

PARASHAT BESHALACH

Exodus 13:17–17:16

Parashat Beshalach takes its name from the second word of the Torah portion. *Beshalach* means “when he sent forth” and refers to Pharaoh’s decision to free the Israelites. Led by Moses, they depart from Egypt, but Pharaoh changes his mind and decides to pursue them. When the Israelites see Pharaoh and his army approaching, they complain to Moses that he has brought them into the wilderness to die. He assures them that God will save them and leads them through the Sea of Reeds. From the other side they watch as the pursuing Egyptians are drowned. In celebration, Moses and the Israelites sing a song of praise to God. Afterwards they begin their journey through the Sinai desert. Despite their victory over the Egyptians and their liberation, however, the Israelites continue to complain to Moses. They cry out that they have no water to drink, no bread to eat. God grants them water and provides them with “manna,” a food substance resembling flour. While the Israelites are camped at Rephidim, they are attacked by the Amalekites. Joshua, who has been appointed by Moses, successfully destroys the Amalekite forces.

OUR TARGUM

· 1 ·

Upon departing from Egypt, Moses does not lead the people directly to the Land of Israel. Wishing to avoid a war with the Philistines, which might frighten the people and make them want to return to Egypt, Moses takes them south from Goshen towards the Sea

of Reeds [Red Sea]. God leads them with a pillar of fire by night and a pillar of cloud by day.

Pharaoh, who has finally agreed to free them, suddenly regrets his decision. He sends his whole army to bring the Israelites back to Egypt. When the Israelites see Pharaoh and all his chariots approaching, they cry out to Moses: “What have you done to us, taking us out of Egypt? . . . Let us be, and we will serve the Egyptians, for it is

better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.” Moses responds by assuring them that God will save them. God then says to Moses, “Tell the Israelites to go forward.”

As Moses holds out his hands, the Israelites enter the Sea of Reeds. The waters split and form a corridor through which they pass safely. When the pursuing Egyptian army led by Pharaoh enters the corridor, the waters crash in upon them. The Egyptians panic, their chariot wheels lock, and the whole army is drowned in the sea.

Victoriously, Moses and the Israelites sing a song of praise to God: . . . “Pharaoh’s chariots and his army/God has cast into the sea;/And the pick of his officers/Are drowned in the Sea of Reeds./ . . . Who is like You, O Lord, among the mighty;/Who is like You, majestic in holiness,/Awesome in splendor, working wonders!/. . . The Lord will reign for ever and ever!” Miriam,

the sister of Moses and Aaron, leads all the women in a festive dance.

• 2 •

From the Sea of Reeds, the people travel to Marah, or “bitter,” so named because of its bitter waters. When the people complain about the taste of the water, God tells Moses to throw a piece of wood into it. He does, and the waters sweeten.

Later, the people journey to the wilderness of Sin. There they turn on Moses again. “If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots, when we ate our fill of bread! For you have brought us out into this wilderness to starve this whole congregation to death!” Hearing their complaint, Moses and Aaron answer the people: “By evening you shall know it was the Lord who brought you out from the land of Egypt.”



That evening, the camp is covered with quail to eat; in the morning, manna, a flaky substance like coriander seed, white in color and tasting like honeyed wafers, rains down upon the people. Moses orders the people to collect an *omer's* measure, approximately a hand full, for each person and a double amount on the sixth day for the Sabbath.

Nonetheless, some people go out to gather manna on the Sabbath. They find nothing, and God declares to Moses: "How long will this people refuse to obey My commandments and My Teachings? . . . Let the people remain where they are and observe the Sabbath."

• 3 •

From the wilderness of Sin, Moses leads the Israelites to Rephidim. Finding no water to drink, the people complain once again. "Why did you bring us from Egypt to die of thirst?" Frustrated,

Moses cries out to God, "What shall I do with this people?" God tells Moses: "I will be standing before you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock [with your rod] and water will come forth from it." Moses does this, and the people are given enough to drink. The place is named Massah, which means "trial," and Meribah, which means "quarrel."

