

# PARSHAS VAYIKRA-ZACHOR

תשפ"ב

This Shabbos, we read Parshas Zachor. The details of the mitzvah of zechiras Amolek is a major machlokes rishonim. The Rambam holds it does not apply nowadays. The Sefer Hachinuch says there is a mitzvah today on Jewish males to remember what Amolek did, but not necessarily to read it from a sefer. Tosfos and the Rosh hold it is a mitzvah to read it in public from a sefer – reading Parshas Zachor is a mitzvah de'oraisah. This is how the Mogen Avrohom paskens.

After Klal Yisroel went through Yam Suf with all the miracles that were involved, they come to Moroh. They got water through a miracle and received some mitzvos of the Torah. At that point, Moshe Rabbeinu made a takonah not to go three days without limud Torah. They came to Refidim where they received quail and manna and water from a rock.

Then Amolek came and made war with Klal Yisroel in Refidim. Rashi says Klal Yisroel became vulnerable because they were weakened by their reduced dedication to learning Torah. What are Chazal trying to convey with this statement?

They are telling us that because of all the miracles they experienced, there was a tendency for Klal Yisroel to become complacent. They saw their enemies destroyed and became exceedingly wealthy from the bizas hayam. They were surrounded by ananei kovod. All their physical needs were taken care of, and they were living a supernatural existence. It was easy for them to think they weren't living in the real world with real consequences to their actions. They took their comfortable situation for granted.

Moshe Rabbeinu told them that they need to take measures to protect and preserve all the things they were being given on a silver platter. They had to constantly maintain a strong connection to Hashem if they wanted to remain on this elevated level of existence. You can't afford to take anything you have for granted. You have to be connected to Hashem through the Torah. Without it, you will lose what you have.

But Klal Yisroel became weak in Torah and they became vulnerable to attack from Amolek. Moshe sent Yehoshua to fight while he went up to the hilltop to daven. Klal Yisroel saw Moshe davening and this inspired them to connect strongly to Hashem which allowed them to be victorious over Amolek.

With this war in Ukraine raging, I marvel at how often the truth is staring people right in the face yet they aren't able to see it. People refuse to confront reality. You read about how so many Ukrainians were utterly taken by surprise when the invasion started. And they only fled to the next city instead of out of the country. Don't they know that Putin wants to take over the whole country? Everyone saw that Russia was intent on taking over the entire Ukraine – weeks before the invasion. There were massive forces accumulating on the border with Ukraine well in advance. But the Ukrainian people didn't think it would really happen. No-one evacuated when the danger became clear – most of them went on with their normal lives and waited until it was already unsafe to remain where they lived.

People are confidently talking about this war as a sign of Moshiach's imminent arrival. After all, the gemara says he will come on Shemittah or motzai Shemittah. But they forget that there is a stage called chevlei Moshiach, with all kinds of destruction and calamities that are involved in the process to bring Moshiach. The gemara in Sanhedrin tells of people who had apprehensions about Moshiach coming because of the frightening chevlei Moshiach that will come before. We have a vicious dictator who is willing to wipe out large cities in his drive

to dominate the world. The gemara says what do you do to protect yourself? Learn Torah, more Torah and more Torah, and do gemillas chasodim.

So while people are all confident and eager for this war to play out to bring Moshiach, they do not realize that we are living in a very dangerous time of history. This is a person who will stop at nothing to achieve his global ambitions. He is threatening to send nuclear bombs to anyone he doesn't like at the slightest provocation. In his Russian newspaper, he publicizes daily how all his nuclear submarines are deployed around the coasts of the United States, waiting for the signal to launch missiles and finish the United States in minutes. Chazal tell us that in times of intense destruction, you prepare by hasmado in limud Torah and chesed.

The verse says that Hashem Himself will see to it that Amolek will be destroyed from under the Heavens. The midrash in Parshas Noach says that when you have a corrupt society whose culture is irredeemably evil and murderous, then it must be totally eliminated without leaving a trace. Because if even a trace remains from that culture, it will inspire others and be reconstructed by other nations and the evil will persist. We know this is what happens from King Shaul's failure with Agog. We will now go through the haftorah.

Shaul's job was to kill out Amolek. For the most part, he succeeded. Everyone was killed except the king and some livestock to be used for korbanos. The very next day, Shmuel killed Agog. So how did he have a descendant? The answer is that Shaul hesitated. He took pity on Agog as a broken king who lost his entire kingdom. The pizmon after the megillah reading says Hashem foils all the plots of the cunning nations. Homon was the remnant of Amolek. He was self-confident because of his extreme wealth. It dug a pit for him to eventually fall into.

Homon knew that he came from a certain culture and he took on his ancestor's legacy to destroy the Jewish people. Throughout history, we see that mass murderers want to kill Jews as well. Hitler and Stalin were the biggest mass murderers of the 20th century and both of them had an inexplicable hatred of Jews. Idi Amin was a vicious dictator of Uganda. He was a cannibal. There were no Jews living in Uganda, but for some reason he hated Jews and eagerly helped the Palestinian terrorists hijack a plane and bring Jews to be terrorized in Entebbe – his capitol city.

The pizmon continues: Shaul had pity on Agog and because of that, Homon was born and the evil of Amolek came back to endanger Klal Yisroel. The one night after Agog was captured he was with a woman who became pregnant and Homon emerged from that union. This is why Amolek must be totally wiped out. We find three instances where the Torah demands total annihilation, leaving no-one and nothing to remain – the seven nations of Canaan, Amolek, and the Ir Hanidachas. Because when certain things become a part of a culture of evil, it has to be eliminated completely otherwise it will return again and again. This is not an easy mitzvah. Shaul had a very difficult time fulfilling it.

