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INTRODUCTION TO PARASHAT HASHAVUA

PARASHAT BESHALACH

The Battle of Amalek

By Rav Michael Hattin

INTRODUCTION

Amalek arrived and battled Israel at Refidim. Moshe said to Yehoshua: "choose men for us and go out to fight Amalek, for tomorrow I will stand at the top of the hill with the staff of the Lord in my hand". Yehoshua did just as Moshe had told him (and chose men) to fight against Amalek, while Moshe, Aharon and Chur ascended to the top of the hill. When Moshe raised his hand then Israel would prevail, but when he put down his hand then Amalek would prevail. But Moshe's arms became heavy, so they took a rock and placed it underneath him and he sat upon it. Aharon and Chur supported his arms, one on each side, so that his hands remained steadfast until the setting of the sun. Yehoshua overpowered Amalek and its people by the sword.

God said to Moshe: "Record this as a memorial in the book and recount it clearly to Yehoshua, for I will surely blot out the memory of Amalek from underneath the heavens!" Moshe built an altar and called its name 'God is my banner', for he said: "a hand is upon the throne of God, a war for God against Amalek for all generations!" (Shemot 17:8-16)

THE EVENTS OF PARASHAT BESHALACH

So concludes Parashat BeShalach, perhaps the most stirring section in all of Sefer Shemot. Narrated in its brief span of one hundred and fifteen verses is the account of how the people of Israel brashly but hesitantly journeyed forth from bondage, but were soon pursued and then trapped by Pharaoh's seasoned and bloodthirsty cavalry as they placidly and obliviously encamped at the shores of the Sea of Reeds (14:9). Suddenly Israel's proud resolve melted away as their short-lived freedom now seemed to them a cruel illusion, a heartless deception perpetrated by a God with a penchant for inflicting torment. Moshe, himself unsure of God's intent but utterly certain nevertheless of His salvation, attempted to buoy their broken spirits, as God's fiery angels took up defensive positions around the Israelite camp and the eastern winds began to boldly blow (14:21). As the night gloom ominously fell, the waters of the Sea suddenly parted and Israel was offered a stark and overwhelming choice: either to follow God's guidance and descend into the dark and threatening depths or else to remain behind to be cut to pieces by Pharaoh's charioteers. Wisely, Israel chose the former, but now Egypt pursued them into the midst of the churning waters. But with the rising dawn, Pharaoh's forces were thrown into discomfiture, for the chariot wheels were hopelessly locked in the thick mud of the returning tides. As the blood-red sun rose over the azure surface of the sea, the dead Egyptian host aimlessly bobbed upon its crests as Moshe triumphantly led the people in a victory song to God (15:1).

Once again, though, the people's elation was short-lived, for now they entered the foreboding wilderness of Shur and could find no water to drink (15:22). Miraculously preserved from thirst by Moshe's prayer and Divinely-directed intervention, the people then journeyed on to enjoy a brief respite at the oasis of Eilim but then entered the vast wasteland of Seen and now hungered mightily (16:1). Again, God assuaged their desperate discomfort, this time by providing them with the extraordinary manna to eat. Scarcely a single month had elapsed from the time that the people had left the brick pits of Egypt, but in that short span they had already acquired a lifetime of experience! Soon, Israel journeyed to Refidim, as they slowly made their way in the direction of Sinai, but once again they were plagued with thirst (17:1). This time, Moshe struck the rock at God's behest, and the people's thirst was quenched. Then, quite unexpectedly, Israel was attacked by the marauding tribe of Amalek, in the final and desperate close to this most riveting section of the Torah. Only through the heroic efforts of Yehoshua and the otherworldly intervention afforded by Moshe's outstretched arms was Israel victorious over the foe.

Considering the matter of the Parasha in its entirety, we may summarize by observing that every one of the Parasha's events presents us with a striking and unsettling contrast of emotional states, an exultant euphoria now abruptly punctured by a paralyzing dread, a sanguine and hopeful anticipation now dashed to pieces by some unforeseen and overwhelming menace. How ephemeral are the moments of equilibrium, how brief and short-lived! And linking together these otherwise disparate events, like some tenuous and delicate thread, is the Parasha's recurring refrain: trust in God and be preserved; abandon that trust and perish.

