innate superiority over the heart, it is a most difficult and challenging task for a person to exercise this superiority—to direct and mold his feelings and desires to conform with what he knows to be right. This is the "Exodus from *Mitzrayim*" that is incumbent on each and every generation: the individual challenge to negotiate the narrow straits of one's internal "neck," to overcome the material enticements, the emotional subjectivity, the ego and self-interest which undermine the mind's authority over the heart and impede its influence on the person's character and behavior.

As long as a person is still imprisoned in his personal *mitzrayim*, he faces many challenges to his integrity. As long as he has not succeeded in establishing his mind as the axis on which all else revolves, his base instincts and traits—such as greed, anger, the quest for power and instant gratification—may get the better of him. But once he achieves his personal "Exodus" from the narrow straits of his psyche, once he establishes his knowledge and understanding of the truth as the determining force in his life, the battle is all but won. He may be confronted with negative ideas and rationalizations, but free of the distortions of self-interest, the truth will triumph. He may be tempted by negative drives and desires, but if in his life the mind rules the heart, it will curb and ultimately transform them.



But there remains one enemy which threatens also the post-Exodus individual: Amalek. Amalek "knows his Master and consciously rebels against Him." Amalek does not challenge the truth with arguments, or even with selfish motivations; he just disregards it. To the axiom, "Do truth because it is true," Amalek says, "So what?" Armed with nothing but his *chutzpah*, Amalek jumps into the boiling tub, contests the incontestable. And in doing so, he cools its impact.

Beyond Reason

How is one to respond to Amalek? How is one to deal with the apathy, the cynicism, the senseless doubt within? The formula that the Torah proposes is encapsulated in a single word: *Zachor*—“Remember.”

In his *Tanya*, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi discusses the faith in G-d that is integral to the Jewish soul. Faith is not something that must be attained; it need only be revealed, for it is woven into the very fabric of the soul's essence. Faith, continues Rabbi Schneur Zalman, transcends reason. Through faith one relates to the infinite truth of G-d in its totality, unlike the perception achieved by reason, which is defined and limited by the finite nature of the human mind.

Amalek is irrational and totally unresponsive to reason; the answer to Amalek is likewise supra-rational. The Jew's response to Amalek is to *remember*: to call forth his soul's reserves of supra-rational faith, a faith which may lie buried and forgotten under a mass of mundane involvements and entanglements. A faith which, when remembered, can meet his every moral challenge, rational or not.

Who and Where is Amalek Today?

From Breslov.org

The Midrash relates: Cursed are the wicked. They occupy their time with ideas about how to destroy the Jews, with each one vying for the honor of having the best idea. Esav ridiculed Cain for killing Abel during Adam's lifetime. If Cain wanted the whole world for himself, he should have realized that Adam was still alive and could have more children. Esav was not going to make that mistake. He would wait until Yitzchok's death and then kill Yaakov. Later, it was Pharaoh's turn to laugh at Esav. Didn't Esav know that Yaakov could have children before Yitzchok died? Nothing would be gained by killing Yaakov if he had offspring that would survive him. Pharaoh thought himself smarter than Esav. He would kill every Jewish male at birth. Centuries later it was Pharaoh's turn to be thought a fool, by Haman. Didn't Pharaoh understand that even if one Jewish male remained he could father the nation anew? Haman's plan was to kill them all!

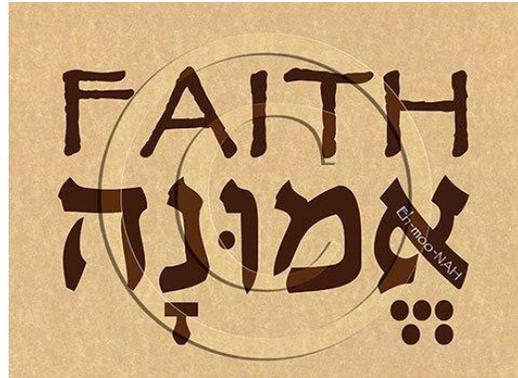


The Midrash concludes by teaching that in the future, Gog and Magog will deride Haman. Didn't Haman know that the Jews have a Father in Heaven Who will never let them be destroyed as long as they do His bidding? So they will first do battle with God by keeping the Jews from observing the Torah and mitzvot. This will enable them to destroy the Jews. But God's response to this is clear: “I have many messengers whom I can send into battle. But the war against Gog and Magog I shall wage Myself. Their destruction shall be complete.” (Esther Rabbah 7:23).

