



AARON AND HUR HOLDING UP MOSES' HANDS.

*“While Moshe’s hands were up, Israel prevailed, but whenever his hands fell, Amalek prevailed.” Ex. 17:11*

*“Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey, after you left Egypt – how, undeterred by fear of God, he surprised you on the way when you were weary and faint, and attacked your tail—all the stragglers at your rear. Therefore, When YHVH your God gives you rest from all your enemies round about in the land that YHVH your God is giving you as an inheritance, you are to blot out the name of Amalek from under the heavens; Do not forget! (Deut. 25:17-19)*

### ***Shabbat Shalom,***

By way of introduction, I feel honored to begin serving as your rabbi (and cantor). In addition to my bi-weekly services and programs, I hope to offer these weekly summaries and drashot (commentaries) on the weekly Torah reading, which some call a “*parsha*” (portion) and others call a “*sidra*” (order). I prefer the former name, but a rose by any other name would smell as sweet. This is an experiment, especially since we have just met. So here goes...

This *parsha* continues where last week’s left off, with a lengthy list of laws for maintaining a just society. At first glance it appears to be a hodge-podge of diverse commandments for the commonweal, along with some others that may grate on the modern mind. The myriad of topics include: treatment of women captured in war; birthrights; punishment of an incorrigible son; returning lost property; rules on robbing a bird’s nest; cross-gender clothing, the taboo of mixed species, prohibition against a parapet on one’s roof; the accused virgin; adultery; rape; interest on loans; vows; divorce; treatment of vulnerable members of society such as the stranger or laborers; levirate marriage; honest weights and measures, and more.... Whew! Several of these topics merit their own study and discussion. Many of the laws focus on sins either against a family member or the community. Thus, it is significant that this Torah portion is read during the month of Elul as we perform our annual self-examination of our behavior during the past year and pray for God’s help in making changes in the coming year. The *parsha* concludes with the commandment not to forget how the *Amalekites* attacked the Israelites’ rear soon after they left Egypt.

This Torah portion attempts to provide concrete examples for living the values of the Torah. Thus, the Mishnah, Talmud and later medieval sources derived hundreds of laws based on some

of these specific cases. For example, the prohibitions against taking the mother bird along with the eggs (22:6-7) or muzzling an ox while it is threshing (25:4) are among those commandments cited to prevent cruelty to animals. One challenge of this portion is to categorize the laws into the principles they represent.

*Which laws represent family values?*

*Which laws represent taking care of the underdogs of society?*

*Which laws represent communal responsibility?*

*Which laws represent keeping the purity of the Israelite line?*

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However, as we approach the High Holidays, I am drawn to share this D'var Torah about the final verses of the parsha, about not forgetting how "Amalek" attacked the Israelites on the way out of Egypt. On the Shabbat before Purim, we re-read the verses from Deut. 25 at the top of this handout "you shall surely erase *the memory of Amalek* from beneath the heaven, do not forget." Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (German Orthodox 1808 –1888) wrote "What threatens the moral future of humanity is not Amalek, but *zekher Amalek*, the glorification of the **memory of Amalek**. As long as the annals of humanity attach glory to the heroes of the sword; as long as those that throttle and murder the happiness of humanity are not buried in oblivion, subsequent generations will look with admiration upon these infamous strongmen, and their memory will awaken the desire to emulate them in acts of violence and glory."

The Amalekites were sort of like the desert marauders in the "Mad Max" series – a savage tribe that attacked the defenseless and weary without provocation or "fear of heaven." However, today, we may view "Amalek" not as an ethnic or racial group, but as the archetype of the wanton aggressor who attacks the weak and defenseless in every generation, or the evil within the human heart. "Not only are Jews commanded to wipe out *Amalek*...but each Jew has to wipe out that negative part that is called *Amalek* hidden in his or her heart. So long as the descendants of *Amalek* are in the world – and each of us is also a small world, so when the power of evil in each of us arises (that which leads us to sin) *Amalek* is still in the world – the reminder (to wipe out *Amalek*) calls out from the Torah." (*Kedushat Levi*, R. Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, 18<sup>th</sup> c.)

To many commentators – and to me personally – reading this section before Purim and before the High Holidays sends a message that each of us – and society as a whole - must erase, uproot and nullify the *yetzer harah*/evil impulse, which arouses him and reminds him of appetites and the needs of this world in vain and insipid things. Amalek represents the fear, hatred, materialism, and cynicism that can close our souls and harden our hearts. Amalek is the force that makes us insensitive to the presence of God that is with us all of the time. Amalek is surely afoot in America today. But is it a "person" or a "force?" Where is your Amalek hiding?

**How do you understand the "inner Amalek"? Our negative, destructive urges? Mundane, unhelpful distractions? Cynicism and despair? Anger and polarization? What practices might we use to counter the force of "Amalek" within us?**