• 4 •

While camping at Rephidim, the Israelites are attacked by the forces of Amalek, a group of tribes that live in the Sinai desert. Moses orders Joshua to organize a response to the attack. Joshua successfully overwhelms the enemy, and Moses builds an altar and names it Adonai-nissi, meaning "God is my banner." He declares that "God will be at war with Amalek throughout the generations."

THEMES

Parashat Beshalach contains three important themes:

1. The "miracle" of the Israelites' escape from Egypt.
2. The Israelites' "complaints" in the desert.
3. Amalek's attack upon the Israelites.

PEREK ALEF: *Was Israel's Escape from Egypt a "Miracle"?*

The Torah's report of Israel's departure from Egypt makes it clear that the liberation was not only a human effort. We are told that the people were led by an angel of God and by a pillar of fire by night and a pillar of cloud by day. When they arrived at the Sea of Reeds and saw the Egyptian army advancing upon them, God split the waters of the sea so that they could walk safely on dry land to the other side. Then, God rolled back the waters upon the Egyptians, drowning all of them together with their horses and chariots. Upon seeing the "miracle" that God had performed for them, the Israelites sang out: "I will sing to the Lord, for God has triumphed gloriously; Horse and driver God has hurled into the sea. . . . You made Your wind blow, the sea covered them; They sank like lead in the majestic waters." (Exodus 15:1,10)

Is that really what happened? Can we believe that God sent angels to lead the Israelites, split the sea for them, and destroyed the Egyptians by drowning them? Did Moses play any role in the victory? Did the Israelites do anything to save themselves? Is the Torah story an exaggeration beyond belief?

If I told you what the teacher told us . . . We are told about the ten-year-old whose father was driving him home from religious school. "What did you learn about today?" his father asked. The child responded: "The teacher told us about the Israelites' escape from Egypt. They came to the Sea of Reeds and built pontoons and drove across the water. As soon as the Egyptians and their tanks were on the pontoons, the Israelites sent in their air force and bombed them." The father looked with surprise at his child. "Is that really what the teacher told you?" "Not

really," answered the child, "but, if I told you what the teacher told us, you would never believe it!"

It was a miracle

There are always those who will deny the existence of miracles. They claim that the works of ha-Shem (God) are simply natural phenomena. This was the attitude that many nonbelievers assumed in regard to the splitting of the Red Sea. It was caused by an earthquake, they might claim; it was just a freak accident of nature.

To forestall any such beliefs, ha-Shem magnified the miracle of the Red Sea. He split not only the Red Sea but also all the waters in the world. Even water that was in a cup gravitated to two separate sides! Because of this no one could deny that the splitting of the Red Sea was a true miracle. . . . (Rabbi Mordechai Katz, Lilmod U'Plamade: From the Teachings of Our Sages, Jewish Education Program Publications, New York, 1978, p. 75)

According to the author of the *Zohar*, God created one miracle after another to liberate the Israelites. Plagues were sent to convince Pharaoh to free the people. When they reached the Red Sea, God caused the waters to split and harden so that the Israelites could walk safely from one shore to the other on dry land. As soon as Pharaoh and his army entered the sea, God allowed the waters to crash in upon them, destroying the entire army.

Many commentators ask: How can God allow such miracles? Would the world not be destroyed if the laws of nature, like gravity that causes the Red Sea to flow, were suspended even for a second?

The *Zohar* provides an answer. Quoting Rabbi Isaac (perhaps second century C.E.), we are told that, when the Israelites approached the Red Sea, God called upon the great angel who had been appointed to rule over it. "At the time I created the world," God said to the angel, "I appointed you angel over this sea, and I made an agreement with you that, later when the Israelites would need to pass through your waters, you would divide them. Now they have arrived at the sea; open it and allow them to pass through safely." (*Zohar, Beshalach*, 48a-49a)

Clearly, the early rabbis were troubled by the Torah's claim that God had made a miracle at the Red Sea. Rabbi Isaac's explanation seems to overcome the problem by saying that the splitting of the sea had already been fixed or preordained at the time God created the world. In other words, God anticipated the need for dividing the Red Sea and "programmed" the event. Therefore, according to Rabbi Isaac, it was not a matter of a miraculous suspension of the laws of nature. Instead, the splitting of the Red Sea occurred exactly as God had preplanned it!

