

Understanding “Zachor”

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 Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shmuel David ben Moshe Halevy, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

This Shabbat we will read Parshiot Tetzaveh and Zachor. According to the *Shulchan Aruch, Orech Chaim* (146:2 and 685:7), this act enables one to fulfill two of the three *Taryag* (613) commandments associated with Amalek, as counted by the Rambam in his *Sefer HaMitzvot*: “*Zachor mah sheasah lanu Amalek*” (“Remember what Amalek did to us,” Positive Commandment 189) and “*Shehizharnu mishchoach mah sheasah lanu zerah Amalek*” (“We are warned not to forget what ‘the seed’ of Amalek did to us,” Negative Commandment 59).

Amalek personified malicious and unmitigated evil like no other group in history. As a result, they had a truly unique status, namely, no one from the ancient tribe of Amalek was ever allowed to convert to Judaism. The reason is clear; this ancient and now non-existent *tribe* went to war, so to speak, against G-d Himself. “...*milchamah l’Hashem b’Amalek m’dor dor*” (“...a war of Hashem against Amalek throughout all of the generations,” *Sefer Shemot* 17:16). Therefore, Parashat Zachor states, “*v’lo yarah Elokim*” (“...and he did not fear G-d”). In other words, Amalek acted as if G-d did not exist, as if there would be no reaction or response to malevolent and sadistic behavior. Hence, there must be a war throughout all generations against this representative of evil

incarnate. Moreover, this is why we are obligated, in the third Amalek-based commandant of the *Taryag Mitzvot*, to completely annihilate this tribe's name and all for which it stood.

At first blush, however, it appears difficult to maintain a strong emotional revulsion against a people that no longer exists. After all, according to *Mishnah Yadaim* 4:4 Sennacherib, the King of Assyria (720-683 BCE approx.), completely destroyed the cohesiveness of all the nations of his time. In sum, they were decimated and their members were "cast to the wind." Since that is the case, why does the Torah give us three separate and eternal mitzvot regarding a tribal entity that no longer exist?

My rebbi, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal*, known by his students as "the Rav," answered this question in his famous essay of 1956 entitled: "*Kol Dodi Dofak*." Therein, he presented a seminal idea learned from his father, Rav Moshe Soloveitchik *zatzal*:

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 (Rabbi Moses Soloveitchik) 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 Keneset Israel. 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. Today their place has been taken over by the mobs of Nasser and the Mufti. If we are silent now as well, I know not the verdict that will be issued against us by the G-d of justice. Do not rely on the "liberal" world's sense of equity. Those same righteous liberals were around fifteen years ago, and they looked with indifference upon the extermination of millions of people; they did not lift a finger. If,

heaven forbid, yet a second spectacle of blood were to take place before their very eyes, it is likely that they would not even lose a night's sleep over it. (Pages 65-66 from the English translation entitled *Fate and Destiny*)

According to the opinion of Rav Moshe Soloveitchik *zatzal*, as presented by the Rav *zatzal*, Amalek is not a tribe or an ethnic entity at all. Amalek is, in fact, a state of mind. As such, Amalek is not a time-bound entity. Amalek has existed since time immemorial and will continue to exist until *Mashiach Tzidkanu* (the true and righteous Messiah) comes and destroys this force of evil in the world. (See Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Melachim* 11:4 wherein the Rambam states the true messiah will fight *milchamot Hashem* – the wars of the L-rd) The Rav underscores this point in footnote 23, as found in the original Hebrew edition of “*Kol Dodi Dofak*”: “...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.” Thus, the Rav writes: “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.”

Make no mistake about it, the ever-changing persona of Amalek has one incontrovertible goal: to destroy each and everyone one of the Jewish people so that G-d's name, *chas v'shalom*, would be obliterated from the world. Anti-Semitism, coupled with the rejection of the existence and supremacy of Hashem, are the principles by which Amalek lives. As Hashem's authentic witnesses, our very existence belies the specious “beliefs” of the Amalekites for all time. If so, it behooves us to fight them with every tool at our disposal. Yet, how can we stand up and join Hashem in His continuous struggle against the forces

of ultimate darkness? The Torah gives us the answer in one word: “*Zachor!*” – Remember! We must not be fooled by Amalek’s single-minded duplicity - regardless of what the media attempts to purvey. Instead, “*Zachor!*” - never forget the passionate enmity that Amalek has for the Almighty and His chosen people. This is the first step in “*timcheh et zacher Amalek,*” of destroying the memory of Amalek.

May *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* give us the strength and ability to join Him in His righteous war against Amalek. In addition, may we witness the time of *Mashiach*, when the entire world will stand shoulder to shoulder in recognizing G-d’s truth and glory. Then, the words of Zephaniah the prophet will finally be fulfilled: “I will make the peoples pure of speech so that they will all call upon the Name of G-d and serve Him with one purpose.” (3:9) May that time come *bimharah u’vmeinu*, soon and in our days. *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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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. They are available here: <http://tinyurl.com/82pgvfn>.

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