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Achdut, Amaleik, and, Adar

By Rabbi Rappi Mandelstam

As Purim approaches, we must consider why the reading of Parashat Zachor is such an important aspect of preparing for Purim. The Magein Avraham notes that one could fulfill the Mitzvah De'Oraita of remembering Amaleik with the reading of either Parashat BeShalach or Parashat Ki Teitzei, both of which record the story of Amaleik. However, the Anshei K'nesset HaGedolah felt it necessary to have the special reading of Zachor right before Purim to draw a clear connection between the original attack by Amaleik and their attack in the days of Haman. The reason, says the Magein Avraham, is obvious! We should not think of Amaleik as an enemy of the past; rather, we should be reminded every year that just as they attacked us in the Midbar, so too they attacked us in the days of Haman and have continued to attack us since then. If we fail to learn from the past, Amaleik will surely resurface. But what is the lesson to be learned? What mistakes on our part bring Amaleik upon us?

When we look at the original battle with Amaleik in Parashat BeShalach, there seems to be no rhyme or reason for Amaleik's attack. The Pasuk (Shemot 17:8) simply states, "*VaYavo Amaleik VaYilachem BeYisrael BeRephidim*", "And Amaleik came and battled against the Jews in Rephidim." Amaleik seemingly out of nowhere wages war against us.

Rashi explains why Bnei Yisrael deserved to be attacked by pointing us to the story immediately prior to Amaleik's attack, where Bnei Yisrael complain to Moshe for water. While the demand for water on its own may have been understandable, the perspective and attitude expressed by Bnei Yisrael reveals a fundamental flaw. As the Pasuk testifies, (Shemot 17:7) Bnei Yisrael questioned whether Hashem was really in their midst as they traveled in the desert.

The lack of recognition of Hashem's constant presence in this world is what always brings about Amaleik. As developed in depth by Rav Yitzchak Hutner, Amaleik is the force of chance - Mikreh - that relate to world events as having no significance, no message, and certainly, no religious meaning. When we fail to see that everything is controlled by Hashem we expose ourselves to Amaleik. Similarly, in the days of Haman, when the Jews of

Persia perhaps put more trust in political figures like Achashverosh than in the Ribbono Shel Olam, Haman's attack reminded us that no current of history is made without Hashem pulling the strings.

Although there are many additional points that support this approach, I would like to focus on a different aspect of our battles with Amaleik that also clearly expresses itself in the story of Purim. When we look at Haman's justification for killing the Jewish people, he describes Bnei Yisrael as a nation that is "*Mefuzar UMeforad Bein Ha'Amim*," "Scattered and dispersed amongst the nations" (Megillat Esther 3:8). Even Haman recognized that a nation that is meant to be an Am Echad was failing. The lack of Achdut amongst Klal Yisrael was the very cause for our narrowly averted destruction.

What must happen for the Purim story to completely reverse? Esther tells Mordechai (Megillat Esther 4:16) "*Leich Kenos Et Kol HaYehudim*," "Go and assemble the entire Jewish people." If we want to overcome Haman, we must fast and daven, but even more so, we must unite as a people. Rav Shlomo Alkabetz suggests that this answer explains why we celebrate Purim the way we do. Why, in contrast to other Yamim Tovim, do we have a special Mitzvah of Mishlo'ach Manot? Mishlo'ach Manot is the way we ensure that we share the joy of Purim with as many people as possible. The Mitzvah of Mishlo'ach Manot creates a greater sense of Achdut and closeness within Am Yisrael.

If the lack of Achdut is what brought Amaleik upon us in the Purim story, then perhaps it was also the problem in Parashat BeShalach. Chazal say that Am Yisrael was most united at Matan Torah, as the Pasuk (Shemot 19:2) states, "*VaYichan Sham Yisrael Neged HaHar*," "And the Jewish people encamped there in front of the mountain." Rashi (Shemot 19:2 s.v. *VaYichan Sham*) notes that the word "*VaYichan*" is singular; this form is used to teach us that all members of Am Yisrael were "*Ke'Ish Echad BeLev Echad*", "Like one man with one heart." It's true that we all came together in order to receive the Torah, but we can imply that until we arrived at Har Sinai, we were not such a unified nation.

