

A Tale of Two Enemies

Jewish holidays are times of contrast and uniformity. Oh yes, we all know about “they tried to kill us, we won, let’s eat.” That, supposedly, is the uniform part. But the contrasts are much more dramatic. Take Purim and Passover for example.

On Purim, before ever opening the Megillah, we retell the story of Amalek, who attacked our ancestors in the desert and preyed on the stragglers while we were “tired and exhausted and not fearing G-d.” And we are charged to “blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.” And then we are told not to forget. A built-in contradiction: if we blot out the memory, what should we not forget?

The difficulty with Amalek goes beyond that, however. This is a strange commandment, unique in the Torah. Read literally, it is a commandment to genocide. And it was never carried out. If it was, Jewish history would be quite different. After all, the Talmud states that Haman was a physical descendant of Amalek, since the Megillah identifies him as an *Agagi*, that is a member of the clan of Agag, king of Amalek. Wipe out Amalek, and there would be no Agag. No Haman. No Purim.

And what about Amalek’s spiritual descendants? Without the Amalek heritage, would there be no Nebuchadnezzar, no Titus, no Torquemada, no Chmelnitzky, no Petlura, no Hitler?

All we know is, that’s not what happened. Amalek was never physically destroyed. And as if to anticipate history, the Torah also states: “G-d is at war with Amalek to all generations.”

Classic commentaries interpret Amalek to symbolize the evil in each one of us. That is what we need to exterminate. Not just once, but every day. As the Lubavitcher Rebbe pointed out, the text uses three different forms of the word *timkheh* (blot out) – one beginning with an *alef*, one with a *mem*, and one with a *taf*. Those three letters spell *emet* -- “truth.” And the truth is, the battle goes

on. Whether or not we defeat our external enemies, the Amalek inside still plagues us. That is what we must not forget.

So, Haman was descended from Amalek. He tried to kill all the Jews, and failed. Boy, did he fail. Hanged on the gallows he built for Mordechai! His plan smashed when the Jews were armed and permitted to defend themselves. And we celebrate his defeat by reading his story, drowning out his name with noise, and drowning our troubles with *l'hayims* and a raucous unstructured feast, and more *l'hayims*, and masquerades and, yes, more *l'hayims*. For once in the year, it is a *mitzvah* to overindulge.

But four weeks later comes Passover. More details than we can count. Search for the *khometz*, burn the *khometz*, clean the house, sell what's left of what we didn't find.

(Now there's a transaction for you. I sell my bran flakes and pumpernickel and whiskey -- whatever is left over from Purim -- to someone we'll call Jim. And I pay Jim??)

On Seder night we tell the story of the Exodus. No instructions to blot out the name of Egypt. Why not? After all, Haman only **planned** to kill us. Even his ancestors of Amalek did limited damage. Egypt enslaved us for two centuries – or four, depending on which reading of history you accept.

Again we celebrate deliverance from danger. But this time it wasn't through self-defense. It was Divine intervention. Nature was pre-empted, and the Red Sea drowned the pursuing Egyptian army. But before the sea was split, Moses got the word: "Why do you cry to Me? Tell the people of Israel to go forward." Only when one Jew – Nakhshon – took his life in his hands and stepped into the water, says the Midrash, did the sea divide, and Israel was saved.

No unlimited *l'hayims* this time, just four cups of wine, symbolizing the four promises of freedom – with maybe an extra cup or two during dinner. A highly structured meal surrounded by a Seder ritual and elaborate customs.

Total contrast. Purim and Pesach – two faces of Jewish joy. One, the abandon of victory; the other, a dramatization of gratitude for freedom.

Both of these tales have a message for us. It's the same message. Take a risk – that's the message. Esther took a risk to plead her people's cause to the king. Nakhshon took a risk to walk into the Red Sea. Esther's action gave us the most lighthearted holiday of the Jewish year, a day so treasured that the Talmud says it alone will still be observed after the Messiah comes and all other holidays could be cancelled. Nakhshon's risk gave us freedom, and made possible the next three millennia of Jewish history. It also gave us a holiday that has become a highlight of our year, an occasion for family reunions and home festivities par excellence.

Today our people in Israel are taking a risk every day. As we celebrate with our families and friends in a land of freedom and relative security, we must support them in their time of danger. If you plan to spend Pesach in Israel, *yasher koach* – good for you! And if not, visit Israel this year. It's safer than a lot of streets in Los Angeles. And besides – it's a *mitzvah*!

Do not forget.

Hag sameach – happy holiday!