

The Battle against Amalek: A Battle that Rages On

In the revelry and zaniness of the day, the serious messages of Purim are often overlooked. In fact, the very frivolity of the day, the masks, the over-the-top antics, are all strategies to mask a much deeper sense of anxiety. For indeed, Megilat Esther (the book of Esther) grapples with *the persistence of anti-Semitism*, an issue that more than ever is pressing for us today. I believe the book provides an answer that is often overlooked.



Haman. However, are we really to believe that Haman decided to destroy an entire people, convince a king to do this, arm an entire militia, and fund a war machine because of a personal vendetta against one individual?! In other words, is Mordechai's refusal to bow down the *cause* of Haman's reaction, or is it the *symptom* of a larger conflict that already existed. If the book is read in the context of other books of Tanakh, it is clear the latter is true. *The struggle between Mordechai and Haman is a reflection of a more fundamental battle.*

To understand this conflict, we must understand a bit about the lineage of Haman. Where did he come from? We are introduced to Haman as the son of Hamdata the Agagite. Now Agag was the king of the Amalekites, an ancient people and a descendent of Esau. Like Jacob and Esau, the relationship between Israel and Amalek was contentious; it was and is- a fundamental conflict that rises above the specific historical moment, and in fact reflects a cosmic battle between two dialectically opposed philosophies.



Where do we see this? On the Shabbat before Purim, Jews read a special section of the Torah, known as Parshat *Zachor*, the section of remembering. In this section we are commanded to remember a specific historical event, and are enjoined to annihilate the tribe of Amalek from the face of the earth.¹

Why? The Torah records the reason. The Jewish people had just crossed the Sea of Reeds (mistranslated as the 'Red Sea'). This event is described in detail in the book of Exodus, and was seen in both its time (if we are to believe the Torah literally) and subsequent generations as the clearest Divine intervention in history. Pharaoh and all of his men

¹ While beyond the scope of this piece, to be sure this commandment has **no practical applications** and there is no tribe called Amalek today. Most thinkers have allegorized the commandment to fight against evil.

were ‘hurled into the sea’ (Exodus 15:5). When the other kings heard about these events how did they respond? According to the Song at the Sea (Ex. Ch. 15), they all trembled in fear. The entire world recognized the last line of the song “*Adonai Yimloch L’Olam Va’ed*”- God shall reign for ever and ever. The world recognized the One True King of this world. It was *this* King that liberated slaves, executed justice, and provided a moral law to the world. *For a minute, the entire world understood this reality.* However, it was only for a moment, a portent of a future messianic age.

Only weeks later, while wandering in the desert, the Amalekites engage the Israelites in battle in a place called Refidim. According to chapter 17 in Exodus, there is no reason and no provocation.² According to the recounting of the event in Deuteronomy, they simply ‘happened upon the way’ and attack from the rear cutting down all of the stragglers. The rabbis pick up on the words, they “happened upon the way”, remarking that the Amalekites represented a *Weltanschauung* of ‘*mikreh*’- that is to say, *everything in the world is arbitrary and by chance. There is no judge, no justice, and no higher order to our world.* The Amalekites therefore denied the reality which was affirmed through the splitting of the Sea of Reeds, and sowed doubts in the hearts and minds of others.

The Israelites and Amalekites battle throughout the night.³ Joshua leads the troops, while Moses stands atop a mountain with his hands raised to the heavens. The intensity of the battle is pronounced, and represented by the arms of Moses, which become heavy and must be supported by Aaron and Chur (Aaron’s Grandson) throughout the dark night. When his hands are raised heavenward the Israelites surge, but when his hands go down the Amalekites dominate. The image is striking: as long as Moses affirms God’s presence and the people look heavenward they are strengthened. If his hands are lowered, the people lose faith and the Amalekites- and the forces which they represent- prevail.

In the end however, the Israelites are victorious, but the story does not end. God enjoins the Jewish people to utterly erase the memory of this people, concluding with the following cryptic phrase: “For the hand [of Amalek] is on the throne of God (*kes yah*), God maintains a war against Amalek from generation to generation.” (Exodus 17:16) Now what is striking here is the facts that while the war seemed to be directed at the Jewish people, the reason for the command is that the Amalekites *were really waging war against God.* While there are various translations of the aforementioned verse, the above translation reflects Rashi, who quotes a rabbinic tradition that notes the defective spelling of both God’s name (should say the unutterable Divine name *Yah- weh*) and God’s throne (should say *kisei*), to reflect the fact that as long as Amalek exists in this world, *God’s kingdom is incomplete.*

² The rabbis however give many explanations including the fact that the Jewish people’s own lack of faith in God in the preceding episode (see Exodus 17:1-7; Rashi to 17:8) opened the door for Amalek to attack. If true, Amalek is not so much a physical entity, as it is an internal force within the soul of each person.

