

BUILD, PRAISE, SANCTIFY

by Rabbi Yosef Aryeh Schlusel

This week is the second of the four special Torah readings in the weeks before and after Purim, Parshas Zachor. It is the only one of the four based on a Biblical obligation. What is Zachor all about?

The portion of Zachor is the Torah's recounting of the atrocious Amalekite attack perpetrated upon the Jewish people in their journey out of Egypt. Therefore, one of the Torah's 613 commandments mandates we annually read this portion publicly. Why is this attack noteworthy? Many nations waged battle against the Jews; what was different about Amalek's aggression?

Rabbi Yitzchok Hutner (1907-1980, Dean of Mesivta Chaim Berlin in Brooklyn, New York) explains using one of the Torah's descriptive, yet enigmatic, statements about Amalek. In Bamidbar/Numbers 24:20, the gentile prophet Bilaam proclaims, "Amalek was the first of nations, their end is eternal destruction." Rashi understands this verse to be explaining the reason for the ultimate destruction of Amalek. In Devarim/Deuteronomy (25:18) Rashi explains that Amalek's attack effectively "cooled off" the Jewish nation. He gives a parable of a body of very hot water that people are looking at, standing afar, afraid to go in. That is, until someone else goes in first. The first person entering, although himself scalded, cools the waters, allowing everyone else to follow. So too, when the nations of the world observed the downfall of Egypt and the exodus of the Jews by the hand of G-d, they trembled before the Jewish nation, realizing that G-d was with them. The nations of the world dared not make trouble with the Jews. Then came Amalek. They were the first to attack. They not only attacked the Jews but were also the cause of all other eventual affronts to the Children of Israel. The boiling water did not seem so hot anymore. Thus, expounds Rashi, "Amalek was the first of nations..." therefore "...their end is eternal destruction."

But the eventual destruction of Amalek is more than just a punishment for the pain that they brought upon the Jews. They are punished for the attitude they brought to the world. Rabbi Hutner explains there are two outlooks with which one can approach life and all that one encounters. One approach is to look for the good in all that surrounds us. Find something positive and build on it. Give it credence and strive to incorporate it into one's persona. The alternative approach is to look at ideas and concepts that people find sacred and try to knock them down.

Build or destroy. Praise or insult. Sanctify or defile. The decision involves two personal battles. First - are we people who look to build or to break down structures? Second - if we indeed look to bolster those things that are important, how do we proceed? What will we hold sacred? Where will we put our efforts? Where will this effort take us? Only after we have faced the first question can we begin

to think about the second. When people are looking for truth and are open to new ideas and concepts, then personal and societal growth can occur; but when people aim to be cynical and consistently attempt to brush off any growth opportunity that comes their way, there can never be any progress in their moral and spiritual growth. This, concludes Rabbi Hutner, is the deeper condemnation of Amalek's approach. The world was just starting to recognize something important, something special. G-d just turned nature and history upside down so man could see and recognize Him. The Jews were a sanctified nation. This was something worth investigating. A process of building was on the world's fingertips. Meanwhile, Amalek was busy telling them, "There is nothing special here! Ignore them! Attack them! Destroy these people who represent such a ridiculous concept!"

This attitude will lead to their eventual downfall. Finally, in the end of days, when the world will have complete recognition of G-d's will, Amalek will still be sitting on the sidelines with their same old refrain, "Ignore this too; nothing here is worth your time." They will be overcome, but they will not be changed. The very attitude behind being the first nation to attack the Jews will be the very reason of their ultimate demise.

Have a good Shabbos!

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