Other interpreters agree, but their explanations of what happened at the Red Sea are different. Some say that the splitting of the sea occurred in a natural way.



Hertz

Rabbi J. H. Hertz speculates that "a strong east wind, blowing all night and acting with the ebbing tide, may have laid bare the neck of the water joining the Bitter Lakes to the Red Sea, allowing the Israelites to cross in safety." Rabbi Hertz also explains that "a sudden cessation of the wind . . . would . . . convert the low flat sandbanks first into a quicksand and then into a mass of waters" which would have drowned the pursuing Egyptians. (*The Pentateuch and Haftorahs*, Soncino Press, London, 1966, pp. 268-269)



Rambam (Maimonides)

Use of miracles

A miracle cannot prove what is impossible; it is useful only to confirm what is possible. (Moses Maimonides, Guide for the Perplexed 3:24)

Believing in miracles

In short, I do not believe in miracles. Not if the word be interpreted in its usual sense as exceptions to the laws of nature. I believe in miracles

only as occurrences and events that are far too marvelous for me fully to comprehend but that are entirely consistent with nature's accustomed patterns. . . . Do you know any word more descriptive than miracle for the fact that within the tiny, submicroscopic cell each of us was at the moment of conception were already contained the seeds of all the physical traits, all the mental characteristics, all the emotional proclivities, all the creative possibilities of the adults we are today? Compared to that, a sea splitting in two . . . is simple child's play. There are more miracles without magic in this universe than the wisest of us could ever identify. The trouble is that most of the time we're looking for them in the wrong places. (Roland B. Gittelsohn, Man's Best Hope, Random House, New York, 1961, pp. 114-118)

Modern Bible scholar Umberto Cassuto claims that what happened at the Red Sea "is a common occurrence in the region of the Suez." He explains that "at high tide, the waters of the Red Sea penetrate the sand, from under the surface, and suddenly the water begins to ooze up out of the sand, which has been dry. Within a short time the sand turns to mud, but the water continues to rise and ultimately a deep layer of water is formed above the sand, the whole area becoming flooded. . . . Against this natural background the biblical account can easily be understood."

Cassuto, however, does not reject the notion that a "miracle" occurred at the Red Sea. "The miracle," he says, "consisted in the fact that at the very moment when it was necessary, in just the manner conducive to the achievement of the desired goal, and on a scale that was abnormal, there occurred, in accordance with the Lord's will, phenomena that brought about Israel's salvation." (*A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, Magnes Press, Jerusalem, 1951, pp. 167-168)

Philosopher Martin Buber seems to agree with Cassuto, but from a different point of view. Buber argues that the details of what happened at the Red Sea are not important. "What is decisive . . .," he writes, "is that the children of Israel understood this as an act of their God, as a 'miracle.'" Buber explains that from a historical point of view a miracle is "an abiding astonish-

ment," a feeling of surprise and awe that people sense in especially significant moments. That is what happened at the Red Sea—and afterwards. The Israelites saw Pharaoh's advancing army drowned and destroyed. They were astonished by the events that saved them. At that moment, as Buber comments, "the people saw in whatever it was they saw 'the great hand of God.'" Afterwards, generations of Jews who retold the story continued to find in it traces of wonder that they identified as the miraculous work of God. (*Moses: The Revelation and the Covenant*, Harper and Row Publishers, Inc., New York, 1958, pp. 75, 77)

Whatever happened at the Red Sea, it is clear that the Egyptians were defeated and the Israelites went forth to freedom. The victory was surprising, a critical turning point in Jewish history. For those who were there, and for those who would tell the tale afterwards, something momentous and "astonishing" happened. God split the sea, saved the Israelites, and assured their liberation. All of this seemed more than the work of ordinary people. Something wonderful occurred, something awesome beyond human comprehension. So they called their victory "a miracle."

PEREK BET: *Why All the Complaints against Moses and God?*

As astonishing as their victory over Pharaoh's army and their Exodus from Egypt, the Israelites are not portrayed as particularly grateful to God or to Moses. Our Torah portion, in fact, is filled with their complaints, angry questions, and discontent. On four occasions the people turn on Moses and attack him with harsh accusations.