In fact, the story right before Matan Torah, according to most opinions, is the battle with Amaleik. Considering that the Torah is not always in chronological order, many assume the beginning of Parashat Yitro occurred after Matan Torah. Therefore, the war with Amaleik would have had to take place immediately before Matan Torah. The Kli Yakar suggests (Shemot 19:2 s.v. *VaYisu*) that the place where we were encamped when Amaleik attacked was Rephidim. What's the meaning of the name Rephidim? If you rearrange the letters in Rephidim by switching the Reish and the Phey, you get Pridim which means 'the separated ones.' Just as Haman described us an "*Am Meforad*," so too in Rephidim our lack of unity brought Amaleik upon us. How do beat Amaleik? By becoming Keish Echad BeLev Echad. It is no coincidence that

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both battles against Amaleik are followed by an acceptance of the Torah. The Gemara (Shabbat 88a) comments on the phrase (Megillat Esther 9:27) “*Kiyemu VeKiblu HaYehudim*,” “The Jews undertook and accepted.” Following the Purim miracle we reaffirmed our acceptance of the Torah out of love. Only when we recognize the importance of each member of Klal Yisrael and join together as a nation do we find ourselves worthy of the gift of Torah.

In addition to the battle at Rephidim, there is yet another attack by Amaleik in the Torah itself that is not often given attention. In Parashat Chukat, after the death of Aharon HaKohein, the Torah briefly describes the attack of the Kena’ani Melech Arad. In identifying our attacker, Rashi (BeMidbar 21:1 s.v. *Yosheiv HaNegev*) quotes from the Midrash that it was actually Amaleik, masking itself as a group of Kena’anim. What triggered this attack? The Gemara in Rosh HaShanah notes that the story begins with “*VaYishma HaKena’ani*,” “And the Kena’ani heard” (BeMidbar 21:1), without actually describing what was heard. Based on the events of the previous Perek, Chazal say the king heard of Aharon’s death and assumed Am Yisrael would be vulnerable. Why does the death of Aharon HaKohein make Bnei Yisrael more vulnerable to attack? The Gemara says that the Ananei HaKavod that had been protecting the Jews was in the merit of Aharon, and after he died, they were no longer present to protect Bnei Yisrael.

We can suggest on a deeper level that the loss of Aharon HaKohein meant the weakening of his legacy and impact on the people. What was Aharon HaKohein’s legacy? The Mishnah in Avot describes him as a person who loved Chesed, chased after peace, and brought people closer to Torah. The person who more than anyone devoted himself to bringing Jews together was Aharon HaKohein. Would we be able to remain a unified nation without Aharon HaKohein? Our sense of Achdut must have been weakened because Amaleik felt compelled to attack. Only when we lose our sense of unity does Amaleik approach. In this incident, after a captive was taken, Bnei Yisrael vowed to devote the spoils of the war to Hashem if they won. The word “*VaYidar*,” “And he vowed” (BeMidbar 21:2) in the Pasuk is written in the singular; this signifies the unity of Am Yisrael, just as the singular word “*VaYichan*” did in Parashat Yitro. The Torah highlights that our response to Amaleik was, and must be, to act as one unified people, just like we were Ke’Ish Echad BeLev Echad at Har Sinai and in the Purim story.

REAFFIRMING BELIEFS IN THE WAKE OF A TRAUMATIC INCIDENT

By Moshe Y. Golubtchik

In the aftermath of the Jewish people’s battle against the non-Jewish population of Persia, the tale was recorded for posterity in Megillat Esther and a holiday was established by Mordechai and Esther, in order to commemorate the miracles which had occurred. In the description of the Jews’

acceptance of this holiday, the Pasuk states “*Kiyemu VeKibbelu HaYehudim Aleihem Ve’Al Zaram Ve’Al Kol HaNilvim Aleihem VeLo Ya’avor*,” “The Jews undertook and irrevocably obligated themselves and their descendants, and all who might join them...” (Esther 9:27). This Pasuk, although seemingly only a reference to Purim, is taken by Chazal in a much broader light.

