

# THE DEATH OF HUMANISM

*by Rabbi Aron Tendler*

Amalek's unprovoked attack on the Jews at the end of last week's Parsha was a stain on humanity's record. It proved that the human creature was capable of absolute evil. (Think 9-11) It was the death of humanism.

If Amalek had been among the nations living in Canaan their attack might have been lauded as the heroic preemptive strike of an indigenous population against declared invaders. They would have been protecting their homeland. However, Amalek was south east of Canaan and would not have been subject to attack when the Jews conquered the Promised Land. Therefore, Amalek's attack was an insidious attempt at genocide motivated by theological bigotry and hatred.

If we contrast the mission of Amalek with the mission of the Jewish People we can better understand the Jewish Raison d' e-tre. The Jews were to be G-d's "kingdom of priests and holy nation." Individually and collectively, they were to teach the rest of humanity what it meant to be created in "G-d's image."

G-d, the most unique and individual entity of all existence, is by definition the most separate entity in existence. Because there is no other like Him, He stands apart from all of creation. The human, having been created in G-d's image, is also more separate and apart from all other creatures. As such, it is the quality of our divinely decreed separation that sets us above and beyond all other animals. Therefore, the fact of our differences should be respected. This means that we must respect our being apart from all other creatures and we must each respect being apart from all other humans. It logically follows that those who claim to be "G-d's Chosen" and are the most separate from all other people should be the most accepting, unbigoted, and moral people of all. Respect for the person and property of others should be paramount.

If we are to teach the world about G-d's loving benevolence we must be the first to embrace existing differences between people. At the same time, we must not confuse love and acceptance with moral apathy or indulgence. Strength of purpose, Torah values, and devotion to G-d must be the hallmark of our people. We must be prepared to both live and die by those principles; and if we have to fight, our belief in G-d's truth and love must be the force of our resolve and commitment. It is important to note that the Jews were never commanded to "cleanse the world" of pagans or other forms of worship or theologies. The only time we ever went to war was to claim G-d's promise to our ancestors and in defense of our homeland.

Amalek was the moral antithesis of the Jews. Motivated by arrogant selfishness they attacked an otherwise defenseless nation. It was not an attack against the Jew as much as it was an attack on G-d, creator of separation and purpose. Their intent was to deny that individual destinies and histories were G-d's realm. Their intent was to deny divine purpose and expectation. Regardless of Yitzchak's blessings to Yakov and Eisav, regardless of G-d's blessings to Avraham, Amalek acted as if they were not bound by G-d's intention for the human to behave in His own image. Instead, Amalek attempted to reconstruct the human in their own image.

Following the victory against Amalek the nation was introduced to Yisro, Moshe's father-in-law. Yisro entered onto the stage of history as the first converted humanist. He had already proven through a lifetime of seeking and sacrifices that he sought to worship the image of the divine rather than the image of man. A man of extraordinary courage and integrity, Yisro chose to live apart from the rest of his nation. Suffering bigotry and hatred he nevertheless rose above the social pressures and exile and raised a family worthy of being mentioned in the Torah.

Yisro represented the best of the non-Jewish world. On par with the likes of Iyuv, (According to the Medresh Iyuv was another non-Jew and a contemporary of Yisro.) Yisro knew that there had to be more than the limits of his own intelligence and comprehension. There had to be rhyme and reason to the order of the universe. His fateful meeting with Moshe and Moshe's appointment to the task of Redeemer gave him hope that his search was nearing its end.

Following the miraculous exodus of the Jews from Mitzrayim and the battle against Amalek Yisro elected to join the nation of G-d in the desert. His timing was perfect. The Jews needed to see a non-Jew like Yisro. They needed to know that the search for truth and comprehension was not unique to the Jew. They needed to know that individuals and nations would embrace their teachings and accept their love, so long as they lived by their own words. They needed to know that the entire world was not like Amalek. However, Yisro was much more than a source of encouragement. Yisro, as proven by his suggested plan for organizing the judicial system of the nation, was a brilliant teacher and innovator. He was a powerful, insightful, yet humble intellect who had come to willfully subjugate his limited belief in humanism to Moshe's teachings of G-d's truths.

We now understand why the Parsha details Moshe's greeting of Yisro with such great honor and fanfare.

Imagine! How often did strangers approach the Israelite camp? I would think very few.

"Suddenly, a man leading a woman and two young boys appeared at the gates of the camp asking to see the great Moshe. The Jews had just finished their battle against Amalek. Elated yet sobered by the experience, the appointed guards confronted the stranger and asked his business.

Picture the shock when told that he was Yisro, Moshe's father-in-law, and that the woman and children with him were Moshe's family. (18:6)

Within moments, the entire camp heard the news. "Moshe's wife and children are here! Yisro, his father-in-law has brought them! Did you even know that he was married? I didn't! You did? Why didn't you tell me! And where have they been all this time? Come let's get over there and see what's going on!"

Remember that Moshe's tent was within the center of the Israelite encampment. The camp was approximately 8.6 x 8.6 miles and it would have taken a few moments to inform Moshe of Yisro's arrival. In the time that it took to do so the news would have spread throughout the camp. By the time Moshe arrived to greet his father-in-law and family a good part of the 3,000,000 Jews would have gathered to witness the unfolding drama.

"Which one is he? Look at him, the one with the strange headdress standing in front of the woman. And the woman - have you ever seen someone so regal and beautiful! I wonder why they are here? Quiet, here comes Moshe. Oh my! Moshe is bowing down before that man. Now he's kissing him. Look how he treats him. Such deference and honor - he must be very special. I wonder what's his story! But quiet! He's about to speak. Shhhh! "Blessed is Hashem! â€¦.Now I know that He is the greatest of all G-d's!" (18:10)

Yisro's arrival heralded the beginning of the Jew's integration into world society. Yisro was the proof that their mission was destined to succeed. Emes - truth is the greatest motivator of all, and they, as guardians of the Torah were the teachers of truth.

However, there was one important factor missing. They had not yet received the Torah. True, Yisro had heard about the great miracles and justice performed by G-d on behalf of the Jews. Yet, Yisro came seeking a divine system that would replace his belief in humanism. Miracles alone would not suffice. Miracles are short lived and shorter believed. There had to be more than miracles. There had to be a revelation of the Creator's intention for humanity and the universe.

From the death of humanism at the hands of Amalek to the birth of divine revelation at Mt. Sinai, this week's Parsha presents Yisro as the symbol of the Jew's national goal. All were created in G-d's image, Jew and non-Jew alike; however, the Torah was entrusted only to the Jew. It is their job to teach the world how to distinguish miracles from nature and justice from coincidence. It is not sufficient that only the self-motivated seeker know the truth. They must train everyone to be a seeker!

The first and most important step in accomplishing that goal is the Jewish nation's personal commitment to living a life of Torah and Mitzvos. Only as role models of G-d's truth will they be able to convince the world that humanism divorced from divine imperative is often fanatical and destructive. By contrasting the quality and benefits of living by G-d's commandments with the ever-changing values and expectations of humanism they will hopefully denounce their religious like belief in humanism and embrace G-d's truth in its stead.

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