Shaul was given a Divine command – Hashem is now giving a reckoning for what Amolek did. It is time for their elimination. Why? Because, as it says in Tehillim, Amolek is a nation dedicated to removing Klal Yisroel from the world. That is how they define themselves. You cannot have mercy on them. Shmuel came to Shaul and told him this command. Shaul had a restless sleep that night. The midrash explains that in his

dream, Shaul complained to Hashem that it wasn't fair. It wasn't moral to kill all these innocent people. He was very conflicted. In the end, Shaul and the people had pity on Agog and all the beautiful cattle Amolek had.

The midrash says that when Hashem wiped out the dor hamabul, Hashem send such a destructive force in the waters of the mabul that eliminated every trace of that entire civilization. Not even a plow or a tool survived the mabul. Why? Because Hashem didn't want anything to remain for people later in history to discover and then try to reconstruct that evil civilization.

Klal Yisroel didn't want to get rid of the cattle from Amolek. Hashem complained to Shmuel that Shaul did not fulfill His command and he turned away from Me. Shmuel confronted Shaul with his disobedience and he initially denied it. Then he justified it by saying this is what the people wanted. Shmuel reprimanded him by saying he is the leader. You lead the people. Don't let your humility allow the people to lead you!

The Maharam M'Ruttenburg explains why other people whom the halacha requires us to respect can waive their honor, but a king cannot. He says Hashem gave a Jewish king tremendous power and honor in order to represent Hashem's kingship in the world. It must be absolute and never compromised. A Jewish king isn't powerful and respected because of who he is as an individual. He has to understand that he represents Hashem, Who bestows kingship to kings. Another idea Shmuel told Shaul is that the Jewish king represents the Jewish people. You can't be intimidated and feel inferior to any non-Jewish king when you represent Hashem's chosen nation. It isn't your personal battle against Amolek. You are fighting Hashem's battle against evil. They cannot be shown any mercy.

Shaul tries to excuse his disobedience by saying they will bring these animals as sacrifices to serve Hashem! Isn't that a much better use of these animals than to just destroy them? Shmuel responds to this argument with a fundamental principle of Yiddishkeit. Listening is more important than korbonos. We don't tell Hashem how He should be served. He tells us what He wants as His avodah and we simply must obey. We don't rationalize doing something Hashem doesn't want by saying it's really a better way to serve Hashem!

Then Shmuel says something puzzling. He said this sin is like magic and avodo zoro. Why? Because Hashem created people with a moral conscience and put in everyone a certain instinct for what is right and wrong. But it was given to us to make us naturally sensitive to what Hashem tells us is good and evil. We have to refine that moral instinct and train it to respond to what Hashem says is right and wrong. We don't use it to stand in judgment over what Hashem says is right and wrong.

Avodo zoro is the belief that there are forces and powers that exist independently of Hashem. This is true about physical power and it is true about moral power. When a person thinks that his moral instinct is more correct than Hashem's morality, he is worshipping his own moral conscience as something independent of Hashem. It is not allowed.

Hashem created morality and concepts of good and evil. They are not independent of His will to then use them to question and challenge Hashem's morality. Since Shaul detested Hashem's judgement, he can't represent Hashem in this world any longer.

Shaul accepted Shmuel's rebuke and admitted his guilt. He tried to find a way to fix the mistake, but Hashem said the mistake was too fundamental. You don't stand in judgement of Hashem's commands. We only obey. Hashem made a decree and He will not change His mind.

Then Shmuel confronts Agog before he executed him. He says you killed many people and made many mothers grieve over lost children, so too, you mother will be bereaved. You are evil and evil must be eliminated.

There are many deep lessons in this haftorah. Amolek has to be removed completely from this world. Hashem is dedicated to this mission. His malchus will not be complete until the source of evil is eliminated. We say there will be a final judgment of Eisov and Amolek before Moshiach comes.

Another lesson we learn is that our sense of morality comes from Hashem. I can't use it to turn around and judge Hashem's morality. Hashem created those feelings and moral instincts, and my job is to adjust them and make them resonate with the Torah's morality. There is no moral power parallel and independent of Hashem's morality. Shaul followed his personal feelings of morality and had pity and spared Agog. Because of that, he lost the kingship. Evil has to be eliminated. Klal Yisroel suffered from Homon, his direct descendant, as a result of Shaul's mercy.

Shaul was intimidated by the people who wanted to use the animals to serve Hashem when Hashem simply wanted them destroyed. But you don't get to decide how Hashem ought to be served. We let Hashem tell us how He wants to be served. Our job is to do mitzvos whether we agree with them or not.

There is a Ramban in Kiddushin who gives an important reason why the gemara says someone who is commanded to do mitzvos gets more reward than someone who does the mitzvos voluntarily. You would think it is the opposite – you are doing extra things – beyond what you have to! But the Ramban explains that there are two aspects to mitzvos. There is the inherent spiritual nature of a mitzvah – its positive effects on your personality or on your neshomo that Hashem implanted in it. Then there is the aspect of obedience. You are doing this mitzvah because Hashem is your master and you obey His commands. You submit your will to Hashem's will and this can only be done if you are being commanded to it. This is the extra reward beyond someone who does it voluntarily.

The king's power and his honor is not really his own. He is merely a representative of Hashem to lead His chosen nation. Shaul made it all about his personal moral feelings and judgements and he failed to understand what his job as a Jewish king is – to fulfill Hashem's mission of eliminating evil from the world. As a result, he lost the kingship to Dovid who did understand it.