Perhaps the hardships encountered at Yam Suf and Shur, the wilderness of Seen and Refidim, were to impress upon the nascent nation what sorts of challenges would surely lie ahead along the long path towards achieving the national goal. In order to securely establish their state in Canaan, at that time only a distant dream, the people of Israel would have to overcome deprivation and scarcity, setback and adversity, and no shortage of hostile enemies lurking in the shadows. But by trusting in God and following His commands, admittedly no small expectations from a people just recently freed from bondage of the body and still conditioned to subjugation of the spirit, Israel could succeed.

THE ATTACK OF AMALEK

The brief finale of the Parasha is, however, exceptionally obscure. We are not told why Amalek attacks the people of Israel, we are left to our own devices to ponder the nature of Moshe's unusual stratagem of outstretched arms, we are introduced for the first and penultimate to an otherwise unknown character by the name of Chur, and we are certainly taken aback by God's unusually harsh pronouncement against the routed foe. Fortunately, some light is shed on the matter by the brief parallel passage in the Book of Devarim that contains God's directive to the new generation poised to enter the land to always remember Amalek's diabolism:

Remember what Amalek did to you on the way as you left the land of Egypt. They encountered you upon the way and attacked all of the stragglers at the rear (of the camp) while you were weary and exhausted, and they did not fear the Lord. Therefore, when God your Lord grants you respite from all of your foes roundabout, in the land that God your Lord gives to you as an inheritance to possess, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under the heavens. Never forget! (Devarim 25:17-19).

This much is clear from the above passage: Amalek's attack was not only unprovoked, it was also most dastardly focused upon those members of the Israelite camp least able to defend themselves. Those that tarried at the back of the camp, unable to keep up because of infirmity or age, were cut down and killed. Like the modern-day terrorists that are their spiritual descendants, Amalek struck the weak and the feeble, the children and the old, choosing a moment when the people of Israel were drained from their wilderness journey and disillusioned by its ordeals.

AMALEK'S INTENT

Returning to our passage, we note that the verse states explicitly that "AMALEK ARRIVED ("Vayavo Amalek") and battled Israel at Refidim" (17:8). Thus, it emerges that the deed of Amalek was more than a spontaneous attempt to secure easy plunder, a chance encounter with the slow-moving and disorganized Israelite camp that, once engaged, could not be passed up. Rather, Amalek set out from their desert strongholds with a definite destination in mind, a clear objective and a specific aim. Aware of the events of the Exodus and informed of Israel's route, well-accustomed to the privations of the wilderness and thus fully aware of novice Israel's predicament, Amalek sallied forth not to offer relief but instead to assail. Amalek's immediate intent was to check the Israelite advance towards Sinai and later Canaan by sowing seeds of terror in their midst.

But that is not all. The passage from Sefer Devarim illuminates Amalek's motives, for it states explicitly that the nomadic marauders "did not fear the Lord". While this phrase may be reasonably understood as an objective value judgement furnished by the narrative in the aftermath of Amalek's conduct, it may also be taken as a subjective statement of their state of mind, their underlying motivation on the eve of their assault. In other words, because they did not fear the Lord, therefore they attacked.

Taken together then, the passage from Devarim when coupled with our passage from BeShalach, the painful reminisce and the actual event, make it clear that the attack of Amalek was in fact extraordinary. Pharaoh's pursuit, the textual analog to the episode of Amalek, is at least comprehensible if morally unjustifiable. Had he not been grievously struck by the plagues of their God and forced to surrender them to freedom against his will? But how are we to explain the nefarious conduct of Amalek (whose only previous connection to Israel was one of distant kin – see Bereishit 36:9-12), except by assuming, as the Rabbis surely did, that Israel was only a concrete expression of their true target: God Himself.

THE FORMULATIONS OF IBN EZRA AND RAMBAN

Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra (12th century, Spain) explains:

The chieftains of Edom trembled at the reports of His signs and wonders in Egypt and at Yam Suf, and so too Moav and Peleshet. This tribe of Amalek heard also of God's mighty acts on behalf of the people of Israel. They journeyed from afar to battle Israel and did not fear God. And so it states that "he did not fear God" (commentary to 17:14).

The Ramban (13th century, Spain) employs very similar language but amplifies the matter:

The punishment meted out to Amalek is more severe than that reserved for any other nation. This is because all of the other peoples heard and trembled, and the resolve of Peleshet, Edom, Moav and the Canaanites melted in the face of God's mighty grandeur. But Amalek came from afar AS IF TO OVERPOWER GOD, and therefore it states that "he did not fear God". Also, Amalek are the descendants of Esav and therefore our kin, but here they sought to stoke enmity by battling against us without cause (commentary to 17:16).