The Gemara (Shabbat 88a) interprets the words “*VaYityatzevu BeTachtit HaHar*,” “And [the Jewish people] stood at the lowermost part of the mountain” (Shemot 19:17), stated in the context of Matan Torah, to mean that Hashem lifted Har Sinai above the Jewish people and threatened to crush them with it if they refused to accept the Torah. Rav Acha Bar Yaakov posits that, as Bnei Yisrael were coerced to accept the Torah, it may not be completely binding. However, Rava cites the aforementioned Pasuk in Esther as evidence that the Jews in that time willingly accepted the Torah. This reading of the Pasuk is unchallenged in the Gemara, but it leaves a gaping question: are we really to believe that until the time of Mordechai and Esther, the Jewish people had never willingly and wholeheartedly affirmed their acceptance of the Torah? It seems puzzling that this didn’t happen in the times of Yehoshua, Shmuel, David, or any other time of spiritual uplift.

I would like to propose a simpler explanation. Assume for a moment that the Jews accepted the Torah completely willingly at Har Sinai. In the ensuing generations, the Jewish people experienced many hardships, not the least of which was Haman’s plan to wipe out the entire nation in one day. It is perfectly natural that in hard times, one’s faith might be shaken. However, after the Jews emerged from this traumatic ordeal victorious, they were reminded of the hand of Hashem, which was clearly orchestrating the entire story. Their miraculous salvation was enough to restore their faith in Hashem and inspire them to reaffirm their commitment to Torah observance.

A proof for this concept can be found in one of the stories about Eliyahu Hanavi. In Melachim Aleph Perek 17, Eliyahu encounters a poor widow and asks her for food. She responds that she does not have anything to spare for him, as she has only enough flour and oil for herself and her son to eat a final meal before their inevitable deaths from famine. Eliyahu performs a miracle and causes the flour and oil to last and sustain all three of them for an extended period. Some time later, the widow’s son dies and she immediately blames Eliyahu for causing his death. Eliyahu HaNavi cries out to Hashem and then revives the woman’s son. Upon seeing her son revived, the woman declares, “*Atah Zeh Yadati Ki Ish Elokim Atah UDevar Hashem BeFicha Emet*,” “Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the LORD is truly in your mouth” (Melachim Aleph 17:24).

At first glance, this may seem surprising. The widow has already seen Eliyahu perform a great miracle which saved her life. Why is she only now accepting that he is a true Navi?

However, considering what had just transpired, the widow’s reaction is understandable. The widow’s son died, and she became angry with Eliyahu, and seemingly Hashem as well. Then, Eliyahu revived her dead son, thereby demonstrating his capabilities as a Navi yet again, as well as God’s beneficence. This

students of Jewish Philosophy pay considerable attention to Rav Chasdai Crescas' views until this day. What makes this Sefer so remarkable was that the author had both the time and presence of mind to author such a work for the ages despite living under such severe strain.

Rav David ben Zimra, known as Radbaz, was born in Spain in 1479 and was forced to leave Spain with his family in 1492. They resettled in Eretz Yisrael.

The trauma experienced by the Jewish exiles from Spain, such as the Radbaz and his family, was profound. The Catholic Church forbade Jews to leave Spain with gold and silver, and so Jews were left with no choice other than to sell their property for next to nothing. Homes, for example, were sold for as little as a donkey on which to leave Spain.

The impoverished Jewish refugees were extremely vulnerable at sea due to the combined dangers of stormy weather, murderous pirates, and slave traders eager to sell them into slavery. Moreover, the trauma did not end when for Jews when they arrived at their new countries. The difficulty of adjusting to an often hostile new society when the refugees had little or no resources is unfathomable.

