

IN THE SHADOW OF AMALEK

BY HINDISHE LEE

The commandment of dealing with Amalek is so crucial to Israel's survival, that God *Himself* swears ...*For I will blot out the memory of Amalek ...because a hand is on God's throne, war for God with Amalek from generation generation.* (Exodus 17:14–16).

We note that the word "throne" (כִּסֵּא), is shortened to כֵּס without the א. Secondly, the concept of God waging constant war with a nation is disturbing. If God indeed is omnipotent, can He not obliterate any foe within a breath? Rashi¹ comments: "God's hand is upraised to swear by His throne to have war with Amalek. Yet, why the missing letter in כֵּס? It is answered: God's throne will not be complete or whole (שלם) until He annihilates Amalek's name entirely."

However, Rashi raises a deeper problem. How can any aspect of the Almighty be described as "incomplete"? Is it possible satisfactorily to interpret "God's throne" to fit Rashi?

The two passages declaring Amalek's destruction² utilize the term מִתַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם *from under the heavens*. Clearly, Amalek is an entity to be reckoned with on the terrestrial, not the celestial level. What could represent God's throne, His kingdom? S. D. Luzzato cites the Bible critic Clericus of Amsterdam (1683–1715): "For Amalek set his hand against God's throne, i.e., against Israel, since God dwells in their midst..."³ Now Rashi can be understood: God's כִּסֵּא, namely Israel, being in an incomplete state, causes God Himself to fight Amalek. The particular absence of א from the word כִּסֵּא to form כֵּס, corroborates this idea. A nation which lacks unity is unwhole and incomplete.

The precept of waging eternal war against Amalek appears twice in the Pentateuch:

1 Rashi Exod. 17:16.

2 Exod. 17:14; Deut. 25:19.

3 Samuel David Luzzato, *Perush Shadal Al Hamisha Humshat Torah* (Tel Aviv; Devir, 1965), p. 303.

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- a. As an oath which God takes upon Himself, (Exodus 17:14):

And God said to Moses... I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under the heavens.

- b. As a demand to Israel, (Deuteronomy 25:19):

...You shall blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under the heavens. You shall not forget.

These quotations are complementary. The first, God's self-imposed pledge, is juxtaposed in the very same passage mentioning כֵּס.⁴

The second statement, directed towards the Children of Israel, describes the human element of this undertaking. The word כֵּס is the binding factor.

How can Israel obey this commandment? Only through אֶחָדוּת — unity. For Israel's unity (God's throne complete) can end the war with Amalek.

WHY AMALEK

Why Amalek? Why the incessant strife between God and this people? An elucidation of the Amalekite origin and nature is essential in this study.

Amalek is the son of Eliphaz, the son of Esau, Jacob's brother. His mother, Timnah, is a concubine.⁵ This latter fact denotes Amalek's filial position. Eliphaz has other sons by standard marriage. They, the Edomites, are the inheritors of Mount Seir. In fact, Nahmanides proposes the alienation of Amalek as the solution to a paradox:

*Thou shalt not abhor an Edomite, for he is thy brother.*⁶

*You shall blot out the remembrance of Amalek.*⁷

These statements seem to contradict each other. Isn't Amalek an Edomite? The answer, according to Ramban, is "no." As the son of a concubine, Amalek does not share in his brothers' portion.⁸ Ironically, Amalek's fate is indeed tragic; for he has no other recourse but to go his own separate way, as an outcast. While Israel displays different attitudes towards Edom and Amalek, there seems to be, from the start mutual animosity.

Let us begin with the biblical account of the birth of Jacob and Esau. *And the children struggled together within her.*⁹ God answers Rebekah's enquiries regarding the struggle: *Two nations are in thy womb and two peoples shall be*

4 Exod. 17:16.

5 Gen. 36:12.

6 Deut. 23:8.

7 Deut. 25:19.

8 Ramban Gen. 36:12.

9 Gen. 25:22

*separated from thy bowels.*¹⁰ Twins were born. These two individuals, Jacob and Esau, though of identical ancestry and background, possess antithetical characters and follow different destinies. Curiously, their descendants perpetually interact as two poles of a magnet, apart, yet always in contact.

