

"I HAVE ALREADY WRITTEN OF YOU THRICE:" MEGILAT ESTHER AND THE ETERNAL WAR WITH AMALEK

by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

THE PURIM-AMALEK CONNECTION

It is nearly axiomatic that the celebration of Purim represents a victory over the evil of Amalek.

In deciding when to establish the annual public reading of "Zakhor" (Devarim 25:19-21), to fulfill the obligation to "remember...never forget" the enmity of Amalek, the Rabbis selected the Shabbat before Purim. The Gemara (BT Megilah 30a) reckons that the reading of "Zakhor" is the "commemoration" mentioned in Esther 9:28. In addition, the Gemara derives the rule that the Megilah must be read from a scroll (and not by heart - M. Megilah 2:1) from the common root "Zekher" found in the commemoration of the days of Purim (Esther 9:28 - which is the source of the Mitzvah of the reading of Megilat Esther) and found in the commemoration commanded by Mosheh to Yehoshua regarding the actions of Amalek (Sh'mot 17:14). (BT Megilah 18a).

One of the Rishonim even goes so far as to explain the relevance of the "cities which were walled from the time of Yehoshua bin- Nun" (M. Megilah 1:1) as the cut-off point for deciding where the Megilah should be read on the fifteenth of Adar as associated with Yehoshua being the first to do battle against Amalek (Ritba, Megilah 2a s.v. K'rakhim in the name of the Sefer haMikhtam).

While the battle with Amalek is certainly viewed as the background against which the story of Esther, Mordechai, Ahashverosh and Haman is played out, the connection is a difficult one to maintain. Although Haman is called "Ha'Agagi", the connection between him and Agag, king of Amalek during Sha'ul's time, is tenuous. Both "Haman" and "Hamdata" (his father) are Elamite names; although Elam is well within the Semitic families (B'resheet 10:22), there is no direct relationship with Amalek who is, after all, a grandson of Esav (ibid. 36:12). How, then, are we to understand this consistent and far-reaching association within Halakhic and Midrashic literature?

II

THE PROBLEM OF CANONIZATION

Although this belongs to a much longer analysis, the evolution of a canon (the sealed collection known as T'nakh) is a central issue in any discussion of Megilat Esther. Not only is Esther one of the

latest books in T'nakh (thus allowing for many exegetic associations

which build upon passages in earlier books, as has been pointed out in this forum in past years), its place within T'nakh was disputed as late as the third century CE. No less an authority than Sh'mu'el of N'hardea' maintained that "Esther does not defile the hands" (BT Megilah 7a) which, according to many authorities (e.g. R. Hai Ga'on, quoted in Otzar haG'onim ad loc., Ritba ad loc.) translates to exclusion from the canon. Indeed, Esther is the only book in T'nakh which is not represented - even as a fragment - in the voluminous collection known as the Dead Sea Scrolls. (It is likely that the Judean Desert sect did not consider Esther part of the canon and thus had no Esther-scrolls.) The Septuagint (the translation of the T'nakh and apocrypha produced in Alexandria) includes additions to Esther - additions which change the entire tenor of the book. The many arguments in favor of Esther being written "b'Ru'ach haKodesh" (BT Megilah 7a) bear witness to the contentious nature of the book and the tenuous nature of its canonicity.

We will turn our attention to one passage in the Gemara which presents the problem of the inclusion of Esther in the T'nakh from a different perspective - a perspective which is wholly bound up with the association of the Purim miracle with the eternal war against Amalek.

III

ESTHER'S REQUEST

The Gemara (BT Megilah 7a) records that Esther sent a request to the Sages of her generation that her story be canonized for posterity.