The first time occurs just as they are escaping from Egypt. When the people see Pharaoh's army pursuing them, they ask Moses, "Was it for want of graves in Egypt that you brought us to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, taking us out of Egypt? Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, saying, 'Let us be, and we will serve the Egyptians, for it is better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness?'" (14:10-12)

The second time occurs just after their "miraculous" victory at the Red Sea. They travel for three days and camp at Marah, meaning "bitter," located

in the desert region of Shur. Because the water there tastes bitter, the people grumble against Moses and ask him, "What shall we drink?" (15:22–24)

Two and a half months later, they express their displeasure with Moses for a third time. Having just arrived in the wilderness of Sin, they are hungry, hot, and frustrated. So they tell Moses: "If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots, when we ate our fill of bread! For you have brought us out into this wilderness to starve this whole congregation to death!" (16:1–3)

On the fourth occasion, the people are camped at Rephidim in the wilderness of Sin. Again, they complain about not having sufficient water. Angrily, they ask Moses, "Why did you bring us up from Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" (17:1–3)

What accounts for all of these complaints and accusations? Several theories are advanced.



Rashi

Rashi explains that the people see "the guardian angel of Egypt marching after them," and they are seized by fear. The guardian angel represents the military power of Egypt. It is advancing quickly upon the Israelites who are unarmed and unable to defend themselves. They are frightened that they will be overtaken and destroyed. Out of fear and disappointment they turn upon Moses, accusing him of leading them to their deaths at the brutal hands of the Egyptians. The terror of death, Rashi believes, generates their complaints.

Handling our disappointments

The Israelites were disappointed and angry when they saw the Egyptians pursuing them. They felt tricked and used by Moses when they found themselves in the wilderness without food and water. Given the steps for handling anger suggested below by psychologist Haim G. Ginott, how did the Israelites do when they were "pushed to the brink"?

Describe what you see.

Describe what you feel.

Describe what needs to be done.

Do not attack the person.

(Between Parent and Teenager, Macmillan, New York, 1969, p. 100)



Ibn Ezra

Ibn Ezra disagrees with Rashi. He points out that there were six hundred thousand Israelites, and they could have easily taken on Pharaoh's army and defeated it. However, they were psychologically incapable. They still saw themselves as slaves, not free people. They thought that they were weak, still subservient and inferior to the Egyptians who had enslaved them. "How would it be possible," they asked themselves, "to go to war and win against those who ruled us?"

According to Ibn Ezra it was not fear that brought on the Israelites' complaints. It was their perception of themselves as "weaklings" before their former Egyptian masters. Even though they outnumbered Pharaoh's army, their morale was so low and their self-esteem so shaken that they could not imagine themselves successfully battling the Egyptians. Instead, they turn upon Moses, make him a scapegoat for their frustrations, and blame him for bringing them out to the desert to die. (14:13)

Rabbi Eleazar of Modi'im explains their behavior from a different point of view. As soon as the Israelites left Egypt, he says, they began to experience the difficulties of thirst and hunger in the desert. They were uncomfortable, anxious, and irritable. As a result they began to look back upon their slave experience with nostalgia. They forgot about the beatings and humiliation; they remembered the abundance of food on their tables.

From where did such recollections come? Rabbi Eleazar points out they were based on their experience in Egypt. The people had been slaves to rulers and had been permitted "to go out to the markets and fields to help themselves to grapes,

figs, and pomegranates, and no one would stand in their way.”

