

Thoughts on Purim

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Know your Enemies

And it will be that when Hashem, your L-rd, grants you rest from all your enemies that surround you, in the land that Hashem, your L-rd, gives to you as a portion to possess, you should destroy the memory of Amalek from under the heavens. Do not forget. (Sefer Devarim 25:29)

I. The relevance of the commandment to destroy Amalek

The above passage is the source for the commandment to destroy Amalek. Who is Amalek? This nation attacked the Jewish people as they traveled from Egypt to the Land of Israel. We can no longer identify the descendants of this nation. Does this mean that this commandment is no longer relevant?

Rambam seems to indicate that this commandment retains its relevance even though the nation of Amalek has ceased to exist.¹ How can we be obligated to discharge this obligation if we cannot identify the nation of Amalek? Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik Zt"l suggested a response to this question that was shared with him by his father – Rav Moshe Zt"l. Rav Moshe suggested that the term Amalek refers to both a specific nation and to all others who adopt the outlook of this nation. The Torah deems a nation and individual who adopt the Amalek philosophy to be members of the Amalek nation.

And Amalek came and waged war with Israel at Refidim. (Sefer Shemot 17:8)

II. Identifying Amalek

What is the Amalek philosophy? Rav Soloveitchik quotes his father as explaining that Amalek sought to eradicate the Jewish people. A person or nation seeking our destruction is regarded as Amalek.²

A study of the comments of our Sages suggests a more precise definition of the Amalek philosophy. What motivated Amalek to attack Bnai Yisrael? Rashi explains that Amalek was not motivated by fear of conquest. It did not anticipate the Bnai Yisrael would attempt to conquer its land. It was not acting to forestall such an attempt. Amalek's motivations were more perverse. Amalek was driven by hatred for the Jewish people.³

This week's edition of Thoughts is dedicated to Rabbi Bernie Fox



For all the Torah that he has shared and continues to spread.

Eliezer Barany

A donation has been pledged to Yeshiva Bnei Torah.

¹ Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) *Mishne Torah*, Hilchot Melachim 5:4-5. Rambam explains that we cannot identify the nations of Cana'an. He does not extend this comment to Amalek. This implies Amalek can be identified.

² Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, *Harerai Kedem* vol 1, chapter 186.

³ Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), *Commentary on Sefer Devarim* 25:18.

Our Sages suggest different sources for this hatred. However, for the purpose of defining the Amalek philosophy, one need not know the source of the hatred. The essential characteristic of Amalek is that its aggression against the Jewish people is not a response to a real danger; it is an expression of base hatred.⁴ This suggests that mere aggression toward the Jewish people does not identify a person or nation as Amalek. Aggression may be motivated by a legitimate fear or intended to protect a true self-interest. This is not Amalek's aggression. Amalek's aggression is an expression of baseless hatred.⁵

A consequence of this discussion is that it is difficult to identify the contemporary Amalek. Aggression toward the Jewish people does not, itself, render a person or nation Amalek. The motivation must be base hatred. Is it ever possible to determine who is Amalek? This question provides an insight into Megilat Esther.

As on the days that the Jews rested from their enemies and the month that was reversed from anguish to rejoicing and from a time of grieving to a festival – to make them days of feasting and rejoicing, sending portions of food to one another and gifts to the poor. (Megilat Esther 9:22)

III. The Megillah's overt plot

The above passage describes the creation of the Purim festival. Mordechai directed the Jewish people to observe Purim and established practices to be observed on the occasion. These include the Purim feast, friends sending gifts to one another, and giving gifts to the poor. The passage also describes the theme of Purim. It recalls the rescue of the Jewish people from annihilation.

This theme is developed in the Megillah. It tells the story of the rise of Haman to eminence in the court of King Achashverosh. Haman hates the Jewish people and persuades Achashverosh to allow him to issue a decree against the Jews. On the thirteenth day of Adar the people of Achashverosh's kingdom are invited and urged to rise-up against their Jewish neighbors and destroy them.

Achashverosh comes to suspect Haman's loyalty and to appreciate the integrity of Mordechai, the Jew. Esther succeeds in exposing Haman to the King. Achashverosh orders the execution of Haman. He empowers Mordechai and Esther to issue a decree allowing and encouraging the Jewish people to defend themselves from their enemies. This the Megillah's overt plot. The Sages suggest that the Megillah includes another less obvious sub-plot.

After these events, Achashverosh gave prominence to Haman, the son of Hamdatah, the Aggagi, and he elevated him. He placed his seat above all the ministers that were with him. (Megilat Esther 3:1)

IV. The Megillah's sub-plot

The above passage describes Haman's rise to eminence. Achashverosh appoints him as his senior minister. Commenting on this passage, the Sages explain that Hashem allowed Haman to be granted this position as a prelude to and foundation for his destruction.⁶ The appointment of Haman provided him the opportunity to plan the destruction of the Jews. Haman's campaign to annihilate the Jewish people eventually led to his own destruction. This is a difficult idea to understand. If Hashem's objective was to destroy Haman, could this not

⁴ Rav Meir Leibush ben Yechiel Michel (Malbim), *HaTorah VeHaMitzvah – Commentary on Sefer Shemot*, 17:8.

⁵ This distinction has a contemporary application. Are the Palestinians a modern-day expression of Amalek? This depends upon the source of their aggression toward the State of Israel. If it is motivated by a sincere desire to regain a homeland that they believe is their own, then they are not Amalek. If this is not the underlying motivation, but instead, they are motivated by a hatred of the Jewish people, then they are Amalek. As we shall discover, determining whether an individual or nation is Amalek is challenging.

⁶ Midrash Rabba, Megilat Esther 7:1.

have been accomplished without jeopardizing the survival of the Jewish people?

As noted above, it is difficult to identify Amalek. The solution to this problem is the Megillah's sub-plot. It explains how the Jewish people were able to identify the Amalek of their time.

The Megillah's narrative describes the coincidence of two circumstances that exposed those who were Amalek.

- The Jewish people were citizens of Achashverosh's kingdom. They did not have sovereignty and were not a threat to any nation or people. Aggression directed against the Jewish people could only derive from base hatred and not in response to a real threat.
- Expression of this hatred was allowed and even sanctioned. This encouraged the haters to reveal themselves and become known to their Jewish neighbors.

Imagine the experience of the Jews at that time. Haman's decree was issued. The day was selected for the massacre of the Jewish people. Haman would not send forth the king's armies to carry out this mission. He invited the citizens of the kingdom to be his henchmen. The Jews observed the reactions of their neighbors. Some regarded Haman's decree as an abomination.

They would never consider turning upon their neighbors. Others responded with indifference. But some eagerly awaited and planned for the coming massacre. They gathered weapons, designed the operations they would carry out. They eagerly and openly awaited the day on which they would give full expression to their vile hatred.

Like Haman, they exposed themselves as Amalek. When Achashverosh turned against Haman and empowered Mordechai and Esther, the Jews knew which of their neighbors were Amalek. They used this knowledge to confront and destroy the Amalek of their time.

V. Watch our Amalek!

Haman's decree caused the Jews enormous anxiety and anguish. Their lives were in jeopardy. They faced annihilation. However, this suffering was the means through which their enemies were fully exposed. Amalek was identified.

It is painful to observe the resurgence of anti-Semitism throughout the world. However, it is also true that the prerequisite for its destruction is the exposure of those who are Amalek.

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