YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA**

**SICHA OF HARAV YEHUDA AMITAL**

**The Splitting of the Sea and the War with Amalek: A Perspective on Israel's Current Crisis**

Translated by Kaeren Fish

We find ourselves now between Purim and Pesach, between the war against Amalek and the splitting of the Red Sea. I would like to take this opportunity to repeat some ideas that I shared with our talmidim regarding the current situation in Israel.

"And Yitro, the priest of Midian, father-in-law of Moshe, heard of all that God had done for Moshe and for Israel His nation, that Hashem had taken Israel out of Egypt." (Shemot 18:1)

Rashi comments, "What did Yitro hear that made him come? He heard about the splitting of the sea and the war against Amalek." Rashi is quoting here from the Gemara in massekhet Zevachim (116a), which asks which specific event it was, out of all the miracles and wonders associated with the exodus from Egypt, that caused Yitro to journey all the way from Midian to the Israelite encampment in the desert in order to gain a first-hand impression of what God had done for Israel. The Gemara records three different opinions:

1. Rabbi Yehoshua proposes that he heard about the war with Amalek.
2. Rabbi Elazar HaModa'i maintains that he heard about the giving of the Torah.
3. Rabbi Eliezer says that he heard about the splitting of the Red Sea.

Rashi combines two of the answers into one: the splitting of the sea and the war against Amalek.

Rabbi Yehoshua's answer seems surprising – after all, what was so extraordinary about the war with Amalek? Amalek came and attacked Israel. This wasn't a battle for Am Yisrael's survival; it wasn't the nation as a whole that was endangered. Nevertheless, it was a war, and Amalek succeeded in dealing the nation a significant blow. As we read (Devarim 25:18), "And he attacked the hindmost of you, all those who were feeble at the back." And that war had its ups and downs: at times Israel had the upper hand; at other times Amalek seemed to prevail, as we read (Shemot 17:11), "And it happened that when Moshe raised his hand, Israel would prevail, and when he dropped his hand, Amalek would prevail." The war ended far short of a sweeping Israelite victory: "And Yehoshua weakened Amalek by the sword" (Shemot 17:13).

What a great distance separates the miraculous victory at the Red Sea from the battle against Amalek! Concerning the Red Sea, we read (Shemot 14:28), "And the waters returned and covered the chariots and the horsemen and the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not a single one of them remained," while in the war against Amalek, Israel succeeded only in "weakening" the enemy.

The war with Amalek took place only a few days after the splitting of the sea, but it presents a sharp contrast to that miraculous event, where Bnei Yisrael declared,

"The nations shall hear and be afraid; trembling shall take hold of the inhabitants of Peleshet; then the chiefs of Edom shall be astounded, the mighty men of Mo'av will tremble, all the inhabitants of Kena'an will melt away." (Shemot 15:15-16)

Forty years later, Rachav describes to the spies sent by Yehoshua the strong impression made by the story of what happened at the sea:

"For we heard that Hashem dried up the waters of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt... and we heard and our hearts melted; there was no courage left in anyone because of you." (Yehoshua 2:10-11)

But only several days after the splitting of the sea, Amalek is unimpressed; he demonstrates courage and comes from afar to wage war against Israel. This is a historical riddle that we cannot understand: how could the war of Amalek have taken place against the backdrop of the very recent miracle at the sea?

It was precisely this point that Yitro found astounding. He heard about the war with Amalek and its results, and found it difficult to understand against the backdrop of what had taken place at the Red Sea. For that reason, Yitro came from afar. And when he came, he began to understand the ways of God's special providence as it relates to Am Yisrael. The Holy One does not allow Am Israel to rest on their laurels after leaving Egypt, as though now all their problems are over. Am Yisrael must always fight, they must always be at war – that is their fate. They are forced always to gaze upwards, towards Moshe's raised hands, and to subordinate themselves to their Father in Heaven.

This fact is so fundamental to the essence of Am Yisrael that a gentile who wishes to convert is told, among other things: Know that Am Yisrael have a special fate - "They cannot receive either too much good or too much punishment," in the words of the Gemara (Yevamot 47a-b). As the Rambam explains (Hilkhot Issurei Biah 14:4),

"They cannot receive too much good in this world, lest their hearts become haughty, as it is written (Devarim 32:15), 'And Yeshurun grew fat and kicked.'"

Yitro, who ultimately converted, had to know this before he became a member of Am Yisrael.

Similarly, it was Israel's fate to be continually at war with the surrounding nations throughout the First Temple period: the Tanakh emphasizes the exception to the rule when it notes that "the land was quiet for forty years."

We today, in the State of Israel, find ourselves in the midst of a war similar to that of Amalek in Refidim. The war is not one of survival; the existence of the State of Israel is not in danger, just as in the war against Amalek the nation was not involved in a battle for survival. But Amalek succeeded in hurting many individuals: "All those who were feeble at the back." Today, too, to our sorrow, the enemy succeeds from time to time in harming individuals, despite our military superiority.

The aim of the State of Israel is not to annihilate the Palestinians, but rather to weaken them, just as we read in the war against Amalek, "And Yehoshua weakened Amalek by the sword." The reality is such that no one expects or hopes for anything more than an end to the violence.

Someone who observes our struggle today on its own, divorced from a broader perspective encompassing the great miracle of the "splitting of the sea" in our own time, namely, the establishment and development of the State of Israel - such a person has a real problem. The current events must be seen against the background of that historical miracle, when Am Yisrael, immediately after the Holocaust, succeeded in establishing a State which, within a mere fifty years, has achieved a level of economic and military power that astounds all the nations of the world; it is a phenomenon which has no parallel in history – and all of this while in the midst of continual war. This State managed to bring in the Jews from the Arab countries at the very last minute before their gates were locked. This in itself was also a miracle.

Someone who looks at the current events against the backdrop of that historical miracle or, more accurately, those historical miracles, on the one hand sees things in their true proportions, and on the other hand also recognizes that it is the hand of God that stands behind that historical "splitting of the sea" that was the establishment of the State. And if that is so, then it is natural that such a person should declare, in the words of the Gemara, that "God does not perform miracles for naught."

Our problem lies mainly with the youth, who have difficulty perceiving a complex reality. They see today on its own and yesterday on its own; they have trouble seeing today as part of a larger unit of time. They perceive salvation as standing apart from mourning, and hence their frequent transitions from euphoria to despondency.

We, the older generation, are better able to see the whole picture, a picture that includes both the splitting of the sea and the war of Amalek. The memories of our struggle for the establishment of the State with all that we experienced – the days of celebration and the days of mourning – are parof our consciousness, and for that reason we have faith that "Hashem will not desert His nation, and will not abandon His inheritance."

(This speech was delivered at Yeshivat Har Etzion's annual dinner in New York, 25 Adar 5761, March 20, 2001.)