YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**PURIM IN THE TEACHINGS OF THE MAHARAL**

**by HaRav Yehuda Amital**

**I. The Lord's Everlasting War With Amalek**

The battle between Israel and Amalek is an eternal one. A divine oath has been sworn: "God shall be at war with Amalek for all generations" (Shemot 17:16). The enmity began during the Jews' forty-year journey through the desert, when Amalek attacked the feeble people marching in the rear. It climaxed with Haman the Agagite, of Amalekite descent, who plotted to destroy the whole Jewish nation.

Yet, despite God's directive to obliterate the memory of Amalek from under the heavens, we find an unexpected development in the Rambam (Hilkhot Melakhim 6:4; Ra'avad and Kesef Mishneh op cit). If an Amalekite were to accept upon himself the seven basic Noachide commandments, he immediately would cease to be considered an Amalekite and we must treat him as any other righteous Gentile! Even more surprising, we find a long-standing debate among our Sages and Rishonim regarding the permissibility of accepting an Amalekite convert. In either case, the possibility that an Amalekite can choose to relinquish his status as such clearly indicates that our goal is to annihilate the Amalekite mindset and culture and not the people per se.

What Amalekite trait is it that deserves our eternal enmity?

As we mentioned above, the struggle began after the Jews left Egypt, when they were in Refidim. There, Amalek's ambush was not provoked by fear of a nation whose God had performed miracles for them. That would have been understandable. Rather, Amalek simply "happened upon you (karekha) as you traveled" (Devarim 25:18), and seemingly came to a random decision to smite us. Centuries later, Haman continued in this path of groundless antagonism. This is detected by the keen eyes of Chazal (Esther Rabba 8:5) who note that Mordekhai employed the same word in his message to Queen Esther: he wants her to know all that has happened to him (karahu). With this uncommon verb, he awakes her to the urgency of their situation: they who are characterized by capricious hatred have "happened upon" us again.

This arbitrariness, then, is the defining feature of Amalek and is the very cornerstone of their ideology. One might say, indeed, that Amalek is essentially anti-ideological. There is no rhyme or reason in the world, no historical progression, no guiding force. Everything simply "happens" to be.

With this denial, though, Amalek ironically forfeits his own right to exist. As long as one can perceive a broader picture, every detail has its place. The smallest cog serves a function within a vast mechanism - if one believes that there is a mechanism. Even bitter tastes are essential within the structure of the palate as a whole, as is shown by the inclusion of galbanum, an unpleasant smelling resin, among the spices of the Temple incense.

The Talmud teaches us that King Saul was punished for being merciful toward the cruel. This is difficult to understand, for is not the trait of mercy a commendable one? We learn from here that hard-heartedness, too, has its rightful place in the world. It is essential in wartime, for example, or when dealing with terrorists. All activities, all qualities, all elements, when combined properly, form a harmonious whole in God's plan for the world. One who denies this reality, however, can have no place within it.

In the words of the Maharal (Or Chadash p. 167):

"This is the bottom line: Amalek has so far removed himself from [true] reality as to be considered simply a thing apart. Therefore, as long as Amalek exists in the world, it cannot be said that "God is One and His Name is One"... For this reason, they are deserving of obliteration for the sake of the future, for God will be one only after Amalek has been evicted from the Oneness of God. That is, the downfall of Amalek.

"This is why it says regarding his downfall, 'tomorrow.' Amalek resembles the morrow in that while the first day of creation was 'echad,' unity, the following day was 'sheni,' duality or otherness, and Amalek too is 'other,' as Moshe declared in the battle with Amalek, 'Tomorrow, I will stand at the top of the hill.' Similarly Esther said, 'And tomorrow I will do as the king commands.'"

**II. "To the Sinner He Gives the Task of Collecting and Gathering"**

It is written in Tractate Megilla 10b:

"Rabbi Abba the son of Cahana began his discourse with the following: 'To the man who is good before Him He gives wisdom, knowledge and joy, but to the sinner he gives the task of collecting and gathering, that he may give it to the one who is good before God...' (Kohelet 2:26). 'To the man who is good before Him' - refers to Mordekhai, 'but to the sinner He gives the task of collecting and gathering' - this refers to Haman, 'to give to the one who is good before God' - this refers to Mordekhai, about whom it is said, 'And Esther placed Mordekhai in charge of the house of Haman' (Esther 8:2)."

The Maharal (Or Chadash p. 64-5) comments:

"This homily comes to teach us that one can learn from the megilla God's ways of dealing with the righteous and the wicked. God, blessed be He, grants riches and success to the wicked man - in order that the righteous man come and take it from him. Why does God give to the righteous man in this indirect way, by means of the wicked? It is because the wicked man is marked by tremendous greed, continually eager to amass wealth. Righteous people, on the other hand, are content with their lot and do not pursue material prosperity as the wicked do. For this reason, the righteous man is not adapted to accumulate riches in the same way that the wicked people are."

God wished to give to Mordekhai the house of Haman, which means not only his estate but, more importantly, his power. As the Maharal explained, God sets before the wicked man the task of "collecting and gathering," exempting righteous people from this activity because they are purely occupied with the pursuit of wisdom and knowledge. Hence, the wicked man prepares an estate, thinking it is for himself, and when it is complete, God simply transfers it to a righteous man.

