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In Memory of Rabbi Abraham Leibtag
Shiurim in Chumash & Navi by Menachem Leibtag

Likrat Shabbat ZACHOR - 5768
"Wiping out AMALEK" - Vendetta or Virtue?

Had it not been for our custom to read Parshat Zachor every year, the nation of Amalek most probably would have been long forgotten. So what's the logic behind the Torah's 'eternal' command to 'wipe out their memory'?

In the following shiur, we attempt to answer this question, by comparing this commandment of "zachor" [to remember Amalek] with the other commandments of "zachor" in Sefer Devarim.

PARSHAT ZACHOR IN THE CONTEXT OF SEFER DEVARIM

Parshat Zachor (Devarim 25:17-19) is only one of the numerous mitzvot that Moshe Rabeinu teaches Bnei Yisrael in the "chukim u'mishpatim" section (chapters 12--26) of his 'farewell address' in Sefer Devarim. In our shiurim on Sefer Devarim, we explained how those laws, which Moshe Rabeinu is now teaching to the new generation - were first given to him by God during the first forty days, as an integral part of "brit Sinai". We also explained how those laws provided guidelines for exemplary behavior - as adherence to these laws would transform the nation into a "mamlechet kohanim v'goy kadosh" (see Shmot 19:5-6 & Devarim 26:16-19), i.e. a people designated to represent God - the very essence of the covenant at Mount Sinai.

[For example, that section includes laws to establish an exemplary judicial system (16:18-17:13), a just economic system (chapters 14-15), and special laws for how God's nation goes to war (chapter 20). It also contains many laws relating to social justice (see chapters 22-25).]

It is in this context that we must approach our study of the underlying meaning of "zachor" in Parshat Zachor.

TWO OTHER "ZACHOR"'s

One chapter before Parshat Zachor, we find numerous mitzvot that remind us of our need to help the poor and needy, such as the orphan, widow and stranger (see Devarim 24:10-22). As a 'motivator' to encourage the people of Israel to keep these laws, Moshe Rabeinu reminds the people twice - "**And you should remember** - that you were also once a slave in Egypt" (see 24:18 & 24:22, in their context).

Clearly, this commandment to 'remember that you were once a slave in Egypt' is not to be understood as an independent commandment - to simply remember a historical event. Rather it serves as a statement of motivation, reminding God's special nation of their need to be extra sensitive to the needs of the downtrodden - especially as they themselves were once taken advantage of by the Egyptians (compare with Shmot 23:9 and Devarim 10:16-19!)

Earlier in chapter 24, we find yet another commandment to "**remember what God had done to Miriam**" (see 24:8-9). According to Ramban's beautiful interpretation of this pasuk, this is to be understood as a positive commandment not to speak "lashon harah" [evil speech]. Once again we find a commandment to remember a historical event, for the primary purpose of improving once personal behavior. In other words, when we 'remember' what God did to Miriam, that 'memory' will cause us to be more careful in our daily conversations about other people.

REMEMBER WHAT AMALEK DID

In this context, one can offer a very similar approach to the explanation of the opening two psukim of Parshat Zachor. We must remember what Amalek did to us, i.e. how they attacked the back lines of our camp; specifically those who were tired and unprotected (see our TSC shiur on this topic on Parshat Beshalach, especially in regard to the phrase "v'lo yarey Elokim").

We must remind ourselves of this despicable type of behavior, not simply to increase our hatred of that nation, but rather to increase our disgust from that type of behavior.

This approach neatly explains why this mitzvah continues to have meaning, even way after there are no more 'genetic traces' of Amalek left. The emphasis is not on our need to remember to kill Amalek, but rather to remember their terrible behavior - to remind ourselves how we should not act. In this manner, it becomes yet another of one of the many mitzvot of Sefer Devarim, where the active memory of certain historical events serve to shape the very character of Am Yisrael as God's model nation.

A JOB FOR THE KING

The final pasuk of Parshat Zachor (see 25:19) leaves us with an interesting question. Why does the commandment to wipe out Amalek apply only after we have achieved rest from our enemies that surround us?

If Amalek is a nation who's entire existence is dedicated to looting and brutally stealing from those who are unprotected (such as innocent, but unprotected travelers on the international highways - see our shiur on Parshat Beshalach) - this type of phenomena cannot be uprooted by a single individual. Rather, it can only be accomplished by a sovereign nation - with an army and the necessary resources to engage in such combat. Hence, the practical application of the law only becomes feasible once the Jewish people establish themselves as a sovereign nation with a King. [See Rambam Hilchot Melachim 1:1-2, based on I Shmuel 15:1-4.]

However, even after our own country has achieved relative quiet and stability within its own borders, nonetheless, it remains our international responsibility to protect the 'unprotected travelers' in our region - from raiders such as Amalek. This may explain why the mitzvah to wipe out Amalek, is only incumbent on the King; while the mitzvah to remember Amalek applies to every individual.

BETWEEN AMALEK & ISRAEL

If the Biblical Amalek represents a nation dedicated to taking advantage of the vulnerable and unprotected, the nation of Israel - especially according to the laws in Sefer Devarim - represents precisely the opposite type of behavior. While Amalek searches out the weak and unprotected - in order to loot and steal; the nation of God searches out for the weak and unprotected - in order to provide them with assistance and support. The individual Jew fights Amalek on a daily basis by the way he acts. He must **remember** what Amalek did [wrong], to remind himself how he should act [right].

Just as the memory of our slavery in Egypt and the acts of Miriam, serve as guides for our daily behavior, so too the memory of Amalek.

AMALEK & ISRAEL TODAY

Unfortunately, new forms of Amalek seem to appear in every generation. This last week, our people suffered terribly as eight innocent and unprotected Yeshiva students were gunned down by a terrorist in Jerusalem.

This year on Shabbat Zachor, it will be difficult not to remember that horrific incident. Nonetheless, we must also remember how the Jewish nation fights back. On the national level, God has blessed us with a sovereign nation with the military capability to fight this type of terror. And we must pray for the success of all their endeavors.

However, as individuals, we must also remember how we must act according to the guidelines of Sefer Devarim. Just as Mordechi & Esther instituted "mishloach manot ish l'yeyahu" & "matanot l'evyonim" - active acts of kindness- to remember the victory of the Jewish people over the Amalek of their time period - so too we must remember - to think of innovative ways to help the downtrodden of our own generation, in order to become worthy of God's help in our struggle with the Amalek of our own time period.

shabbat shalom,
menachem