Despite this horrific experience, the Radbaz flourished in his new home, learning with great rabbis in his adopted community of Tzefat and emerging as a great Torah scholar who was appointed as Hacham Bashi (chief rabbi) of the Egyptian Jewish community. While serving with distinction in this role for over forty years, the Radbaz published more than three thousand responsa that have had immeasurable impact on Mizrahi (and all other) Jews. For example, there is hardly a Teshuvah authored by Rav Ovadiah Yosef that does not quote the Radbaz! Moreover, he found time to compose his Teshuvot while he was raising great Talmidim, such as Rav Yitzchak Luria (the great Ari z"l), the author of the Shitah Mekubetzet, and the Maharikash (Rav Yaakov Castro).

Examples of Other Great Spanish Rabbis from the Pre- and Post-Expulsion Era

Many other examples abound. The oft-quoted Teshuvot of the Maharam Alashkar, who was born in 1466 and suffered terrible tribulations during his voyage from Spain to North Africa in 1492, is an excellent example. The Maharam Alashkar eventually resettled in Jerusalem and was one of the shapers of Minhag Yerushalayim, the practices of Sephardic Jewish residents of Jerusalem.

Rav Yaakov Beirav, Rav Yaakov Ibn Haviv, the Tashbeitz and Maharashdam

Rav Yaakov Beirav was born in Spain in 1474 and was expelled from Spain in 1492. He eventually made his way to Tzefat, where he served as the Rav of Rav Yosef Caro, and authored authoritative Teshuvot frequently cited until this day. Another Spanish Jewish refugee, Rav Yaakov Ibn Chaviv, wrote the classic work Ein Yaakov on the Aggadic portions of the Gemara. The Tashbeitz (Rav Shimon Duran) was forced to leave Spain during the violence of 1391 and wound up in Algeria. Rav

Duran published more than eight hundred Teshuvot, which remain well used and often cited until this very day.

Finally, the Maharashdam (Rav Shmuel De Medina) published nearly one thousand Teshuvot that are often cited until this very day, despite his heavy burden as the leader of the large community of refugees from Portugal and Spain in Salonica (located in Greece).

We have not yet mentioned the extraordinary contribution made by Rav Yosef Caro in his Shulchan Aruch. As he writes in his introduction to the Shulchan Aruch, the aftermath of the Spanish inquisition left Jewish communities in Halachic turmoil around the known world. Rav Caro, a refuge from Spain of 1492, sought to, and succeeded in, stabilizing the Halachic practice of Jews with the publication of the Shulchan Aruch. Of course, this is the most lasting and impactful of all the contributions of the Spanish rabbis of the era which we are addressing.

Explaining the Extraordinary Literary Output of the Spanish Rabbis of the Expulsion Era

The accomplishments of the Spanish rabbis of the era of the Geirush (Expulsion) are beyond remarkable. It is an expression of the phenomenon describes in the Torah as "The more they tried to oppress them, the greater they became" (Shemot 1:12). These many great rabbis succeeded in taking all of the hideous negative energy unleashed upon them by the Catholic Inquisition and transforming it into extraordinary Torah productivity that lasts for all generations.

Conclusion

Jews marching to the gas chambers in the Concentration Camps chanted "we will outlive them" (referring, of course, to the Nazis). The Jewish expellees from Spain have certainly outlived the horrific leaders of the Inquisition, just as the Jews have outlasted the Nazis. The inquisition and its evil leaders are long gone and forgotten, while the works of the expulsion era Spanish rabbis dramatically transformed Mizrahi Judaism and our lovingly studied by hundreds of thousands of Jews until today.

I suggest that Mizrahi Jews refer to themselves as Sephardic not only due to the influence of Rambam and Rav Yosef Caro who were born in Spain. Rather it is because of the totality of the influence of the great Spanish rabbis, especially those of the Expulsion era, whose writings made an extraordinary impact on the practice of eastern Jews.

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Questions or comments? Contact us at:

Kol Torah

c/o Torah Academy of Bergen County

1600 Queen Anne Road

Teaneck, NJ 07666

Phone: (201) 837-7696

koltorah@koltorah.org