

Trivial Pursuits

Purim, Amalek, and Meaning: *Hillul vs. Chillul*

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Criticism may not be agreeable, but it is necessary. It fulfills the same function as pain in the human body. It calls attention to an unhealthy state of things.

– Winston Churchill

Most of us do not take well to criticism. We get defensive and angry, and vehemently deny any and all charges against us. You – you dare to criticize me – me?! However, at a later point when we are calmer and more rational, most of us will wonder if our critic was right. Hopefully, we then subject ourselves and our actions to an internal critique. Then if it seems that our actions were wrong, we try to correct them (even if we never admit it to our critic). This enables us to improve.

In the Torah portion of Beshalach, we read about the first attack on the Jews after the Exodus from Egypt. The nation of Amalek comes to fight with the nation of Israel in Refidim. This incident is retold in the portion of Ki Tetzei in Devarim. This retelling is read on the Shabbat before Purim, as we know that according to rabbinic tradition Haman the Aggagite of Megilla fame was a descendant of Amalek. In Ki Tetzei, the Torah mentions that Amalek's attack was a surprise one. The language used (*asher karecha baderech*) is reminiscent of the Hebrew word for cold (*kar*). Rashi (1040-1105), quoting earlier rabbinic sources, famously explains that after the miraculous Exodus, the Jews could be described as boiling hot. Everyone was afraid to start up with the Jews because they knew they would get burned. Unfortunately, the nation of Amalek broke this taboo. Although it did get burned, it effectively succeeded in cooling off the Jews. The other nations no longer feared the consequences of attacking them.

Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner (1904-1980) elaborates on this idea in his book *Pachad Yitzchak* (Purim 1:6). The war with Amalek was not similar to other wars. It was an attack on the significance and importance of Israel. All the other leaders of the surrounding nations understood the significance of the Exodus and the splitting of the sea: G-d is involved with the world. These lessons were anathema to Amalek. Amalek represents the power of mockery and desecration (*chillul*), while the power of the Jews is that of sanctification and the glorification of G-d (*hillul*). They stand in opposition to one another: Amalek versus Israel. *Chillul* versus *hillul*. With the birth of the Jewish nation, the power to recognize meaning entered the world. Amalek's attack on the Jews represented an attack on all meaning. This is the power of mockery. It trivializes everything. Nihilism reigns.

Following the incident of Amalek, we are told that "Yitro heard . . . everything G-d had done for Moshe and Israel" (*Shemot* 18:1). On this verse, our Sages comment, "Beat the scoffer and the simple will become clever" (*Mishlei* 19:25). 'Beat the scoffer' refers to Amalek, and 'the simple will become clever' refers to Yitro" (*Shemot Rabba* 27:6). When Yitro heard about what happened in Egypt, he recognized the greatness of G-d Who saved the Jews from the Egyptians, and he offered up sacrifices to G-d. In contrast, the nation of Amalek could not learn a thing from its own downfall. For the mocking essence of Amalek rejects rebuke, meaning it neither acknowledges significance nor accepts rebuke, making it impossible for its

soul to grow. Esau, who was the progenitor of Amalek (*Bereishit* 36:12), already had some of this mocking character. He did not just sell his birthright – he denigrated and despised it (*Bereishit* 25:34). He held it cheap and trivialized it.

For this same reason, in the End of Days all other nations will be perfected, but Amalek will be destroyed, as Bilam predicted – “His end is to be destroyed forever” (*Bamidbar* 24:20). Amalek is incapable of being perfected. Anyone who sees nothing as meaningful and can take nothing seriously will never be able to improve.

It is for this reason that G-d wages an eternal war against Amalek (*Shemot* 17:16), and we are enjoined to wipe this nation out (*Devarim* 25:19). It would seem that the common practice of stamping and noisemaking at the mention of Haman during the Megilla reading is a symbolic way of fulfilling this mandate. Some people even write the name Haman or Amalek on the soles of their shoes, and then rub it out when they stamp. This is an easy, fun, symbolic way to wipe out Amalek on Purim.

Even after Purim is over, we must proceed to continue with the more challenging task of wiping out Amalek's character traits. By thinking carefully about what is important and significant in life and allocating our resources accordingly, by being receptive to constructive criticism, and by using it as a springboard for self-improvement, we can eradicate Amalek from within us.

A freilichen Purim!

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