

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

The Book of Shmuel
Yeshivat Har Etzion

LECTURE 27: CHAPTER 15

SHAUL'S WAR AGAINST AMALEK (PART I)

Rav Amnon Bazak

I. "REMEMBER WHAT AMALEK DID TO YOU"

Our chapter seems to totally ignore the fiasco related to the first war against the Pelishtim. Shmuel turns to Shaul with an unequivocal command:

(1) And Shmuel said unto Shaul, "The Lord sent me to anoint you to be king over His people, over Israel; now therefore hearken you unto the voice of the words of the Lord. (2) Thus says the Lord of hosts: I remember that which Amalek did to Israel, how he set himself against him in the way, when he came up out of Egypt. (3) Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass."

The commandment to destroy Amalek has raised many discussions throughout the generations, and countless ink has been spilled to explain it.^{1[1]} This is not the place to consider the issue in its entirety, though I will relate below to the moral aspects of the topic. Let me, however, briefly review the background for the *mitzva* of blotting out the memory of Amalek.

Amalek is mentioned in the Torah in two passages that are very different from each other. At the end of *Parashat Beshalach* we read as follows:

^{1[1]} A lengthy discussion of this issue may be found in R. Yaakov Medan's article, "Amalek," in "Al Derekh Ha-Avot," Alon Shevut (5761), pp. 317-396.

Then came Amalek, and fought with Israel in Refidim. And Moshe said to Yehoshua, "Choose us men, and go out, fight with Amalek; tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the rod of God in my hand." So Yehoshua did as Moshe had said to him, and fought with Amalek. And Moshe, Aharon, and Chur went up to the top of the hill. And it came to pass, when Moshe held up his hand, that Israel prevailed and when he let down his hand, Amalek prevailed. But Moshe's hands were heavy; and they took a stone, and put it under him, and he sat on it. And Aharon and Chur supported his hands, the one on the one side, and the other on the other side, and his hands were steady until the going down of the sun. And Yehoshua harried Amalek and his people with the edge of the sword. And the Lord said to Moshe, "Write this for a memorial in a book, and rehearse it in the ears of Yehoshua: that **I will utterly blot out** the remembrance of Amalek from under the heaven." And Moshe built an altar, and called the name of it Adonai-Nisi (the Lord is my banner), for he said, "Because the Lord has sworn by His throne that the Lord will have war against Amalek from generation to generation." (*Shemot* 17:8-15)

In contrast, at the end of *Parashat Ki-Tetze* we learn:

Remember what Amalek did to you by the way, when you came out of Egypt, how he met you by the way, and smote the hindmost of you, all that were feeble in your rear, when you were faint and weary; and he feared not God. Therefore it shall be, when the Lord your God has given you rest from all your enemies round about, in the land which the Lord your God gives you for an inheritance to possess it, that **you shall blot out** the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven; you shall not forget. (*Devarim* 25:17-19)

The difference between the two accounts is striking to the eye. In the book of *Shemot*, the campaign is described as an ordinary war, in which Israel fights Amalek face to face in an organized battle; Amalek does not appear to be essentially different from any of the other nations that Israel would fight in the future. In the book of *Devarim*, on the other hand, we read of the immoral dimension of Amalek's fighting, not a battle between two armies, but rather: "And he smote the hindmost of you, all that were feeble in your rear, when you were faint and weary."^{2[2]}

It seems that these differences give expression to two different dimensions of the severity of Amalek's action. As was already noted, in the book of *Shemot* there is nothing special about the war itself; what stands out is that Amalek was the first nation to dare and fight against Israel after the exodus from Egypt and the splitting of the sea. These events had

^{2[2]} On the practical level, there may not be a contradiction between the two accounts, and thus, there is no need to invoke the "perspectives method." It might be argued that the book of *Devarim* describes Amalek's first contact with Israel, whereas the book of *Shemot* describes the second day ("tomorrow"), when Israel went out and fought Amalek face-to-face (this is R. Medan's argument in the article mentioned in the previous note). In any event, it is clear that each book presents a different aspect of the event.