Before citing the text of their communication and deliberation, it will be helpful to quote four verses from the 22nd chapter of Mishlei. Their relevance will become apparent once we engage in the analysis of the Talmudic passage:

Incline your ear, and hear the words of the wise, and apply your heart to my knowledge. For it is a pleasant thing if you keep them inside you; let them be firmly attached to your lips. That your trust may be in Hashem, I have made known to you this day, even to you. Have not I written to you excellent things (Shalishim) in counsels and knowledge? (Mishlei 22:17-20)

Although Rashi (following the last approach presented in Midrash Mishlei 22, which is similar to the "three-fold praise" of Torah recorded in the name of a certain Galilean in BT Shabbat 88a) renders Shalishim as "three-fold matters" (i.e. Torah, N'vi'im and K'tuvim), most Pashtanim (e.g. Metzudot, Ralbag) understand that this key word should be understood as "noble", "royal" or "excellent" (cf. Sh'mot 14:7) as has been translated here.

The Gemara records:

Esther sent to the Wise Men saying, Write an account of me for posterity (l'Dorot). They sent back

answer, Have I not written for thee three times - three times and not four? [And they refused] until they found a verse written in the Torah, Write this a memorial in a book, [which they expounded as follows]: Write this, namely, what is written here and in D'varim; for a memorial, namely, what is written in the N'vi'im; in a book, namely, what is written in the Megillah.

The difference [between the first and second of these opinions] is also found between two Tannaim.

Write this, what is written here. *For a memorial, namely, what is written in D'varim. In a book, namely, what is written in the N'vi'im. So R. Yehoshua.*

R. Eliezer haModa'i says:

Write this, namely, what is written here and in D'varim; for a memorial, namely, what is written in the N'vi'im; in a book, namely, what is written in the Megillah.

Even a cursory read of this passage raises several intriguing questions which cut to the core of inclusion of Esther in the canon:

- 1) How are we to understand the wording of Esther's request - Kitvuni l'Dorot? Although we have no record of a parallel request against which to measure this formulation, we would expect something along the lines of Kitvuni baKodesh or Kitvuni v'Kad'shuni (emphasizing the sanctification of the text via its inclusion in the canon).
- 2) How are we to understand the opposition of the Hakhamim? Rather than challenging the validity/sanctity of the text, they seem to be opposed because there is limited space in the canon for certain types of text - and that limit has been reached. Why should there be any quota at all?
- 3) What are we to make of the dispute between R. Elazar haModa'i (whose opinion forms the justification for inclusion) and R. Yehoshua (whose exegesis would, perforce, exclude Esther)?

We will expand this question further in our analysis of the sugya.

Although there are several other difficulties found in this sugya, in the spirit of Shalishim, we will limit our questions to these three.

IV

AMALEK IN THE DESERT

In order to understand the response and deliberation of the Hakhamim - and the associated dispute between R. Elazar and R. Yehoshua - let us look at the history of the belligerent engagements between Amalek and Yisra'el.

The first encounter with this nomadic tribe (actually a group of nomadic tribes, some of which were based in the Sinai peninsula, but others which roamed further north in the Levant - see, e.g. Shof'tim

5:14) was at some point during the last two weeks of the second month (i.e. "Iyyar") after leaving Egypt:

Then came Amalek, and fought with Yisra'el in Rephidim. And Mosheh said to Yehoshua, "Choose for us men, and go out, fight with Amalek; tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the rod of God in my hand." So Yehoshua did as Mosheh had said to him, and fought with Amalek; and Mosheh, Aharon, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. And it came to pass, when Mosheh held up his hand, that Israel prevailed; and when he let down his hand, Amalek prevailed. But Mosheh's hands were heavy; and they took a stone, and put it under him, and he sat on it; and Aharon and Hur stayed up his hands, the one on the one side, and the other on the other side; and his hands were steady until the going down of the sun. And Yehoshua discomfited Amalek and his people with the edge of the sword. And Hashem said to Mosheh, "Write this for a memorial in a book, and recite it in the ears of Yehoshua; for I will completely put out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven." And Mosheh built an altar, and called its name "Ado-nai Nissi"; For he said, Yad al Kes Y-H (Because Hashem has sworn that) Hashem will have war with Amalek from generation to generation. (Sh'mot 17:8-16)

There isn't much here to tell us about the nature of Amalek's military tactics or style. Without recourse to more information, we can already sense something sinister in this attack. 'Am Yisra'el was a slave-nation that had just been liberated; yet was now traveling in an unknown desert and (as we see throughout the travel narratives of Sh'mot and Bamidbar) were frightened and somewhat confused. Amalek was the first nation to engage them in battle, taking advantage of their fear and confusion.

