

This Shabbat is known as Shabbat Zachor, the Shabbat of remembrance. On this Shabbat in addition to the usual Torah reading, we read an additional section from Devarim. This short reading which contains only three verses, states as follows; "Remember what Amalek did to you as you came out of Egypt. He met you by the way, and smote the hindmost of you, all that were enfeebled in the rear, when you were faint and weary; and feared not G-D. Therefore it shall be, when G-D has given you rest from your enemies around you, in the land which G-D has given you for an inheritance to possess it, that you shall blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven; you shalt not forget."

Although the directive may sound simple - remember what Amalek did and never forget the damage inflicted upon you when you left Egypt. Practically, how can one be instructed to remember something, isn't the ability to remember and forget really beyond our control. No one tries to forget material for a test, their anniversaries, or their children's' birthdays; it happens as unintended consequence of our limited human abilities. As unpleasant as it may be, it is only natural to forget things. So how can we be held responsible to remember Amalek and to not forget them?

The Gerrer Rebbe, Rav Yitzchok Meir Alter is bothered by the secondary obligation of the reading to blot out the remembrance of Amalek. Why should G-D require us to wipe out Amalek? Certainly an omnipotent G-D is more than capable of performing this feat. Wiping out a single nation, the evil clan of Amalek should present no challenge for G-D.

Scientists have long debated why human beings forget things. While there are no shortage of theories as to the process of memory recall and the troubling tendencies of retrieval failure, the Torah also presents a theory on the subject. The Torah in its subtle and unique way describes the oft repeated failure of the Jewish people to remember the existence of G-D. In Devarim (8, 14-17) the Torah tells us, "When your herds and flocks multiply, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied; and then your heart be lifted up, and you forget G-D, who brought you forth out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage". Simply stated, the Torah is telling us that we forget important matters, such as the existence of G-D, when we become complacent and arrogant. When we become self-assured and lose all sense of humility then forgetfulness sets in. The humble person who is fully aware of his own shortcomings and makes self-improvement a priority is less likely to forget important details. When we become over confident in any area or relationship we fail to pay attention to detail, lose track of information, and general apathy sometimes sets in.

The Gerrer Rebbe suggests that the Amalek that we are supposed to wipe out is actually the trait of haughtiness that resides within us. The downfall of Amalek has always been its utter lack of humility. Haman, the chief antagonist in the Purim story was an Amalekite and without a doubt a most conceited individual. All of Shushan's Jews bowed down before him, yet one elderly Jew, Mordechai would not submit before him and that incensed him. He claimed that all of his honor and fame is worthless if even one Jew refuses to honor him. These words are the ravings of an arrogant man with an incredibly inflated ego and self-worth. He petitioned Achashverosh to sanction the genocide of the entire Jewish nation simply because he felt disrespected by a solitary Jew. The Rebbe points out that the numerical value of the word Rom, arrogance, is equivalent to the numerical value of the word Amalek, again reminding us that the obligation to rid the world of Amalek is actually an imperative to remove from ourselves any trace of arrogance, to make humility our ally and hubris our enemy. Success at achieving humility will ultimately determine our ability to prioritize and remember what is important to us.

The imperative of Zachor, remember what Amalek did to us, seemingly contains two distinct elements, yet they are very much connected. We are enjoined to remember what Amalek tried to do to us, and also to erase Amalek from the world, but we can only remember what Amalek did to us if we first eradicate the Amalek from within us. By erasing arrogance from our hearts we will never forget the pain that Amalek has caused us. More importantly though, by never forgetting what Amalek did to us we will ensure that we ourselves never become Amalek.

***Shabbat Shalom
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