

COMMANDING EMOTIONS

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Can an emotion be commanded? Can a person be told, "Love this thing now!" or, "Hate this people now!" and be expected to do so, instantly? To quote my Rosh HaYeshivah, Rav Noach Weinberg, zt"l: "Love is the emotional pleasure one feels upon seeing the virtue in another," which can only be the result of a process that allows us to notice, contemplate, and appreciate the virtue we see in others.

Therefore, the Rosh HaYeshivah's brother, the past Rosh HaYeshivah of Yeshivah Ner Israel in Baltimore, Rav Ya'akov Weinberg, zt"l, explained to us that, mitzvot, such as "Love God," are really commandments to do that which will result in love of God. To actually love God is the ultimate, but we can be considered to be fulfilling the mitzvah just by doing that which will, eventually, lead to love of God.

For example, the Rambam explains, love of God can be achieved by simply contemplating God's vast and awesome Creation, and the wisdom He used to create it (Yad, Yesodei HaTorah, Ch. 2). The more appreciation one has of the wondrousness of Creation, from the smallest of the small to the largest of the large, the Rambam teaches, the more love of God he will naturally feel.

Likewise, the mitzvah to hate Amalek, if you don't already do so, is to develop the kind of realization that allows you to see and appreciate his evil, which, naturally, any sane person would hate. Who was Amalek? What did he do? Why is God specifically at war with him, and no other nation? What danger does he still pose to Creation, if any? All of these are questions that the mitzvah to hate Amalek demands that we investigate and answer.

And, if we don't? Then what?

Then Purim. Purim came along because we forgot who Amalek is, what he does, why God is specifically at war with him and no other nation, and the danger he poses to Creation, even if his people no longer exist today. The events that eventually became the Purim story occurred to re-educate us in the importance of never losing track of Amalek, for when we do, we not only lose our capacity to hate Amalek, but we also lose our capacity to love God as well. For, love of God and the hatred of Amalek are really just two sides of one coin, or, to include this week's parshah, of one kohen.

Indeed, when telling us how to develop our love for God, the Rambam could have summed up his instructions with just one phrase: remove Amalek from your life. If love of God is a flowing river, then Amalek is the dam that blocks it. If love of God is the air we breathe, then Amalek is what pollutes it.

He is, in effect, that aspect of life that has the capacity to desensitize a person to those aspects of life that ought to drive a person closer to his Creator.

Once, Amalek was a specific people, just like once, Mitzrayim was a specific location. However, just as Mitzrayim is first and foremost a concept, an ideology that says, "True spirituality isn't important, and even hampers one's ability to enjoy the material world," so too is Amalek first and foremost an attitude towards life, one that questions, "Is God really amongst us or not?" (Shemos 17:4).

Hence, any society that promulgates the first approach to life is the Mitzrayim of its time, even if the people themselves do not live in the northern part of South Africa. For a period of time, Mitzrayim and Egypt were the same thing, but not anymore, not for a long time now. Though Egypt may have stayed where it has always been physically, Mitzrayim didn't, moving on after the exodus of the Jewish people, from continent to continent ever since.

Likewise, any people who question, "Is God amongst us or not?" in either thought, speech, or deed, is the Amalek of their time, even if they live in the heart of Western society, and often, because they do. Western society is usually synonymous with atheism, or at least, agnosticism, and the phrase from the Torah: *kochie v'otzem yadie*—believing too much in our ability to accomplish, one of the downsides of technological achievement

After the destruction of the First Temple, and into the first exile of the Jewish people from their land, it was not hard for Jews to wonder if God was amongst them or not. After all they had gone through, it was hard not to believe that God had abandoned them, especially since they couldn't have blamed God for doing so. It was a question that lingered for 70 years, as the Jewish people coped with the reality of being strangers, once again, in a hostile country, after 850 years of living in their own land.

The only question is, after a while, do you get used to it, and learn to live without God, or do you work on rebuilding the relationship? When you ask, "Is God amongst us or not?" do you ask because you want to live as if He isn't, or because you want to figure out how to repair the relationship? The path we take at such a crossroad determines whether or not we return home peacefully, or only after some kind of major confrontation with a king that makes us pray that God is indeed amongst us:

Rebi Eliezer said: "If Israel repents, they will be redeemed; if not, they will not be redeemed." Rebi Yehoshua said to him, "If they do not repent, will they not be redeemed! Rather, The Holy One, Blessed is He, will set up a king over them, whose decrees will be as difficult as Haman's, whereby the Jewish people will repent, and he will thus bring them back to the right path." (Sanhedrin 97b)

Hence, though there were many points at which Megillas Esther could have begun, it begins specifically with the feast of Achashveros, which he had made to celebrate what he had calculated to be the end of the 70 years of Jewish exile, and the lack of redemption. In answer to the Jewish people's age-old question, "Is God amongst us or not?" Achashveros answered resoundingly, "See

for yourself: He's not!"