Facing the hardships of the desert, the people began to idealize their situation in Egypt, to look at it through “rose-colored glasses.” Rabbi Eleazar says it was out of that twisted point of view about the conditions of their slavery in Egypt that the Israelites complained to Moses. (*Mechilta, Vayasa*, on Exodus 15:27–16:3)



Zugot

They were testing God

Rabbi Joshua said: The Israelites argued that if God is truly the Power over all things, then we shall serve the Lord. If not, then we shall not serve God. Rabbi Eleazer claimed that they argued that if God fulfills our needs for food, water, and shelter, then we shall serve the Lord. If not, we shall not serve God. This is what the people meant when they said, “Is the Lord among us or not?” (Mechilta, Vayasa, on Exodus 17:7)



Leibowitz

Nehama Leibowitz, quoting an observation found in the commentary *Hemdut ha-Yamim*, observes that the Israelites may have lied to one another about their slave existence in Egypt. They recalled all the positive aspects of slavery, not the negative ones. “There was not an ounce of truth in their words” to one another, Leibowitz writes. Like all slaves they were free “from responsibility for their own destiny, their own economic and social ordering. They were in the charge of a taskmaster who forced them to work, beat them, urged them to finish their tasks but also fed them that they might have strength for their labor. Now they were free, no longer dependent upon taskmasters who beat and fed them! The whole burden of taking care of themselves was theirs. This was

the source of their discontent.” In other words, the Israelites grumbled at Moses because they now had to make their own decisions, find their own food and shelter. They resented the burdens of freedom. (*Studies in Shemot*, p. 265)



Ramban (Nachmanides)

Ramban sees the situation of the Israelites in a different way. They had left Egypt bravely and were now in the desert. They had thought that Moses would lead them to a city or safe place where they would find food, drink, and shelter; they believed it would not be long before they entered the Promised Land of Israel. However, after a month of wandering in the desert, their provisions were nearly gone. They were thirsty and hungry. Their essential needs were not being met, and they feared for the safety of their children. So they said to Moses, “What shall we eat? With what will this great wilderness into which we have come supply us?” Their complaints were not only understandable but both realistic and justified. (Comment on Exodus 16:2)

They were disloyal to God

God performed marvels . . . split the sea and took them through it . . . split rocks in the wilderness and gave them drink as if from the great deep. . . .

But they went on sinning against God, defying the Most High in the parched land . . . because they did not put their trust in God, did not rely on God’s deliverance. (Psalms 78:12–13, 15, 17, 22)



Sarna

Nahum Sarna rejects the notion that the people were justified in their complaints. Instead, he ar-

gues that they were like spoiled children. Moses had led them out of slavery. God had freed them from bondage. Even after they had been given sweet water at Marah and manna to eat, they still found reasons to murmur against Moses and God. They remained skeptical, doubtful of God's goodness and of Moses' intentions.

When the Israelites should have been grateful to both God and Moses for their liberation, they appear selfish and unfaithful. "The extreme language of the complaints betrays profound lack of faith in God and base ingratitude," Sarna argues. He points to Psalm 78 as an indication that Jerusalem poets living during the time of the Temple (second century B.C.E.) also saw in all the grumbling of the Israelites an example of their ingratitude, faithlessness, and disloyalty to God.

One other explanation may provide a significant understanding of their behavior. In his *Guide for the Perplexed*, Moses Maimonides makes the observation that God deliberately tested the Israelites with difficulties and challenges. When the time came to leave Egypt, God instructed Moses to take the Israelites the long way through the desert to the Promised Land rather than the direct route across the northern border of the Sinai peninsula, which would have taken only ten days. In the wilderness, God tested the people with thirst and hunger. All these tests, Maimonides explains, were meant to toughen the people and to prepare them for conquering the Land of Israel.

"It is a fact," Maimonides argues, "that the Israelites would not have been able to conquer the land and fight with its inhabitants if they had not previously undergone the trouble and hardship of the wilderness. . . . Ease destroys bravery while trouble and concern about food create strength. This strength that the Israelites gained was the ultimate good that came out of their wanderings in the wilderness." (3:24)

Maimonides viewed the complaints as natural. The people were tried by unpleasant conditions. One would expect them to grumble about their troubles and difficult circumstances. What was important, however, was not their complaints but the lessons they were learning. In coping with all the hardships of the wilderness, they were preparing themselves to conquer the Promised Land.

In the variety of explanations for the people's

many complaints against Moses and God, we encounter not only different approaches to our Torah text but also a rich array of opinions about motives for human behavior. The Talmud teaches that "a person is to be judged by his anger." Might it also be correct to say that a person and a community are also judged by their "complaints"?

