

Shabbat Zachor, Parashat Terumah - Rabbi James Proops

This Shabbat we will read the special *Maftir* for *Parashat Zachor*, taken from the *Parasha* of *Ki Teitzei*, in which we are commanded “זָכוֹר אֶת אֲשֶׁר-עָשָׂה לְךָ עַמְלֵק בְּדַרְךְ - Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey, after you left Egypt” (*Devarim* 25:17). We read this passage every year on the *Shabbat* preceding *Purim*, as the celebration of *Purim* and the reading of *Megillat Esther* revolve around the defeat of *Haman*, a descendant of *Amalek* and one of the most significant instances of the eternal battle that the Jewish People face. We are told in *Parashat Beshalach*, following the account of the attack by *Amalek* “מִלְחָמָה ל' ה' בְּעַמְלֵק מִדֶּרֶךְ - The LORD will be at war with Amalek from generation to generation”, we will therefore have to face *Amalek* throughout the ages. It is clear that the ethnic group of *Amalek* disappeared over two thousand years ago yet nonetheless the threat lives on. *Chazal* explain that *Amalek* personify all elements in existence which want to obliterate the Jewish People both spiritually and physically.

In the reading of *Parashat Zachor* the *pasukim* recount how *Amalek* attacked *Bnei Yisrael* immediately after leaving *Mitzrayim* and there is one curious word used to describe the attack. The *Pasuk* states “אֲשֶׁר קָרַךְ בְּדֶרֶךְ - he surprised you on the way”. There is much discussion in the commentaries about the use of this strange word, rather than stating simply that they were attacked. *Rashi* provides three explanations as to the use of this word, one of which is that the root of the word *Karcha* is ‘*Kar*’ meaning cold. It is important to note that the word is being used as a verb, meaning that *Amalek* ‘made cold’ or ‘cooled down’ *Bnei Yisrael*.

In order to understand what it means that *Bnei Yisrael* were cooled, *Rashi* citing the *Medrash Tanchuma*, provides an explanation regarding the effect that the attack of *Amalek* had on the other nations’ perception of *Bnei Yisrael*. However, the *Sfat Emet* (Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter d. 1905) offers an additional understanding in his comments regarding a well known phrase from *Megillat Esther*. Following the fall of *Haman* the *Megillah* states “לִיהוּדִים הָיְתָה אוֹרָה וְשִׂמְחָה וְשִׁשְׁוֹן וְיָקָר - The Jews enjoyed light and gladness, happiness and honor”, on which the *Gemmara* (*Megillah* 16b) comments that ***Orah - light*** refers to the Torah, ***Simcha - Joy*** refers to *Yomim Tovim*, ***Sasson - Happiness*** refers to *Brit Milah*, and ***Yakar - Honor*** refers to *Tefillin*. The *Sfat Emet* points out that the implication of the *Gemmara* is, that it was only after the removal of *Haman* from office that the Jews were able to return to these four fundamental areas of Jewish life and practise. This suggests therefore, that during *Haman’s* rule Jews were prevented from

partaking in all these areas. However, nowhere in the *Megillah* does it suggest that *Haman* sought to prevent the practise of Judaism, but rather he was determined to destroy the Jews physically. It is often cited that this is one of the major differences between *Purim* and *Chanukah* as the *Yevanim* sought to destroy Judaism, whereas *Haman*, like the Nazis, sought to destroy the Jews.

The *Sfat Emet* asks therefore, how can we understand this teaching of *Chazal*, that only after the fall of *Haman* were the Jews able to restart learning *Torah*, celebrating *Yomim Tovim* and fulfilling the *Mitzvot* of *Brit Milah* and *Tefillin*? Surely these practises had never stopped. He explains that while the Jews at the time of the story of *Esther* were indeed able to keep all these *Mitzvot* continually, they were nonetheless doing so under the influence of *Haman*, who personified *Amalek*. The impact of this influence, whether overt or subconscious, meant that their participation and attitude towards their Judaism was ‘cooled’ down. They may have been engaged in carrying out *Mitzvot* and learning *Torah* but they did so in a way that was *Kar*, a way that was cold. Their engagement in *Avodat Hashem* was not whole hearted and certainly not in an excited and joyful way. They may have been fulfilling their *Torah* obligations with their minds and body, but not in a fully connected spiritual way. This could have been because of the fear and trepidation that they felt towards *Haman* as well as the general impact and influence that he was able to have on society.

This leads us to a much higher level of understanding as to what the threat of *Amalek* truly is. While *Amalek* certainly represents those forces in the world who seek to physically destroy us, it also represents anything which seeks to undermine our passion for Judaism and anything which causes us to connect with *Hashem* in a less meaningful way. While the Jewish People have had many enemies throughout history, it is only *Amalek* about whom we are commanded to remember and destroy. Other enemies of Judaism we can resolve the conflicts with, but with *Amalek* there is no negotiation and resolution. We are told *M’dor dor*, in every generation there will be enemies or elements which exist and seek to undermine our relationship with *Torah*.

While the connections between *Amalek* and anti-Semitism is clear, it is also vitally important to contemplate those other forces in the world which cause us to be distant from God and *Torah*. Once we are able to identify these causes we must seek to obliterate them in the same way that we are commanded to destroy *Amalek*. One example of this, cited by the *Ba’alei Mussar*, is the character trait of apathy. One who suffers from apathy

will not be able to engage in *Torah* and *Mitzvot* in a joyful and complete way and therefore we must do all we can to uproot any sense of apathy.

One of the consequences of Covid-19 for many of us, is an increased distance from our ability to engage fully in *Mitzvot*, *Tefillah* and our general connection to our Judaism. We must therefore approach this ongoing problem in the same way that we are commanded to approach *Amalek*. On the one hand we have to destroy it. This will come through the continued roll out of vaccinations and continued compliance with appropriate safety measures. However, we must also fight the spiritual impact that the pandemic is having. We cannot allow ourselves to be less engaged with Torah, with the community and with Hashem.

This coming *Purim* presents us with a number of challenges that we must face and overcome. If one is able to safely attend a *Megillah* reading, rather than rely on the leniency to follow along on Zoom, then certainly we should attend and embrace the opportunity to connect wholeheartedly. However, if we have to join via Zoom, then it should be done with the same attitude and *Kavod* in which we would have attended shul in a regular year and muster those feelings of inspiration and connection. We face another major challenge regarding *Purim Seudah*. Not only are we not able to gather together with friends and family, but this year *Purim* is on a Friday which presents its own issues. Many will be tempted, given the lack of guests and it being *Erev Shabbat*, to skip the normal *Purim Seudah* effort and extravagances. However doing so will just reinforce any distance that we and our families are feeling from our Judaism. We should try to be inventive and creative and make sure that this year nothing will stand in our way of ensuring that we have a meaningful and inspirational *Purim* experience. I have heard that some, 'unrestricted' by the *Halakhot* which usually impact our ability to virtually share *Yom Tov* and *Shabbat* meals, are scheduling their private meals for the same time as others, so that they can Zoom or facetime with others in order to partake in some way of the normal experience of *Purim*.

As we read *Parashat Zachor* and fulfil our obligation to remember the immense danger that *Amalek* poses to us, let us all endeavor not to allow anything we face to take away from our connection to each other and Hashem.

Shabbat Shalom and Purim Sameach