

Good Shabbos, everyone.

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Today we read Parshas Zachor. In advance of Purim, we read about the first attack on the Jewish people, **simply because they were Jews**, carried out by the nation of Amalek. The **Malbim** writes this attack was unique in its evil. It was not an attack to defend themselves from a potential threat, or any of the other accepted reasons which “justify” war. It was motivated solely by hate and fueled by a singular bloodthirsty desire to challenge the existence of Hashem by fighting His chosen people. Furthermore, it went against all conventions of war—attacking the unarmed and the infirm, without any warning...**it was pure evil**...an attack on all that is sacred. We read this account to acknowledge that antisemitism is not new; and that the Purim story and the hatred and antisemitism the Jewish people still experience today, is a continuation of this evil mindset of Amalek.

How did Amalek have the audacity to attack a nation that had just experienced open miracles? And why did the attack almost work? Why did Moshe have to help the Jews regain their confidence and faith and commitment at that time to be successful in their defense?

וְהָיָה כַּאֲשֶׁר יָרִים מִזְרָח יָדוֹ וַיִּגְבֵּר יִשְׂרָאֵל וְכַאֲשֶׁר יִגִּישׁ יָדוֹ וַיִּגְבֵּר עַמְלֵק:

Then, whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed; but whenever he let down his hand, Amalek prevailed.

Amalek was an ancient wild tribe that attacked Israel and remains forever after the symbol of anti-Semitism, of cruelty, of blind and baseless hatred. In the character of Amalek, there is no sign of hesitancy or self-doubt. The Torah teaches us that others heard about the Jews' miraculous exodus from Egypt and were in awe. Some, like Yisro were even inspired to change. But Amalek had the opposite reaction—Amalek was supremely confident and unwavering in their position: ולא ירא אלקים, they did not fear the Hashem at all. There is no reticence in Amalek's mind: no questioning, no debating, no wondering. He is **certain** that there is no God, there is no justice, there is no one to whom he must answer. He is certain enough to viciously attack the nation that challenges his ideology.

But why are they successful? The rabbis in the **Medrash Yalkut Shimoni** declare that Amalek *domeh l'zevuv*, Amalek can be compared to a fly. The **Kli Yakar** points out that the zevuv, or fly, is often symbolic of evil in our literature. Thus, the evil inclination, the yetzer hara, is also compared to a fly.

What is the nature of a fly? How does it attack?

כלי יקר שמות פרק יז(ח) ויבוא עמלק וילחם עם ישראל ברפידים. בילקוט (רמז רסא) מסיק שעמלק דומה לזבוב וכו', משל למלך שהקיף כרם וכו', ביאור המשל וסברתו. . . שהיצר הרע המשילוהו חז"ל (ברכות סא א) לזבוב שכח פיו חלוש לעשות נקב בבשר השלם אך במקום שהזבוב מוצא איזה מורסא או שחין אשר שם פתח פתוח קצת לבשר שם ירביץ וירחיב הפירצה. כך היצר הרע אין לו כח להזדווג אצל הצדיק השלם בכל מעשיו ולא פתח לו כלל פתח לחטאת ולגדה, אך הבא לטמא ועושה פתחים לו, שם ירביץ להרחיב הפירצה עד עלות חמס גבר לאין מרפא.

The **Kli Yakar** writes that the fly does not sting or puncture skin on its own. Rather, it finds the dried blood of an existing wound in the body and settles there. The fly attacks by looking for an opening, searching for a weakness in his victim. That is why God told Kayin רובץ חטאת רובץ, "sin crouches at the door." Sin never attacks a person who is perfect and whole and confident. It always looks for an opening, some sign of weakness. Thus, Amalek looked for this kind of opening in the life of Israel. Like a fly, it did not attack until it noticed that Israel itself was beginning to weaken.

But what was this sign of weakness in the Jewish people? What was this "opening" for Amalek?

מאור ושמש שמות פרשת בשלח: כמו שמצינו בזה הקדוש שמיד שאמרו ישראל (שמות יז ז) ה'יגש ה' בקרבנו אם אין - מיד 'ויבא עמלק'; הגם שדברי הזוהר הקדוש הם עמוק עמוק מאד, עיין שם, על כל פנים על פי פשוטו מרמזים הפסוקים כשבאו ישראל לאיזה ספק בהאמונה - אזי בא עמלק לנתק אותם יותר ויותר מאמונת אלהי עולם לגמרי ה'.

The **Zohar** teaches that the opening for Amalek was **Israel's lack of self-confidence, its deadly self-doubt**. The Zohar teaches that the words עמלק, ויבא עמלק, and Amalek came (to attack Israel), follow immediately upon the Torah's description of Jewish people's doubt: ה'יגש ה' בקרבנו אם אין, "Is Hashem among us or not?" Note that this question is not a matter of theological debate, no religious skepticism is implied: the question is not whether God exists. Rather, it is a question of connection to Hashem: is He בקרבנו, in our midst? Are we worthy to have Him with us? **The Jewish people did not question God; it questioned itself**. It is precisely at this time that Amalek attacked. For Amalek recognized this elementary human principle: when a powerful self-confidence confronts diffidence and self-doubt, then the one with the greater confidence will usually win. Amalek was certain of its policy of hatred and injustice; its contempt for law and decency. The Jewish people were not certain whether God was with them or not. Hence, Amalek attacked and came close to winning—**because the more they attacked and mocked the Jews, the more the Jews doubted themselves** היש ה' בקרבנו אם אין.