left a deep impression on the neighboring nations, as is described in detail in the Song of the Sea:

The people shall hear, and be afraid; trembling shall take hold of the inhabitants of Peleshet. Then the chiefs of Edom shall be amazed; the mighty men of Mo'av, trembling shall take hold upon them; all the inhabitants of Kena'an shall melt away. Fear and dread shall fall upon them; by the greatness of Your arm they shall be as still as a stone...
(*Shemot* 15:14-16)

Now, in the midst of this great trembling before God, Amalek was the first to attack, as is stated in the famous parable of *Chazal* cited by Rashi (*Devarim* 25:18):

It may be compared to a boiling hot bath into which no living creature could descend. A good-for-nothing came, and sprang down into it; although he scalded himself, he made it appear cold to others.

Since, according to this account, the insult was primarily directed at God, it is no wonder that Scripture emphasizes that in effect the war was decided by God, who is represented by Moshe's hands turned heavenwards: "And it came to pass, when Moshe held up his hand, that Israel prevailed: and when he let down his hand, Amalek prevailed." For this reason, the King, King of kings, Himself accepted the mission to blot out Amalek – the first nation to strike at God's honor – in the future as well: "I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under the heaven... Because the Lord has sworn by His throne that the Lord will have war against Amalek from generation to generation."

In the book of *Devarim*, on the other hand, the emphasis is placed on Amalek's immorality. This fits in well with the image of Amalek as it is reflected in other places: nomadic tribes who do not toil for their living, but rather plunder and take the toil of others. A unique account of the conduct of these nomadic tribes is found in the book of *Shoftim*, which relates how the Midyanites harassed Israel before Gidon emerged as a *shofet*:

And so it was, when Israel had sown, that Midyan and **Amalek**, and the children of the east came up against them; and they encamped against them, and destroyed the produce of the earth, as far as Azza, and left no sustenance for Israel, neither sheep, nor ox, no ass. For they came up with their cattle and their tents, and they came like locusts for multitude; for both they and their camels were without number, and they entered into the land to destroy it.
(*Shoftim* 6:3-5)

According to the book of *Devarim*, the critical factor in Amalek's war was the fact that they fell upon an "easy prey," a nation that had just now left Egypt after having been in bondage for hundreds of years, with a great deal of booty taken from the Egyptians. It was

for the immorality of their war that Amalek was punished for all generations, and it was the people of Israel, the nation that had suffered from this lack of morality, who were expected to exact the price: "You shall blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven."

Thus, we also understand why the command at the beginning of our chapter primarily reflects the wording found in the book of *Devarim*: "I remember that which Amalek did to Israel, how he set himself against him in the way, when he came up out of Egypt." This chapter gives expression to the obligation falling upon the people of Israel to blot out the remembrance of Amalek, and therefore it alludes to the section in the Torah that deals with this obligation.

II. THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN AMALEK AND YITRO

Another connection between our chapter and the Torah's account regarding Amalek finds expression in what is said about the Kenites:

And Shaul said unto the Kenites, "Go, depart, get you down from among the Amalekites, lest I destroy you with them; for you showed kindness to all the children of Israel, when they came up out of Egypt." So the Kenites departed from among the Amalekites.

Who are the Kenites? Two passages in the book of *Shoftim* are relevant to this question: "And the children of the Keni, Moshe's father-in-law, went up out of the city of palm trees..." (*Shoftim* 1:16); "Now Chever the Kenite, who was of the children of Chovav the father-in-law of Moshe, has severed himself..." (ibid. 4:11). This is not the place to go into detail about the relationship between "Chever the Kenite" and "Kayin;" what is important for our purposes is that we are dealing with descendants of Moshe's father-in-law, Yitro.

