

THE HEART OF GOLD - PERCEIVING AMALEK

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The ability to part with one's wealth and possessions for a philanthropic purpose is not easily attained and is also not easily maintained when attained. The "normal" attitude towards wealth and possessions is characterized by the great rabbis of the Book of Avot as being: "What is mine is mine and what is yours is yours." The desire to have more wealth and possessions is so intense that the Talmud sadly comments that "most people are guilty of stealing from others." Since the drive to have more material wealth and keep and conserve what is mine is apparently so ingrained in our human nature, the Torah goes to great lengths to uproot that characteristic - selfishness and miserliness - from our nature and to turn us in the direction of selflessness and generosity. The Torah therefore made the construction of the Mishkan, the tabernacle in the desert, a human project rather than a Godly one. The Jewish people were requested to donate from their own personal wealth substantial contributions of materials in order to complete that structure. After centuries of slavery in Egypt, after suffering impoverishment and want, it would be only natural to expect that there would be a hesitance among the newly-freed slaves to part with their only-recently-acquired goods and possessions. The Torah boldly moves to counter that weakness of character and demands immediately that the generation that only just left Egyptian poverty and bondage become a nation of sharing and philanthropy.

The Torah however does not measure donations and giving by purely objective standards. It is not merely the amount, important as that figure is, that is being given that ultimately counts. It is also and perhaps even more importantly in a spiritual and psychological sense than the amount of the gift, the spirit and donative intent of the giver that determines the true value of the gift and donation. The Torah records that the contributions for the Mishkan were to be taken "from every person whose heart prompted him to donate" to the holy project. And that, my friends, is a very subjective standard, known perhaps only to the Creator of us all. When we donate money, time, talent, effort to a good cause, there are usually a wide variety of forces and influences that motivate us to do so. If we can examine our motives and impulses to give to charitable causes and "improve" on those motives to raise them to a more selfless and less complicated level of our being, the gifts that we give will have far deeper meaning and effect upon our inner character, even if the amounts of the gifts basically remain constant.

The great Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin, the founder of the "mother" of all later Lithuanian yeshivot, the yeshiva of Volozhin, employed fund-raisers to travel in Eastern Europe to collect donations for the support of the yeshiva. A wealthy donor to the yeshiva once complained to Rabbi Chaim that he

wanted his donation to go directly to the study of Torah and not be consumed in the expenses of the fund-raising projects and employees. Rabbi Chaim coolly answered him: "When Jews contributed gold to the building of the Mishkan all of them undoubtedly wished that their particular piece of gold be used in the creation of the Holy Ark itself and not dispensed for other purposes connected with the expenses of that construction. Bezalel, the builder of the Mishkan, possessed Divine inspiration and therefore he was able to discern which gold was given with the purest and most selfless of motives and which gold was donated because of other causes and influences. The "pure" gold, given selflessly, without hesitation and in fulfillment of God's commandment, found its way into the construction of the Holy Ark, which housed the tablets of stone of Sinai. The other gold, containing the dross of conflicting and varying motives for its donation, was used for the other tasks necessary for the creation of the Mishkan. So too is the matter regarding the donations to the yeshiva of Volozhin. The purer the intent of the donor to only do God's will and to truly support the study of His Torah, the more likely it is that his donation will be used directly for the study of Torah itself and not be subsumed in the expenses of the fund-raising operations of the yeshiva. So, it is the donor himself, not I nor my staff, that will make the eventual determination as to how and where the monies donated will be allocated and spent." The Shabat that precedes Purim is Shabat Zachor. It is on this Shabat that we commemorate the commandment of "remembering Amalek" by reading a special portion of the Torah that describes that commandment of remembrance. In our time it has not been difficult to remember Amalek, for he, wearing different uniforms and guises, has ravaged us and destroyed Jews in the millions. Yet, the commandment, and perhaps even more importantly, its necessity and moral message has escaped the notice of many Jews. Jews live in a just and fair world, according to God's view of things. We, with our finite eyes and minds, on the other hand, perceive this world to be in the main unfair and unjust. We therefore ignore Amalek and always assign him the role of being the aberration in world society, the exception to the rule, the mad murderer whose presence and behavior is always unforeseen and unavoidable. However, the Torah does not quite agree with this description of Amalek's presence in our midst. Amalek, and its evil, thrive on the shortcomings of good society, so to speak. The Rabbis mention and Rashi quotes the concept that Jews cheating on weights and measures allow Amalek to spawn and grow and eventually appear in its destructive force. If a good people, a good society, tolerates wrongdoing, corruption, cheating, dishonesty and shameful behavior, then the bacteria of Amalek has a fertile feeding ground from which its evil capacities will be nurtured.

In our time, the major killers belonging to Amalek - Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot -all were allowed or even encouraged, to continue to practice their barbarities because of the tolerance, the "appeasement" extended to them by well-meaning good people. If honest people wink at cheating, simply because they mistakenly believe that it does not affect them directly, Amalek certainly feels justified in cheating. If human life is not held dear in good societies, and is subject to newly invented rights (right to my own body, right to die when and as I wish, etc.) then Amalek on a frighteningly grand scale will view human life as cheap and certainly secondary to political and national concerns.

The Rabbis taught us that the city of Sodom was destroyed, not because of its millions of bad people but rather due to the absence of ten good people in its midst. Good people would have spoken up, would have been an example to others, would have introduced a different moral climate into that city, and therefore they would have saved Sodom from destruction. Amalek can be prevented and combated by the presence of uncompromising good in society. It is the vacuum of the absence of good that allows Amalek to arrive on the scene and flourish.

Shabat Shalom.
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