

Parashat Beshalach 5776, 2016

Who Is Amalek?

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, HaRav Yosef Shemuel ben HaRav Reuven Aharon, David ben Elazar Yehoshua, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The end of our *parasha* focuses upon the epic battle between our nascent nation and the marauding desert tribe of Amalek:

Amalek came and fought with Israel in Rephidim. So Moses said to Joshua, “Pick men for us, and go out and fight against Amalek. Tomorrow I will stand on top of the hill with the staff of G-d in my hand.” Joshua did as Moses had told him, to fight against Amalek; and Moses, Aaron, and Hur ascended to the top of the hill. It came to pass that when Moses would raise his hand, Israel would prevail, and when he would lay down his hand, Amalek would prevail... Joshua weakened Amalek and his people with the edge of the sword. The L-rd said to Moses, “Inscribe this [as] a memorial in the book, and recite it into Joshua's ears, that I will surely obliterate the remembrance of Amalek from beneath the heavens.” Then Moses built an altar, and he named it “the L-rd is my miracle.” And he [Moses] said, “For there is a hand on the throne of the Eternal, [that there shall be] a war for the L-rd against Amalek from generation to generation.” (*Sefer Shemot* 16:8-11, 13-16 this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*, underlining my own)

In sum, there was a battle between Amalek and the Jewish people that was fought on both the physical and spiritual planes. Joshua was the general who commanded our people's troops, and Moses served as the viaduct through which G-d's protective beneficence flowed. The final *pasuk* (verse), “For there is a hand on the throne of the Eternal, [that there shall be] a war for the L-rd against Amalek from generation to generation,” is very difficult to understand, however, since the tribe of Amalek ceased to exist as an identifiable ethnicity thousands of years ago. If that is the case, how can there be “a war for the L-rd against Amalek from generation to generation?”

My rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as “the Rav” by his followers and disciples, answered this question in his famous essay of 1956 entitled: “*Kol Dodi Dofek.*” Therein, he presented a seminal idea learned from his father, Rav Moshe Soloveitchik (1879-1941) *zatzal*, regarding the future of the fledgling State of Israel:

Divine providence is testing us once again via the crisis that has overtaken the land of Israel. Let it be clearly stated: The matter does not just affect the political future of Israel. The designs of the Arabs are directed not just against the political sovereignty of the State of Israel but against the very existence of the *Yishuv* (settlement) in the land of Israel. They wish to destroy, heaven forbid, the entire community, “both men and women, infant and suckling, ox and sheep” (1 Samuel 15:3). At a Mizrahi convention I cited the view expressed by my father and master of blessed memory, that the proclamation, “The L-rd will have war with Amalek from generation to generation” (Exodus 17:16) does not only translate into the communal exercise of waging obligatory war against a specific race but includes as well the obligation to rise up as a community against any people or group that, filled with maniacal hatred, directs its enmity against Kenneset Israel [the Jewish people].

The Rav continued his development of the concept of Hashem’s war against Amalek by noting that our enemy is not a time-bound genealogically homogeneous entity, but rather, any group whose purpose and goal is the destruction of *klal Yisrael* (the Jewish people):

When a people emblazons on its banner, “Come, and let us cut them off from being a nation: that the name of Israel may be no more in remembrance” (Psalms 83:5) it becomes, thereby, Amalek. In the 1930's and 1940's the Nazis, with Hitler at their head, filled this role. They were the Amalekites, the standard-bearers of insane hatred and enmity during the era just past. (Pages 65-66 from the English translation entitled *Fate and Destiny*, underlining my own)

According to the opinion of Rav Moshe Soloveitchik, as presented and elaborated upon by the Rav, Amalek is not a tribe. Amalek is, instead, a state of mind. Consequently, Amalek has existed since time immemorial and, unfortunately, will continue to exist until *Mashiach Tzidkanu* (the true and righteous Messiah) arrives and destroys this force of evil in the world. As the Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204) states:

If a king will arise from the House of David who diligently contemplates the Torah and observes its *mitzvot* as prescribed by the Written Law and the Oral Law as David, his ancestor, will compel all of Israel to walk in (the way of the Torah) and rectify the breaches in its observance, **and fight the wars of G-d**, we may, with assurance, consider him Mashiach. If he succeeds in the above, builds the Temple in its place, and gathers the dispersed of Israel, he is definitely the Mashiach. (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Melachim* 11:4, translation, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger, bolding my own)

The Rav underscores this point in footnote 23, as found in the original Hebrew edition of “*Kol Dodi Dofek*”: “...Amalek still exists in the world. Go and see what the Torah says: ‘a war of Hashem with Amalek throughout all of the generations.’ If so, it is impossible that Amalek will be destroyed from this world before the arrival of the Messiah.”

Anti-Semitism, and the denial of the existence and supremacy of Hashem, are the principles by which Amalek lives. Moreover, he has one undeniable goal: to destroy each and every one of the Jewish people so that G-d’s name, *chas v’shalom* (G-d forbid), would be obliterated from the world. Therefore, we must ever be vigilant and stand shoulder to shoulder to ensure the physical and spiritual safety of our fellow Jews, wherever they may be. Perhaps, then, no truer expression was ever spoken by *Chazal* (our Sages of blessed memory) than *kol Yisrael arevim zeh l’zeh* (all of the Jewish people are responsible for one another). May these words, in our hearts and on our lips, serve as a beacon of light and a call to action forevermore. *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom,

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

They may also be found on YUTorah.org using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha’s name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email rdbe718@gmail.com.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on “*Tefilah: Haskafah* and Analysis,” may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.