

The Spirit of Amalek Lives! Thoughts for Shabbat Zakhor

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By

Rabbi Marc D. Angel

This week's maftir portion includes verses commanding us to obliterate the memory of Amalek, the classic arch-enemy of the people of Israel. Yet, the Torah also lists other peoples who oppressed the Israelites. The Egyptians enslaved us for centuries; the Edomites and Moabites harmed us--yet only Amalek is singled out for our eternal enmity.

Rabbi Yosef Sarfati, in his book *Yad Yosef*, offers a poignant comment. There are two kinds of hatred. One kind can be justified by rationalization. For example, the Egyptians hated the Israelites because they feared that the Israelites would multiply greatly and would join the enemies of Egypt in battle. Other enemies feared that the Israelites would overrun their lands. Even if these fears and rationalizations were unwarranted, the enemies of Israel based their hatred and anti-Israelite violence on some sort of justification. Such hatred, says Rabbi Sarfati, ultimately weakens, and can actually die away. Once the rationale for hating has past, the hatred itself can dissipate.

There is a second kind of hatred which is totally baseless. This is the hatred symbolized by Amalek. Amalek offered no justification for its opposition to Israel; it had nothing to gain by attacking the Israelites. Amalek was imbued with pure and undiluted anti-Israelite sentiments. This kind of hatred, so totally unfounded and irrational, is much more difficult to eradicate. Therefore, the Torah commands us to be exceedingly vigilant regarding this latter kind of hatred, typified by Amalek.

Sadly, this irrational hatred of Jews has been passed by Amalek throughout the generations, up to our own day. There are those who hate Jews, hate Israel with a blind, irrational hatred. They have nothing to gain from hurting us, and have no reason to cause us ill. Yet, they seem to be infected with a disease of hatred for which they cannot be (or do not wish to be) cured. For them, Israel and the Jews are always wrong. Don't confuse them with facts.

Rabbinic tradition teaches that Israel can defeat Amalek by strengthening our own spiritual condition. When we live according to the highest teachings and values of Torah, when we live in a spirit of love and compassion, then we undermine the forces of Amalek.

This is not a theoretical discussion. The Jewish community needs to mobilize itself to uproot the forces of Amalek in our world. Baseless hatred against us will not simply disappear on its own. Oppression of Jews will not suddenly come to a halt through wishful thinking. Rather, we need to utilize all legitimate methods available to us to help eradicate anti-Semitism, and to work with all people of good will who share our dream of a world freed from irrational hatred, bigotry and violence.

If Amalek is so evil, why was it necessary for the Torah to command us to remember to be vigilant against Amalek? Wouldn't we have done this by ourselves, without needing any reminder? The answer is: People do become forgetful and complacent. If they themselves are not immediately faced by the crisis, they tend to believe that the crisis is not so bad after all. The Torah reminds us not to drop our guard, but to feel the immediacy of the challenge. Amalek exists. It is corrosive to the well-being of the Jewish people, and indeed to the well-being of a harmonious world. We need to strengthen ourselves spiritually. We need to stand up in every available forum, in order to promote the rights and honor of the Jewish people--and all decent human beings. In our eternal vigilance against Amalek, the Jewish people stands as a beacon of strength for the dignity of all humankind.

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