We are, however, given much more insight into the heinous nature of their raid in the passage in which we are commanded to simultaneously wipe out their memory while maintaining our own memory of their enmity:

Remember what Amalek did to you by the way, when you came forth out of Egypt; How he met you by the way, and struck at your rear, all who were feeble behind you, when you were faint and weary; v'Lo Yare Elokim (and did not fear God). Therefore it shall be, when Hashem your God has given you rest from all your enemies around, in the land which Hashem your God gives you for an inheritance to possess, that you shall blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven; you shall not forget it. (Devarim 25:17-19)

The focus here is placed on Amalek's vulture-like strategy - to prey on the weak and straggling ("feeble behind you"). We now understand why the Torah reckons Amalek as the worst of our enemies (see Bamidbar 24:20) and why we must always remember their hatred. As opposed to a "legitimate" enemy, fighting over land, money, national honor etc. and fighting in conventional means (see, for instance, the forty-day "face-to-face" stand of Golyat in I Sh'mu'el 17), these nomads raid vulnerable people just because they can get away with it.

This is not the only time that we have cause to interact with Amalek; however, by the time of our next significant interaction with them, our circumstances are far removed from a straggling bunch of recently liberated slaves walking through a frightening desert.

(I am eliding the two mentions of Amalek in Shoftim [3:13 and 6:3] since in each war Amalek merely played the role of ally to our chief enemy [Moav and Midian, respectively]).

V

AMALEK DURING THE EARLY DAYS OF THE MONARCHY

After Sha'ul had been anointed as the first king of Yisra'el, he fought a series of wars - against the P'lishtim and other neighboring nations. Subsequent to a summary report of his battles (see below), we are told of a specific command given to him by Sh'mu'el:

Sh'mu'el also said to Sha'ul, Hashem sent me to anoint you to be king over his people, over Yisra'el; now therefore listen to the voice of the words of Hashem. Thus said Hashem of Hosts, I remember that which Amalek did to Yisra'el, how he laid wait for him in the way, when he came up from Egypt. And go and strike Amalek, and completely destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox, and sheep, camel and ass. (I Sh'mu'el 15:1-3)

The simple read of this command indicates that this was to be a war of revenge for Amalek's attack (cited above) on our people when we left Egypt - an attack which took place approximately four hundred years earlier. Although this is not, in and of itself, reason to suspect other, more contemporary, motivations for this battle, there are three textual clues which point us elsewhere.

1) The command to wipe out Amalek is stated twice by Sh'mu'el: after the one cited above, when Sh'mu'el is rebuking Sha'ul for his failure to completely fulfill God's command, he restates the command:

And Hashem sent you on a journey, and said, Go and completely destroy the sinners the Amalekites, and fight against them until they are consumed. (v. 18) The Amalekim are called Hata'im - sinners - indicating that this group (not just their forebears) were guilty of sinful behavior.

2) In the passage preceding Sh'mu'el's explicit command to Sh'aul regarding Amalek, we read of Sha'ul's wars against our enemies:

So Sha'ul took the kingdom over Yisra'el, and fought against all his enemies on every side, against Mo'av, and against B'nei Ammon, and against Edom, and against the kings of Zovah, and against the P'lishtim; and wherever he turned himself, he did them mischief. And he gathered an army, and defeated Amalek, and saved Yisra'el from the hands of those who plundered them. (I Sh'mu'el 14:47-48)

Abravanel maintains that the mention of the war with Amalek here refers to wars which antedated

the war commanded by Sh'mu'el in chapter 15. Following that approach, it is clear that Amalek was an active enemy at Sha'ul's time and the attack commanded via Sh'mu'el was in response - at least partially - to their contemporary "mischief". Even if we follow Radak's approach, that the war mentioned in 14:48 is a summary reference to the war of ch. 15, Amalek is still reckoned among our active enemies here.

