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Amalek
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A. STRUCTURE OF PARASHAT AMALEK

(25:17) "Remember what Amalek did to you on the way when you came out of Egypt,

(18) That he met you on the way and attacked your rear - all the weak ones trailing behind - when you were weary and faint, and did not fear God.

(19) And it shall be, when the Lord your God gives you rest from all your enemies around in the land that the Lord your God gives you as an inheritance, to possess it, you shall wipe out the memory of Amalek from beneath the heavens; you shall not forget."

The parasha is clearly divided into two halves that are equal in length, with an obviously chiastic relationship between them. This structure hints at the great significance of the parasha - a significance that is not immediately apparent upon an initial reading.

On the basis of its overt content, the parasha is divided into two parts:

- A. verses 17-18 - describing Amalek's action (which must be remembered);
- B. verse 19 - the mitzva commanding Israel to pay back Amalek in the future for that action.

The transition from the description of Amalek's act to the command concerning Israel's response is indicated by the expression, "And it shall be" (ve-haya), with which verse 19 begins.

The two halves are really equal, although there are two verses on one side and one on the other. In such a small literary unit, the number of verses cannot serve as a reliable quantitative indicator, and to complete the picture we need to count words. Lo and behold, verses 17-18 together contain 23 words, while verse 19 contains 24 - an almost-exact match.

The chiastic framework of this parasha is apparent at first glance, for it concludes with an echo of its introduction: "Remember... you shall not forget." Indeed, the midrash halakha and the codifiers of the mitzvot who follow its lead recognize the connection between the introduction and the conclusion. "You shall not forget" the same thing that you must "remember;" both commandments refer to "what Amalek did to you." The Sifri therefore teaches, "Remember' - verbally, 'do not forget' - in your heart." The midrash halakha distinguishes between the two commands as regards the MANNER in which they are to be fulfilled, but considers both to apply to the same content.

If not for the literary connection between the beginning of the parasha and its end, one may have understood "You shall not forget" as referring to what precedes it: "You shall wipe out the memory of Amalek." In other words, one might assume that

we should "not forget" to fulfill this mitzva of wiping out Amalek. However, the literary parallel and structure indicates that "You shall not forget" refers to the same thing as "remember."

Let us now examine the parallels between the description of Amalek's act and the command to pay them back for it. What were the circumstances of time and place in which Amalek acted? This we are told in the parasha twice: Amalek's attack was (17-18) "ON THE WAY when you were coming out of Egypt, when they met you ON THE WAY." However, retribution will be carried out (19) "IN THE LAND that the Lord your God gives you as an inheritance, to possess it." Only when the process of the exodus reaches its conclusion will the time for retribution come.

The text is clearly contrasting Israel's situation when Amalek came to attack (wandering in the desert, shortly after leaving Egypt) and their situation when they will exact their revenge (dwelling in the land promised and given to them by God).

This contrast continues. Israel's situation at the time of Amalek's attack was:

(18) "...when you were TIRED AND FAINT, and did not fear God."

The time for retribution will come when Israel's condition will be exactly the opposite:

(19) "When the Lord your God GIVES YOU REST."

Weariness and rest, or faintness and rest, are common opposites in Tanakh and in reality:

(Yishayahu 28:12) "This is THE REST, let THE WEARY..."

(Yirmiyahu 45:3) "I AM WEARY of sighing; I have found no REST."

The contrast between these two states of Israel is a dual contrast: the weariness of Israel on the way at that time seems to be related to "not fearing God," but when the nation dwells at rest in its land, they will be aware that this rest is God's gift to them: "When GOD YOUR GOD GIVES YOU rest."

The final contrast between the two halves involves the act that Amalek committed and the retribution that Israel is commanded to carry out. Concerning Amalek, we are told:

(18) "...he attacked your rear, all the weak ones trailing behind."

Although the attack was a partial one, it was directed specifically at the weakest travelers, whom Amalek attacked from the rear. Israel, in contrast, is commanded to wage an all-out war against Amalek: (19) "You shall wipe out the memory of

Amalek from beneath the heavens." An attack on their weaklings, who represent a convenient target, is not sufficient.

