

Vulnerability or Victory by Rabbi Ralph Pelcovitz

The story of Purim has its origins in the attack of Amalek upon the Israelites when they leave Egypt. To properly understand the message and meaning of Purim one must examine the episode as recorded at the end of *בשלח* and the admonition to ever remember this dastardly attack which is found at the end of *כי תצא*. The parallel between the events in the time of Moses and those in the time of Esther and Mordecai is a remarkable one, and the lesson we can learn from it is extremely significant for our time.

“And Amalek came and fought with Israel in Rephidim”. Our Sages comment on the word Rephidim — *שרפו ידיהם מן התורה* — The Jewish people wavered in their faith and trust in the Almighty. In the preceding *posuk* we are told that Israel questioned whether G-d was in their midst or not. It has been pointed out that the word *עמלק* is numerically equivalent to *ספק* —doubt! When Jews become weak in their faith and begin to question and doubt their own unique roles as G-d's chosen people, then Amalek attacks, for the enemies of Israel somehow sense our vulnerability. Amalek chooses as its victims *כל הנחשלים אחריו* — “the enfeebled ones” which refers to those who had removed themselves from the protection of the Almighty, as the *Sifre* states. Our strength and ability to withstand the onslaught of our enemies is measured not by our physical or military might but by our firm, resolute trust in the G-d of Israel and when that faith falters we become vulnerable to attack.

Many centuries later, Haman, the descendant of Amalek, understands this and when he comes to the King to obtain permission to annihilate the Jews he states *ישנו עם אחד מפוזר ומפירד* — “there is a people dispersed and divided”, and our Sages comment *ישנים מן המצוות* —they slumber and ignore the *mitzvos* “they do not observe the laws of the

King” according to *חז"ל* refers to the laws of the King of Kings, i.e. their own Torah. Even a Haman would fear to attack and destroy the Jews were he not confident that G-d's protection had been removed from them for they had rejected Him, therefore He in turn had abandoned them.

Considering the cause of Israel's vulnerability to Amalek and Haman we can readily perceive the need not only to defend ourselves against the enemies of Israel but also to do *תשובה* to repent and return to G-d thereby insuring our survival through the providence of the Almighty. Moshe realizes this in his time as does Mordecai in his. Moshe chooses Joshua to lead the Jewish forces when Amalek attacks. Our Sages explain why he chooses *יהושע* as follows: *your forbearer (Joseph) said “I fear the Almighty” therefore you are the one to do battle with those of whom it is said “and they feared not the Almighty”*. To combat those who not only have no reverence for G-d themselves, but also detect a weakening of faith in Israel, we must choose one whose *יראת שמים* is so strong that he is the only one who can be the champion of Israel, deserving of G-d's special *השגחה*. Mordecai also reacts properly when he hears of Haman's plot. He could have reasoned that since Haman gave the King 10,000 peices of silver to allow him to destroy the Jews then let's make an appeal and outbid Haman! But he realizes that if Jews are so vulnerable to the evil plot of Haman it is time for *תשובה* — for repentance and return so as to deserve G-d's protection—not a time for fund raising which does not address itself to the heart of the problem. And he is successful—for not only is the plot foiled but *קימו וקבלו* —the Jews rededicate themselves once again to Torah.

There is one other parallel between the Amalek event and the story of Purim which need be stressed. Note that in both cases Jews *do* fight! There is actual military combat, coupled with the *תשובה* —the repentance and return to G-d. The reason is because we are dealing in both cases with a challenge not only to

the Jewish people but to G-d Himself. In both instances G-d is being mocked and attacked. Amalek is characterized as not fearing G-d, and Haman is also convinced that he need not fear the Almighty. It has well been said that if at the Red Sea G-d says "you be silent" whereas Amalek, Moshe, reflecting G-d's wishes, commands צא הלחם "go out and fight Amalek"—the reason is that in the former case Jews יהדות were being attacked but in the latter case—יהודים—Judaism was under attack! And the same was true in the story of Purim. When this occurs Jews themselves must take up arms and fight. There were no revealed miracles in either episode—Amalek or Purim. Both are in the category of נס נסתר—a hidden miracle. When this is so, natural means must be used by Jews as well, not supernatural—hence it is imperative to confront the enemy—ourselves. We must be prepared to literally fight for our תשובה thereby demonstrating our total אמונה—a willingness to use might and mind as we manifest our total commitment to G-d and Torah.

We have drawn a parallel from the time of Moses to that of Mordecai. Every Jew today can certainly draw a parallel from these events to the times in which we live. If we do so, wisely and sincerely, we will merit to witness the dawn of a period marked by—
ליהודים היתה אורה ושמחה — כן תהי לנו —