

The Message of “Zachor” and the Mandate of Peace

Rabbi Neil S. Cooper, March 15, 2014

In Maimonides' *Sefer HaMitzvot*, the Rambam points out that within this morning's *maftir* reading there are two distinct *mitzvot*. First, is the positive command to utterly destroy the Amalekites (#188). Second, the reading emphasizes that we must never forget the cruel and nefarious deeds of the Amalakites: Remember...Do not forget" (#189). According to the Rambam, regarding the command to destroy Amalek, that has already been accomplished. The commandment requires that we destroy "only the seed of Amalek" (*Sefer HaMitzvot*, Positive, #188). Maimonides states that the "seed" and offspring of Amalek be "only" of Amalek, that is, the offspring of an Amalekite and a person from another tribe, would not be included in this injunction. For that reason, Maimonides concludes, the seed of Amalek has, over time, become diluted and that, in his own day, and certainly in our day, there are no longer pure Amalekites in the world.

This morning, however, I would like to focus on the command to remember Amalek (#189) and pose the following question: If there are no more Amalekites in the world, what is the purpose of remembering? Again, the Rambam has an answer: we should remember the cruelty with which the Amalekites attacked us. By remembering, therefore, we recall the suffering of our ancestors at their hands. We remember, as well, so that the hatred of Amalek is not removed from our hearts (#189). We remember in order to realize that in the world, terrible evil is possible.

Yet, it seems to me that there may be another reason to remember Amalek. By focusing on, and expressing our outrage toward Amalek, we remind ourselves that, though others may be cruel and merciless, they are not Amalekites. And, since they are not Amalekites, we cannot continue to harbor that hatred reserved only for Amalek. We cannot seek to "utterly destroy" enemies who are not Amalek, no matter how much we may hate them.

There is irony in this mitzvah. *Parashat Zachor* reminds us that we must distinguish between Amalek and all other enemies. Unlike the way we regard Amalek, we must learn to see our enemies in a different light. We cannot simply dismiss them as Amalekites. We must see in our enemies their humanity, as hard as it may be to see it. That means that we cannot be blind to their suffering or impervious to their pain. We cannot demonize them as they do to us. We must act toward them differently from the way they act toward us, because we are different, we are Jews. How we behave is not dictated to us by our enemies. We do not model our behavior after theirs. We must act, guided by our values, our standards of behavior and by our embrace of what it means to be a Jew.

This does not mean that we must not be strong or vigilant in our dealings with our enemies. It does mean, however, that we must not demonize our enemies. We cannot paint all individuals of an entire people with the same broad brush. To be a Jew means that we must find humanity, even in our enemies, and that begins by seeing them as people.

In his recent book, My Promised Land, Ari Shavit, Israeli journalist, Zionist, defender and critic of Israel, writes of his roots in the land and describes how his first family member arrived in Israel. His great-grandfather, whose last name was Bentwich, arrived in Jaffa in 1897 and was taken by carriage to his

new home in Ramleh. After reading his great-grandfather's journal about his trip to Ramleh, Shavit reacts:

Looking out over the vacant territory of 1897, Bentwich sees the quiet, the emptiness, the promise. Here is the stage upon which the drama will play out...He does not see the Land as it is. Riding in his elegant carriage from Jaffa to Mikveh Yisrael, he does not see the Palestinian village of Abu Kabir. Traveling from Mikveh Yisrael to Rishon LeZion he does not see the Palestinian village of Yazur, etc... How can that be? I ask myself in another millennium. How is it possible that my great-grandfather does not see? There are more than half a million Arabs, Bedouins and Druze in Palestine in 1897. There are 20 cities and towns and hundreds of villages. So how can the pedantic Bentwich not notice them?

When the Torah tells us to destroy Amalek, we are to do so utterly and completely, with nothing left of them to look at because, if we leave a remnant of them, we must look at them and see them as people. And, if we look at them, we must deal with the issue of humanity, theirs and our own. And so we must destroy them without regard for their humanity. But for all other enemies, we must look. We must see.

