

PARSHAS BESHALACH

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Tamari

"And Amalek came and warred with Israel" (Shmot17:8). There are many motives to explain this attack. Perhaps he was in the neighborhood by chance and therefore attacked. [Contrast this with S. R. Hirsch's view that Amalek had a contrary viewpoint to Judaism, according to which all is mere mikreh, chance, without any Divine plan]. Alternatively, he remembered how Yaakov took the blessing of Yitschak from his grandfather Eisav and attacked Israel out of revenge or out of fear that the prophesy, 'and the elder shall serve the younger' would be realized at his expense. The attack by Amalek was punishment for Israel's sin when they said "Is Hashem in our midst"? [Contrast this with Rashi's comment that sinning through weight s and measures brings the enemy (Devarim, 25:17) He could have thought this was the moment to attack them as the blessing said, "If he will not be deserving then you will break his yoke from off your neck" (Ber.27:40). Amalek knew that his destiny, like all the descendants of Eisav was to live by the sword so that this attack was a fulfillment of destiny; it would also show his superiority over Pharaoh and Egypt who had been powerless against Israel.

Actually there were 2 battles. The first when Amalek attacked suddenly; note the text says Amalek came and attacked, rather than Amalek came to do battle. Then there was the battle of Yehoshua on the orders of Moshe, rather than by Divine command. Moshe went up the mountain and stood there with his arms raised when Yehoshua took some men against Amalek. In view of the insignificance of the enemy, Moshe himself did not go to battle nor did he send 'anshei hayil' men of valor, seasoned and select troops, but only, as the text tells us choose people, any anonymous people, led by one who was only a youth, the servant of Moshe. He took with him the staff with which he had performed miracles, the most recent of which was the drawing of the water from the rock. Indeed, it was to the same rock that Moshe went; the same rock where later G-d was to show His Glory and teach Moshe and Israel the 13 Divine Attributes, when He forgave Israel for the sin of the Golden Calf. Now he stood there as a memorial for the people of 2 things. The one was boost their morale in the same way as kings and generals do, by showing their troops that they are in command and guiding the battle. Halakhically, the war against Amalek required a king. In addition, by showing the staff of miracles and his hands raised in prayer, he was telling Israel that Hashem had forgiven them for their questioning whether He was really in their midst in their difficulties. As Chazal teach us, "When Moshe raised his arms, the people subjected their hearts to G-d and were victorious" (Rosh Hashanah).

We should note that Yehoshua did not destroy Amalek, only "he harried or discomfited Amalek

with the edge of the sword". Nor did Shaul wipe them out, neither were they wiped out in the days Mordechai and Esther after Purim. Therefore we were given the constant and eternal commandment of remembering what Amalek did to us and of wiping out his memory (Devarim, 25:17-19). Yet there was also the eternal war referred to in our sedrah, of G-d against Amalek.

Such eternal enmity, battle and destruction we do not find with any enemy of Israel apart from Amalek. With regard to Egypt we are warned, "You shall not abhor an Egyptian for you were a stranger in his land"(Devarim, 23:8). They welcomed us and gave us hospitality and that should be remembered. It is true that later they oppressed us and persecuted us, but that was the manner of the nations and they were punished for their excessive oppression. Regarding Edom who was a descendant of Eisav like Amalek and from whom we suffered at various periods, the same verse tells us, "You shall not abhor an Edomite for he is your brother ". They too were punished for their actions. In both cases after 3 generations intermarriage with their converts were permitted. Why then is Amalek singled out eternally for destruction both by Israel and by G-d? [Abarbanel seems to consider Amalek as something more than the usual anti Semite. In modern parlance he is guilty of crimes against humanity, a war criminal; we must remember that there exists in Judaism the concept of kosher warfare.]

Amalek never fought a humane war. He did not announce his attack and give the enemy a chance to surrender as do all kings and rulers when they declare war on somebody. Rather, he snuck up and suddenly fell on the stragglers as does a thief in the night. [The Admor of Chabad taught that having stragglers, the weaker and ignored members of a Jewish society, was the sin that called for Amalek]. He attacked a people unused to warfare, coming out of slavery when they had neither food nor drink. Perhaps he wanted to return them to slavery?

His war with Israel had neither a just cause nor a legitimate purpose. They were no threat to his territory nor were attacking his allies. There was no history to justify his attack nor were going to a land that belonged to him. Amalek was not set on theft, booty or taking captives. Chazal likened him to snake who kills even when it does not want to eat the prey. Amalek just killed for the sake and pleasure of killing. This was simple and unashamed evil and inhumanity.

There was in Amalek neither fear of G-d nor belief in His Justice and Providence; only a denial of His Power and His intervention in the affairs of mankind. He saw only rule of power and the success of physical strength. He cowardly feared open combat and the challenge of balanced forces. However, he had no fear nor any thought of the Master of the whole world and the Creator of all that exists.

So we have "remember what Amalek did to you when you left Egypt", but also "the Lord will war with Amalek from generation to generation".

Dr. Tamari is a renowned economist, Jewish scholar, and founder of the Center For Business Ethics (www.besr.org) in Jerusalem.