

PARSHAS TETZAVEH - ZACHOR

by Rabbi Dovid Siegel

Shmuel I 15:2

This week's haftorah that we read before Purim deals with Hashem's command to Shaul Hamelech (King Saul) to annihilate Amalek. The time had come for the Jewish people to eradicate every trace of their earliest archenemy who paved the way for all subsequent battles. A pure descendent of the wicked Eisav, Amalek displayed no fear or reverence for Hashem and arrogantly waged war against Hashem's chosen people with overt blasphemy. Although the Jewish people successfully defeated Amalek his open blasphemy had not been addressed. Shaul Hamelech (King Saul) faithfully fulfilled most of his order and annihilated the entire Amalek save one soul, King Agag. Shaul destroyed almost all their animals but acquiesced in the Jewish people's plea to spare select sheep for sacrifices. Hashem immediately summoned the prophet Samuel to reprimand Shaul for his shortcomings. Shmuel told Shaul that his serious oversight cost him the throne and that his successor was already in place.

Shmuel proceeded to summon King Agag and gruesomely execute him. However, Shmuel's act came after Agag remained alive one last day. The Sages teach us that the Amalekite king took full advantage of Shaul's error. In a most unpredictable way Agag managed to spend his last hours of life procuring his nation. His attempt was successful and, against all odds, the entire nation of Amalek was reborn. (see Mesichta Megila 13a) This total reversal seems to reflect Hashem's interest in preserving Amalek. Although one day earlier Hashem decreed Amalek's total destruction the Jewish people apparently forfeited this privilege. Their recent error called for Amalek - the epitome of anti-Semitism - to continue to exist.

In order to properly understand this let us discover Hashem's purpose for this wicked nation and what benefit it serves. For this, we refer to the Jewish people's initial encounter with Amalek and the strategy used against him. The Torah states, "And when Moshe raised his hand the Jewish people overpowered (Amalek) and when he lowered his hand Amalek overpowered (the Jews)." (Shmos 17:11) These words peculiarly suggest that the Jewish nation's success against Amalek depended on Moshe Rabbeinu's raised hand?! The Sages ask this question and answer that Moshe Rabbeinu's hand served as a vehicle and gauge for the Jewish people's devotion to Hashem. (Mesichta Rosh Hashana Perek 3)

The Sages explain that the defeat of Amalek required extreme devotion and tefilla prayer. Hashem

demanded His people to totally subject themselves to Him before responding to their dangerous predicament. Moshe's hands did not fight the war but they did propel the Jewish people into devoting every fiber of their heart and soul to Hashem. As long as their hearts were totally focused on Hashem's salvation He responded accordingly. But, the moment they deviated from total devotion Hashem no longer assisted them. Moshe Rabbeinu's hand was a perfect catalyst for this devotion. His totally raised hand reflected their total subjection to Hashem and the slightest lowering of it indicated their lack of focus on Him and predicted inevitable defeat.

This initial encounter reveals the need for Amalek and why Hashem permits him to attack Hashem's people. The Sages trace this back to the Jewish people's initial shortcoming in the desert. The Sages support this by citing the verse immediately preceding Amalek's arrival. Therein the Torah states, "....For your testing Hashem and questioning, 'Does Hashem dwell in our midst or not?'" (Shmos 17:7) The Sages explain that the Jewish people became acclimated to their miraculous existence in the desert. Hashem so perfectly attended to their needs that they began questioning if Hashem's presence remained amongst them. Thus far, their relationship consisted of crying out to Hashem and Hashem coming to their rescue. Their recent stretch did not involve hardship and overt danger. Hashem so efficiently provided their needs - food, drink and shelter - that they felt totally secure in their incredibly perilous predicament. Consequently they did not feel Hashem's presence and began questioning if He truly remained amongst them. (see Rashi Shmos 17:8)

This absurdity reflected their lack of subjection to Hashem and unwillingness to recognize His constant involvement in their lives. In truth, the clouds of glory were themselves a manifestation of Hashem's glorious presence. Yet, instead of praising Hashem for every moment of existence the Jewish people took all their favors for granted and began searching for Him. This absolutely unwarranted behavior called for immediate response and Amalek was summoned to send the shock. He was notorious for his unwillingness to recognize Hashem and subject himself to a supreme power. Amalek reflected, in extreme proportions, the Jewish people's subtle - but similar - imperfection. They immediately responded and reversed their line of thinking. During the attack they remained transfixed on Hashem's salvation thereby rectifying their lack of devotion. Hashem responded to their abrupt turnabout and delivered them from the hands of their enemy.

With this newly gained insight we return to Shaul Hamelech's subtle - yet serious - deviation. The Sages reveal that Shaul Hamelech found it difficult to accept Hashem's command to annihilate an entire nation. He compassionately questioned, "If Amalekite men are sinful why must the children perish and their cattle die?" (Mesichta Yoma 22b) Although these concerns came from the heart they reflected Shaul Hamelech's faint unwillingness to subject himself to Hashem's supreme intellect. His error together with the Jewish people's weakness reinstated their earlier shortcoming and gave rise to Amalek. Regretfully, the Jewish people and their king did not seize the opportunity to overcome their deep-seated problem. They forfeited through this their one time chance and Amalek was granted the right to exist. It was then determined that anti-Semitism would remain and be on call to

remind the Jewish people to totally subject themselves to Him.

This pattern reappeared in the days of Purim. The Jewish people became acclimated to their lifestyle in the diaspora and reduced their focus on Hashem. At their first opportunity to display Persian loyalty the Jews of Shushan eagerly attended a royal feast despite Mordechai's stern warning. Severe immorality reigned at the feast, as would be expected at occasions of that nature. In addition, the sacred vessels of the Bais Hamikdash were exposed and defiled but the Jewish people were indifferent to all. The Sages reveal that, under cover, this royal feast actually was meant to celebrate Hashem's rejection of His people. The Persian king Achashveirosh believed that he accurately calculated the Jewish people's promised day of return. Once this did not happen he was convinced it never would. In honor of his newly gained control over the Jewish nation he gleefully celebrated and arrogantly served in the sacred Bais Hamikdash vessels. (see Mesichta Megila 11b)

They should have protested and fainted at the sight of the vessels but they were so insensitive to Hashem that they did not even respond! Such indifference called for immediate action and once again Amalek was called to give the shock. Haman, a pure descendent of Amalek suddenly rose to power and reminded the Jewish people to focus on Hashem. He influenced the king to involve the entire world in a one day merciless frenzy of total Jewish annihilation. Through Mordechai and Esther's guidance the Jewish people responded with three consecutive days of prayer and fasting. This total subjection to Hashem reestablished the Jewish people's long lost relationship with Him. Hashem miraculously responded and Haman and tens of thousands of Amalekites were decimated without a single Jewish casualty. The Jewish people responded to Hashem's display of love and rededicated themselves to His Torah in an unprecedented manner. (see Mesichta Shabbos 88a)

Let us pray to Hashem that we learn our Purim lesson well and merit to reestablish our relationship with Hashem. Once we totally subject ourselves to Hashem He will undoubtedly respond and end our seemingly endless troubles. May the day soon arrive when Eisav's descendent Amalek will be totally destroyed thus clearing the path for Hashem's absolute rule over all of humanity. Amen.

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