Thus, not only did the king serve fine food and wine at his banquet, but he also donned the holy clothing of the Kohen Gadol, mentioned in this week's parshah:

Make holy garments for Aharon, your brother, for glory and for splendor. (Shemos 28:2)

It is ?amazing? how the same clothes can bring one man glory and splendor, and make a fool out of another. As Achashveros put on the bigdei Kohen Gadol, presumably to mock the Jewish people and their relationship to God, he in turn mocked himself. He acted like the pig that puts forth its two cloven feet, claiming to be kosher, by which he only emphasizes just how treif he really is on the inside.

Likewise, had Achashveros left the holy clothing meant for the purest man on earth, then he would have only been just another gentile ruler, even though he destroyed the Temple. For, that had been his job at that point in history, and God seemed to have forgiven him for it, evident by the success he had in building his career since.

However, when he donned the bigdei Kohen Gadol, he brought out his own lowliness that much more, pushing himself into a whole new category of impurity, by comparison. And, had the Jewish people, at that moment of extreme profanation, become spiritually reinvigorated by the offence, zealous for God and His holy ones, the rest of the Purim story would not have been necessary.

Indeed, by remaining unmoved by the very clothing that said, "God is definitely amongst us," which was the source of its glory and splendor, the Jewish people acted, instead, as if they doubted that God was amongst them. Their despair became clear to everyone, including themselves, evident by the fact that Achashveros' folly had not been enough to re-ignite their commitment to God.

What followed? The miraculous, mercurial rise in power by a slave/barber to second-in-command over Persia, someone by the name:

Memuchan was Haman. Why was Haman called Memuchan? Because he was set aside for punishment— muchan l'puryanos. (Megillah 12b)

However, though he was born Memuchan, he became, for the sake of terrorizing the Jewish people of his time, Haman. As in ha-mann, "the mann," the miraculous bread that had fallen daily to feed the Jewish people in the desert ... just in advance of the very first attack by Amalek, back in Moshe Rabbeinu's time.

But, what does food from Heaven have to do with the clothing of the Kohen Gadol, or Purim for that matter? This:

Not by bread alone does man survive, but by whatever the mouth of God brings forth does man live. (Devarim 8:30)

In other words, both the mann and the clothing of the Kohen Gadol emphasized, "Yes, God is amongst us," even if we fail to see Him. In fact, this is why the parshah begins with the mitzvah to produce olive oil for the Menorah, which existed specifically to make this point as well:

"Outside the cloth partition of the [Ark of] Testimony." (Vayikra 24:3)

God needs the light [of the Menorah]? For the entire 40-year period that the Jewish people traveled in the desert, they did so by His light [and not by the light of the Menorah]. Rather, [the light of the Menorah] was for a "testimony," so that everyone in the world would know that the Divine Presence resided amongst the Jewish people. What was the testimony?

The western candle contained as much oil as the others, yet others were kindled from it, and its oil never diminished. (Shabbos 22b),

The Menorah, the symbol of Chanukah, is the anti-thesis of the Mitzrayim syndrome, which the Greeks had extended into their time, and which the Hellenists adopted. They said, "True spirituality isn't important, and even hampers one's ability to enjoy the material world," and therefore, the mitzvah is to use not just olive oil, but the purest of olive oils. The bigdei Kohen Gadol, likewise, are a symbol of Purim. The Persian exile said, "Listen you Jews, God is not amongst Jew anymore, so give it up!" Achashveros added, "Watch me become your Kohen Gadol," just to emphasize the point.

However, he also set in motion events that would cause Memuchan to be promoted to Haman, second-in-command over Persia, and Mordechai, to become chief protagonist and destroyer of Amalek. By the time the story was over, and Mordechai triumphed over Haman, it would be clear in the minds of just about everyone living in Persia at the time: God is indeed amongst the Jewish people after all.

Text

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