

# REMEMBERING AMALEK

*by Rabbi Yaakov Menken*

We have a wonderful and illustrious heritage, and much history to remember. Judaism calls upon us to recall the Exodus from Egypt, the Revelation at Sinai, and above all our unique relationship with G-d.

This week, though, we find one of our oddest "remembrances" in the special Maftir which precedes the Purim holiday. G-d commands us to remember that the nation of Amalek attacked us at the beginning of the Exodus -- and to destroy its remembrance. Amalek attempted to destroy the Jewish People, and to deny our unique relationship with our Creator, and therefore we are called upon to destroy Amalek instead.

There are no modern maps with "Amalek" listed. There is no Amalekite government, no UN representative, not even an Internet Country Code. The only people remembering Amalek are the Jews, and we have a Commandment to destroy their memory. It would seem that the best way to perform this Mitzvah is also the easiest -- namely, to forget the whole thing.

Would that it were so simple! It may be true that there is no nation to which we can point, but Amalek's descendants live on: ideological descendants, and, according to the Medrash, even physical ones. We read this special Parsha of Remembrance immediately before Purim, because Haman was from the Amalekites. Nazi Germany, of course, also followed this same ideology, and there are certain Talmudic passages about a country called "Germania" during the Roman Diaspora (the current exile) which seem eerily prescient today. There may be no country called Amalek, but the commitment to destroy the Jews is alive and well. You can find ideological Amalekites in Europe, the Middle East, even in America. Clearly, we still need to remember.

There is a fascinating comment by the Ohr HaChayim concerning the battle with Amalek. The Medrash discusses a later attack by the Canaanites, also during the Exodus. The Medrash says that the Clouds of Glory covered the people in the desert, as described in the Torah, and therefore no one knew exactly where they were. Once Aharon passed away, however, the Clouds of Glory departed, and the Canaanites were able to attack.

This being the case, the Ohr HaChayim asks: how did Amalek know where to look? His answer is that Amalek "struck behind you," as it says in our reading. Amalek could not enter the clouds, but Amalek could follow after them and attack those stumbling behind.

As this passage from the Ohr HaChayim makes clear, we are not referring here to physical tiredness.

The Clouds of Glory did not fail to protect G-d-fearing insomniacs. Amalek finds his opening when there is spiritual tiredness, when the connection between the Jews and their G-d is weak.

This is borne out in the Purim story. The Megillah begins not with Haman's plot, but with the King's banquet. Why is the celebration relevant? Is it only because it led to Vashti's death, and the elevation of Esther as the new Queen?

The Sages provide a much more profound reason. The King ordered this Celebration because he knew the Jewish prophecy that their exile would last 70 years. He miscalculated the starting time, however, and came to the conclusion that the 70 years were now over -- and yet the Jews had not been redeemed. He concluded that the Jewish G-d had been defeated, and celebrated by having this banquet, and using the sacred vessels from the Holy Temple to serve the buffet.

Unbelievably, even though the Jewish spiritual leadership (Mordechai et al.) avoided the party, most of the Jews of Shushan saw nothing wrong with attending a banquet celebrating the demise of their faith! This indicated such tremendous spiritual weakness that Haman's moment had arrived.

Spiritual weakness is the real enemy, even without a Haman or a Hitler. We ourselves are witnessing an unprecedented decline in Jewish affiliation. Over the next generation the Jewish people may suffer a decline as great as the Holocaust, without a drop of blood being shed!

We can counter this trend, just as the Jews of Shushan did: by strengthening ourselves. For them, it was three days of fasting and prayer (during the Passover holiday, no less) that reversed the decree. For us, it is a new commitment to Jewish education for all our children that will be needed, to provide the Jewish people with the needed spiritual strength and commitment to ensure our future. "VeNehapech Hu" -- it shall be reversed, turned upside down, as committed generations produce a growing population of committed Jews.

And that, on Purims to come, will be a wonderful thing to celebrate!

Good Shabbos,

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