



Remember Amalek...Don't Forget PurimBurst 2014

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(1) Remember¹....(2) to blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under the heavens²....

(3) Do not forget!³

Who is this Amalek that three of our 613 mitzvot revolve around him? And how do we “remember to eliminate the memory of something while also never forgetting it?” Isn’t that self-contradictory?

The Torah accords Amalek the mysterious distinction as “First of the nations...” [ראשית גוים] [עמלק...].⁴ The midrash explains that this is because Amalek was the first tribe to assault the Israelites in their journey to Sinai.⁵ The wonders that accompanied Israel’s exodus from Egypt proved God’s love for them, yet Amalek was undeterred. Without a trace of compunction, its soldiers attacked straight away.⁶ Amalek’s distinction as “first” to assault Israel (God’s chosen ones) attests to its rotten core. In the Torah’s lexicon of symbols Amalek becomes the token of pure evil.

Many nations warred against Israel, yet Amalek gets singled out. This defining incident marks the Amalekim for all time. One of the most difficult assessments a judge makes is whether the felon will use a reprieve to alter the course of his life for good (through *teshuvah*). Or whether he’ll harden his criminal ways because he got away with it this time. In response to Amalek’s attack HaShem declares: “I will blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under the heavens.”⁷ With these words the Wise-and-Compassionate-Judge-Who-Sees-Hearts-and-Does-not-Err is clear that Amalek will not mend its ways....that its citizens are incapable of *teshuvah*.

When Moshe recounts this incident he chooses a Hebrew word that conveys a variety of associations all of which apply and add richness to the tale.⁸ He employs the root קרה to describe Amalek’s surprise attack.

אָשֶׁר קָרָה בְּדַרְךְ

“...He met you on the way...” As if it were a happenstance (מקרה), a chance event.

Yet the two strong letters of that root, קר, also mean cold. The Torah hints that the trait of “coldness” characterizes Amalek.¹⁰ In Torah psychology a cold soul is indifferent to Spirit, phony in observance, and lacks empathy. The Baal Shem Tov would place his hand on the heart of children and say, “The most important thing is have a warm heart.” *Devekut* requires heat. In modern psychology a lack of empathy, remorse and genuine warmth associates with psychopathy—a criminal disposition with a grim prognosis, for without remorse there is no *teshuvah*. And without *teshuvah*, change does not stick.

Though there is no longer a nation called Amalek today, they maintain a presence on the inner planes where they left viable spores that, under favorable conditions, still do quicken, sprout and take root. These seedpods float through history, looking for friendly “soil,” infecting those who are susceptible to it cold-hearted contagion—individuals and nations alike.¹¹ Nazi Germany is the textbook case but there are societies today that display clear symptoms of this chilling pestilence.

But the mystery of Amalek goes deeper still, for unless we are grappling with paradox we do not have the full picture.

The Torah begins with the verse: In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth...

בראשית ברא א/להים...

The first letter of the Torah—the ב (meaning “in”) is extra large, and thus hints to an alternative reading. The midrash interprets the ב as a contraction for the Hebrew word *bishvil* (for the sake of), which changes the meaning of the phrase to: “**For the sake of** *reshit* [which means *first*] God created the heavens and the earth.”¹²

May HaShem please bless *Benjamin ben Leah* with a speedy and complete healing and recovery, “Refuah Shlema to Benjamin with all our love”...Carole Berman

In memory of *Dovid ben Matatia Yisrael*. May he rest in peace....Yaffa Miller

In honor of my beloved mother, *Chayyah Bat Yetta*. May she be bound in a bundle of life with HaShem...Linda Lippitt

The obvious question becomes what is this *reshit* that is singled out as the purpose of it all? There is no greater honor than to be deemed the pinnacle of creation. The midrash searches the Bible and brings two answers: The universe is created for the sake of the Torah which is called *reshit* in Proverbs 8:22, and for the sake of Israel, who are called *reshit* in Jeremiah 2:3.¹³ The Or HaChayim expands the list but explains how all of the unmentioned *reshits* (wisdom, fear, Temple offerings) are subcategories of the Torah and are thus included in that entry.¹⁴

Conspicuously absent from all of these lists is Amalek, who is clearly called *reshit* in the verse cited above. [ראשית גוים עמלק]. And while the other *reshits* (Torah and Israel) connect to less authoritative sections of the Bible, Amalek's link to *reshit* derives from the Torah itself. It is not bona fide to leave Amalek out of the list. If the world was created for *reshit*, then Amalek is part of that privileged class. Yet how can that be true?

It only makes sense because these three *reshits* actually comprise a single entity, the cosmic *other*, called the Shekhina that is the whole point of creation. Before genesis, the infinite *One* lacked nothing except, in some mysterious sense, the experience of actualized relationship, because there was no *other* with whom to relate.

Yet this novelty, called relationship, is paradoxical to its core.¹⁵ Defined as “the association of *two* or more things,” a consummate relationship is when the couple yearns to merge as one. They are soulmates—conjoined in their root—and they long to express that unity in the corporeal world. Yet if they would succeed in that desire, their relationship would cease. The pleasure (and adventure) of encountering an *other* would disappear the minute they fused into one big conglomerate self.

It follows that the boundaries blocking their merger, contribute as much to the vitality of their relationship, as their passionate drive to unite as one. These two competing tendencies scuffle within the relationship and each has moments when it prevails. The couple alternates between merging and differentiating in a pattern that can actually be mapped. This becomes the heart-print or cardiogram of their particular union.