This is one of the problems today in Israel. As secure and strong as is Israel, to find peace, we must find a way to look at our neighbors, some of whom we hate deeply and with good reason:

- *They have created false narratives.
- *They have encouraged and incited violence against us.
- *They have murdered our people and blown up women and children on buses.
- *They express their anti-Semitism and find common cause in Europe, from those seeking to damage Israel through the BDS Movement.

Yet, these are the people with whom we will need to make peace.

Last week, at AIPAC's annual Policy Conference in DC, I listened to two prominent figures, Jack Lew, Secretary of the Treasury, and John Kerry, Secretary of State. Each spoke of the efforts of the current administration on behalf of Israel and, for Sec. Kerry, of his own personal efforts to negotiate a peace accord between Israel and the Palestinians. Each emphasized their commitment to Israel, the unbreakable bond of the Israel-US relationship and their own understanding of and commitment to Israel's safety, security and well-being. Each spoke of how much the US is doing on Israel's behalf, trying to breathe new life into a moribund peace initiative.

However, beneath the scripted words of these two important national figures was a perceptible sadness. I cannot say whether the sadness came from those speaking or was evoked from the 14,000+ people in the audience listening, but I felt the sadness. The reception of the crowd was respectful, to be sure, but tepid nonetheless. No rousing cheers which, at an AIPAC Policy Conference, are expected. No enthusiastic moment at which all were simultaneously brought to their feet. The response, as it seemed to me, had nothing to do with politics. Democrats, as well as Republicans, seemed equally reserved. We all come to AIPAC expecting "meat." I left feeling like we had eaten pareve at best, and I wondered why.

Upon reflection, it seems to me that, with all of the assurances and weaponry promised by those who addressed us, including the Iron Dome and F35s, something was missing. I felt as if the promises and

reassurances might secure *status quo*, but the *status quo* is not the dream we have cherished for millenia or the reason for which the State of Israel was founded. Our enthusiasm as Jews has never been for military strength but for the prospect of peace.

As I listened to our speakers, I wondered if the Jewish vision for peace had been lost by some. A safe and secure Israel might provide a comfortable state for Jews, but it would not suffice as a Jewish State. A Jewish State must adhere to and be built upon Jewish values, the values articulated by the great Prophets of Israel. Those Prophets instilled in our ancestor and in us a dream of peace which we have kept for over 3000 years. It is the dream of the Prophet Isaiah who articulated for the Jewish People a vision of a time when:

V'Chititu Charvotam L'Ittim, V'Chanitoteihem LiMasmerot

They shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. (Isaiah 2:4a)

In Israel today there is a split in opinion, a split not over whether or not to make, but a split over the path peace:

*Some want to make more concessions. Others label such an approach as national suicide.

*Some want to take a slower, more considered path, even though it will be bumpy and full obstacles. Others see this as squandering the opportunity before us.

I do not know which path will ultimately be best for Israel. I have no illusions that, either way, chances for peace, at this time, are slim. I do believe we must go forward, no matter what our enemies may do, no matter how much they kick and scream, because their actions and refusals do not determine how we must behave as Jews. Our enemies are not Amalekites. They are human beings, even if we do not like them. They are human beings, at whom we must look at and see and with whom we shall be obligated, sooner or later, to make peace. We must open doors for peace even when our enemies seem intent on closing them.

I say this because I and we are Jews. And, as such, to secure a *status quo* will not suffice. We are the people whose Prophet has admonished us to turn implements of war into tools of peace. That same Prophet completed that exhortation as follows (2:4b):

Lo Yisa Goy El Goy Cherev, V'lo Yilmidu 'Od Milchama

Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

To be a Jew does not constrain us with politically partisan positions. To be a Jew does not speak to the issue of whether one favors the political right or left. To be a Jew means to dream of peace, to strive for peace and work for peace, and, to be a Jew means to pray for the strength needed to that make peace:

May God grant to our People strength and bless us with peace.

Adonai 'Oz L'Amo Yiten, Adonai Yivarech et 'Amo BaShalom.