Let us now highlight the structure of the two halves with their parallels, presenting the parasha as a whole:

- I 1. (17) "REMEMBER what Amalek did to you
 - 2. ON THE WAY WHEN YOU CAME OUT OF EGYPT,
 - (18) That he met you ON THE WAY
 - 3. and attacked your rear - all the weak ones trailing behind
 - 4. when you were WEARY AND FAINT, and did not fear God.
- II 4a. (19) And it shall be, WHEN THE LORD YOUR GOD GIVES YOU REST from all your enemies around
 - 2a. IN THE LAND THAT THE LORD YOUR GOD GIVES YOU AS AN INHERITANCE, TO POSSESS IT,
 - 3a. you shall wipe out the memory of Amalek from beneath the heavens,
 - 1a. YOU SHALL NOT FORGET."

A fundamental difference between the two halves is now highlighted. In the first half there is no mention of God's Name (other than the negative, "...did NOT fear God"). Israel's situation on the way, at the time of Amalek's attack, expresses distance from God and a hiding of God's face from them. This is apparently the reason for their weariness and faintness, and for the weaklings to be trailing behind. Their physical weakness reflects a spiritual failing, rooted in the concluding words of this half: "...and did not fear God." In the second half, by contrast, "the Lord your God" is mentioned twice, and He is bestowing good on Israel. He GIVES REST to them from all their enemies around, and it is He who GAVE them the land as an inheritance to possess it.

B. WHO "DID NOT FEAR GOD" - AMALEK OR ISRAEL?

In the previous section we assumed that the subject of the expression, "and did not fear God," was Israel, and that these words describe their religious-spiritual situation at the time of Amalek's attack. This assumption requires some clarification.

The accepted interpretation by the earliest commentators - Rashi and Ibn Ezra - and those that follow their example, is different:

Rashi: "'And did not fear' - [this refers to] Amalek. 'God' - from doing evil to you."

Ibn Ezra: "'And did not fear' - this refers to Amalek; it is a past-tense verb."

The traditional cantillation of the verse also supports this interpretation.

The reasoning behind this interpretation requires a certain linguistic background. The expression, "did not fear" (lo yarei) includes a verb that is preceded by a negative. But the negative word here - 'lo' - is usually used in Tanakh only with reference to past or future tense verbs. In the present tense, it is more common for the negative 'ein' to be used.

The word 'yarei' (fear) itself may be interpreted in two different ways: as a verb in the second-person singular in the present tense, or as a verb in the third person singular in the

past tense. In the previous section we treated the word "yarei" in our parasha in accordance with the first possibility: as referring to the present tense, describing in the second person (in the same way that the Torah addresses Israel throughout the parasha) Israel's situation at the time of Amalek's attack.

But this interpretation involves a difficulty. If the verb here is indeed meant in the present tense, it should be negated by the word "ein," such that the phrase would read: "...when you were weary and faint AND DID NOT FEAR (ve-einkha yarei) God." Rashi and Ibn Ezra avoid this difficulty, since according to their explanation, the word "yarei" (fear) refers to Amalek, and is therefore meant in the past tense (like all the other verbs in this parasha that refer to Amalek). Accordingly, it is negated by the word "lo."

This, then, is the decisive consideration underlying the cantillation of these verses as well as the interpretations of Rashi, Ibn Ezra and other commentators who follow their lead.

Nevertheless, already in the Mekhilta of Rabbi Yishmael (Beshalach, Masekhta de-Amalek, parasha 1) we find an interpretation according to which the subject of the sentence is Israel:

"And Amalek came'... Because [Israel] strayed from the words of Torah, therefore the enemy came upon them...

Others say: 'and did not fear God' - THIS REFERS TO ISRAEL, who had no mitzvot to their credit."

Among the early commentators, we find that Chizkuni adopts the Mekhilta's interpretation. How does this interpretation answer the linguistic problem, i.e., the negation of a present-tense verb by means of the word "lo"?

Consultation with the Concordance reveals that in fifteen instances in Tanakh, a verb in the present tense is negated with the word "lo." The following are a few examples:

(Bemidbar 35:23) "He IS NOT AN ENEMY (lo oyev) to him AND DOES NOT SEEK (ve-lo mevakesh) his harm"

(Devarim 4:42 and 19:4) "He HAS NOT HATED (lo sonei) him"

(Yirmiyahu 2:2) "Your walking after Me in the wilderness, in a land THAT IS NOT SOWN (lo zeru'a)"

(Tehillim 38:15) "I was like a man WHO DOES NOT HEAR (lo shome'a), with no rebuke in his mouth."

