

Thoughts on Purim

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Amalek's Persistence

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A man of Yehudah was in Shushan, the capital. And his name was Mordechai, the son of Yair, the son of Shimi, the son of Kish, a member of Binyamin. (Megillat Esther 2:5)

After these events, King Achashverosh elevated Haman, the son of Hamdatah, the Aggagi, and selected him. And he placed him in a position above all the ministers who served with him. (Megillat Esther 3:1)

Megillat Esther describes Haman's efforts to destroy the Jewish people and Mordechai's response to this threat. Although Hashem's name is not mentioned in the Megillah, its story reveals His role. The message of the Megillah is that Hashem's involvement in the affairs of the Jewish people may not always be evident, but He is guiding events.

The *pesukim* above identify the two main characters of the Megillah. Mordechai is identified as a member of Shevet Binyamin. Haman is described as a descendant of Agag, the king of Amalek. Ralbag – Gershonides – explains that these descriptions of lineages are significant. Haman is identified as a member of Amalek, and Mordechai is introduced as a member of Shevet Binyamin. Shaul, the first anointed king of Israel, was from the Shevet of Binyamin. He waged a successful war with Amalek. Shaul captured Agag, and subsequently, Agag was killed by the prophet Shmuel. However, Shaul did not completely destroy Amalek. Haman's ancestors survived and remained determined to annihilate the Jewish people. Mordechai responded to this threat. So, the Megillah

seems to characterize the events it narrates as a continuation of the conflict between Bnai Yisrael and Amalek or – more specifically – of the conflict between Shaul and Agag.¹

Therefore, when Hashem gives you peace from all of the enemies around you in the land that Hashem, your Lord, gives to you to occupy as a heritage, you must obliterate the memory of Amalek from under the heavens. Do not forget. (Sefer Devarim 25:19)

Bnai Yisrael first encountered Amalek as they left Egypt. Amalak attacked them. This *pasuk* commands us to destroy Amalek. This is one of the Torah's six hundred-thirteen *mitzvot*.

Amalek is not the only nation that Bnai Yisrael is commanded to destroy. Seven idolatrous nations inhabited the land of Israel before Bnai Yisrael. We are also commanded to destroy these nations.

Rambam – Maimonides – makes an interesting distinction between these two *mitzvot*. He explains that the commandment to destroy the seven nations is no longer in effect. David the King eliminated most of the members of these nations. The remainder became dispersed and assimilated. Radvaz explains the historical basis for this claim. The Assyrian king and conqueror Sennacherib dispersed the nations that he subdued. By relocating these defeated nations' populations, he set in motion a process that eventually erased their individual national identities. These exiled nations completely assimilated.² Rambam explains that because we can no longer identify members of the seven nations, the *mitzvah* to destroy them no longer applies.³

Surprisingly, Rambam maintains that the *mitzvah* to

¹ Rabbaynu Levi ben Gershon (Ralbag / Gershonides), *Commentary on the Meggilot*, (Mosad HaRav Kook, 2003), p 137.

² Rabbaynu David ibn Zimra (Radvaz) *Commentary of Radvaz on Mishne Torah*, Hilchot Melachim 5:4.

³ Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) *Mishne Torah*, Hilchot Melachim 5:4. See also Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) *Sefer HaMitzvot, Mitzvat Aseh* 187.

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destroy Amalek still applies.⁴ This creates an interesting problem. Today, we cannot identify members of the Amalek nation. Yet, this commandment still applies despite the impossibility of fulfilling it! How can Rambam rule that the requirement to destroy the seven nations is no longer binding, but the commandment to destroy Amalek, in some way, is still operative?

And he said, “For the hand is on the throne of G-d. Hashem will be at war with Amalek from generation to generation.” (Sefer Shemot 17:16)

Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik *Zt”l* notes that a passage in the Torah supports Rambam’s position. The Torah describes the first encounter between Bnai Yisrael and Amalek. Amalek attacked Bnai Yisrael as it left Egypt. While Moshe led the nation in prayer, Yehoshua defeated Amalek. The above *pasuk* is the final passage of the narrative. It is a difficult passage to understand. Rashi explains its meaning. Moshe declares that Hashem has sworn on His throne that He will wage war with Amalek throughout the generations. Furthermore, neither Hashem’s name nor His throne will be complete until this battle is completed.

Rav Soloveitchik explains that according to this passage – as interpreted by Rashi – the battle with Amalek continues throughout the generations and is only completed with the final destruction of Amalek. The implication is that this conflict applies even today. Amalek’s destruction cannot be achieved through its assimilation; it can only be achieved through its destruction. However, Rav Soloveitchik acknowledges that this interpretation of the passage leaves a practical problem. We can no longer identify the members of Amalek. How can we continue to battle a nation that we cannot identify?

