Drash for Parashah Ki Seitzei – August 29, 2020; 9 Elul 5780 – Mark (Moshe) Gottlieb – Netivot Shalom

The Memory of Amalek

The commandment to remember to erase the memory of Amalek in Torah poses a conundrum. How do we remember to erase Amalek’s memory when mention of Amalek occurs several times in the annual cycle of the Torah? From year-to-year, this commandment comes up again and again. We are told by Moses in Deuteronomy 25 that we must erase the memory of Amalek from under the heavens – and we must not forget! Furthermore, the commandment to erase the memory of Amalek is the third of the Six Remembrances said daily by observant Jews. Some regard this commandment as one of the two great mysteries in the Torah, the other being the mystery of the Red Heifer. In considering this question, the great Torah commentator Rashi taught that the Torah was telling us that Amalek is within us separating us from G-d.

I propose to answer this dilemma in an unusual way. My answer hinges on the understanding that what Torah commands is not that we erase our memory of Amalek as a man who lived over 3,000 years ago, but rather that we erase the type of memory Amalek had and caused in others, most notably the Hebrew people he attacked on their way to Mount Sinai, where they received the Torah. I call this type of memory caused by Amalek the Amalek Memory. In more general terms, an Amalek Memory may be any memory of pain, shame, embarrassment, or suffering that anyone may cause another person, or even cause himself or herself. Its erasure is consistent with many other teachings in Judaism such as Hillel’s that “What is hateful to you do not do unto others.”, and the central tenet of Judaism, “Love your neighbor as yourself.”.

We must recall that Amalek was the son of Timnah, who was the concubine of Eliphaz, the youngest son of Esau. Legend has it that Timnah was a Moabite princess who desired to marry into the Abrahamic line. She was refused the honor of becoming a matriarch in the line for the Hebrew people and in desperation entered the line of Esau as a concubine of Eliphaz. This caused her much shame and resulted in the great anger of her son Amalek toward the Hebrew people who he attacked without mercy from the rear, harming the weak, sick, and elderly stragglers among them. His Amalek Memory was one of his mother’s shame.

The question arises, “How do we erase the Amalek Memory described above?”. I propose that Amalek Memories may be erased by erasing or preventing the conditions by which they are formed. For instance, if we lived in a society in which there were no crimes, no one would have the pain, shock, and dislocation caused by a criminal act, and consequently, no one would have Amalek Memories of criminal acts, though they would have knowledge of criminal acts that occurred in previous times. These Amalek Memories would be erased as a-result-of erasing the conditions by which they are formed.

At once, we see the brilliance of the commandment to erase the Memory of Amalek as it appears again and again several times in the annual cycle of the Torah. In commanding us to erase the Memory of Amalek, we are reminded again and again by the Torah to erase the conditions by which Amalek Memories are formed and not our memory of Amalek himself as presented in the Torah. It is as if we need these annual reminders to stay true to our task in erasing the conditions by which Amalek Memories are formed.

Several observations derived from the text of the Torah about the memory of Amalek are in order. In Exodus 17, G-d says to Moses that He will erase the memory of Amalek from under the heavens, and then Moses says that G-d maintains a war against Amalek from generation to generation. Clearly, Moses is not referring to Amalek the man in stating that G-d is waging a war against him from generation to generation. Rather, Moses in my interpretation of this verse is alluding to the Amalek Memories that must be erased from generation to generation, as described above.

A second observation is that in Exodus 17, G-d says that he will erase the memory of Amalek, while in Deuteronomy 25, Moses commands the Hebrew people to erase it. I contend that in the quote from Exodus, G-d is speaking to the Hebrew people on their way to receiving the Torah, a time in which they were not equipped to erase Amalek Memories by erasing the conditions by which they are formed. However, in Deuteronomy 25 the Hebrew people have received the Torah and have been educated by Moses to study and implement its commandments for 40 years. The responsibility for erasing Amalek Memories and the conditions that cause them now falls to them.

A third observation is that in both Exodus and Deuteronomy, the erasure of the Amalek memory is stated in the last paragraph of each Parashah, i.e. Parashah Beshalach in Exodus and Parashah Ki Seitzei in Deuteronomy. In Exodus, Parashah Beshalach is followed by Parashah Yisro, in which the Torah is given. It is as if G-d is demonstrating how the Amalek Memories may be erased by the erasure of the conditions that cause them by means of the implementation of the words and teachings of the Torah.

More to the point, Parashah Yisro begins with Yisro hearing the Word of G-d and bringing the wife of Moses, Zipporah, and his two sons, Gershom and Eliezer, to Moses. At once we see by this juxtaposition of Yisro and Amalek an example in Torah of the blessings following the erasure of the Amalek Memory as commanded at the end of the previous Parashah, Parashah Yisro. Yisro is a man of peace able to hear G-d’s Word. Yisro restores the family of Moses to Moses and greatly aids Moses in building the community and nation of the Hebrew people into which he (Yisro) is accepted. Yisro comes and leaves in love and peace. Clearly, he is not bound by Amalek Memories in his dealings with Moses and the Hebrew people as is Amalek who is, as seen in his merciless treatment of them.

Likewise, in Deuteronomy, Parashah Ki Sietzei is followed by Parashah Ki Savo, the first words of which are “It will be that when you enter the land that HaShem your G-d is giving you [the land of Israel], ...”. I interpret this to mean that Amalek Memories and the conditions that cause them must be erased by the Hebrew people before they enter the land of Israel. I believe that G-d is saying that the land of Israel must not be tarnished and made unclean by Amalek Memories and the conditions that cause them among the Hebrew people. Truly, they must love their neighbors as themselves upon entering the land of Israel.

It is noteworthy that Parashah Ki Seitzei and the commandment to erase the memory of Amalek, what I term the Amalek Memory, occurs early in the Hebrew month of Elul. The month of Elul is a time of introspection on our shortcomings and sins. We are instructed to both ask for and offer forgiveness for our wrongdoings, and to forgive ourselves. Doing this will aid in the erasure of the Amalek Memories we have caused others and that they have caused us. It is also noteworthy that some Amalek Memories will remain and others will reappear over time and new ones will arise, lending a sense of urgency and deliberation to our task of erasing them or at least ameliorating them. And, most certainly, we must erase the Amalek Memories within ourselves that limit and constrain us to the “Narrow Places” within ourselves and cause us to adversely affect our relationships with others.

I believe that our Amalek Memories are that aspect of Amalek within us that separates us from G-d, as Rashi taught. May we do “All the Words of this Torah” to enable us to erase the Amalek Memories forever, as we prepare to enter this coming New Year.