

Haman the Agagite: Enemy of the Jews

Deuteronomy 25: 17-19

On the Shabbat before Purim, generally known as Shabbat Parashat Zachor, Jews around the world gather in their synagogues to hear Deut 25:17-19 read at the end of the Torah reading: Remember what the Amalekites did to you along the way when you came out of Egypt. When you were weary and worn out, they met you on your journey and cut off all who were lagging behind; they had no fear of God. When ADONAI your God gives you rest from all the enemies around you in the Land He is giving you to possess as an inheritance, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget!

What must the children of Isra'el remember? Deuteronomy 25:17-19 refers to an incident in Exodus 17:8-16, just after the Israelites crossed the Sea of Reeds (see my commentary on Exodus Cv - The Amalekites Came and Attacked the Israelites at Rephidim). As they traveled in the desert on their third day after leaving Egypt, the army of Amalek swooped down from behind them, attacking the old and the weak that were struggling to keep up. The command to remember Amalek, however, wasn't merely remembering that he attacked the Jews in the wilderness; it is remembering that they would do away with the Amalekites altogether.

Parashat Zachor is read on the Shabbat before Purim because Haman was a direct descendant of Amalek. Like his forefathers, Haman was the sworn enemy of the Jews. He wanted to exterminate the entire Jewish nation. Nothing could change his mind because he understood that children of Isra'el represented ADONAI whom he hated. In order to understand Haman's motives and the commandment of Zachor, we need to learn more about Amalek's story.

Amalek was a real person who later became the leader of a clan, which became a nation of the same name, the Amalekites. Amalek was a grandson of Jacob's brother Esau (see my commentary on Genesis Ip - Esau's Sons and Grandsons). Now Timna was a concubine to Elifaz, son of Esau, and she gave birth to Amalek. Later we learn the Timna was the sister of Lotan who was the chieftain of the land of Seir where Esau went to live (see my commentary on Genesis Ir - The Sons of Seir the Horite). Thus, we see that Amalek was the offspring of two powerful families, yet he was only the son of a concubine. The rabbis teach that Amalek was raised in the tents of Esau, constantly hearing his grandfather bemoan his fate and how his brother, Jacob, had stolen his birthright (see my commentary on Genesis Gn - Then Jacob Gave Esau Some Lentil Stew and Esau Despised His Birthright). Amalek absorbed Esau's hatred of the children of Jacob, thus it became the nature of the Amalekites to hate the Jews.

As noted above, three days after the crossing of the Sea of Reeds, the **Amalekites** traveled a long way in order to attack the Israelites from behind. But the Jews miraculously defeated the **Amalekites** in a one-day war. This battle was significant because it showed the true nature of the **Amalekites**. After all the miracles God had performed, not one nation had dared to attack the Jews except **Amalek**. Far from being courageous, they attacked the weak stragglers from behind. Every nation has certain noticeable character traits. **The Amalekites** were known for an all-consuming love of self and a reliance on violence to prove their supposed superiority. Their underlying strategy was always, "might makes right." **The rabbis teach that Amalek never denied the existence of the LORD or His special relationship with the Jewish people. They just didn't care. In fact, the very understanding of ADONAI and His relationship with the Israelites was exactly why they felt they needed to attack.**

Not long after the unified Kingdom of Isra'el was formed under the reign of King Saul, the king, at the direction of the prophet Samuel (**First Samuel 15:1-3**), gathered his army to fulfill the biblical commandment to wipe out the **Amalekites**. King Saul and the Israelites won the decisive, virtually destroying the entire nation. He took Agag king of the **Amalekites** alive. Saul was to spare not even one of the **Amalekites** and show no pity. **But Saul and the army spared Agag and the best of the sheep and cattle, the fat calves and lambs - everything that was good. These they were unwilling to destroy completely, but everything that was despised and weak they totally destroyed (15:8-9).** By having mercy on Agag, Saul had sinned against God. That act of disobedience in a holy war disqualified Saul from being Isra'el's king.

The very next morning, Samuel went to Saul and informed him that ADONAI was angered by his disobedience and not fulfilling His commandment to completely destroy the **Amalekites**. After a brief and futile denial by Saul, the king admitted his sin. Then Samuel ordered Agag brought to him. The prophet proceeded to cut Agag to pieces, but the damage had already been done. **The rabbis teach us that in one night, Agag had relations with a maidservant who later gave birth to a son. Consequently, over a thousand years later the Jews were faced with mortal danger from Haman the Agagite.** It is interesting to note that just as Haman was a descendant of Agag, both Mordecai and Esther were descendants of King Saul and the tribe of Benjamin.

Because of Saul's failure, the **Amalekites** continued to plague Isra'el throughout her history. **The Talmud tells us that the wording in Deuteronomy 25:18, *asher kar'cha be'derech*, literally means that the Amalekites happened upon the Jews. The rabbis teach that this explains the personality of the Amalekite people. They represent the philosophy of chance, of the haphazard dictates of fate and destiny, which opposes the**

Jewish belief that God alone is sovereign in the universe. But the view of the Amalekites is in opposition to the concept that there is a purpose for mankind, or creation itself. Once again, opposite of the Jewish belief.

These differences between the Amalekites and the Jews can be clearly seen all the way back to their national forefathers, Esau and Jacob. Esau was a hunter. He lived for the thrill of the hunt, the risk of danger and for instantaneous pleasure. Life had no particular purpose in Esau's mind, which was demonstrated by his craving for Jacob's stew and his willingness to forfeit his birthright merely because he was hungry at the moment, saying: **What is the birthright to me?** Jacob, on the other hand, planned for the future. He lived in tents, meaning he went into the family business and became a shepherd (see my commentary on **Genesis Gn - Then Jacob Gave Esau Some Lentil Stew and Esau Despised His Birthright**). He spent years learning his trade. He was in the line of blessing and ADONAI blessed him by making him the father of twelve sons, which became twelve tribes, the future nation of Isra'el.

The attack by the Amalekites on the Jews after they crossed the Sea of Reeds was motivated by this hatred of the Israelite's belief in YHWH. Undoubtedly the Amalekites and the entire world had heard of the ten plagues that had struck Egypt, but they didn't really believe that they had happened. While no other nation dared to attack the Israelites, the Amalekites needed to prove that "might makes right" was still the natural order of the world. While they were defeated, they certainly reduced the fear of other nations toward the Jewish people. **The Midrash describes it as if the Amalekites cooled a hot bath, scalding themselves, but encouraging others to enter.**

Haman's attempt to destroy the Israelites was a direct result of the age-old battle between the Amalekites and the Jews. As a descendant of Agag, King of Amalek, Haman is abundantly aware of the Israelite victory over the Amalekites, both in the wilderness and in the time of King Saul. Haman's conflict with Mordecai, however, was based on the worldview of both nations. Just as in the days of the wilderness wanderings, Mordecai, or the Jews, stood as a reflection of the divine hand of God in the world. As Haman himself pointed out to King Ahasuerus, no other nation was so scattered, yet so unified (**Esther 3:8**). And Mordecai defied Haman's belief that "might makes right," by refusing to bow to him just because he was the prime minister. While the king of the land may have commanded all to bow down to Haman, the King of the Universe commanded all to bow to no one but Him. Thru *the Megillah* there is an underlying struggle of Haman trying to show that he controls his own destiny, the destiny of the empire, only to be foiled by the subtle plans of ADONAI.