And Yehoshua subdued Amalek and its nation by the sword. (Sefer Shemot 17:13)

The above passage is a part of the Torah’s narrative of the first encounter between Bnai Yisrael and Amalek. The passage tells us that Yehoshua successfully subdued Amalek and its nation. The problem with this *pasuk* is

obvious. What is the meaning of the phrase “and its nation?” Rabbaynu Avraham ibn Ezra explains. He comments that Amalek was joined by other nations eager to participate in Bnai Yisrael’s destruction. The phrase “and its nation” refers to these nations. According to Ibn Ezra, the *pasuk* tells us that Yehoshua defeated Amalek and its allies.⁵

Rav Naftali Tzvi Berlin – Netziv – adds that Hashem’s pledge to destroy Amalek extends to these allies. Presumably, the obligation upon Bnai Yisrael to battle with and destroy Amalek also includes them.⁶

Netziv’s comments create an additional problem. As noted, the requirement to destroy Amalek seems impossible to fulfill. We can no longer identify the nation or its members. Netziv’s comments imply that we must also destroy Amalek’s allies. But how do we identify these allies? The Torah does not say which nations supported Amalek in its attack. Furthermore, even if the Torah did reveal these ancient allies, how can we today identify a people or person as their descendants?

Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik tells us that his father – Rav Moshe Soloveitchik *Zt”l* – suggested an original solution to these problems. Rav Moshe explains that the term Amalek describes two groups of people. First, it describes a specific nation that attacked Bnai Yisrael. This nation existed as a distinct people at the time of the Exodus. Second, it represents any nation or group that adopts the outlook and philosophy of Amalek. Rav Moshe’s perspective is reflected in Ibn Ezra’s comments. Ibn Ezra describes those people who joined Amalek in its attack on Bnai Yisrael as “its nation.” In other words, these people are regarded by the Torah as included in the nation of Amalek.

Rav Moshe’s insight also resolves the difficulty with Netziv’s comments. Netziv explains that the nations that were Amalek’s allies are included in Hashem’s pledge to destroy Amalek and presumably in the commandment to destroy Amalek. However, the Torah does not identify these nations! According to Rav Moshe, the Torah does

⁴ Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) *Mishne Torah*, Hilchot Melachim 5:5.

⁵ Rabbaynu Avraham ibn Ezra, *Commentary on Sefer Shemot*, 17:14.

⁶ Rav Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin (Netziv), *Commentary Birkat Netziv on Midrash Michilta*, Parshat BeShalach, chapter 2.

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not need to identify them. A nation is not defined as an ally of Amalek because of a historical association at the time of the Exodus. It is defined as an ally because, in its day and age, this nation continues the battle Amalek initiated. It has adopted Amalek's outlook and philosophy and continues the persecution of the Jewish people. However, according to Rav Moshe, these persecutors of Bnai Yisrael are not merely allies of Amalek. They are included within the term Amalek.

With his insight, Rav Moshe explains Rambam's position. Rambam maintains that the commandment to destroy Amalek exists even in our time. True, it is impossible to identify the descendants of the nation that attacked Bnai Yisrael. However, as Rav Moshe explains, the term Amalek includes a historical people and all those who adopt its outlook and philosophy. We cannot destroy the descendants of the historical nation that attacked Bnai Yisrael. However, we can identify those who have adopted its outlook and philosophy. The *mitzvah* requires that we destroy them. Therefore, the obligation to destroy Amalek extends to all generations.⁷

The *Tirgum* – the Aramaic translation – of Megillat Esther supports Rav Moshe's explanation. Haman attempted to destroy the Jews in Achashverosh's kingdom. Esther and Mordechai convinced Achashverosh that Haman was evil, and the king allowed the Jews to defend themselves. The Jews were attacked and were victorious over their enemies. In the passages that describe this victory, the *Tirgum* repeatedly refers to the enemies of Bnai Yisrael as members of Amalek.⁸ There is no indication that these people were actual descendants of Amalek. Why does the *Tirgum* describe them as Amalek? According to Rav Moshe, this is very appropriate. These people sought to destroy Bnai Yisrael. Therefore, they deserve this appellation.

What precisely is Amalek's outlook and philosophy? Rashi deals with this issue. He explains that after the Exodus from Egypt, the nations of the land feared Bnai Yisrael. They had witnessed or heard of Hashem's triumph over the Egyptians. They recognized that

Hashem is omnipotent and the Bnai Yisrael is His nation. Amalek was determined to alter this perspective. Their attack on Bnai Yisrael was not motivated by fear of being conquered or other practical concerns. Amalek attacked Bnai Yisrael in an attempt to disprove Hashem's omnipotence.⁹

The continued existence of the Jewish people provides compelling evidence of the Almighty's omnipotence and providence. Over the centuries, the Jewish people have been repeatedly persecuted. We were exiled from our homeland. In exile, we were persecuted and evicted from the various countries in which we sought shelter. Over and again, nations attempted to destroy or assimilate the Jewish people. But despite all these persecutions, the Jewish nation survives.

The survival of the Jewish people – like the Exodus from Egypt – communicates Hashem's omnipotence, His providence, and testifies to His unique relationship with the Jewish people. The contemporary version of Amalek is any nation that hates or attacks the Jewish people to undermine any or all these truths. They seek to destroy us because they believe that if they succeed, they can disprove these truths.

⁷ Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, *Harerai Kedem* vol 1 pp. 313-314.

⁸ See for example, *Tirgum Megillat Esther* 9:6.

⁹ Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), *Commentary on Sefer Devarim* 25:18.