

Amalek

This week's reading from the Torah starts with the Exodus. The Children of Israel leave slavery in Egypt and head out towards Sinai. But then the Egyptians change their minds and pursue them. They are defeated not by the fleeing slaves but by Divine, or Natural forces at the Red Sea. And yet the Egyptians are not regarded by the Torah as an eternal enemy. On the contrary, in the bible itself (Deuteronomy 23) we are commanded not to hate the Egyptian.

The very end of this week's reading concerns the tribe of Amalek. They were the first people to attack the Israelites when they escaped the Egyptians. They came from behind, with no cause, and massacred women, children and stragglers. We might understand the Canaanites wanted to defend themselves against the invading Israelites. But Amalek had no such motive. They were not in the path of the refugees.

Moses then commanded Joshua to gather a fighting force together and during the ensuing battle Moses sat on a hill overlooking the fight. When his arms were raised, pointing to the Heavens, the Israelites won. When his arms were lowered, they lost. As he felt weak he was supported by Aaron and Hur and they kept his hands up until Amalek was finally defeated. Sometimes we manage to defeat our enemies through our own prowess and sometimes we rely on other factors such as Divine intervention, morale, even self-destruction, to remove the threat.

According to our tradition we learn two things from the battle against Amalek. If the soldiers realized they were fighting a moral ethical battle, driven by the spirit that Moses was pointing upwards to, they would be able to overcome the odds. But if they were simply thinking of a physical struggle, there would be no moral victory just the survival of the fittest. And secondly Moses struggling to keep his arms up, symbolizes the fact that even those who not physically fight but support in other ways, are just as important as the soldiers in winning a war.

In the case of Amalek, unlike the Egyptians, we must remember their hatred. Amalek is the symbol of Anti-Semitism, irrational causeless hatred. The Egyptians on the other hand had their reasons to attack Israel, self-interest, self-preservation. That is why we were commanded not to hate those enemies who attack us for their own good reasons. The Anti-Semite on the other hand is animated by prejudice and hate. He has no justification or excuse and we simply should stand up and defeat him. Whereas we are commanded not to hate Egypt, we are commanded to remember and destroy Amalek.