



# Zachor, Forgiving and Forgetting

In this period of reawakening of the Jew-hatred of the ages, we must study the lessons of Parshat Zachor anew from many angles. One of these is the tension between the values of moving on with forgiveness versus vengefully refusing to forget.

A beautiful characteristic of the Jewish people is their forgiving nature. As our Sages saw it (Avot d'Rabbi Natan 12:1), Aaron Hakohein personified this trait, pursuing peace amongst Jews by encouraging forgiveness and helping them to move on after seeing the regrets of those who had wronged them. It was because of his capacity not to harbor jealousy and resentment that he was privileged to wear upon his good and gracious heart the breastplate bearing the names of all the Jewish tribes, the symbol of unity and caring of the Jewish people (Shabbat 139a).

Yet forgiving and forgetting are not in the cards when it comes to Amalek, as the Torah demands that we never forget what Amalek did to us millennia ago and that we await the eventual opportunity to destroy them. The Purim story of opposition to Haman the Amalekite focuses significantly on revenge and on Haman getting his due where the punishment clearly matched the crime. Immediately following the reading of the Megillah we specifically

bless Hashem for taking revenge on our behalf, *Baruch ... hanokeim et nikmateinu.*

Clearly vis-à-vis Amalek there is no room for the beautiful Jewish quality of forgiveness. Quite the opposite; here we are committed to revenge.

The difference is simple. Revenge is both celebrated and reviled by the Torah. G-d is called the G-d of vengeance (Tehillim 94a, Brachot 33a), and the Talmud (Yoma 23a) requires that a Torah scholar be “as vengeful and resentful as a snake.” Yet revenge and the bearing of grudges are prohibited by the Torah (Vayikra 19:18)! Amongst other considerations, the distinguishing factor when revenge is in place is the attitude of those who committed the wrong. If they are regretful and seek forgiveness, we should forgive them and try to forget that it ever happened. But if they are unrepentant and unchanged, we must never forget the evil that they did and continue to pursue truth and justice that can only be served by a suitable and fitting response to their evil behaviors.

This is implied by a classic passage in the Rambam (Rambam Teshuva 2:10), celebrating the Jewish quality of forgiveness:

*“It is forbidden for a person to be cruel and refuse to be appeased. Rather, he should be easily pacified, but hard to anger. When the person who wronged him asks for forgiveness, he should forgive him with a complete heart and a willing spirit. Even if he aggravated and wronged him severely, he should not seek revenge or bear a grudge. This is the path of the seed of Israel and their upright spirit. In*

contrast, insensitive others do not act in this manner, rather, their wrath is preserved forever (Amos 1:11). Similarly, because the Givonim did not forgive and refused to be appeased, [II Samuel 21:2] describes them, as follows: "The Givonim are not among the children of Israel."

Forgiveness is appropriate for those who seek it and completely misplaced for those like Amalek who do not. Amalek has absolutely no interest in changing his ways as he follows the path of his grandfather Eisav whose very name derives from how complete he appeared at birth (Rashi to Bereishit 25:25), and who – as Rambam quotes from Amos – bears eternal fury towards his brother Yaakov, *evrato shmara netzach* (Amos 1:11). Those like him – individuals and societies - who are entrenched in their evil ways and attitudes do not deserve forgiveness; with them we must hold up the value of judgment such that we never forget the evil they represent and perpetuate and do our part to ensure that that they ultimately face the consequences of their actions.

The worst thing we can do is forgive and forget the antisemitism of those who – like Amalek – continue to harbor it. That is why Rambam's other quintessential negative example of those who eternally bear a grudge is the Givonim's inability to forgive Shaul. It was Shaul who – as we read this week in the *hafatara* for *Parshat Zachor* - lost his throne because he was ready to show a measure of forgiveness to the unrepentant Amalekites. While he may have thought that his gallant compassion would be reciprocated, introducing peaceful civility into a nasty region, the opposite was the case. His forgiving those who remained cruel led to a world where nothing mattered, where he himself acted in a way that was cruel to the kind (Yalkut Shimoni Shmuel I, 121) and that gained his descendants neither forgiveness nor mercy from the Givonim.

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Perhaps that is why Purim is connected to Yom Kippurim, the Day of Atonement. As Jews we believe firmly that people can change, that they can turn the page on past evil deeds, and when they do, we forgive and even embrace them. But for the unrepentant who do not turn the page and remain committed to their evil designs, for the Haman's of then and of now, we can make no more tragic mistake than to forgive them and forget. ■

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