It is told that, when Jacob returned from his sojourn in Haran, and crossing the Jabbok river, he split his camp and his family into three distinct groups.¹¹ Remaining alone during the night, he is assailed by an alien man and wrestles with him. According to the Midrash, this man is Esau's = Edom's guardian angel.¹² Jacob must fight the emissary of his other half — his twin brother, thus continuing the struggle that had already begun long before, a struggle which Jacob neither wins nor loses. It should be noted: this confrontation occurs right after Jacob divides his own people.

AMALEK THE SYMBOL OF ISRAEL'S DISUNITY

This incident is prophetic, presaging future events. When the Children of Israel are filled with discord, they invite the attack of Edom and to larger degree, that of Amalek. For it is now Amalek, Esau's grandson, who falls heir to the role of Edom's "guardian angel."¹³ However, Amalek's role as a gadfly is magnified. Examining the Bible it seems more than a curious incident that Amalek and Israel clash whenever the latter is fragmented.

The first such encounter occurs in the aftermath of a dispute between the Children of Israel and Moses. The newly freed people begin their journey to the Promised Land, but not without trouble: *וילנו* *And they murmured.*¹⁴ From the Red Sea till Masa Umeriva, every protest echoes variations of the word *וילנו*. However, at Masa Umeriva there is a change: *וירב העם עם משה* *And the people strove with Moses.*¹⁵ Here we have anger, a mob, chaos! Ibn Ezra postulates that Israel is rent into two camps during this crisis.¹⁶

We witness the first account of such disharmony among the people of Israel.

10 Gen. 25:23.

11 Gen. 32:8, 25.

12 Rashi Gen. 32:25.

13 Issachar Jacobson, *Chazon Hamikra*, I (Tel Aviv: Sinai, 1962), 97.

14 Exod. 15:24.

15 Exod. 17:2.

16 Picture the scenario. One group is devoid of water. The second group has maintained water from the encampment at Elash. Daringly they set upon testing God... Will He give them what they ask? (Ibn Ezra, Exod. 17:2). Ibn Ezra's theory supplies added meaning to the name *מסה ומריבה* (Test and Dispute).

What happens then is devastating — Amalek, swooping down upon the weakest, killing mercilessly.¹⁷ Victory over Amalek is achieved through supernatural intervention symbolized by Moses' upraised hands. Ramban explicates this rationally. The sight of Moses on a hill, hands uplifted towards heaven, praying sincerely, arouses the people's faith and courage.¹⁸

Nahmanides further quotes the Midrash to illustrate the unifying effect of Moses on the Israelites:

All the people would go out of their tents and see Moses bending on his knees, and they would bend on their knees; he falls with his face to the ground, and they fall... thus, all the people answer after him and the Holy One blessed be He defeats Amalek and his people...

(Ramban, Exodus 17:9)

Disunity brings Israel's punishment through Amalek, while unity brings Amalek's defeat through Israel's oneness. Only in one other part of the Pentateuch is it stated *וירב העם עם משה* — *and the people strove with Moses* namely, in the infamous Me Meriva, the "Waters of Dispute," where Moses tragically errs, and loses his right to enter the Land (Numbers 20:3). This is confirmed by the commentator Kli Yakar.¹⁹ Me Meriva precipitates a confrontation with Edom, not Amalek. Threatened with violence by the kingdom of Edom, freedom to pass through that land is denied. As it is written; *And he said, 'You shall not pass.' and Edom went out to meet him with a heavy army and a strong hand.*²⁰ Remembering the commandments against wronging on Edomite,²¹ Israel detours without incident.

At first view, this event seems inconsistent with our Amalek-disunity theory. Why is this dissension — so severe as to cause Moses to sin — dealt a mild punishment? Or Hachaim suggests that the transgressions of Masa Umeriva and Me Meriva are not of the same degree.