3) When Agag, the (lone survivor and) king of the Amaleki tribe (nearly) wiped out by Sha'ul is brought before Sh'mu'el, we are told that Sh'mu'el, just before executing him, stated: As your sword has made women childless, so shall your mother be childless among women. And Sh'mu'el cut Agag in pieces before Hashem in Gilgal. (ibid. 32-33)

It seems quite clear that Agag (and, by extension, his tribe) was currently liable, not merely as the head of a tribe with a heinous history.

We have, fairly conclusively, demonstrated that Amalek's guilt at the time of Sha'ul played a major role (at the very least) in the timing of God's command to Sh'mu'el that Sha'ul destroy them. As such, any new information about their military tactics can be added to our understanding of our eternal enemy.

Unfortunately, there is nothing in the Sha'ul-Amalek text to enlighten us - but we can learn more about Amalek of this time from a later text in Sefer Sh'mu'el.

VI

DAVID AND AMALEK

During David's ongoing flight from Sha'ul (I Sh'mu'el 19-30), he escaped to Gat, where the king, Akhish, granted him a city of his own, Ziklag. David fooled Akhish into believing that he had completely turned his back on his people and Akhish enlisted him to be his bodyguard in the upcoming battle against Yisra'el. David and his six hundred men proceeded, with Akhish, to join the rest of the P'lishti captains in readying for war. They protested his presence and voiced concern regarding the sincerity of David (how right they were! - by the way, the text gives us no hint of how David would have extricated himself from this situation on his own.)

David and his men returned home; the text then relates:

And it came to pass, when David and his men came to Ziklag on the third day, that the Amalekites had invaded the south, and Ziklag, and struck Ziklag, and burned it with fire; And had taken the women captives, who were there; they did not kill any, either great or small, but carried them away, and went on their way... But David pursued, he and four hundred men; for two hundred remained behind, who were so faint that they could not go over Nahal Besor. And they found an Egyptian in the field, and brought him to David, and gave him bread, and he ate; and they made him drink water; And they gave him a piece of a cake of figs, and two clusters of raisins; and when he had eaten, his

spirit came back to him; for he had not eaten bread, nor drunk any water, three days and three nights. And David said to him, To whom do you belong? and from where are you? And he said, I am a young man of Egypt, servant to an Amalekite; and my master left me, because three days ago I fell sick. We made a raid upon the Negev haK'reti, and upon the territory which belongs to Yehudah, and upon *the Negev of Kalev; and we burned Ziklag with fire. (I Sh'mu'el 30:1-2,9-14)*

In other words, Amalek raided the cities of two powerful and well-established nations who were otherwise occupied at war (with each other). The information provided by the Egyptian slave helps to expand our understanding of the Amaleki approach to war: Not only do they attack the defenseless and tired (in Sinai), but they also take advantage of another nation's exposed flank during a "legitimate" war.

Have we exhausted the mastery of Amalek's military "play-book"? Do we have a complete handle on all of the ways in which our perpetual enemy may attack?

A closer look at the passages in the Torah reveals that there may be one additional prong of their military strategy that we must learn if we are to maintain constant vigilance against their enmity.

VII

V'LO YAREH ELOKIM - WHO?

In the description presented in D'varim of the Amaleki attack of forty years earlier, the Torah confirms that 'Am Yisra'el was faint and weary; as mentioned above, this phrase emphasizes Amalek's strategy of preying on the weak and defenseless. This phrase is followed, after a full pause (Etnachta), with an apparent reference to Amalek's lack of morality: v'Lo Yare Elokim (and did not fear God).

