



PARSHAS KI SEITZEI – THE POWER OF AMALEK AND A LESSON FOR ELLUL - YITZCHOK LANDAU

The end of the sidrah (Perek 25, pesukim 17-19) deals with the enigmatic Mitzvah of obliterating the memory of the Bnei Yisroel's arch enemy, Amalek. Few other Mitzvos in the Torah engender the same intense passion and determination in men, women and children to fulfil this mitzvah, if not in practice then at least through listening intently to the passage being read on Parshas Zachor. What however is the reason we are commanded to hate this nation with such ferocity? Yes, sure they were the first nation to attack us after we left Mitzrayim but, was what they attempted to do - and, more often than not, their efforts met with abject failure despite trying every trick in the book, such as changing their national costume to try to fool the Bnei Yisroel into davening for salvation from a different enemy (see Rashi to Bamidbar 21/1)! - any worse than what other nations such as Mitzrayim actually succeeded in doing to us? There is surely a deeper meaning to this mitzvah and a careful reading of the words used by the Torah to describe this episode, indicates that this is indeed the case and that, moreover, there are important lessons we must internalise and which, whilst relevant at all times, are especially pertinent to this time of year.

The Torah, as elaborated by Chazal, describes how Amalek went out of their way to find and attack the Jewish Nation. Unlike the other nations towards whom the Bnei Yisroel were travelling and who were therefore under direct threat, Amalek had no reason to fear Bnei Yisroel or to plot their downfall. Their actions were entirely the result of base hatred – *sinas chinom* towards us. Even some three thousand years later, we see on an almost daily basis, the results of this "gift" Amalek gave to the world. Unfortunately however, this legacy did not escape the Jewish people. As Rashi explains in the parsha dealing with Aharon's death (see Bamidbar 20/23), when Bnei Yisroel are exposed to negative external influences such as those personified by their enemies, there is always a consequence. [In that episode, Aharon died after the nation was exposed to Edom.] Amalek may have suffered a resounding defeat at the hands of the Bnei Yisroel but their harmful influences and what they represented, clung to the Jewish people long after Amalek themselves were vanquished. *Sinas chinom* is but one of the negative character traits personified by Amalek and which, sadly, has infected our nation over the generations, causing untold misery and destruction. A most poignant reminder of this is of course when we have the *zechus* to stand by the *Kosel* – all that remains of the *Beis Hamikdash* and its environs, destroyed as Chazal tell us, because of the *aveirah* of *sinas chinom*.

Lesson number one therefore, in focusing on the mitzvah to blot out the memory of Amalek, is to ensure that we eradicate the terrible *aveirah* of *sinas chinom* which has so affected us over the course of our history and which Amalek left us as a "bequest".

Lesson number two is more subtle but no less important in that it focuses on our *Emunah*. The word used by the Torah to describe Amalek's confrontation with the Bnei Yisroel is "*karcha*" ("*Zochor . . . asher karcha baderech*"). The basic meaning is that Amalek confronted the Jewish nation on the journey, but the word "*karcha*" is an unusual one to use in this context. The Midrash describes how it is related to the word "*kar*" which means cold and how Amalek's actions were comparable to a foolish person jumping into a hot bath. Whereas he will surely be burned, his actions nonetheless "cool off" the bath for those who inevitably follow.

A different Midrash however, relates the word "*karcha*" to the word "*mikreh*", literally "happening" or "coincidence". There are different explanations as to how this word is relevant in the context, but one idea (which actually ties in well with the explanation of the first Midrash) is that Amalek introduced an element of doubt into Bnei Yisroel's otherwise rock solid *emunah* at that point¹. The point is that Amalek stood up as it were, against Hashem, and dared to challenge Him – as *posuk 18* concludes "*and he (i.e. Amalek) did not fear Hashem*". They may have come off second best but the "questions" they raised did not disappear. This element of doubt is one which we all struggle with on a daily basis, whether we realise it or not. It affects our attitudes towards *tefillah*, learning, *teshuva*, business and so many other avenues of life.²

Accordingly, in commanding us to "*eradicate the memory of Amalek from under the Heavens*", Hashem is also insisting that we rid ourselves of all doubts we may have as to His absolute rulership over the universe, without which we cannot even realistically fulfil the first of the ten Commandments – "*I am Hashem your G-d, Who took you out of Mitzrayim*". In other words, it is incumbent on us to acknowledge and thus seek to restore the original blind faith in Hashem which accompanied the Bnei Yisroel when they left Mitzrayim, the memory of which Hashem still recalls for our favour today.³ Again, as we approach the *Yomim Noraim*, this is certainly a message and lesson as important to us as any other. The final *posuk* of the sidrah suggests that the Bnei Yisroel would be in a position to eradicate the memory of Amalek once they had settled in *Eretz Yisroel* and were at peace. Our parallel, spiritual explanation of the mitzvah to eradicate Amalek's memory also fits perfectly within such a utopian ideal, whereby Hashem's hand would surely be obvious to all and nor would there be any basis for *sinas chinom*. Tragically however, we did not live up to these expectations and have suffered the consequences ever since, of failing to act with *Achdus* (unity) and trusting fully in Hashem.

It is no coincidence that this parsha appears in the month of *Elul* (it is seemingly out of context with the rest of the sidrah up to this point) when our minds are hopefully already focussed on *teshuva* and self improvement. If we are able to distance ourselves from *sinas chinom* and focus on the importance of *Achdus* and *Emunah* in Hashem, then we will surely be a long way along the road towards meriting the renewed fulfilment of the very next *Posuk* in the Torah, the first *posuk* in *Ki Savo*, which talks of our taking possession of and dwelling in *Eretz Yisroel*, except that this time, having eradicated from the world the negative traits personified by our enemies, our settlement in *Eretz Yisroel* will be permanent and with a new *Beis Hamikdash* as our reward.

1. It has been pointed out that *gematria* (numerical value) of Amalek and "*sofek*" (the Hebrew word for "doubt") are the same (240). See also footnote 3 re. The *emunah* of the Jewish People at *Yetzias Mitsrayim*.

2. Rabbi Hartman gave a *shiur* in the *shul* a couple of years ago in the run up to *Rosh Hashana*, entitled "*Why are we not Afraid?*" Here too, this influence of Amalek is surely at the root of the answer.

3. *Yirmiyahu 2/2* – "*So said Hashem: I remember for your sake . . . how you followed Me in the wilderness . . .*" This is one of the *pesukim* we say as part of the order of "*zichronos*" on *Rosh Hashana* & *Yom Kippur*.