

Friday September 12, 2008

With everything we have to remember, why add Amalek?

by rabbi judah dardik

Ki Teitzei

Deuteronomy 21:10-25:19

Isaiah 54:1-10

There is so much to remember these days. A person can easily be lost if they can't recall offhand their Social Security number, login names and passwords, let alone the consequences of forgetting the birthdays and anniversaries of loved ones. Jewish life throws a whole list of additional things to remember onto the pile: yahrzeit dates, holidays that float around the secular calendar, picking up a challah for Shabbat and more.

And then there is Amalek.

In addition to everything else, this week's Torah portion throws in a mitzvah to "Remember what [the nation of] Amalek did to you on the way, when you were leaving Egypt and they happened (karcha) upon you on the way and struck the stragglers and the weak at the back when you were faint" (Deut. 25:17-18).

One more thing to remember each day. But why, and what makes this so significant? There were other nations that attacked us, and we are not bound to recall those battles!

Looking deeper, the verb used to describe Amalek's actions is "karcha," an unusual Hebrew word whose meaning is subject to a great deal of debate. What exactly did they do to us? And why did they attack the stragglers and the weak in the back instead of facing us head on?

Rashi explains the word "karcha" as stemming from the Hebrew word "kar," which means "cold." They cooled us off. He explains the use of the term with an analogy to a boiling cauldron of water. People don't get too near it, lest they get burned. Then along comes a wild fool, jumps into it and gets burned. However, this fool does change two things by taking the plunge: He cools off the water a bit and removes the taboo against getting too close. Somehow, it doesn't seem as "undoable" to the onlookers as it did a minute ago.

The same applies to Amalek and the Jewish people. When we left Egypt, the other nations feared us. Here we were, a slave people, locked up by Egypt — the most powerful and cultured people on Earth at the time. In two years, the Jews and our God had managed to completely decimate Egypt. Its economy was destroyed and its gold in our hands. The leadership was in shambles, the firstborn in every home was dead, its theology shattered and its military drowned in the sea.

We marched fearlessly into the desert. No one would touch us.

Then Amalek comes along and takes the plunge by attacking us. Granted, we repel Amalek and they lose in battle. But all of a sudden, attacking the Jewish people is no longer out of the question. Maybe the Jews can be defeated with a different tactic. That was "karcha" — Amalek cooling off the cauldron.

Rav Yitzchak Hutner explained that this is deeply symbolic and representative of who Amalek was, stating that this battle was that of "the force of 'chillul' (making worthless) vs. the force of 'hillul' (praise)." Amalek didn't just cool off the cauldron of Israel that one time. Rather, these actions represented their self-perceived mission in this world: to knock down and find fault.

They succeeded by going to war and telling the world, "Big deal. Nothing special about the Jews." Finding the weakness of anything that looked strong was a specialty, as evidenced by their attack on those lagging behind.

Oscar Wilde once said that "a cynic is one who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing." The struggle between Amalek and Israel was more than a war in the desert. Rather, it was the struggle between cynicism and seeing the value of things. Between knocking down and appreciation.

So many millennia later, we are taught to remember Amalek. It is a challenge for us, as we are a people who, given our history, have very good reason to be cynical. Yet we refuse to do so, and look instead for what is right in our lives. We who could have been cynical stand against Amalek and see the beauty in our world.

Rabbi Judah Dardik is the spiritual leader at Oakland's Beth Jacob. He can be reached at rabbi@bethjacoboakland.org.