

PARSHAS BESHALACH - WHY AMALEK HATES US

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Why Amalek Hates Us¹

He called the place Masah u-Meriva because of the contention of the Bnei Yisrael, and because of their test of Hashem, saying, "Is Hashem among us or not?" Amalek came and battled Yisrael in Rephidim.

So much of our early history becomes clear when we understand the implications of these pesukim!

Contention and test are two strong words. Surely they were disappointed, and complained - perhaps unduly. But contention? From the fact that the test in the next phrase was of Hashem, we understand that the contention was with someone else. That someone had to be Moshe. About what were they contending? In what way were they testing G-d?

The test had nothing to do with fundamental emunah. They did not have to be convinced of Hashem's existence - not after witnessing the plagues, the crossing of the Sea, the man. They were not challenging Him, but something about Him. At the same time, their cries were not those of a people ready to expire from thirst that brought them to the brink of death. They had water, albeit not enough to prevent them from worrying about the future. They questioned whether Hashem was among them, i.e. whether their needs occupied a position, as it were, close to Him.

At once, we understand what this was all about. They had no trouble accepting the reality of Hashem's existence. This was not so regarding everything else that He wanted of them. He was asking them to believe in ideas about Nature, G-d and Man that were completely foreign to the world they lived in. The gods that their former neighbors served were nothing like Hashem. To them, the laws of Nature stood above everything - including the gods! Poor Man found himself submissive to the absolute and immutable laws of an uncomprehending Nature, and to the fickle self-centeredness of gods who carried on like juveniles out of control. This left very little room for the dignity of Man.

Bnei Yisrael were now asked to set these notions - so obvious to everyone around them - aside. They were instructed about a different G-d, One Who had no restraints or limits, Who did not have to bow to Nature because He had created it, and employed it or ignored it at will. Most importantly, they were taught that His freedom was engineered into their being. They, too, enjoyed freedom of choice.

"Instructed" is the key word here. These were not ideas that people could be expected to grasp the

first time they heard them. Comprehension would come slowly and gradually, as the result of some dramatic experiences that Hashem placed in their path. This is why so much happens to them on the way between the Exodus and matan Torah. Each experience - Marah, the selav, the man, their receiving the mitzvah of Shabbos, the drawing of water from a rock - contributed to a growing comprehension that as a Torah community, they would not be bound by the laws of Nature. Their needs - special and even ordinary - when congruent with their G-d-given mission, would transcend Nature.

Thus, along the route to Sinai, they deepened their appreciation of Who Hashem is, and how becoming His people would lift them above the limitations of other nations. They had no understanding, however, about how becoming the Am Hashem would affect their standing among the other nations of the world. This they learned through the attack at Refidim.

The future violence and oppression to be visited upon the Jewish people was adumbrated in the unprovoked attack on Yaakov by the Spirit of Esav. Just a few generations later, one of Esav's descendants would viciously attack the descendants of Yaakov on their trek through the wilderness. While all other nations took heed of the Presence of G-d that accompanied them and kept their distance, Amalek knew no fear of Hashem.

Since that time, we have lived in continuous tension with Amalek. We reject and despise Amalek not because he stands for ruthless violence and force. Others have lived by the sword as well, but we do not treat them as Amalek. Paroh ruled by crushing any resistance to his rule, but the power of despots can be used - and has been used - in the service of freedom under the right circumstances. Amalek, however, uses strength differently.

Interestingly, Amalek is not threatened by others who wield power. He can respect those who share his principle of might is right. They live in mutual recognition of each other's strength, even as they meet on the battlefield. Amalek reserves his greatest fear and contempt for those who reject his ethos. He cannot abide those who lay claim to spiritual power, who see the sword as expendable and eventually irrelevant, as mankind will repudiate force in favor of peace. People who believe in such a dream, who build their lives around it and attempt to share it with the rest of humanity - those are the people whom Amalek regards as mortal enemies.

Such people deny validity to Amalek and his principles, and therefore must be snuffed out. In the unexpected and senseless attack by Amalek. The Bnei Yisrael instantly understood much of the Jewish future.

1. Based on the Hirsch Chumash, Shemos 17:7-8