There are commentators who understand that in spite of the full pause here, this last phrase also describes 'Am Yisra'el. To wit: Amalek attacked you when you were tired as a result of your lack of fear of heaven. This approach is further strengthened by the juxtaposition of the war with B'nei Yisra'el's complaint about being thirsty (in Sh'mot 17:1-7 - see Rashi at 17:8). In addition, the name Rephidim, where Amalek attacked, is (as a result of these two textual clues), exegetically rendered as a place where "they abandoned the Torah" - sheRaphu Y'deihem min haTorah.

If we follow this reading - and it is not adopted by all commentators (see below), then 'Am Yisra'el played a quasi-active role in the attack of 'Amalek. They created, by their own lack of allegiance and faith to God, a void which allowed Amalek to enter and attack. Thus, we have identified three components in 'Amalek's attack strategy:

1) Attacking a politically and militarily weak, disorganized people, taking advantage of their confusion and fear.

- 2) Attacking a politically and militarily strong people who are involved in another war, taking advantage of their preoccupation.
- 3) Attacking a spiritually weak and disengaged people, taking advantage of their faithlessness.

VIII

THE ETERNAL WAR WITH AMALEK

At the dedication of the altar after the victory over Amalek, Mosheh declared that Hashem will have war with Amalek from generation to generation. Although this might be understood in the same framework as specific proscriptions and prescriptions regarding other neighboring nations (e.g. Ammon, Mo'av, Egypt, Edom, the seven nations of K'na'an etc.), a careful read of Rambam's formulation of the Halakhah of commemorating - and eradicating the memory of - Amalek (MT M'lakhim 5:5) presents a different story.

The Halakhah maintains that all of the neighboring nations were intermarried and integrated during the great geopolitical upheavals which took place under the reign of Sanheriv. (Tosefta Yadayim 2:8) and are, therefore, only theoretical in nature.

Rambam rules accordingly (MT M'lakhim 5:4) regarding the Mitzvah of destroying the seven K'na'ani nations. After presenting the Halakhah, he states: uK'var Avad Zikh'ram - their memory is already lost.

In the following paragraph, Rambam codifies the Mitzvah to remember the enmity of Amalek and to eradicate their memory from the earth - and he omits the same caveat - as if to say, they can still be identified.

R. Mosheh haLevi Soloveitchik inferred from this lacuna that 'Amalek is not purely a genealogical Halakhah (as with all other nations), rather an ideological one. Any nation or group that establishes the destruction of the Jewish people - just for the sake of destruction - as a goal, is to be considered Amalek, regardless of its lineage. (See Kol Dodi Dofek, p. 110 n. 23. This application must be considered tentative, as the implications of a complete identification of any contemporary group with Amalek has practical consequences that most Rabbinic authorities would quickly eschew.)

This is why God's war is against Amalek l'Dor Dor - for generations. Any nation that attempts to destroy His people will be, in effect, declaring war on Hakadosh Barukh Hu.

We can now understand the association of Haman with Amalek. Even though it is hard to reconcile the connection from the perspective of lineage, Haman is a pure example of Amaleki thinking - attempting to wipe out 'Am Yisra'el "just because we're there". (see Esther 3:6 and 5:13).

IX

RECONSTRUCTING THE DIALOGUE BETWEEN ESTHER AND THE HAKHAMIM

When Esther asked the Hakhamim for commemoration l'Dorot (i.e. inclusion in the canon), she was evoking another statement of Haza"l:

only the prophecy which contained a lesson for future generations (l'Dorot) was written down, and that which did not contain such a lesson was not written. (BT Megilah 14a)

In other words, Esther claimed that the lesson of her story was one needed for all generations. In every generation, Jews would need to be aware and on alert for enemies of Haman's ilk. The Sages responded that this message had already been communicated three times - and there was no room for a fourth. In other words, all three methods of attack adopted by our perpetual enemies - the ideological and spiritual descendants of Amalek - were already found in T'nakh and there was no need for another message.

