

## Remember

This past March was a March to remember. I imagine that everyone among us remembers exactly where we were when the world changed forever. For some it was when the NBA suspended their season. For others it was when schools closed. For me and so many of my colleagues it was when the synagogues decided it was time. I remember exactly where I was when we decided to close, but I'll get back to that.

First, I want to talk about why we decided to close. Amidst the deluge of guidelines from medical professionals, our town and state and the CDC, it was this question: Even if we took every precaution, how could we continue to open our doors to the self-selecting young and healthy among us, while pushing the most vulnerable to the margins?

This pandemic is especially threatening to the most vulnerable in our community. In the Torah, we read of a similar threat: "Remember what [the nation of] Amalek did to you on your journey, after you left Egypt—how...[they] surprised you on the road...and cut down all those traveling at the rear."<sup>1</sup> Amalek, like this pandemic, targeted those who were the most unprotected and vulnerable, those at the rear. It is for this reason that in Jewish tradition, Amalek has come to symbolize the pinnacle of evil.

The most familiar reference point of Amalek in our tradition is Purim. Which brings me back to the moment I knew that the world had changed forever: it was Purim. How fitting it is that the arrival of covid-19 in our area coincided with Purim. The Rabbis tell the story of Purim as a tale of Amalek--Haman being a descendant of Amalek, targeting the Jewish people who in his time, lived on the margins of society, were most vulnerable, and certainly underrepresented in positions of power. Purim teaches us that power and representation are extremely important. It also teaches us that it is essential to defend the most vulnerable in our society, even if we are in a position of vulnerability ourselves and *especially* if we are not. On Purim, we have a dual duty: both to hear this story and remember these lessons and to blot out Haman's name with groggers and noise.

These two traditions of Purim, remembering and blotting out, come from the Torah. Just after we are told to "Remember what that nation of Amalek did..." the Torah goes on, "you shall blot out the memory of Amalek."<sup>2</sup> Again, at Purim this year this pandemic resurfaced this same dual obligation: to do all that we can to stop the spread and eradicate this virus *and* to remember what it has taught us.

---

<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 25:17-18

<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy 25:19

The commentators famously struggle with this dual obligation, if we blot out Amalek completely, what is left to remember? If we do succeed in ending this pandemic, what will we remember from this time? The medieval Spanish commentator, Rabbeinu Bachya explains that the emphasis is on what we *remember*. He says, “We should not forget Amalek, what this people *did* to us.”<sup>3</sup> Rabbeinu Bachya teaches that even if we blot out Amalek, we should remember what Amalek *did* to us. Even if and when we blot out this pandemic, this awful virus, we must remember what it *did* to us.

What has this pandemic done to our society? It is taken lives and life from us. It has made us fearful and vulnerable. It has hurt us communally and personally. What has this pandemic done to our society? Like Amalek, it has disproportionately affected those traveling at the rear. The elderly, people with pre-existing medical conditions--visible or invisible, people without access to quality healthcare, communities of color, people who are in poverty, people who are in prison. It has shown us our weaknesses. It has exposed our failures to build a just society and protect those who are most vulnerable.

What has this pandemic done to our society? It has given us the time to look into the mirror, to reflect completely and for many months. It has prompted us to revisit our values, reorganize our priorities, accept our responsibilities and the consequences of our choices. It has reflected what is most important: love, grace, forgiveness, dignity, justice, family, community.

Tomorrow morning, we will read the words of Isaiah. The Israelites ask, “Why, when we fasted, did You not see?”<sup>4</sup> This pandemic has been incredibly painful. And on Yom Kippur we feel this pain acutely in our hearts and in our bodies. We face our grief, regret, anger, fear--our own vulnerability. And yet, God replies, “Is this the fast I desire?”<sup>5</sup> Is pain the purpose of this day? Is pain and loss *all* that we will remember of Amalek’s attack, or of this pandemic? Of course, we will remember the pain and the loss we’ve experienced, but we must also remember what this pain has taught us. In the words of Isaiah, “This is the fast I desire: To unlock fetters of wickedness, And untie the cords of the yoke, To let the oppressed go free; To break off every yoke. It is to share your bread with the hungry, And to take the poor into your home; When you see the naked, to clothe him, And not to ignore your own kin. Then shall your light burst through like the dawn And your healing spring up quickly...The Presence of the Eternal shall be your rear guard.”<sup>6</sup>

Remember, Amalek attacked the rear. And what does Isaiah teach us on Yom Kippur? That when we turn our pain into compassion, our loss into empathy, our failings into justice, our vulnerability into strength. Then, God will do God’s part and take up our rear guard. We cannot expect God to protect the most vulnerable among us if we don’t do so ourselves.

---

<sup>3</sup> Rabbeinu Bachya on Deuteronomy 25:19

<sup>4</sup> Isaiah 58:3

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 58:5

<sup>6</sup> Isaiah 58:6-8

This past March was a March to remember. We will remember fear. We will remember *far* too much loss and grief. But also, in the years to come, when we remember this past March, let us also remember the words of Isaiah. "...unlock fetters of wickedness...share your bread with the hungry...do not to ignore your own kin...Then, shall your light burst forth like the dawn and the presence of the Eternal shall be your rear guard."