Since the purpose of creation is to actualize the potential of relationship, this brings us back to our three *reshits*.

- 1) **Israel:** The sumtotal of creation—its gestalt—is called the Shekhina. She is the cosmic *other* (the *chidush* of creation) that enables the tango of relationship to occur. The inner soul core of this universe-encompassing Shekhina is *Kenesset Yisrael*,¹⁶ the mystical body of Israel—distinguished by one thing alone: The capacity to understand what it means that G-d is one on the deepest possible level. Yet since relationship is forged by “seeing and being seen, knowing and being known,” and since the deepest truth of Divinity is Its Oneness, this feature of the Jewish soul enables Israel to enter a level of intimacy with HaShem that is the ultimate fulfillment of relationship and, by extension, the ultimate achievement of the purpose of creation.
- 2) **Torah:** At the heart of the Torah are 613 revelations of Divine will called mitzvot. The Zohar depicts them as 613 limbs of the King.¹⁷ When we feel thirsty and our hand grabs for water it functions as an instrument of our will and parallels our connection to HaShem when we perform a mitzvah. HaShem expressed a desire for this deed to occur, and we willingly comply. In that moment our existential state of separation dissolves, our wills merge, and we become nothing but a limb of the King (a hand reaching for water, so to speak). This is the ultimate achievement of *devekut* (of fusion with HaShem). In the rhythm of merging and differentiating that marks our relationship with G-d, Torah is the force of merger. It provides the context, pressure and opportunities to merge.
- 3) **Amalek:** Evil is defined as the illusion of other than G-d. The word “illusion” is significant, since nothing is really apart from God for “God is one.” This is not necessarily (or even primarily) an ethical matter. Evil manifests on the physical plane as the opaque skin or shell that surrounds each sliver of soul and

separates it from everything else. This creates the appearance of many which supports the illusion of other-than-God. This is not a moral judgment but a simple fact.

A concise synonym for evil is delusion, and Amalek is its prophet. Evil is the spin doctor that conjures illusion and dissembles truth. And yet, it is precisely this talent for fabrication that is evil's whole point and valued contribution to the world. It is the tool HaShem employed to do exactly that, to create our world ex nihilo, something from nothing. It is the scalpel He wielded to carve us out as a freestanding other that would function as a cosmic soulmate to the Holy One.

Consequently, in the alternation between merging and differentiating that defines our relationship with HaShem, Amalek is the force that disrupts *devekut*, distracts us from G-d, undermines faith, inflates ego, promulgates lies, instigates lust, hardens hearts, fans hatred, incites wars, provokes rebellion, dampens resolutions, etc. His strategies to keep us differentiated are legion. Amalek makes sure the boundaries between us and HaShem stay strong...for better and for worse. His job is to hold that pole and not relent.

Amalek rightly claims its distinction as *reshit* for it provides a service that is absolutely critical to the purpose of creation. But if that be so, why is Amalek so vilified? The answer is because, although Amalek does the Shekhina's dirty work, he has gotten very dirtied by it. And because of the (perhaps unavoidable) pain, suffering, shame, heresy and destruction produced in his wake. And because of the perverse delight he seems to take in all that. And because he seems to go overboard and choose harsh measures when gentler ones could have sufficed. In short, because of his cold heart.

The question becomes, who is responsible for that. The Talmud reports that Timna the mother of Amalek was a Horite princess (in Yakov's generation) who was deeply impressed by the Israelite tribe and sought to convert: "Better that I should be a maidservant to these great men, than a princess among the Horites."¹⁸ For various

technicalities of halacha, the patriarchs refused her and pushed her away.¹⁹ Their rejection of her noble aspirations was arguably cold-hearted. The Talmud rebukes them and reports that they were punished for their error. As a consequence of their rebuff, Timna gave birth to Amalek—the sadistic enemy of Israel and archetype of evil in the universe.

Who knows what might have transpired had Timna been permitted to convert. It is possible that our cosmic battle with Amalek is one big *tikun* for the repercussions of that well-meaning but cold-hearted act. It is possible that our multi-millennial war with Amalek is the mechanism HaShem devised to circumcise our collective and individual hearts. It is possible that we could have differentiated through more subtle methods closer to what will be in messianic times when Amalek ceases, boundaries grow transparent, and we dance into the sunset, still merging and differentiating with our Creator.

Whatever might have been, our present scenario with Amalek is a duel to the death. *Their* mission statement rallies for our complete destruction.²⁰ We are indignant but the fact remains, *our* charter calls for their annihilation as well.²¹

Amalek has adapted to its mission as the archetype of evil. It pushes that agenda at all costs. Every other creature has at least a sliver of soul, a ray of God that dwells within and sustains its life. Yet there are hollow men, who absorb their life juice through their skin.²² They feed off the sparks that fly from the clash of matter and psyches in conflict. They are chronic provocateurs, for their survival requires exactly this. If conflict would cease, so would they, for they have no inner wellspring from which to draw life. These empty creatures with a void at their core are the spiritual offspring of Amalek.

Every fleck of soul must (and will) be redeemed and in some form live eternal.²³ Only Amalek, with its hollow core, is truly subject to death. Amalek plays its role so well it seals its own demise. And yet, against all odds, Amalek actually does snake its way into the world-to-come...and we are its carriers. The Torah instructs us to hold Amalek in our memory for eternity...and to never forget it. Every mitzvah has some eternally enduring expression...including the mitzvah to remember

