

Remember Amalek – A Lesson in Divine Providence

In Memory of the fallen Torah Students of Mercaz HaRav, HY"D

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I was in my rabbinical class just finishing the evening prayers as the sounds of automatic gunfire rang out through the Yeshiva. We were in the classroom directly above the Library which turned out to be the killer's target. As we lay on the floor bracing furniture against the doors to insure he didn't enter, we could only imagine the horror he was wreaking in the rest of the Yeshiva. We were unarmed and could only wait and pray that help arrive as soon as possible. We called the police, but it was only thanks to a man named Dadon and an off-duty officer named Shapira who neutralized the killer. When the security forces finally did arrive, they performed a search of the building and found us sitting on the floor in the dark. As they whisked us out of the building, we gained a first hand glimpse of the horrific handiwork the killer had wrought. We had been spared only by the fact that we were delayed in finding a tenth man to make our minyan. Had we finished praying one minute earlier we would have found ourselves in the path of the killer.

As I was driven home by my daughters, the gnawing question of why bad things happen to good people was now magnified by the fact that murder was perpetrated against young Torah Students in the midst of Torah learning in the middle of a Torah Academy. I offer this essay as an attempt to come to grips with this dilemma.

“The Torah is a tree of life to those who grasp hold of it” (Mishlei 3:18).¹ Yet,

Eight Torah students, in the midst of learning Torah in a Torah Academy, were mercilessly gunned down in cold blood by a raging beast known as Amalek.

“Righteousness (tzedaka) delivers from death” (Mishlei 10:2). On this the Zohar (Miketz 199a) interprets “tzedaka” as the “Torah”², stating, “those who occupy themselves with the study of Torah and know its ways to strive in them [are saved from death]³.”⁴ Yet,

¹ Both Ibn Ezra and Metzudat David explain the verse as referring to life in this world.

² Though in the following paragraph the Zohar explains that “tzedaka” refers both to charity and to Torah study.

³ Matok Midevash (ibid.).

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The Rambam (Moreh Nevuchim III:17, p.287) explains that, “Divine Providence is connected with Divine intellectual influence, and the same beings which are benefited by the later so as to become intellectual, and to comprehend things comprehensible to rational beings, are also under the control of Divine Providence.” Thus, to the degree that one is connected to God intellectually one is privy to his protection. The Zohar (Aharei 61a) explains that, indeed, knowledge of the Torah means union with God. Yet,

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How are we to reconcile these statements of special divine providence with the bloody reality to which we must bear painful witness? The answer lies in the date of the attack: Rosh Hodesh Adar.

Rosh Hodesh Adar

Every Rosh Hodesh is a time of joy in that the beginning of the new moon symbolizes renewal and rejuvenation. Yet Rosh Hodesh is also a time when the moon is not visible, and as such, it is a time of darkness symbolizing the reign of evil. The Zohar (Vayera 114b) explains: “ ‘Blow the shofar at the new moon, at the time of its covering for our feast’ (Tehillim 81:4). The word ‘covering’ indicates the time when the moon is invisible. For at that time the evil serpent is in power and is able to do hurt to the world.” The dual nature of the day is evident in the verse itself: “the covering” – i.e., darkness, evil, “of our festival” – i.e., joy, celebration.

Similar to the dual nature of Rosh Hodesh is the dual nature of the month of Adar.⁵ Adar is a month of great joy in which we celebrate the victory of good over evil. But on the other hand it is a month when we fast over the evil designs of Amalek. Indeed it is the month that we read Parshat “Zachor” denoting the biblical commandment to remember the evil that was, and still is, perpetrated by Amalek.⁶ We remember that in every generation Amalek seeks to uproot Israel from the world; we remember that “God’s war against Amalek is from generation to generation” – till the end of time (Rashi, *ibid.*).

Free Will and Evil

R. Hirsch (Ex. 17:16) explains that the battle against Amalek is really a battle over man’s allegiance, over whether Man will obey God or the dictates of his own rationale:

⁴ Similarly Zohar (Vayehi 230b). Zohar (Terumah 165b) speaks of doing the 613 to obtain providence. Zohar (Pekudei 225b) speaks of Israel’s imperviousness to the attacks of the nations when Israel is attached to God.

⁵ Perhaps this dual nature is expressed in that Adar includes both Moses’ birthday and Yartzeit.

⁶ We fulfill the biblical commandment to remember to blot out Amalek by reading the relevant portion of the Torah (Dev. 25) on the Shabbat before Purim. However, “[t]his mitzvah will be fulfilled completely, only when we shall have caused his memory to perish, and his name to be erased from the world...” (E. Kitov, *The Book of Our Heritage*, Adar, p. 31).