PEREK GIMEL: *Amalek's Attack upon the Israelites*

Near the end of our Torah portion and again in Deuteronomy 25, we are told about the Amalekites' attack on the people of Israel. The version in Exodus 17:8–16 informs us that Amalek declares war upon Israel while the newly liberated people are camping at Rephidim. In response, Moses appoints Joshua to take troops and to engage the enemy in battle. While the war wages, Moses climbs to the top of a hill known as Hur and holds up his staff in prayer to God. After Joshua's victory, God instructs Moses to write out the following promise and reminder: "I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven."

The other version of the war with Amalek, as reported in Deuteronomy 25:17–19, adds some interesting details to the story. We are informed that the Amalekites attack the Israelites by surprise when they are "famished and weary," and they deliberately target the weak "stragglers," who are at the end of their lines. As in Exodus, after their victory, the Israelites are commanded: "You shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget!"

Why this unforgiving command concerning the Amalekites?

Within Jewish tradition the Amalekites are identified as a nomadic people, who lived in the Sinai peninsula and were the descendants of Edom. (Genesis 36:12) In two major wars, the Amalekites were defeated by the Israelites, first under the leadership of King Saul and then under the leadership of King David. (I Samuel 15:5 ff. and 27:8 ff.) In the Book of Esther (3:1), Haman, who schemed to destroy the Jewish people, is described as a descendant of Agag, king of Amalek.

According to Jewish tradition, the Sabbath be-

fore the festival of Purim, when the Book of Esther is read, is called *Zachor* ("Remember"), and the Torah passage designated for that Sabbath day is from Deuteronomy 25:17-19, containing the commandment not to forget Amalek. In this way, the tradition preserves the connection between the Amalekites and wicked Haman.

Why remember Amalek?

Possibly the fact that the Amalekites were the first foes Israel met after its liberation stamped them in the people's mind as the archenemy, the prototype of all whom they would and did meet subsequently. This sentiment is reflected in an old midrash: Moses was to write the judgment on Amalek in a document to let all men know that those who harm Israel will in the end come themselves to harm. (W. Gunther Plaut, editor, The Torah: A Modern Commentary, Union of American Hebrew Congregations, New York, 1981, p. 511)

There can be no doubt that the attack of the Amalekites upon the newly liberated Israelites left bitter memories. Yet, there were many other battles and wars in Jewish history; other peoples sought to destroy Israel and to prevent it from occupying its national homeland. Why then does the Torah single out Amalek for special condemnation, calling for the end of its existence upon earth? Why are we commanded to "remember Amalek" rather than to "forgive Amalek"?

These questions obviously bothered those who studied Torah and sought to understand its meanings. As a result, several commentators provide us with their explanations.

Rabbi Joshua and Rabbi Eleazar Hisma both agree that Amalek's attack was brought about by Israel's behavior and lack of faith in God. From their viewpoint, the people of Israel had not "occupied themselves with the study of Torah." Therefore, they deserved the assault upon them. The command to "remember Amalek" was meant to remind Jews of the consequences of disloyalty to God's commandments. If Jews refuse to study Torah and observe its laws, then God will send enemies like Amalek to persecute and even destroy the people of Israel.

This explanation by Rabbi Joshua and Rabbi Eleazar Hisma, however, represents a minority point of view. By contrast, Rabbi Eleazar of Modi'im, who was put to death by his nephew, Bar Kochba, when he refused to cooperate with the plans for rebellion against Rome in 135 C.E., believed that the Amalekites were condemned because of the tactics they used in their war against Israel. "Amalek," Rabbi Eleazar of Modi'im explains, "would sneak under the wings of the cloud at the rear of the Israelite lines, steal people away, and kill them." In other words, the Amalekites are to be remembered for their trickery and treachery. They deliberately ambushed the weak, exhausted, and hungry. They surprised their victims from behind and then brutally murdered them. Because of their shocking and deplorable tactics, the Amalekites are never to be forgotten.