Admittedly, the negation in present tense by means of the word "ein" is much more prevalent - occurring some hundred and fifty times - and is certainly the general rule. But fifteen occurrences cannot simply be dismissed, and therefore we may add to them our verse - "ve-lo yarei," in the sense of, "And you were not fearing...."

The interpretation of the Mekhilta and Chizkuni is plausible, then, from the linguistic perspective. There are two reasons why this interpretation should be preferable to the more commonly accepted one.

FIRSTLY, this interpretation fits better with the structure of the parasha and the parallel between its two halves, as demonstrated in the previous section. The description of Israel

as "not fearing God" joins the other descriptions of the first half, all of which point to a negative state of affairs: "trailing behind," "weary," "faint." In the final description - "did not fear God" - the source of this negative state becomes clear. This description, then, joins the words, "when you were weary and faint," to form a single continuum (as Chizkuni suggests). The phrase in the second half, "when the Lord your God gives you rest," not only contrasts rest with weariness, but also recognizes the fact that this rest comes from God - the very opposite of "not fearing God."

SECONDLY, the description of ISRAEL as not fearing God is remarkably reminiscent of the description of what happened at Refidim, just prior to the war against Amalek. Refidim was one of the first stops "on the way, when you came out of Egypt." Upon arrival, it became clear that "there was no water for the nation to drink." The description of the nation in our parasha as being "weary" therefore matches what we read there - "and the nation was thirsty for water," for in several places in Tanakh "weary" (ayef) connotes thirst (or hunger).

At Refidim, the nation quarreled with Moshe and tested God. The definition of their sin there is given in the final verse of the story, explaining the name given to the place:

(17:7) "And he called the name of the place Masa u-Meriva, because of the quarrel (riv) of Bnei Yisrael, and their testing (nasotam) of God, saying, 'IS GOD IN OUR MIDST OR NOT?'"

In my shiur on parashat Beshalach, I noted the connection between the sin of Israel at REFIDIM and the nature of the war against Amalek at the same place. The war against Amalek was one in which Moshe's hands were weak (RAFU yadav), and for that reason at certain moments Israel was stronger while at other moments Amalek would prevail.

In the mitzva of wiping out Amalek, in our parasha, the perspective is different from that of Sefer Shemot. There, the subject under discussion was Israel's sin at Refidim and their punishment in the battle against Amalek. In the description of the same event in our parasha, the subject is AMALEK'S GRAVE SIN in attacking Israel at their moment of weakness and danger, thereby endangering the continuation of their journey from Egypt to Canaan.

From the story in Sefer Shemot, we learn that in Refidim Israel were not only "weary and faint," but also - and more importantly - they were in a religious decline: they tested God, saying, "Is God in our midst, or not?" Where do we learn of their debilitated spiritual condition in our parasha? We must conclude that it appears in the words DESCRIBING ISRAEL at the time of Amalek's attack on them at their difficult moment - "and did not fear God."

C. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STRUCTURE AND OF THE POSTPONEMENT OF FULFILLMENT OF THE MITZVA

Why does the Torah postpone the fulfillment of wiping out Amalek to a time when Israel will be dwelling at rest in the land? Aside from the simple reason, hinted at in the words of Ibn Ezra, the full answer arises from a study of the structure of the parasha.

The structure reveals that the two components of the postponement - (a) "When the Lord your God gives you rest..." and (b) "in the land that the Lord your God gives you..." - are essential elements in the chiasmic, contrasting parallel between the two halves of the parasha. The first component - "when the Lord your God GIVES YOU REST" - is a contrast to "when you were WEARY AND FAINT...", while the second - "IN THE LAND" - corresponds inversely to the description of Israel being "ON THE WAY, when you came out of Egypt."

How does this answer our question as to the reason for the Torah postponing the annihilation of Amalek for such a distant time?

In my shiur on parashat Beshalach, I posed a question on the opening verse of the story of the war. (17:8) "And Amalek came and waged war against Israel in Refidim" - FROM WHERE did Amalek come, and WHAT WAS THEIR MOTIVATION in coming to fight? Neither that story nor the mitzva under discussion here give explicit answers to these questions, but their clarification is most important for an understanding of this unique narrative, as well as for an understanding of our parasha. In particular, this clarification will help us understand the very severe punishment destined for Amalek, discussed both in the final section of that story (17:14-16) and in our parasha.