For both of these commentaries, the assumption that it is God Himself who is the target of Amalek's murderous intent goes a long way towards explaining the episode and its literary cues. As our distant kin one would have expected that Amalek would have extended a more gracious welcome to the freed people of Israel. Surely they had no need to feel threatened by Israel's march, since Amalek themselves were nomadic tribesman with no designs of their own on settling the Canaanite highlands that were Israel's eventual destination. Rather, Amalek was unsettled by the new dynamic that Israel's liberation had unleashed in the world, because for the first time in recorded human history a new set of laws had been proclaimed: slavery and oppression are wrong, life must entail more than material acquisition and the building of grand monuments of stone, and the brutal "state of nature" that is the playground for the tyrants and the dictators, the generals and the chieftains, is no place for sensitive human beings who are created in the image of God. In other words, the glitter of the Pharaoh, though he was revered by his subjects and admired throughout the ancient world, constituted nothing more than a thin veneer for his more ominous designs, designs that Amalek themselves wholeheartedly endorsed.

WILDERNESS SURVIVAL AND ITS MORAL IMPLICATIONS

As desert marauders that wandered in the wastelands of the northern Sinai, Amalek's livelihood depended upon regular forays into settled area in order to engage in pillaging and theft (see for example Amalek's role in Sefer Shoftim 6:3-5, testimony to their ongoing loyalty to their lifestyle even more than a hundred years after the events of our Parasha). Denizens of an unforgiving landscape, they knew well nature's harsh dictates that condemned the weak and feeble to oblivion while championing the survival of the stealthy and strong. How irrelevant are moral value judgments to the snake and the scorpion, the vulture and the jackal, the studded thistle and the piercing thorn bush! For Amalek, the unique potential that endows the human being with intelligence, skill and understanding must be employed towards only one "exalted" purpose: to overpower prey and to kill it. Thus, we may say that while Amalek is in ample possession of all of Pharaoh's most unsavory traits, they lack absolutely any of the god king's external charms! Is it any wonder that Amalek emerges from their wilderness redoubts like seasoned predators to shamelessly attack the defenseless stragglers at the rear of the Israelite camp, choosing the freed slaves' moment of exhaustion to unexpectedly strike? Is it any wonder that the Torah refers to this sort of conduct as being motivated by an utter absence of "fear of God"? Is it any wonder that their unprovoked assault is perfectly timed to coincide with the people's exodus from Egypt and triumph at the sea, both of these events overt expressions of God's concerned involvement the human history?

Understood this way, Moshe's hands raised aloft grasping the staff are not meant to be the magical intervention of some sort of inspired shaman who will win the day in spite of Israel's unfamiliarity with combat. Rather, his outstretched arms are potent symbols for God's intervention, for the eternal validity of the principles of ethical monotheism, for the sustaining trust that in the end goodness and righteousness will prevail against cruelty and unprovoked violence. Surely it is more than serendipity that Aharon and Chur bear his hands high, the former later selected to minister in God's House, the latter the progenitor of that House's chief artisan (see Shemot 31:2). But in spite of Moshe's hands, Yehoshua and Israel must still fight, because the war against Amalek, though it is at the core a war of worldviews, must still be waged in space and time. No wonder the early Rabbis were loath to assign Amalek an identifiable ethnic identity, for they detected in the skirmish against Amalek the intimations of all of Israel's future conflicts, the hostility and hatred that would dog their mission in the world until the end of time (see Rashi's commentary to 17:16).

Thus, more than three thousand years after the battle of Amalek, we are still fighting. And though many Jews have already forgotten, whether as a result of the unbearable burden of our history or else by willful neglect, exactly why we are still fighting, Amalek has not forgotten. Stealthily speaking words of peace he continues to sharpen weapons of war, never tiring of his ultimate goal to eradicate Israel's God-idea from the world. But as Ramban (11th century, France) so eloquently explains:

The conflict engendered by Amalek is both our first as well as our last battle. Amalek is a descendant of Esav and was the first nation to attack us; the descendants of Esav later brought about the destruction of the Temple and our present exile…when Amalek and the nations that support it are finally defeated, then our redemption will be eternal as the verse states: "saviors shall ascend Mount Zion to judge Mount Esav, and dominion shall be God's alone (Ovadia 1:21)"…(commentary to 17:9)

Shabbat Shalom