³ This battle is very reminiscent of the battle between Jacob and the angel, and there are literary parallels between the two stories. According to rabbinic tradition, the angel Jacob battles is the spirit of Esau, the great grandfather of Amalek.

In other words, on one level Amalek and all of their anti-Semitic descendants are enemies of Israel, *but on a deeper level they are enemies of God. The Jewish people through their acceptance of the Torah testify to God in their private and public life, and therefore are the targets of those who would deny God's majesty.*

It is this cosmic conflict which underscores the Shabbat Zakhor Torah reading::

Remember what Amalek did to you by the way, when you came out of Egypt. How they met you by the way, and smote those in the back, and the feeble, when you were tired *and they feared not God.* Therefore it shall be, when the Lord your God has given you rest from all your enemies round about, in the land which the Lord they God gives thee for an inheritance to possess it that you shall blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under the heavens; you shall not forget! (Deut. 25:17-19)

Now from these verses it would seem that the obligation to destroy the nation of Amalek derives from an intertribal conflict. However, the phrase 'and they feared not God' refers to this much deeper significance.⁴

Seen against this historical background, the fact that Mordechai does not bow down is *highly significant.* Assimilated as they were, Mordechai refused to bow down to Haman because of what Haman represents. He represents a world view that does not fear God, because God does not exist. There is no higher justice, order, morality, or meaning. In this vacuum of ultimate values, in a world that is arbitrary and decided by 'the pick of the draw', order can be maintained only through brute power. Haman is the ideologue of this movement; Haman does not recognize God, because Haman sees himself as a god, and demands unqualified submission.

Haman wants the Jews destroyed because they are a subversive force that appeals to a higher authority, they are a people "whose laws are different from those of any other people and who do not obey the kings laws" and therefore "it is not in Your Majesty's interest to tolerate them," (Esther 3:8) Indeed, Haman understood only too well why Mordechai did not want to bow down, and for this very reason wanted to destroy the entire people and by extension God!

The modern parallels to the Nazi movement and the megalomania of Hitler are only all too obvious in this context. However, the spirit of Amalek is represented in leaders who have no fear or values, and rule over others with ruthless impunity. The Jewish people have always testified to the fact that all human beings are servants of God, and we are all called to a higher purpose and responsibility. All are creatures of God, and all have rights as well as responsibilities to one another.

⁴ This battle continues throughout the Bible, as King Saul, the ancestor of Mordechai himself, is commanded to destroy the Amalekites in the first book of Samuel. (This is the haftarah read on Shabbat Zakhor.) He in fact does, but in his misplaced mercy spares the king, Agag. For this reason, God reject Saul as King and chooses David. The descendent of Agag is none other than Haman!

In a culture based upon power, there is only the strong and the weak, the rich and the poor, the dominator and the dominated.⁵ In this type of society, the poor, elderly, widows, orphans, and slaves are often the most abused, the most oppressed, as they have no recourse. However, the Jewish God is the God of slaves, the God of the oppressed, and the God the downtrodden. The Torah commands us to give special attention to all of these people, *because of the very fact that they are vulnerable*.

For this reason on Purim the rabbis commanded us to give *Matanot La'evyonim*, gifts to the poor. It is a response to the pagan culture of Achashverosh and Haman which celebrated power and consumption, a world without 'the fear of God'. The Jewish people are commanded to 'perfect the world under the kingdom of God'. As God defends the weakest, so must we in our collective festivities. (This is also the way we begin our seder, the story of our liberation, by inviting all those who are hungry to come and eat.)

It is this fact, that the Jewish people have been- and are- a countercultural force, which is the source of our strength, but also the source of our suffering. Purim reflects our ultimate mission, but also points to the very painful price we have paid for it. In our celebration we simultaneously attest to this, but also mask it, because the truth is too tragic for us- and the world.

Wishing all of you a freiliche Purim

⁵ In fact, it has been pointed out that at the end of the book, no real transformation has occurred. Mordechai inherits the house of Haman, and the Jews do to their enemies what there enemies had planned to do to them. The kingdom of Achasverosh is still defined by this ethic of power, and the victory of Purim is at best provisional.