Another teacher, Rabbi Eliezer, presents the very opposite argument. He argues that the Amalekites did not attack the Israelites secretly, but "defiantly." They did not hide in the darkness of night or use the cover of the cloud at the rear of the Israelite lines. Instead, they maimed and murdered the poor, innocent, and weak during the day, publicly so that everyone could see what they were doing. Amalek stands for random killing and torture without cause—or just for the "sport" of it. The Amalekites are remembered for their public brutality in defiance of respect for the sanctity of human life.

Rabbi Jose ben Halafta offers another view. For him, the evil done by the Amalekites was not a matter of their tactics but of their efforts to solicit and organize other nations to aid them in their effort to destroy the people of Israel.

Rabbi Judah agrees with Rabbi Jose and points out that, in order to attack Israel, the Amalekites had to travel through five other nations. From each nation they sought allies for their plans to exterminate the Israelites. Rabbi Judah warns that we dare not forget their deliberate, cool, and calculated design to end Jewish existence. Remembering Amalek, he says, reminds us to be careful and always on guard about the safety and survival of the Jewish people. (*Mechilta, Amalek, I*)

Modern commentator Nehama Leibowitz presents a different observation. She points out that the Torah's report about Amalek makes it clear

that the killing of the weak and feeble was because “they did not fear God.” Leibowitz says that “we were commanded to blot out the memory of Amalek since they came and fell upon the defenseless and weary without any pretext whatsoever. The children of Israel were not entering their territory, and it was purely a wanton attack.” In other words, had the Amalekites honored the worth of each human life as created in the image of God, it would have been impossible for them to kill without any cause. “Where the fear of God is lacking,” Leibowitz points out, “the stranger who is homeless in a foreign land is liable to be murdered.” We are urged to recall Amalek so that we guard against those who have no fear of God and, consequently, do not believe that each human being is created in God’s sacred image. (*Studies in Devarim*, World Zionist Organization, Jerusalem, 1980, p. 253)



Hirsch

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch finds another reason for not forgetting the Amalekites’ war against the Israelites. Hirsch claims the Amalekites were seeking fame. Because they wanted to demonstrate their bravery and strength, they took up arms against those who had just defeated Pharaoh. “This seeking renown by the force of arms is the first and last enemy of the happiness of mankind,” Hirsch writes. Human beings need to be reminded of the danger of seeking fame through the power of arms and military might. For that reason, the memory of Amalek must never be forgotten.



Peli

Pinchas Peli believes that Amalek’s war against the Jewish people was not only calculated to take their lives but was also intended to rob them of their enthusiasm for freedom. “Amalek rushed to pour cold water on the fire of enthusiasm and faith

generated by Israel and its miraculous deliverance from Egypt.” Recalling the observation of Jewish mystics that the numerical value of the name “Amalek” in Hebrew adds up to 240, which equals the word *safek* (meaning “doubt”), Peli concludes that the Amalekites represent doubters and cynics, who see their roles as “undermining, defaming, delegitimizing, cutting off in its bud, any sign of hope wherever it appears.” In remembering Amalek, Peli observes, we make certain that the cynics and doubters, those who tear down dreams with their contempt and defeatism, are not allowed to triumph. (*Jerusalem Post*, September 13, 1986, p. 22)

To have forgiven the Amalekites and forgotten their attack might have robbed the Jewish people and the world of valuable lessons. The Amalekites have emerged through the ages as a prototype for aggressive, dangerous human behavior. Understanding the consequences of such evil, and battling against it, may be critical for human survival. Remembering Amalek is a first significant step.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. Which explanation for the “miracle” of Israel’s Exodus from Egypt makes the most sense?
2. Martin Buber defines a miracle as an “abiding astonishment.” Of other human experiences that can be recalled, which are so wonderful that people refer to them as “miracles”? What do they have in common with the Exodus of Israel from Egypt?
3. Why do the Israelites offer so many complaints against God and Moses? Do the reasons given by the various commentators also explain why so many people complain about their lives today? What lessons might we learn from the way the early Israelites handled their gripes and grievances?
4. Why does Jewish tradition insist on encouraging people to “remember Amalek”? Wouldn’t it be better for people “to forgive and forget”? Why make a mitzvah out of remembering the past—especially if that past is filled with unhappiness, horror, and fear?