“God’s name is not complete, nor his throne complete, until the memory of Amalek will be lost” (Midrash Tehillim 9). God [until] then only rules in Nature, but not in Mankind. At most God’s mastery is recognized and acknowledged as being over Nature, but not as being over the world of Man, as long as Man does not subordinate his actions to God’s Will, as long as the ideal of Man’s greatness is fixed on might and power, and not on showing his homage to God by completely carrying out His Law of Morality.

Articulated here is the idea that while Man has little difficulty to acknowledge that nature is beyond his control, beyond his definition, morality, on the other hand, is very much seen to be in the purview of Man’s definition. As such, this is the only area where man truly exercises his free will. That is, man expresses his free will in his decision to either act according to his own reason and definitions of right and wrong, which according to Hirsch devolve to “might and power”, or to defer to God’s definition of morality. In the words of the Gemara (Ber. 33b), “Everything is in the hands of heaven except for the fear of heaven.”

The ability to exercise such a choice, a choice between good and evil, demands by definition the existence of evil and by extension, necessitates a people who are the purveyors of that evil. Those people are known as Amalek. And let it be clear that though Amalek was a specific people, the verses commanding us to destroy them state that we are to blot out the “Memory of Amalek”.⁷ Consequently, R. Hirsch (Ex. 17:14) explains this epithet as follows:

It is not Amalek who is so pernicious for the moral future of mankind but “zecher amalek”, the glorifying of the memory of Amalek which is the danger. As long as the annals of humanity cover the memory of the heroes of the sword with glory, as long as those that throttle and murder the happiness of mankind are not buried in oblivion, [then] so long will each successive generation look up in worship to these “great ones” of violence and force, and their memory will awaken the desire to emulate these heroes, and acquire equal glory by equal violence and force. Only when the divine laws and morals have become the sole criterion as to the worth of the greatest and smallest of men, ... then and only then will the reign of Amalek cease forever in the world....

The inherent evil in the world necessary for free will acceptance of divine morality, though part and parcel of the very concept of Creation,⁸ is nevertheless a stain on a loving God who wants only good for his creations. So much so is this negative aspect of Creation acknowledged, that God Himself offers, as it were, a “sin offering” as atonement for the evil He created. And when does He offer this sacrifice? The Gemara (Shavuot 9b) explains that it is on none other than Rosh Hodesh, when light is diminished and evil reigns supreme.

God thus acknowledges the tragic consequences of evil, but can do little more than offer a sacrifice in atonement. The reason is because if God were to do more to end evil, He would be removing from Man the very task He entrusted to him, the very thing which

⁷ See also R. Soloveitchik (Reflections of the Rav, Vol.1., p. 180) who explains that Amalek are any people that seek the destruction of Israel.

⁸ Isaiah 45:7.

makes Man a creation special from the animal. Man is to be a partner in creation, to complete creation, to bring perfection through his own efforts.⁹ We are to hope in the help of the Lord, but we are to act ourselves – “Hope in the Lord, and be strong and courageous of heart, and hope in the Lord” (Tehillim 27:14).

Megillat Esther

Nowhere is this paradigm of existence more pronounced than in the story of Megillat Ester read on Purim.¹⁰ The Megilla tells the story of Amalek seeking to annihilate the Jewish people. Amalek succeeds in obtaining the King’s seal on a decree to kill the Jews. The Jewish people, for their part, fast and pray that Esther’s efforts to annul the decree succeed. However, even this they were not able to obtain, for they are told, “the decree of the King cannot be overturned” (Esther 8:8). And why not?! Since when is a sovereign ruler limited in his ability to issue an annulment?!¹¹ The answer is that we are not talking about just any king; for the Midrash teaches that when the title “The King” appears in the Megilla, it can be interpreted to refer to The King of Kings, God Himself.¹² And so the decree that could not be annulled is God’s decree of Creation, the decree of free will, the decree that evil must have free reign.

What the Jews were able to obtain was the permission to fight back. This was God’s answer to their fasting and prayers: permission to fight evil on its own terms. And just as they had to fight evil in their day, so too has it been in every generation, our generation being no different. Man must take up arms, real arms, against real evil that will not go away with appeasement and peace negotiations.

The story of the Megilla ends with the celebration of the victory of the Jews over their enemies. We rejoice however, not at our own strength, for we realize that we could never have been victorious without the behind-the-scenes help of God. Indeed, the story of the Megilla, filled with numerous twists and turns, is one in which man does everything he can but whose successes are clearly predicated on miraculous “chance” circumstances. The Megilla then is a story wherein God’s name appears not in even one twist, yet wherein God’s hidden hand begs recognition at every turn.

This knowledge that God works behind the scenes to make our efforts successful is the source of our joy on Purim, and in Adar in general. The Gemara teaches “Increase joy when Adar begins” (Tanit 29a). However we do not increase in frivolity for frivolities sake. Rather, on Adar we celebrate Jewish eternity guaranteed by the Eternal One Himself. We increase our joy in the sober awareness that without God’s continuous (i.e., miraculous)¹³ help, the Jewish nation could not survive the onslaught that Amalek imposes.

