

# PUNCHING A HOLE(Y) IN AMALEK'S VIEW

*by Rabbi Pinchas Winston*

This week's parsha begins the third of the Five Books of Moses, VaYikrah (Leviticus), which is also called "Toras Kohanim," since it speaks of many laws concerning priestly responsibilities. It is the shortest of the five books, and it occurred entirely while the Jewish people were camped at the foot of Mt. Sinai.

The first word of the parsha is "vayikrah," which means, "And He called ..." Who called, and whom did He call? G-d called Moshe, to inform him about the procedures for offering the various sacrifices in the Mishkan. But as Rashi points out, the verse hints at the fact that the call went out and reached Moshe's ears only, though technically, others should have been able to hear it as well.

If you will pardon the crude comparison, there is an example of this idea in the physical world, in the form of a dog whistle. Apparently, one of the wonders of creation is that dogs are able to hear noises of such a high frequency that they can respond to sounds that are even inaudible to the human ear. It's not that the "noise" is not there for the human ear to hear; it's just that the human ear can't "pick up" the sound waves and then make them recognizable.

The Torah is telling us that this concept holds true in the spiritual world as well. The reason why Moshe could hear G-d's voice, so-to-speak, was not because G-d "whispered" into Moshe's ear so that others could not hear the prophetic transmission. Potentially, others could have heard what Moshe heard-had they been on the same spiritual level as Moshe. In fact, one of the miracles of Har Sinai was that G-d, simultaneously, spoke to every Jew on his own level of spiritual capability. But that was a singular experience, necessary for the acceptance of Torah ... a gift given to all the Jews at Har Sinai. For the rest of history, to hear G-d "speak," one has had to improve his or her spiritual ability to receive such supernatural transmissions.

The upshot of this idea is obvious. How many times do events occur in every day life that are interpreted on different spiritual levels by different people? One person sees the hand of G-d in what occurred, while another person sees history unfolding-randomly-while another doesn't quite know what to make out of current events.

Who's seeing correctly?

Parashas VaYailech answers this question. The parsha warns us about what will happen to us and the world if we stray from Torah and mitzvos. Then G-d warns that ...

*I will certainly hide (hastehr astir) My face on that day, for all the evils that you have committed ... (Devarim 31:18)*

G-d hides His face? Where? How? Rashi explains what this verse means: It will be as if I do not see their suffering.

Does that mean that G-d will simply flick on the auto-pilot switch and go somewhere else where we can't bother Him? G-d forbid. It simply means that G-d will make it APPEAR to us as if He has grown indifferent to our suffering, when, in fact, He has not. After all, "hiding" implies only that something is there, just not visible to the eye.

This means that history, from a Torah perspective, can never random, no matter how random it may appear to the human mind. Like a father who must train his child to walk for himself, G-d "steps back" from us, so-to-speak, so that we can choose to find Him, to improve ourselves spiritually, to "tune in" to His high spiritual frequency, if you will.

However, not if Amalek can help it. Amalek's intrinsic desire is to convince the doubting Jew that G-d is **not** there, that history is on auto-pilot, and that mitzvos really don't add up to much in the end, anyhow. This is what we read this week in Parashas Zachor, the special maftir read just prior to Purim, when we remember what Amalek did to us on the way out of Egypt. As the Sefer HaChinuch explains:

We are commanded to remember what Amalek did to Yisroel, that he was the first to attack them when they went out from Egypt, before any nation or kingdom raised its hand against them, in keeping with the possuk, The first of the nations was Amalek (BaMidbar 24:20), whose Aramaic translation is: The first attackers of Yisroel were Amalek. For, all were in fear of them since they heard of the great feats which Hashem did for them in Egypt. Yet, the Amalekis, with their evil heart and temperament, ignored this and they attacked them. As a result of this they removed the great fear of them from the heart of the other nations ... (Mitzvah 603)

To what can this be compared?

Imagine an innocent boy being chased across the school yard by a bully. However, as Providence would have it, the chasee's father just happened to be walking by the school yard when he spied his son being chased. The boy, seeing his father, gained newfound confidence as he sprinted toward his father for what he and his father assumed to be safe haven from the impending attack. However, what they didn't anticipate was just how fearless this bully was, for, even as the boy held onto his father's leg, and breathed a sigh of relief, the bully, to the utter shock of both the father and the son, came up and socked the boy!

That was, and this is, Amalek. Even though the Divine Presence was right there, hovering above in the form of the miraculous cloud that enveloped the Jewish people to protect them from the

dangerous elements of the desert, Amalek, according to the medrash, went in and dragged some of the Jews out and attacked them!

Well, if you're not safe in the hands of your own father, then where are you safe?

The truth is, Amalek could not have harmed the Jewish people had they been properly keeping the Torah and mitzvos. This is why Amalek attacked the Jewish people at Refidim, a name, says the Talmud, that alludes to the fact that the Jewish people did not keep up their commitment to Torah (Refidim comes from the words, rafyah yadaim, "weak in their hands," i.e., Torah was weak in their hands). But it **appeared** to many as if Amalek was able to be effective even **against** the will of G-d. And, as history has proven, he has even been able to create the impression that, for all intents and purposes, there is **no** will of G-d.