Araham Kariv z"l (in his book Shivat Amudei Ha-Tanakh) discusses the severity of the punishment:

"In all of Tanakh we do not find a degree of Divine indignation like that expressed against Amalek; nowhere is there anger like this. We must obviously ask: In what way was Amalek's sin so much greater than that of all of Israel's enemies throughout the generations? Admittedly, Amalek came upon those who left Egypt and attacked them by surprise, without their having made any provisions for war, as we understand from the language of the text in Sefer Shemot... and as written explicitly in the extensive addition to the story in Sefer Devarim... But even this lowly war... cannot help us in any way to understand the severity of the punishment set down for him."

As I noted in parashat Beshalach, the key to the question of WHERE Amalek came from is to be found in the story of the spies, in parashat Shelach (Bemidbar 13:29): "AMALEK DWELLS IN THE SOUTH OF THE LAND." Amalek's name crops up several times in that story, and it is therefore clear that at that time, Amalek dwelled at the southern border of Canaan, in the Negev, and served as the first and most difficult obstacle in Israel's path. The attempted entry of the "ma'apilim" into the land via the southern border was forcefully repelled by Amalek and the Canaanites who dwelled in the Negev mountains.

The knowledge of where Amalek came from only sharpens our question concerning their motives. In order to reach Refidim, Amalek had to cross wide expanses of the Sinai peninsula; why would they do this? To answer this question, I quoted in parashat Beshalach the likely explanation proposed by Cassuto in his commentary on Sefer Shemot:

"It is written here, 'And Amalek came' - this indicates that [the Refidim area] was not their dwelling place; they came from afar. Because they dwelled at the

entrance to Canaan on the southern side, AND SINCE THEY HAD CERTAINLY HEARD THAT ISRAEL WERE HEADED THAT WAY, THEY SOUGHT TO TAKE CARE OF THE PROBLEM BEFORE IT AROSE, AND SENT A BATTALION TO ATTACK ISRAEL AT THE BEGINNING OF THEIR JOURNEY."

The war waged by Amalek is therefore a pre-emptive one, meant to cut off the continuation of Israel's path through the wilderness on the way to Eretz Yisrael. Thus Amalek made themselves God's sworn enemy.

Throughout the generations, commentators and philosophers have tried to explain the Torah's attitude towards Amalek and how the latter became God's eternal enemy. Amalek's act, and even their essence, have been explained in categories that ignore their significance as a historical nation. According to the explanation quoted above, the Torah's attitude to Amalek focuses specifically on the one-time historical aspect that is related to Amalek's appearance before Israel.

The period of the Exodus in its wider sense, including the giving of the Torah and the wandering in the desert until the entry into the land, was the period of establishment and molding of Israel as God's nation. In this period, God fulfilled the covenant that He made with the forefathers, and made a covenant with their descendants, the entire nation. This period represents the cornerstone of all of Tanakh, and is perceived in Tanakh as the basis for the rest of the history of Am Yisrael and of humanity in general. During this period, God realized His primal plan to establish from the seed of the forefathers - whom God loved and chose from among all of humanity - a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, who would stand at the center of human history. This was not a plan that involved only one small nation, but rather a plan for all of humanity and for all of history, until the end of days.

This primal and inaugural nature of the period of the Exodus (in the broadest sense) turns its events into the basis for many mitzvot in the Torah. In a certain sense, we may say that the basis for ALL the mitzvot of the Torah lies in the events of that period. But we refer here to those mitzvot that were determined for all generations because of SPECIFIC events that took place then. More than 60 mitzvot out of the 613 are directly related to the Exodus. About half of these involve the Pesach sacrifice and the seven days of the Festival of Matzot, while the other half includes other mitzvot, the reason for all of which is given as being "in memory of the Exodus from Egypt."

It is not only the actual EVENTS of the Exodus that serve as the basis for many mitzvot of the Torah. Israel's JOURNEY from Egypt to Eretz Yisrael - the period of the wilderness - also serves as the background for no small number of mitzvot. The wandering in the desert was a primal experience in its own right, one whose impressions molded the character of Israel and their mitzvot for all generations. Some of the mitzvot based on "the way" are meant to remind Israel of God's mercies towards them during the journey. Thus, for example, the mitzva of dwelling in a sukka:

(Vayikra 23:42-43) "In sukkot you shall dwell for seven days... in order that your generations will know that I made Bnei Yisrael dwell in sukkot when I took them out of the land of Egypt."