What was the message which Esther wished to perpetuate?

In last year's essay on Megilat Esther, I pointed out (citing Haza"l in several places) that the Jews in Persia during the period leading up to our story were intensely and deliberately assimilated into the general - even pagan - culture. This included their names (including Esther, associated with Istahar, the goddess of fertility, and Mordechai, a version of Mardukh, the god of creation - both members of the various panthea common throughout the Levant), their comportment (as the Gemara states in the name of R. Shim'on b. Yohai - the Jews deserved this decree because they participated in Ahashverosh's feast) and even their clothing (note that no one knew that Mordechai was Jewish until he told them - Esther 3:6).

One of the messages of the Megilah - and the one most closely associated with the need to always remember Amalek - is that Amalek attacks us when we are comfortable, settled and secure - and disconnected from Torah. Our lack of a spiritual anchor allows Amalek to come along and attack - and nearly defeat us.

Thus, the message of Esther's Megilah was similar to that found in Sefer D'varim - if, indeed, it was the B'nei Yisra'el who were Lo Yare Elokim (not fearing God). The Rabbis understood that the passage in Mishlei, discussing excellent things to which we ought to incline our ear and keep inside of us all direct us that our trust may be in Hashem may be a reference to the constant awareness we must maintain of the possibility of an Amalakean attack. For that reason, they understood that the word "excellent" may also refer to "three" - since there are only three circumstances during which we need to maintain our vigilance for this perpetual enemy. Hence, they rejected Esther's request on account of the superfluity of the message - it has already been communicated in Sefer D'varim...

...until they found the opinion of R. Elazar haModa'i, who understood that the first of the three commemorations alluded to in Sh'mot 17 referred to both Sh'mot and D'varim; i.e. both of them speak of only one type of Amaleki attack. Perforce, that must be the attack of the vulture-like people

on a defenseless nation.

We now understand the dispute between R. Yehoshua and R. Elazar haModa'i. R. Yeshoshua understands that there were two aspects to the Amaleki attack in the desert - both the cowardly attack on the tired and weary, as well as the opportunity afforded by our lacking fear of God. Hence, he reads the first two commemorations commanded as Sh'mot and D'varim, since each carries a different component of Amalek's attack strategy.

R. Elazar haModa'i, on the other hand, must reject this reading of Lo Yare Elokim, preferring to read the description as being about Amalek (emphasized by the full pause between the description of our weariness and lack of moral restraint). Therefore, both the narrative in Sh'mot and the command in D'varim refer to one incident cut from one cloth - the attack by a group of nomads on a defenseless people recently liberated from servitude and presently wandering in the desert.

If that is the case, goes the argument, there is no message in T'nakh about Amalek's proclivity for attacking us when we are spiritually disjointed. There is, therefore, a crying need for the inclusion of Megilat Esther l'Dorot, since it is a message needed l'Dorot.

X

POSTSCRIPT

The Mekhilta in Parashat B'shalach records the following two opinions:

R. Yehoshua...says...similarly, it is impossible for Yisra'el to exist unless engaged in the study of Torah; since they abandoned the study of Torah, therefore the enemy came upon them, since the enemy only attacks on account of sin and trespass, therefore it says: *Amalek came...*

R. Yehoshua places the blame for the attack squarely on the shoulders of the B'nei Yisra'el.

R. Elazar haModa'i says: And Amalek came. Since Amalek was sneaking under the wings of the cloud [of glory] and kidnapping people of Yisra'el and killing them, as it says:

ow he met you by the way... v'Lo Yare Elokim R. Elazar haModa'i understands that the people who did not fear God were Amalek - thus leaving room in our T'nakh for one more message - Kitvuni l'Dorot.

Text Copyright © 2013 by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom and **Torah.org**. The author is Educational Coordinator of the Jewish Studies Institute of the Yeshiva of Los Angeles.