This was precisely Haman's plan in trying to eliminate the Jewish people of Persia, 70 years after the destruction of the first Temple. As the medrash explains, Haman told Achashveros that the Jewish G-d was "sleeping," and that they would be successful against His people. Therefore, it is not too big a surprise to find out that the verse quoted above, according to the Talmud (Chullin 139b), refers to Queen Esther ("esther" also can mean "I will hide").

Thus one's ability to interpret the events of his or her life and the events of the world in terms of a message from G-d is dependent upon how well one has been able to fend off an Amalekian perspective. Purim comes to help us do just that, so that when the voice of G-d goes out, that we too should merit to hear it, like Moshe.

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The question is, why does this message surface only now, in the **third** book of the Torah, which deals with sacrifices and various other mitzvos?

Any book that deals with kohanim, by definition, addresses the issue of kedusha, i.e., holiness. In fact, the climax of the book is often considered to be Parashas Kedoshim, which exhorts that the Jewish people must strive to live in a state of holiness.

The Ramban asks the question: Why is Parashas Kedoshim the seventh parsha of the book (which happens to correspond to the seventh day of the week, Shabbos), and not the first parsha, or the last parsha? After all, had Kedoshim been the first parsha, then it could have acted as an important introduction to the whole theme of Sefer VaYikrah. Had Kedoshim been the last parsha, then it could have been a vital summation of all that Sefer VaYikrah came to instruct. However, in the middle of Sefer VaYikrah, Parashas Kedoshim seems to be misplaced, coming after many mitzvos that have already been introduced to raise us to a level of holiness.

The Ramban answers this question by stating that the mitzvah of Kedoshim t'h'yu ("You shall be holy") is more than just a mitzvah to keep the mitzvos, such as kashrus, and the like, which preceded

this parsha. Says the Ramban: even with the mitzvos, it is still possible to act in a less-than-noble fashion.

For example, what about eating a steak? Is it permissible to eat a kosher steak? The answer is, yes, of course. But how many steaks, and in which fashion. Is it permissible to drink wine? Of course it is ... when the wine is kosher, and it is not a fast day, or even a day of mourning such as Tisha B'Av. Thus, the true answer to these question is, it depends. It depends upon the person and the situation, and since not all people are alike, and not all situations are the same, then, the mitzvah can't address every individual person and situation in a specific way. Then what is a person's guiding principle supposed to be?

Be holy.

Being holy is not just an action to be fulfilled, but an attitude toward life itself that informs a person in every situation how to behave with dignity and G-dliness, whether it is while standing in line at the supermarket, or, G-d forbid (please forgive the stark comparison), standing in line on the way to the gas chambers, as was the case during the Holocaust. In fact, many brave Jews, unbelievably, went into the gas chambers proudly singing, "G-d, You have chosen us from among the nations ..." (from the holiday prayers). For some this may have appear as "sheep being led to the slaughter"; to the Torah, such faith in G-d and His purpose for creation at such a time represents the supreme act of sacrifice for human dignity, while at the same time denying the nazis their victory over the Jewish spirit.

Ultimately speaking, this is Amalek's master plan in every generation. By reducing belief in G-d's Providential involvement in daily life, Amalek knows that the end result can only be reduced self-dignity. For it is our belief in Torah and G-d's master plan for history that inspires us to upkeep the Torah, which demands excellence from us. Without such a belief, as we learned from the episode of the golden calf, the end result is licentiousness, and the eventual downfall of mankind. This is why Amalek as the antithesis of all that creation stands for.

Hence, kedusha is about dignity, and Parashas Kedoshim is about building on the framework of mitzvos provided by the Torah, and the first six parshios of Sefer VaYikrah, to soar above the base lifestyle we are capable of sinking to when we stop striving for perfection.

Where there is the knowledge and understanding that G-d made the world, and chose the seed of Avraham to lead it to fulfillment (Sefer Bereishis), then there can be redemption from Egypt and the acceptance of Torah (Sefer Shemos). And when there is an acceptance of Torah, and the commitment to it, there can be the basis for holiness (Sefer VaYikrah). And when there is holiness, then there can be no Amalek, not even a trace of him, for it is human dignity and the belief in our G-dliness that gives us the courage to stand up and destroy the amaleks of history, as we learn from the story of Purim.

Can there be any better place to teach this than in Sefer VaYikrah, the Book of Holiness?

We should merit to see the day when the doubt and destruction of Amalek is transformed into a clarity of truth, so that the veils that cover the "hand" of G-d can finally be removed so that He will cease to "hide His face," a time when we will finally be able to rejoice together in the ultimate and lasting Purim of our long and arduous history.

Have a **great** Shabbos and Purim filled with simcha,

Pinchas Winston

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