Commentators have pointed out the gematriya or numerical value of the word "Amalek" is equal to the Hebrew word "safek," doubt. The strategy of Amalek is to look for the opening of doubt in its adversary; that is where it unleashes the full force and fury of its faith in its own nefarious and perverse principles.

When the Jewish people are strong and proud, and sure of their place in history, sure of their destiny and their connection to God; then Amalek has no power over them—their fight becomes Hashem's fight. מלחמה לה' בעמלק מדור דור.

As the **Mishna in Rosh Hashana** (Perek 3) records:

משנה מסכת ראש השנה פרק ג': ויהיה פאשר ירים משה ידו וגבר ישראל וגו' (שמות יז), (וכי ידיו נשאל משה עושות מלחמה או שוברות מלחמה. אלא לומר לה, כל זמן שהיו ישראל מסתכלים כלפי מעלה ומשעבדין את לבם לאביהם שבשמים היו מתגברים. ואם לאו, היו נופלין).

And it came to pass, when Moses held up his hand, that Israel prevailed; and when he let down his hand, Amalek prevailed" (Exodus 17:11). It may be asked: Did the hands of Moses make war when he raised them or break war when he lowered them? Rather, the verse comes to tell you that as long as the Jewish people turned their eyes upward and subjected their hearts to their Father in Heaven, they prevailed, but if not, they fell.

The Rabbis tell us to read about Amalek before Purim, because Purim commemorates a similar plot of Amalek's descendant Haman, to wipe out the Jewish nation. In a famous statement in the **Gemara Megilla 12a** the Rabbis teach us that the reason for Haman's decree of genocide against the Jews, and the reason it almost worked, was that the Jews ate at Achashverosh's feast.

תלמוד בבלי מסכת מגילה דף יב עמוד א שאלו תלמידיו את רבי שמעון בן יוחאי: מפני מה נתחייבו שונאיהן של ישראל שבארתו הדור כליה? אמר להם: אמרו אתם! - אמרו לו: מפני שנהנו מסעודתו של אותו רשע.

One of the commentators on the Ein Yaakov, **Rav Yitzchak Pinto**, questions why a seemingly moderate transgression deserved such a drastic punishment. He explains that the feast of Achashverosh was not simply a feast with non-kosher food and wine. The Gemara teaches that in line with his calculations, Achashverosh believed that the time for redemption of the Jews had passed, and he made a great feast to celebrate the permanent destruction of the Temple and Jewish exile. That is why he used the keilim of the Beis Hamikdash which had been seized by Nevuchadnetzar when the Jews were first exiled.

The Jews were participating in a feast celebrating the end of hope for their redemption from the exile. And it was specifically at that moment of self doubt, when the Jews lost their national pride, their hope to return to their land, and, instead, celebrated their own destruction—**when they doubted their chosenness and their destiny as Jews**, that safek, that doubt, gave room for their arch-enemy of Amalek to attack.

And the same way the war with Amalek was won when the Jewish people looked up at Heaven and regained their confidence in who they were, and their connection to God, The Purim story also has a positive ending only when the Jews gathered together and issued a strong statement of reacceptance of Jewish values. It took the courage of Esther and the conviction of the Jewish nation to come together as a unit and pour out their hearts to God. Mordechai gathered the Jewish people who had lost their conviction and had begun to identify as Persians, and had thus gone to Achashverosh's party. Mordechai brought them back to their heritage—and they proudly stood together in tefilla.

ספר אור חדש על אסתר פ"ד פסוק ט"ז

"לך כנוס את כל היהודים" (פסוק טז). דבר זה רמזה לו על התפילה, שיתפללו, ובדבר זה שייך "לך כנוס", כאשר ילכו לבית הכנסת להתפלל, ולא יתפלל כל אחד בביתו, רק תהיה תפילת צבור.

The same is true in our times—the greatest enemy we face right now is self doubt, that element of safek, that leaves us open to attack from the modern day Amalek and antisemitism.

And what is the answer? The answer is that we must begin to carry ourselves with self-confidence in who we are, our connection to Hashem, in Torah and its relevance for all ages, in the eternal Jewish connection to the Land of Israel, and in the ultimate triumph of truth over falsehood. In the face of antisemitism, we must not apologize for who we are, what we stand for, and where we belong.

We must stand together, as they did long ago in Shushan, with faith and conviction and pride. We must stand up for our right to the land of Israel and our commitment to the State of Israel. History has shown us that when we are sure of ourselves, we get farther than when we doubt ourselves. We have reached the point where we should have that confidence in our own position. The Torah is our heritage. The State of Israel is our country. We must not doubt our position. This must always be our policy, in all circumstances, we must never question our connection to Hashem.

