

WAR AND PEACE

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The parsha begins with war and ends with war. The first war described in the beginning of the parsha is against an unknown, unspecified and unidentified enemy. It is so to speak, a generic war, fought for causes that are not clear and under undetermined circumstances. The second war described at the end of the parsha is fought against a bitter age-old foe, Amalek, and is a war of self-preservation.

The first war is not a mandatory one. The Torah prefaces it with the word "im" - when, if - you go to war. The second war is one of the mitzvot of the Torah. It is obligatory on all. It is to save Israel from the hands of an enemy whose sole intention is to annihilate us. The wars therefore differ not only in purpose and cause but in intensity as well. In the war against Amalek we seek not temporary triumph but permanent achievement. We seek literally the obliteration of Amalek.

It is the fulfillment of the rabbinic dictum of the Talmud that "if one comes to kill you then rise earlier and kill him." In our current world of relative morality and feel-good wishful thinking pacifism, this mitzvah about the destruction of Amalek makes us uncomfortable. Perhaps if we only reasoned with Amalek, appeased him somehow with concessions, he would calm down and be nice to us.

That policy may be valid in the first war described in the parsha. In fact, the Torah bids us always to try peace before embarking on war. But in the war against Amalek no such attitude or policy is even mentioned. It has always been either Amalek or us and if you don't mind, the Jewish people prefer surviving over favorable obituaries in the world's press.

There is another major difference between the wars that the Torah points out to us in the parsha. In the first war, there is the danger of fraternization with the women of the enemy. The Torah makes temporary concessions to this situation though it clearly warns against the long term results of such a relationship. But in the war against Amalek such a possibility or situation is not even mentioned. The war against Amalek is so clearly a battle for survival that such a relationship becomes remote if not even impossible. Amalek asks for no quarter for it extends to us no quarter.

It is the ultimate war of attrition, of determining who will finally be left standing at the conclusion of the struggle. Hence it almost precludes any type of social intercourse between the antagonists. Amalek has taken on many different names and guises in our millennia long struggle against him. He is never vanquished permanently but arises again in a different form and location. We hear his bellicose predictions and boasts about our destruction - God forbid - almost daily. We should not be lulled into the belief that his warnings are insincere.

Amalek has always had the one goal of destroying us. He has always met with partial success though always falling in final defeat after time. Let us realize the struggle that we are engaged in against Amalek is a real and desperate one. And let us pray that the God of Israel together with the people of Israel will foil Amalek's dastardly plans once more.

Shabat shalom.

Rabbi Berel Wein Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com

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