

BESHALACH (EXODUS 13:17-17:16)

Restoring 'G__'s Thr__

2001 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplovitz

Amalek. The very mention of the name awakens within the Jew the memory of countless persecutions, pogroms, and holocausts. Amalek is the symbol of the worst of anti-Semitism. Amalek, the grandson of Jacob's twin brother and archenemy Esau, was surely a source of pride and joy to his evil grandfather. Amalek was the ancestor of the nation that attacked the Israelites shortly after their Exodus from Egypt. Haman of Purim fame was a descendant of Amalek. Agag, an Amalekite king, was a cruel and heartless murderer. There is a tradition in the name of the Vilna Gaon (who lived in the 1700's) that the Germans are descendants of Amalek (Not a surprising tradition, considering the Amalek-like brutality that the Germans demonstrated a half century ago.)

Amalek has declared war against Israel, and G-d has declared war against Amalek. We symbolically obliterate the memory of Amalek by making noise on Purim whenever Haman's name is mentioned. Some Torah scribes test a new pen by writing the name "Amalek" and then crossing it out. Some people write "Amalek" or "Haman" on the bottom of their shoes, thereby erasing the name as they walk.

Why this tremendous enmity for Amalek? Biblical and later history is replete with descriptions of terrible acts perpetrated against our People by many nations. Look at the Egyptians and what they did to us. Yet the Torah tells us not to despise them. (Deuteronomy, 23:8) The same verse tells us not to hate Edomites, also descendants of Esau! The world is filled with enemies of Israel. Why is Amalek singled out for a special Divine grudge?

This week we read of the miracle of the Splitting of the Red Sea. In order to save the Israelites from the pursuing Egyptians, G-d "zipped open" the sea to allow the Israelites to escape, and then closed it on the pursuing Egyptians. At that time, when the nations of the world saw what G-d had done for us, they were united in their fear of the Israelites. They didn't love us, but at least they respected us.

Only Amalek had the Chutzpah to attack. The Torah tells us that Joshua organized a military force to fight back and force the Amalekites to retreat. After the battle G-d took a divine oath, with "*the Hand on G-d's Throne, G-d will be at war with Amalek for all generations.*" (Exodus, 17:16) Just as people can swear by the Torah or something else holy, G-d chose to use His throne as the item upon which to place "His Hand."

The Talmud (Midrash Tanchuma, Ki Setze, 11) points out that the Torah uses an unusual grammatical form in writing the words "G-d's Throne." The Hebrew word for throne, or chair, is "Kisay." The Torah abbreviates the word and writes "Kase." It's basically the same word, but the letter "Aleph" is missing. The Hebrew word for "G-d" is usually spelled with four letters: *Yud, Hey, Vuv, and Hey*." This word, too, is abbreviated in this passage to just the first two letters.

This re-spelling of words is the approximate equivalent of writing "G-d's Throne" as "**G**__'s **Thr**__." Both words are only partially spelled!

The Midrash explains the partial spelling of the words "G-d" and "Throne" in reference to G-d's war with Amalek. What G-d is telling Moses is that "Neither My **Name** nor My **Throne** will be complete as long as Amalek is around!"

Why would G-d's name be incomplete with Amalek around? Is it possible that Amalek has the power to affect G-d??! How could that be?

The Sifsei Chachomim explains that NOTHING could affect G-d's Name and His throne. Rather, what the Midrash is telling us is that as long as Amalek exists, OUR PERCEPTION of G-d is diminished.

Many years ago Rabbi Shmuel Geller, a childhood friend from my hometown of Norwich, Connecticut, now of Jerusalem, shared the following interpretation:

The four letters of G-d's name, *Yud, Hey, Vuv, and Hey*, can be read as initials of the four words, *****Yism'chu **Hashomayim V'sagel *Haaretz..., the Heavens will be glad, and the Earth will rejoice...*" (Psalms, 96:11) This verse refers to how Heaven and all of Creation carry out the will of G-d. This verse points out how G-d is involved in all the intricate functions of Nature.

This is a concept that Amalek rejected. Amalek believed that G-d had created the world, but is really not interested in the day-to-day functions of Creation. The so-called "Watchmaker Theory" -- A watchmaker can make a watch and then go away and never have any other involvement with the watch; it will continue to function. In the same way, G-d created the world, but then He left town; He retired and moved to Florida!

Amalek accepted the first two letters of G-d's name: ***Yud* and ***Hey*, which stand for *****Yism'chu *Hashomayim, the Heavens will be glad.*" Amalek could tolerate the fact that there is a G-d in Heaven who created the world. But he refused to recognize the second two letters, ***Vuv* and ***Hey*, which stand for *****V'sagel *Haaretz, and the Earth will rejoice...*" As far as Amalek was concerned, G-d is not

at all involved in what we do and why we do it. That's why Amalek had no compunctions about attacking the nation that was held in awe by the rest of the world. Quite simply, Amalek "*had no fear of G-d.*" (Deuteronomy, 25:17)

This is the reason for G-d's (and our!) unending battle against the Amaleks of the world. The Torah teaches us that G-d is intimately occupied in every aspect of our lives. He is NOT a watchmaker who creates and goes away. He is like an electrical generator attached to a waterfall -- if the water stops flowing, the lights go out! He created the world way back in Genesis 1:1, and continues to re-create the world every day.

That's why we will celebrate Tu B'Shevat, the New Year for Trees, this week. G-d controls nature. That's why there is a blessing that is recited when leaving the bathroom; G-d controls our health. That's why many people have the custom of reading part of this week's Torah Reading, the section dealing with Manna from Heaven, (16:4-36) every day. G-d controls our income. That's why we pray for peace in Israel and the world. One of G-d's names is Shalom.

Let us all look forward to the day when the whole world will recognize that G-d is One, and His name is One.

Have a great Shabbos.

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