And the lessons necessary to combat this position of weakness, היש ה' בקרבנו אם אין, are present in the Parsha we read—ויקרא that begins with קרבנות. What is a Korban? How does it work? The commentators point out that the essence of a korban is not in the act of offering an animal sacrifice. Rather, it is really in the dedication in the heart of man, in one's character and intention, and desired connection to Hashem, that go along with, and are inspired by, the external actions of a korban.

The Seforno writes that the korbanos functioned as an external expression of the mindset of humility. ספורנו ויקרא פרק א: (ב) אדם כי יקריב מכם. כי יקריב מעצמכם בידיו דברים והכנעה על דרך ונשלמה פרים שפתינו (הושע יד, ג) וכאמרו זכחי אלהים רוח נשברה (תהלים נא, יט), כי אין חפץ בכסילים המקריבים בלתי הכנעה קודמת. *"A person who brings a korban-- me'atzmechem—must bring it from within, with sincere confession, and by humbling themselves."*

Thus, the main function of a korban is to bring something out from within, to help improve the way we think and the way we act. **Therefore, in a sense, the main thing we bring close to Hashem is ourselves.**

How does one bring himself close? The **Seforno** writes: הכנעה קודמת that one offers himself, foremost, by acting humbly, by giving away an expensive animal in an attempt to come close to Hashem. Indeed, the Gemara in **Sanhedrin 43b** cites a teaching of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi that

after the churban Beis Hamikdash, when we no longer have korbanos, humility can take the place of all the korbanos...

תלמוד בבלי מסכת סנהדרין דף מג עמוד ב: ואמר רבי יהושע בן לוי: בזמן שבית המקדש קיים, אדם מקריב עולה - שכר עולה בידו, מנחה - שכר מנחה בידו. אבל מי שדעתו שפלה - מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו הקריב כל הקרבנות כולן, שנאמר +תהלים נ"א+ זבחי אלהים רוח נשברה, ולא עוד אלא שאין תפלתו נמאסת, שנאמר +תהלים נ"א+ לב נשבר ונדכה אלהים לא תבזה.

Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (Vayikra 1:2) writes: “*We have no word in Western languages that adequately conveys the concept inherent in the Hebrew term קרבן. Unfortunately, in the sense of sacrifice, it has taken on the connotation of destruction, annihilation, loss—a connotation that is foreign and antithetical to the Hebrew concept of קרבן. The purpose of a קרבן is to seek God’s nearness. Indeed, the word קרבן comes from the word קרוב, meaning to draw closer, In God’s sanctuary a man will understand that closeness to God is his sole criterion for shaping his outlook on life and for evaluating his true happiness. . .*”

Korbanos are an answer to the question היש ה' בקרבנו? The **Kotzker** Rebbe once asked a Talmid where Hashem is found. The talmid looked confused at the question and responded “isn’t God everywhere?” The Kotzker proceeded to answer: “*God is found wherever He is given entry.*” God is in our midst if we let Him in. Korbanos remind us to make space for Hashem in our lives. . .

And **David Hamelech** taught God finds entry in places where there is space for Him—not where there is haughtiness, but where people humble themselves to make room for Him.

תהלים פרק נא (ט) זבחי אלהים רוח נשברה לב נשבר ונדכה אלהים לא תבזה:

It is interesting to consider that the Parsha of korbanos begins with the word Vayikra, ויקרא which is written with a small “aleph.” This small aleph hints to the humility necessary to allow the korbanos to function. Why does the Torah specifically use the word ויקרא, literally “and He called,” to allude to humility? And what is the lesson of humility doing here with korbanos?

I believe the Torah is teaching humility in the word Vayikra to teach us that God is constantly calling us. But we need to make ourselves smaller—to be humble--in order to hear His call.

If we don’t make space in our lives to listen, all the background noise of our own self interest drowns out the voice of God. Unfortunately, many times **we are our own barriers and obstacles to spiritual accomplishments**. We can get in the way of our ability to hear the call of God. We can impede our own spiritual advancements.

Sometimes, when we contemplate our professional, material, or other success, we take all the credit. We say כוחי ועוצם ידי עשה לי את החיל הזה, *our strength and might are the source of our success*, and tune God out of our lives. We imagine that we have full control and deserve full credit...but we need to remember that, however much we achieve, we did not do it all by ourselves. Hashem is always there—even if His role is not obvious at the time, as we see in the Purim story. That is the triumphant message of the Megilla. Unlike the Jews who thought they must go to the Party of Achashverosh for their survival, our pursuits and goals must always take into account the role God plays in our lives. We get closer to God by making ourselves humble, by making space to always hear God’s call.

The message of Vayikra, is a timeless message that God is calling us...and we must ask ourselves an important question—are we listening? Do we hear His call? Are we making space for Hashem in our hearts and our lives. Let us listen to the call of Hashem, and may it affect our avodas Hashem, in the way we daven with kavana, and learn with passion, and treat one another with respect. May we be zoche to see yeshuos and refuos during this month of simcha for Klal Yisrael. Amen.