YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Challenge of Amalek**

**Based on a sicha by**

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When we consider the sequence of events in the middle of Adar, we find that Purim requires a build-up, as it were. The Fast of Esther precedes the days of feasting and rejoicing, and *Parashat Zakhor* (the commandment to eradicate Amalek, *Devarim* 25:17-19) precedes the reading of the Megilla.

Why is this so? We find no analogue among the other holidays; for example, we are not required to act as if we are enslaved in the lead-up to Pesach!

It appears that the answer emerges from the unique nature of the days of Purim. The holiday of Purim, at its core, is about defeating Amalek. But what is the Amalekite philosophy? What does it mean to defeat it?

A few chapters the commandment of Amalek, the Torah dictates the laws of marriage (*Devarim* 23:4-9):

No Ammonite or Moabite or any of their descendants may enter the assembly of the Lord, not even in the tenth generation.For they did not come to meet you with bread and water on your way when you came out of Egypt, and they hired Bilam son of Beor from Petor in Aram Naharayim to pronounce a curse on you.However, the Lord your God would not listen to Bilam but turned the curse into a blessing for you, because the Lord your God loves you.Do not seek a treaty of friendship with them as long as you live.

Do not despise an Edomite, for he is your brother. Do not despise an Egyptian, because you resided as foreigners in their country. The third generation of children born to them may enter the assembly of the Lord.

While Ammon and Moab are permanently banned from marrying native-born Israelites, Edomites and Egyptians are allowed, from the third generation on. The question jumps out at us: How could this be? The Egyptians, who tossed Hebrew newborns into the Nile, who enslaved the entire people for centuries, are allowed to enter God’s assembly? The Edomites, who respond to the Israel’s request to peacefully pass through their territory by massing their armies and threatening war (*Bamidbar* 20:20-21), are welcomed with open arms into the Jewish nation? Why should they be treated more lightly than Ammon and Moab, who are never allowed to enter the Jewish people?

An analysis of the text shows us the justification for such an attitude. The Egyptians enslaves the Israelites due to what they perceive as an existential threat (*Shemot* 1:10):

Come, we must deal shrewdly with them or they will become even more numerous and, if war breaks out, will join our enemies, fight against us and leave the country.

The Edomites have a similar concern: “Do not pass through me, lest I come out to meet you with the sword” (*Bamidbar* 20:18).

We may dispute this concern — indeed, we do in fact dispute it. Still, we cannot delegitimize it, as the existential threats of war, ideological opposition, et cetera, may arouse alarm from many directions. Morally, these concerns may justify war, harmful and horrible as its reality may be.

The Moabites have a different motivation: “They hired Bilam son of Beor from Petor in Aram Naharayim to pronounce a curse on you.” Moab pays money, employing Bilam, in order to exterminate the Jewish people. This emerges from a base impulse, a destructive desire.

This is echoed, centuries later, by Haman’s declaration (*Esther* 3:9).

If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued to destroy them, and I will give ten thousand talentsof silver to the king’s administrators for the royal treasury.

This is the Amalekite method: to engage in battle not for the sake of ideology or identity, but merely to satisfy the dark side of the human spirit — the desire to harm others not in order to advance one’s principles, but simply to express the cruelty lurking in the dankest crevices of the soul.

This brings us to the essential question: What is the source of this power? What motivates Amalek? What separates it and its ilk from all other nations?

The answer is quite simple: the Amalekite tendency is within every human being. This is not something unique to one nation, but inherent in every person. This is mentioned twice in *Bereishit*.

The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time. (6:5)

The Lord smelled the pleasing aroma and said in His heart: “Never again will I curse the ground because of humans, even thoughevery inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done.” (8:21)

Every person has this brutal, cruel characteristic within him or her naturally; this is the source of Amalekite actions. This tendency exists deep within human nature, a primal survival mechanism maintaining its animalistic character. Like the lion, the human must attack any creature invading its territory.

Most nations and most people have defense mechanisms, on the personal and communal level, which subdue and limit this primal instinct. An internal system of laws and societal sanctions produce the expected social norms and the disincentive to act in this manner.

It was taught: “[And Moshe said unto the people, fear not: for God has come to prove you,] that His fear may be before your faces” (*Shemot* 20:17): By this is meant shame; “that you sin not” — this teaches that shame leads to fear of sin: hence it was said that it is a good sign if a person has shame. (*Nedarim* 20a)

Moreover, each person has an inner sense of limitations and binding ethics, restraining his or her actions.

Amalek, however, does not. Amalek, instead of directing these violent, primal urges towards some beneficial end, lets them run wild and unbridled.

The nature of Purim emerges from this point. It is not merely an occasion for feasting and rejoicing, recalling our victory over those who sought to destroy us; it requires that we think of where we came from, what evil can exist within us, and how we withstood that destructive impulse and conquered it. Our joy is not just at being saved from certain death, but at the defeat of that evil, destructive force, that survival instinct planted within us by the Holy One, blessed be He.

In the encounter with Amalek, the nation which attacked Israel first, the initial reaction is to lick our wounds and seek a respite. “The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness; when Israel sought for calm” (*Yirmeyahu* 31:1). However, once the time is right, Israel must rise and counteract Amalek. Thus, erasing the memory of Amalek is conditioned in *Parashat Zakhor* on a time of national security (*Devarim* 25:19):

When the Lord your God gives you rest from all the enemies around you in the land which He is giving you to possess as an inheritance, you shall blot out the name of Amalek from under heaven.

Only when “the people who survived the sword” find the minimal mental and physiological equilibrium do they have the capability and indeed the duty to rise and counteract Amalek.

This is the most central message of Purim, unlike other holidays. This is also the message of the Fast of Esther, she who orders: “Go, bring in all the Jews who are found in Shushan and fast for me” (*Esther* 4:16). We are to bring ourselves in, to turn inward, to make a spiritual reckoning, to come to terms with this compulsion in our very nature.

We come together for Purim, after recalling Amalek on *Shabbat Zakhor*, after observing the Fast of Esther, after reckoning with this evil impulse in the human heart. This, in fact, allows us to express more meaningfully the manifold positive forces which humanity possesses as well.

(Translated by Yoseif Bloch)