Other mitzvot based on "the way" are meant to eternalize in the national memory the lessons of those primary events and experiences:

(Devarim 4:9-10) "...Lest you forget the things that your eyes have seen... and you shall transmit them to your children and your children's children; the day that you stood before the Lord your God at Chorev..."

(6:16) "You shall not test the Lord your God as you tested Him at Massa..."

(24:8-9) "Guard yourselves concerning the plague of tzara'at... Remember what the Lord your God did to Miriam ON THE WAY, WHEN YOU CAME OUT OF EGYPT."

Some mitzvot related to the events of "the way" are meant to shape Israel's attitude towards the surrounding nations. The general rule is that the attitude of the nations towards Israel, wandering in the desert, determines the future; it determines FOR ALL GENERATIONS what Israel's attitude will be towards them, as reflected in the mitzvot. For this "way" was a test, to distinguish between those nations whose opposition to Israel made them into God's enemies, and other nations. In parashat Ki-Tetze (23:4-9), we find a series of mitzvot regulating Israel's attitude towards the four nations involved in the events of the Exodus and the wandering on the way. The four nations are arranged in the text in inverse chronological order, from the last that Israel encountered to the first:

1-2 (4) "An AMMONI and MOAVI shall not enter God's congregation, even the tenth generation shall not come into God's congregation, forever.

(5) Because they did not meet you with bread and water ON THE WAY WHEN YOU CAME OUT OF EGYPT, and because they hired Bil'am, son of Be'or, against you... to curse you...

(7) You shall not seek their welfare and their good all of your days, forever.

3-4 (8) You shall not despise an EDOMI, for he is your brother; you shall not despise A MITZRI (Egyptian), for you were strangers in his land.

(9) Children that will be born to them - the third generation - may enter God's congregation."

As a continuation of this series of mitzvot, we find - at the end of parashat Ki-Tetze - the parasha of Amalek.

What is the difference between Ammon and Moav's treatment of Israel "on the way when you came out of Egypt," and Amalek's treatment of them when they were on the same journey? The accusation against Ammon and Moav is that ALTHOUGH Israel was "on the way," they did not treat them as people on a journey should be treated, in that they did not offer them bread and water. The accusation against Amalek, on the other hand, is that it was SPECIFICALLY because Israel was "on the way" with all its difficulties - "when you were weary and faint" - that they attempted to exploit this situation and to achieve a quick victory against them, thereby cutting short all at once the great Divine process of bringing Israel out of Egypt and to Eretz Yisrael, at its weakest point. By means of this act Amalek made themselves into an eternal enemy of God and of His nation, Israel, for the war against Israel was in fact an attempt to frustrate God's plan.

Let us now return to the question of the postponement of Amalek's annihilation until the stage of "when the Lord your God gives you rest from all your enemies around, in the land that the Lord your God gives you as an inheritance, to possess it." THIS POSTPONEMENT IS INTEGRAL TO THE TORAH'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS THAT BATTLE, and itself contains the great victory against Amalek. The nation that attempted to confound the Divine plan of Israel's entry into the land, by exploiting their weariness and faintness "on the way," suffering a spiritual crisis and the hiding of God's face because they "did not fear God" ("Is God in our midst or not?") - this very nation will serve as proof to all that the Divine plan has been realized in full.

How has the Divine plan been realized? Israel overcame the difficulties of "the way" and completed their journey - despite its length; they entered the land that God gave them and possessed it, even meriting rest from all their enemies. THE EXODUS FROM EGYPT WILL HAVE ACHIEVED ITS END AND ITS PURPOSE, and the attempt to curtail it in the middle will be proven to have failed. Amalek's scheme of exploiting Israel's weakness "on the way, when you came out of Egypt" was therefore defeated not only in Yehoshua's local battle, which "weakened Amalek by the sword," but principally in the huge historical change that occurs in Israel's situation. They grow from a wandering nation that was "weary and faint, and did not fear God," into a nation that merited to possess the land given to it by God, and to dwell therein at rest.

This, then, is the meaning of the contrasting parallel between the two halves of parashat Amalek. It hints at the severity of Amalek's scheme and at what it was that the war was supposed to achieve. It hints at the enormity of Amalek's defeat in the face of the complete realization of the Divine plan concerning Israel. It is only when the victory of the Divine plan for Israel is made clear, that Israel is required to settle their account with those who had pitted themselves against that process.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish.

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