⁹ See Midrash Tanhuma (Tazria 7); Sefer Hahinuch, Mitzvah #2.

¹⁰ For a thorough analysis of the Megilla see Y. Hazoni, *The Dawn*, Shalem Press, Jerusalem, 2000.

¹¹ And certainly this “irrevocability” rule was not known, for if so, Mordechai and Esther, as part of the royal court, surely would not have sought precisely the remedy of annulment!

¹² Esther Rabba 3:10.

¹³ Rashi (ibid.).

There is a legend that King Fredric the Great asked a Lutheran pastor for proof of God's existence, to which the pastor answered simply, "the Jews".¹⁴ No theory of history can explain the persistence of a people who finds itself at the forefront of the battle against evil.¹⁵ It is only the guarantee of the Creator that can explain Israel's continued existence. But that guarantee extends only to the nation as a whole and not to individuals. "For God will not abandon His nation, nor forsake His heritage" (Tehillim 94:14). No individual can confidently assume a protected existence – not even a Torah scholar, learning Torah, in a Torah academy.

Trust in Providence

So what then is the purpose of all the promises that Torah study offers special divine providence?¹⁶ Perhaps we can say that, though the Torah does provide a path to righteousness and life in general, there are nevertheless times which are beyond man's comprehension. At such times we must lament as did the Psalmist: "Difficult¹⁷ is the death of the righteous in the eyes of God" (Tehillim 116:15).

The Zohar (Toldot 142a) provides what I believe to be the most succinct and comprehensive theological statement on this issue in the form of simple prudent advice: "A man should not confidently affirm – God will deliver me or will do for me this or that – but rather he should endeavor to fulfill the precepts, walk the path of truth, and put trust in Him that He will help." That is to say, we do not know, cannot know, the system by which God runs the world; the only thing we can be sure of, is that everything is taken in to account by the Judge of all the earth and we should strive to fulfill His will, and as such, trust that He will help.

Conclusion

As mentioned by the Midrash, God's throne is not complete until Amalek is destroyed. The fight against Amalek is really a fight for the perfection of the world, it is a fight for God's presence in the world. It is a fight that man must wage inside himself to acknowledge and act according to God's will. But it is also a fight that man must wage against all those who wield "might and power" to avoid "carrying out His Law of Morality."

The victory of this battle is embodied in the building of the Holy Temple, the Beit HaMikdash – symbolizing God's dwelling amongst man as a result of Man's acceptance

¹⁴ R. A. Kaplan, *The Infinite Light*, p.12

¹⁵ Nicholas Berdyaev, *The Meaning of History*, pp.86-7. R. Aryeh Kaplan, *The Infinite Light*, p.13. Dennis Prager, *The Nine Questions People Ask About Judaism*, p.28.

¹⁶ The Zohar offers primarily two responses which we will make mention for the sake of completeness: (1) at a time of distress in the world, the Satan, angel of destruction, is given free reign, at which time both wicked and righteous suffer the same fate. Indeed, many can be taken without justice being served. (See esp. Vayera 113a; also Vayera 119a, Vayera 107b, Miketz 197b, Bo 36a, Vayakhel 196a, Metzora 54b). (2) In several places the Zohar explains that "the righteous are taken before their time due to the sins of the generation" (Shmot 10b), or to "atone for the sins of the generation" (Achrei 56b). The Zohar explains that through the merits of the righteous and the children who learn Torah, atonement is made for the sins of the generation. And if there is yet more sin than can be so atoned, then God takes them from the world "though there is no sin in them" (Vayikra 17b).

¹⁷ The commentators translate "yakar" as "difficult" (see Radak, Metzudat David, Metzudat Zion).

of His will. It was precisely this building that Amalek, led by Haman, sought to derail.¹⁸ As it was then, so it is today, where Amalek attacked our Mikdash Mei'at, our small Holy Temple, the Yeshiva, center of Torah learning, where all that is sought within these walls is to bring God's will, God's morality, God's peace, to the world.

And so it was on Rosh Hodesh Adar, a time of good mixed with evil, that our rejoicing was mixed with tears. We cry bitterly over the loss of our holy people, our holy Torah students, at the hands of Amalek. But we rejoice in the Divine promise that no matter what designs the evil Amaleks of the world will conspire, they will never destroy the nation of Israel. In the words of the prophet from Haftarat "Zachor", "*Netzab Yisrael Lo Yishaker*" – The eternity of the people of Israel is guaranteed by God (Shmuel I 15:29).¹⁹

¹⁸ Menashe Lehman, *Understanding the Background to Purim*, Masot U'Masaot, Mossad HaRav Kook, Jerusalem, 1982, pp.46-52.

¹⁹ See esp. Ralbag (ibid.).