The connection between Amalek and Yitro appears already in the book of *Shemot*. Immediately following the story of the war against Amalek at the end of *Parashat Beshalach*, Scripture tells of Yitro's arrival in Israel's camp in the wilderness. *Chazal* (*Zevachim* 116a) and the biblical commentators across the generations disagreed regarding whether Yitro arrived before or after the giving of the Torah. The Ramban (consistent with his general approach) maintains that the Torah's stories are recorded in their correct chronological order. His main proof is from the fact that Moshe tells his father-in-law "all that the Lord had done to Pharaoh and to Egypt for the sake of Israel, and all the travail that had come upon them by the way, and how the Lord delivered them" (*Shemot* 18:7). Had Yitro arrived only after the Torah was given – "why did he not tell him of the revelation at Mount Sinai, from which he would know that God is true and his Torah is true and there is none beside Him?"

The Rashbam, on the other hand, adopts the approach that Yitro arrived after the Torah had been received at Sinai. His main proof is from the verse "And Yitro, Moshe's father-in-law, came with his sons and his wife to Moshe into the wilderness, where he encamped at **the mount of God**" (ibid. v. 5). The people of Israel only come to the mount of God in the next chapter – "In the third month, after the children of Israel were gone out of the land of Egypt, the same day they came into the wilderness of Sinai. For they were departed from Refidim, and were come to the desert of Sinai, and had pitched in the wilderness; **and there Israel camped before the mountain**" (ibid. 19:1-2). This implies that Yitro only arrived afterwards. The Ibn Ezra adds another proof from Moshe's words to Yitro: "And I do make them know the statutes of God and his *Torot*" (ibid. 18:16), which, according to the plain sense of the text, refers to the *mitzvot* which had already been given at Sinai.

The question that arises, however, is that if Yitro arrived only after the Torah was given, why does the Torah record his arrival earlier, deviating from the proper chronological order? According to the Rashbam, the reason is "so as not to interrupt the sections dealing with the *mitzvot*," that is to say, to preserve the continuity between the revelation at Mount Sinai and the *parashot* dealing with the *mitzvot* that follow it, beginning with *Parashat Mishpatim*. The Ibn Ezra, on the other hand, argues that Yitro's story was moved up in order to join it to the end of *Parashat Beshalach* – the story of Amalek: "Since it already recorded the evil that Amalek did to Israel, it recorded the good that Yitro did for Israel."

Amalek and Yitro are connected by their contrast – they represent two extremes among the nations of the world: Amalek represents moral and religious evil, whereas Yitro represents loving-kindness, righteousness, and faith. It is precisely because Israel is commanded to blot out the remembrance of Amalek that there is room to emphasize that the nations of the world are given the opportunity to choose the path of Yitro. The same is true in our chapter; it is precisely after the command to blot out Amalek that it is emphasized that a distinction must be made between the different nations, and that no harm should come to the descendants of Yitro, who represents the total opposite of Amalek.

III. "AND SHAUL SPARED AGAG"

The account of the war begins on a very positive note:

(7) And Shaul smote the Amalekites, from Chavila as you go to Shur, that is in front of Egypt. (8) And he took Agag the king of the Amalekites alive, and utterly destroyed all the people with the edge of the sword.

At this stage, keeping Agag alive seems to be a normal procedure, no different than Yehoshua's conduct in some of his battles:

And it came to pass, when they brought out those kings to Yehoshua, that Yehoshua called for all the men of Israel, and said to the captains of the men of war who went with him, "Come near, put your feet upon the necks of these kings." And they came near, and put their feet upon their necks. And Yehoshua said to them, "Fear not, nor be dismayed, be strong and of good courage; for thus shall the Lord do to all your enemies against whom you fight." And afterwards Yehoshua smote them, and slew them, and hanged them on five trees; and they were hanging upon the trees until the evening. (*Yehoshua* 10:24-26)

It might be understood that Agag was kept alive for only a short period of time in order to humiliate him, just as Yehoshua had humiliated the kings of the south. Other than that, it seems that the objectives of the war had been achieved. But it soon becomes clear that this was not the case:

(9) But Shaul and the people spared Agag, and the best of the sheep and of the oxen, even the young of the second birth, and the lambs, and all that was good, and would not utterly destroy them; but every thing that was of no account and feeble,^{3[3]} that they destroyed utterly.