It is a well-known fact that in order to attain a senior government position, one must trample upon others; before one becomes a cabinet minister one must serve his time in the outlying branches, then transfer to party headquarters, and only much later, after a titanic struggle, can one achieve cabinet rank. So too it is in the megilla: God granted Haman the ability to fashion a power base from which he could control both the king's court and the land as a whole. Once this was achieved, the rulership is transferred to Mordekhai, who stepped into a ready-made position: "And Esther placed Mordekhai in charge of the house of Haman." Mordekhai, alone, could not have attained this position; his eyes were bent towards wisdom.

One might utilize this concept to help understand why according to Rav Kook the Land of Israel was built up by non-religious Jews. I do not mean to say, God forbid, that the builders of the State were Hamans; rather, they were more suited to the task than the humble, pious Jews. One who wishes to build an economically viable state must have experience and expertise in economic matters. One whose focus in life is solely intellectual and spiritual will be incapable of performing such a task. The Chafetz Chaim (or Rav Kook for that matter) could not have built a factory. This does not negate the importance of such an endeavor, but to do it properly, we need a man whose focus is on economic achievement.

Many of those who built up the land were specifically those who were interested in settlement and agriculture. Religious matters were not at the top of their list of priorities. These were practical people, and precisely because of this they were successful in laying down a sturdy industrial infrastructure. Were a pious, undemanding, scholarly type of individual to turn his hand to these practical matters, he would probably fail. Not only might he lack the skills, he would lack the drive. Being himself satisfied with a humble life, he would not feel the need to develop a thriving economy. Ultimately, of course, the goal is for all to be pious, and for all to share and enjoy the fruits of this labor.

**III. "Each One Would Swallow His Fellow Alive"**

Tractate Megilla 11a:

"Rabbi Nachman the son of Yitzchak began his discourse with the following: 'A song of ascents, by David ... If not for God who was with us when men rose up against us ...' (Tehillim 124:1-2) - men, but not a king."

The Maharal (Or Chadash, p. 67) comments:

"This homily comes to teach us that the trouble with Haman was like no other which befell the Jews, for they were sold to be completely destroyed, killed, and annihilated without exception. The reason for this is that Haman was an ordinary man and not a king. A king, by the very nature of his dominion, seeks subjects to rule over, for that is what makes him a king. If his nation were to rebel, he would attempt to chastise them, not to destroy them. But Haman was different for he had no intention of rebuking people but only of destroying and killing. This is what is meant by the verse, 'If not for God who was with us when men rose up against us' - it is when a man rises up against us that we see the protecting stance of God, who does not permit the destruction of Israel."

This idea, the Maharal goes on to explain, finds a practical expression in Chazal's dictum (Pirkei Avot 3:2) that were it not for the fear of the government, each man would swallow his fellow alive. One could say that man is an egoistical creature, unable to share his world with another. In his words (p. 68),

"The first man was created alone. One can see from this that it is inherent in his nature to be alone. This is because man is king of the lower creatures who are beneath him, and just as two kings cannot share one crown, two men cannot share this position. The fact that man multiplied and became many, that is the doing of God who is King of Kings and desires multiplicity. From the point of view of God who is King of Kings, it is not fitting for man to be king; however, the natural state of affairs indicates that man should be alone in his role of king of the lower creatures."

Man was created singly because he is indeed king of the whole world. All other creatures are under his dominion. The possibility of the existence of other human beings points to the fact that there is a King above them - the Holy One, Blessed be He - for otherwise every person would forever be locked in a struggle with his fellow, attempting to rule and not to be ruled.

To be sure, this viewpoint is a pessimistic one, maintaining that man is a self-centered creature who could not co-exist with others in a just society were it not for the fear of the law. Indeed, human government presents only a partial solution to the problem, since it is bound to be tainted by personal interests and shifting morality. Only the fear of the kingship of heaven can guarantee a harmonious world in which one does not attempt to "swallow his fellow alive."

**IV. "To Be Prepared for This Day"**

In Megillat Esther (3:13-15) we read:

"And the letters were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces, to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all the Jews ... The copy of the writing, to be given out as a law in every province, was published to all the peoples, that they might be prepared for this day. The couriers went out in haste by the king's command, and the decree was given in Shushan the capital ... and the city of Shushan was perplexed."

The term "perplexed" seems inappropriate at this juncture. One would understand if Shushan was "sorrowed" or "mourned," but why "perplexed?"

An additional difficulty presents itself in the next verse (4:1), which reads, "And Mordekhai knew all that had taken place." What could this be referring to, for the decrees were by now public knowledge with messengers sent throughout the land?

Furthermore, after Esther is informed and submits her request to Achashverosh, he responds innocently, "Who is he, and where is he?" Is it conceivable that he is truly ignorant of the identity of the plotter? And when Esther petitions the king to cancel the decree, he tells her, "And you write [a second decree] ... for that which has already been written in the name of the king cannot be revoked." Where is the logic in a system which makes it impossible to reverse previous decisions, but permits them to be "bypassed?"

One is led to the conclusion, that Haman suspected that the Jews would find a way of influencing the monarch in their favor. Therefore, he sent a secret epistle to all the viceroys and colonial governors detailing his nefarious plan, and in addition published a separate leaflet, telling the citizenry to prepare itself for an unspecified event on the thirteenth of Adar. The common people, then, did not know what to expect, and this is what led to the perplexed state of Shushan. Mordekhai, though, did know of the plot against the Jews and took care to inform Esther. When she turned to the king, he decided to feign ignorance of the matter since the epistle was supposedly confidential. Upon being forced to confront the facts, he pointed out that he was unable to withdraw an official edict, but there was yet hope - since the previous epistles were kept hidden from the public eye, it is still possible to publish new ones, favorable to the Jews, and no one would be the wiser.

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Translated by Pnina Baumgarten.

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