"At Masa Umeriva, the people are *not* in dire need; they said; "Give us water!" and because Moses has water to give them, this is nothing else but a quarrel (Or Hachaim, Exodus 17:2). At Me Meriva they are truly

17 Exod. 17:8.

18 Ramban, Exod. 17:9.

19 Kli Yakar, Num. 20:3.

20 Num. 20:20.

21 Deut. 2:4-5; 23:8.

suffering:²² they were grumbling at him that he should pray for them that they should not die (Or Hachaim, Numbers 20:3).

The unfortunate circumstances of Me Meriva do not merit strict punishment. Therefore, there is no Amalek here, only a menace of harm from Edom. Battle cannot ensue, for the Law protects Edom's inheritance. Divine retribution is exercised through caveat, but, still via Esau's descendants.

AMALEK — ISRAEL

This correlation between Israel's disharmony and Amalek's position in Jewish history spans the Bible, from the Exodus through the Exile, although in the later records Amalek's presence is subtle and symbolic. It is then to the earlier books that we turn for confirmation of the relationship.

At a most vital point in the desert journeys, Amalek appears once again. The account of the faithless spies ignites the people to panic and loss of faith. God sentences the Israelites to forty years of nomadic life in the wilderness. In a reckless attempt to prove their faith, the people venture to conquer and ascend the hill. Moses warns them to abort this foolhardy plan, declaring God is not with them. Nevertheless, they go on their futile quest. However, *the ark of the covenant of God, and Moses, did not depart from the midst of the camp.*²³ A rift begins. Moses and the priests are on one side, the Israelites on the other. Dissension now takes hold. Consequently, *the Amalekites and the Canaanites came down... and smote them.*²⁴

Later on, King Saul's encounter with Amalek²⁵ is of special interest. An opportunity is presented to fulfill the law of Amalek's annihilation. Saul's failure to obey, evokes division:

And Samuel turned to go and he took hold on the corner of his [Samuel's] mantle and it rent. And Samuel said to him 'God has rent the Kingdom of Israel from you.'

This transgression ultimately sparks the civil war between pro-David and pro-Saul factions, becoming the counterpoint of the Israel-Amalek relationship. Amalek's elimination, through Israel's oneness, can be fulfilled. Disobedience to

²² According to the classic commentator, Rashi, the water source supplying Israel in the desert ceased at this time, upon Miriam's death. (Numb. 20:2).

²³ Num. 14:44. ²⁴ Num. 14:45. ²⁵ I Sam. 15.

the destruction of Amalek, brings fragmentation. The final battle in the Bible between Amalek and Israel is symbolized in the Book of Esther. Though its confrontation is blatant and straight-forward, paradoxically, Amalek appears as the *concealed* foe of Israel. Interestingly, this coincides with the beginning of the "non-prophetic period." According to Tradition, this era is marked by God's "hiddenness," revealing Himself indirectly, not through prophets or supernatural miracles.

In Haman the Agagite, descendant of Amalek, who seeks to oppress Israel, the Amalek-disunity motif is crystallized. Megillath Sesorim²⁶ explains "When the Israelites reach a spiritual nadir, they become disunited, scattered and separated."²⁷ Upon repenting (i.e., returning to the Torah, which has always identified them as one people), they are once again a solidified unit."

The rabbis teach that every generation has its own Amalek, if not the physical progeny of the Amalekites, then their spiritual heir.²⁸ This is already found in the Pentateuch. Both verses stating Amalek's destruction use the term — *זכר עמלק* — *remembrance of Amalek.*²⁹ Those who continue in Amalek's ways, attacking and oppressing Israel, cause Amalek to be remembered.

²⁶ Megillath Sesorim, Esther 9:19.

²⁷ Esther 3:8.

²⁸ Exod. 17:14; Deut. 25:19.

²⁹ Exod. 17:16.

REFLECTION OF READERS

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The route necessarily taken by the merchantmen who drew Joseph out of the pit ran westward through Beth Shean towards Megiddo, transversing the Dothan Valley and exiting at Dothan Juncture to join the Via Maris for the journey south to

Egypt. Since that route never came closer than sixteen miles from Shechem, the encounter between Joseph and the caravan could not have taken place had he not proceeded to Dothan in the search for his brothers.