It seems that the verse should be read as follows:

But Shaul	and the people	spared
↓	↓	
Agag	and the best of the sheep, and of the oxen ^{4[4]}	

Among other ways, it is possible to prove this from the words of Shaul to Shmuel below: "for the people spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen" (v. 15). We can argue, then, that the people spared the best of the sheep and oxen, whereas Shaul spared Agag, king of Amalek. If this is true, why did the verse combine these two acts of sparing? It seems that Scripture wishes to imply that the two acts of sparing have a common root.

^{3[3]} The word *melakha* (translated here as "thing") refers to the sheep (see *Bereishit* 33:13-14); *Shemot* 22:10); the expression "*nemivza ve-names*" (translated here as "of no account and feeble") means "despicable and loathed" (see *Tehillim* 15:4).

^{4[4]} I already discussed a similar structure in chap. 6 (lecture no. 10, sec. IV), and there I also noted other verses structured in this manner.

The people spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen for the reason stated explicitly in the text: Even though they had been commanded, "And utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass," it was convenient for them to fulfill the command only with respect to "every thing that was of no account and feeble." But they were not eager to fulfill it with respect to "the best of the sheep, and of the oxen, even the young of the second birth, and the lambs, and all that was good." These they preferred to keep for themselves, out of narrow self-interest.^{5[5]}

Connecting Shaul's sparing of Agag to the people's sparing of the sheep teaches us that that his action also stemmed from narrow self-interest. In certain circles in Israel, Shaul is described as a humanist – in contrast, as it were, to Shmuel, the threatening prophet, who executes Agag in cold blood. This perception, however, is a clear perversion of Scripture: It is difficult to say that someone who kills an entire nation and spares only its king is acting out of humanist inclinations. It seems, therefore, that Shaul's failure to put Agag to death stemmed from the accepted practice during the biblical period, according to which the victorious king would spare his vanquished counterpart but subject him to humiliating conditions, thus providing the ultimate satisfaction of victory. A striking example of this practice is familiar to us from the beginning of the book of *Shoftim*:

But Adoni-Bezek fled; and they pursued after him, and caught him, and cut off his thumbs and his great toes. And Adoni-Bezek said, "Seventy kings, having their thumbs and their great toes cut off, gathered food under my table; as I have done, so God has requited me..." (*Shoftim* 1:6-7)

Even though it is reasonable to assume that such cruel behavior was not universal, nevertheless, the phenomenon of defeated kings eating at the table of the victorious king is familiar to us from other accounts as well:

And it came to pass in the thirty seventh year of the captivity of Yehoyakim king of Yehuda, in the twelfth month, on the twenty seventh day of the month, that Evil-Merodakh king of Bavel in the year that he began to reign did lift up the head of Yehoyakim king of Yehuda out of prison; and he spoke kindly to him, and set his throne above the throne of the other kings that were with him in Bavel. And he changed his prison garments, and he did eat bread continually before him all the days of his life. (II *Melakhim* 25:27-28)

^{5[5]} The word "*va-yachmol*" should not be understood as an indication of pity. The people were not concerned about Agag and the best of the sheep for moral reasons, but for a selfish one – the monetary gain that they did not want to forfeit. This is also the sense of the term in the story of the poor man's lamb: "And there came a traveler to the rich man, and he spared to take of his own flock and of his own herd, to prepare it for the wayfaring man that was come to him; but he took the poor man's lamb, and prepared it for the man that was come to him" (II *Shmuel* 12:4). There, too, the rich man did not act out of compassion, but out of miserliness.

It stands to reason, then, that Shaul had a similar fate in mind for Agag, and he thus shared in the sin of the people. Instead of fulfilling the command of total destruction, Shaul acted out of personal interest in order to glorify his own name. Of course, this action joins with another deed performed by Shaul at the end of the war: "And it was told to Shmuel, saying, Shaul came to Carmel, and, behold, he is setting him up a monument" (v. 12). Setting up a monument was just another one of the measures taken by Shaul for the same purpose: glorifying his name in the wake of the victory over Amalek.

One question remains: What was so terrible about Shaul's action that sealed his fate and brought about the loss of his kingdom? I will address this question in the next lecture.

(Translated by David Strauss)