Today, though Amalek definitely and unfortunately exists, we cannot say with certainty who, or where, all of them are. However, there is a noteworthy exception. When Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany visited Jerusalem during his journey to the Holy Land almost all the religious leaders of Jerusalem came to the city gates to greet him. Rabbi Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld (d.1932), the spiritual leader of Ashkenazic Jewry in Israel at that time, did not go. When asked about his refusal he answered that although the Kaiser himself was deserving of the honor bestowed upon him, “I have a tradition that Germany is Amalek.”

The Amalek Within

Our Sages teach that God says to the Jews, “If you do not remember Amalek, you will be sent back to the bondage of Egypt.” (Pesikta Rabati 12). This is exhibited frequently on a personal level. The modus operandi that Amalek has always used in attacking the Jews can be described in a word: Devious. He gets the international community embroiled in some sort of political or military conflict for example, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, or he gets Jews to engage in some worthy cause, “civil rights,” all with one goal in mind: The annihilation of the Jews. Amalek has the same numerical value (240) as “safek”, doubt (B’nei Yissaschar, Purim). The Amalek that is omnipresent today are the questions and doubts that we have regarding our faith. This includes the uncertainties, confusion and troubles we face when we lack proper direction and advice. When we strengthen ourselves in true faith in God, we overpower the Amalek within.



Reb Noson writes that Amalek corresponds to burning lust, the strife between husband and wife, between a person and his community and the hatred directed against the true tzaddikim (Likutey Halakhot, Minchah 7:20).

An additional aspect of Amalek that is prevalent today: False leaders. “The Torah writes, [Amalek] smote the hindmost among you” (Deuteronomy 25:18). Our Sages teach: “[Amalek] separates the tails and throws them high (Tanchuma, Ki Taytze 10). Reb Noson writes: “Amalek found a clever way to destroy the Jewish nation. ‘He takes the tails,’ people of little or no stature, and ‘throws them high’ makes them into Jewish leaders (Likutey Halakhot, Shabbat, 5:9). Thus, the Jewish people have been fooled into thinking that their leaders are men of stature when in reality many of them are ordinary people who lack the ability to guide. A nation without proper leaders is easily misled, and so many unsuspecting and misguided Jews end up living a life devoid of real Jewish meaning.

Yet another face of Amalek that plagues us today is forgetfulness (ibid., Aveidah u’Metzia 1:3). We forget God’s goodness, the countless times He’s helped us in many ways, large and small (ibid., Nachlot 4:12). This leads to our forgetting about God, the Torah and mitzvot, and even the Mashiach, who will bring the Ultimate Redemption. Perhaps, since Amalek represents forgetfulness, we’re instructed to remember what he did. Even though we don’t know which individuals today are Amalekites, the mitzvah to remember the evil, ruthless and cruel behavior they personify, remains.

Yahrzeit Plaques

Commemorate a loved one by dedicating a yahrzeit plaque in his or her memory at the Carnegie Shul. These beautiful plaques, mounted on the sanctuary walls, are lit on the loved one’s yahrzeit, Yom Kippur, and days when Yizkor is recited. The names are also read aloud from the Bimah during services on the Sabbath of the yahrzeit and on Yom Kippur. To purchase a plaque, for only \$175, please email Mike Roteman at mrmike7777@yahoo.com.

Sponsor a Kiddush

Please consider sponsoring a Kiddush in honor or in memory of a loved one, for only \$36. Your sponsorship will be announced from the bimah and in the weekly Chatter. To sponsor a Kiddush, email mrmike7777@yahoo.com.