

The Weekly 'Hi All' by Rabbi Jeff Bienenfeld

ZACHOR

There appears to be a curious disparity in understanding exactly how one fulfills the mitzva to remember Amalek. On Shabbat Zachor, we are all enjoined to remember how the diabolical nation of Amalek attempted to destroy the Children of Israel after their redemption from Egypt (Sh'mot 17:8-16). As is generally assumed, based upon the ruling in the Shulchan Aruch (O.C. 146:2 and 685:7), the Biblical obligation requires us to read a special Torah portion (D'varim 25:17-19) once a year. However, in Rambam's formulation of this halacha (Hilchot Melachim 5:5), he states that the obligation is not just annually, but TAMID, always. Likewise, Ramban, in his commentary (D'varim 25:17), advocates a similar view: "... that we shall orally retell the story [of Amalek's attack] to our children and to all our future generations." In fact, there is a daily custom, following the Shacharit prayers, to remember the nefarious Amalek deed. Which then is it: once a year or constantly? Can these opinions be reconciled?

Perhaps we can propose a solution based upon a remarkable insight of Rav Chayim Brisker (Soloveitchik). He notes (see Harerei Kedem I, 186) that while today we have no idea who are

the biological descendants of the ancient nations that dwelt in Israel (Sanhedrin 20b), Amalek is uniquely different. Any nation that espouses the same malevolent and loathsome ideology of Amalek - one that seeks to exterminate every Jew on the planet - is, in fact, Amalek! As such, while there may be a technical halacha to formally read of Amalek once a year from the Torah, there also exists a continual and persistent mandate to have Amalek always in our conscious awareness.

Here is how Rambam expresses this injunction in his Sefer HaMitzvot (Mitzvat Asei 189). His language is strikingly blunt: "We are to speak of this [Amalek's unprovoked attack] at all times and to arouse the people to make war upon him and bid them to hate him..., and that hatred of him not be weakened or lessened with the passage of time..."

What emerges from this reconciliation of views is this: The reading of Amalek on Shabbat Zachor comes to place the wickedness of this ancient arch enemy and all who adhere to his odious ideology - front and center - in our collective memory, never to be forgotten for even a moment.

Why is this so important? In Rav Soloveitchik's discussion of the lessons from the Purim story (Reflections of the Rav, chapter 17), the very first one is that "Man can

become Satan. Our faith in man's goodness should not blind us to the latent demonic in man. Evidently, civilized men can become the personification of evil. The thin veneer of social restraint can suddenly be lifted, exposing the ugly brutish potential of man... [Man] is capable, from time to time, of going berserk, of turning into a monster." The presence of fanatical and extreme evil is a dark reality that must be honestly acknowledged, bravely confronted, and utterly defeated.

The second lesson the Rav mentions is that "Human monsters, though an enemy and threat to all mankind, somehow specialize in the hatred of the Jews... It was a rude awakening for the Jews of Persia to discover that the main preoccupation of the new Prime Minister was to annihilate them... Suddenly, the Persian Jew discovered that he was hated with concentrated passion."

At every Pesach Seder, we declare: "In every generation, they rise against us to destroy us." Amalek, the embodiment of radical wickedness, has a peculiar and sinister - a pathological - animus for the Jew. No wonder our Sages have cautioned us - warned us - to always be on the alert. Amalek and his cohorts must never be forgotten. We need not apologize for our acute sensitivity to any manifestation of anti-Semitism. We dare not back down in refusing to

compromise with the Amaleks of our day - to overlook the hostility lurking behind their shadowy animosity and bargain with them. In the Rav's words: "One must never acquiesce in evil, make peace with it, or condone its existence" (Out of the Whirlwind, pp. 102-103). For who, indeed, is clairvoyant enough to assure us that even a minor display of hatred for the Jew will not metastasize, Gd forbid, into a virulent and deathly holocaust?!

Some years back, Rabbi Dr. Meir Soloveitchik (Rav Aharon's Soloveitchik's grandson) penned a critically important essay entitled, "The Virtue of Hate" (First Things, February 2003) in which he effectively contrasts the Christian and Jewish views on this subject. The author does not shy away from boldly stating the Jewish position: "'Hate' is not always synonymous with the terribly sinful. While Moshe commanded us 'not to hate our brother in our hearts', a man's immoral actions can serve to sever the bonds of brotherhood between himself and humanity. Regarding a RASHA, a Hebrew term for the hopelessly wicked, the Talmud clearly states [Pesachim 113b]: MITZVA LISNOTO - one is obligated to hate him... [Among Jews] there is an oft-used Hebrew phrase whose equivalent I have not found among Christians. The phrase is Y'MACH SH'MO, which means, may his name

be erased. It is used whenever a great enemy of the Jewish nation, of the past or present, is mentioned." Dr. Soloveitchik concludes his essay - capturing the essence of the virtue of hatred - by paraphrasing the Jewish writer, Cynthia Ozick's, sharp poetic reflection: "Let the terrorist die unshriven. Let him go to hell. Sooner a fly to Gd than he."

But even as we reflect upon this mitzva to remember Amalek in all his hideous and frightening guises, the anxiety and unease that it evokes is effectively offset by the Rav's final lesson from the Purim saga, one which may very well be the most reassuring and inspiring of all. "Gd does not abandon His people... When imminent annihilation confronts the Jew, Gd always sends His agent(s) to save His people. Mordechai and Esther assumed this role in Persia, just as Moshe was mandated to do [when Gd appointed him] to free the Israelites from Egypt."

KI LO YITOSH... - For the Lord will not abandon His people, nor forsake His own heritage" (T'hilim 94:14).

This Shabbat, we will remember Amalek, and, in a week, on Purim, we will celebrate our salvation from Haman's vile and despicable schemings. Both are mandated; both are necessary. And, as we declare in the AL HANISIM prayer, we thank HaShem for all "the miracles He

performed for our ancestors in those days at this time." And we pray that He continue to do so for us, in our day, until the war waged with Amalek is ultimately won and his evil obliterated forever! 🙌