

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
Yiskah *bas* Moshe *a”h*
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of her *neshamah*

Under the Heavens

PARSHAS BESHALACH 5778

At the end of this week’s *parshah* we read of the evil exploits of Amalek, a nation deemed so contemptible to Hashem that He mandates their utter destruction: כִּי־מַחַח אֶמְחָה אֶת־זֵכֶר עַמְלֵק מִתַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם – “For I shall wipe out the memory of Amalek from under the heavens” (*Shemos 17:14*).

Now, this was not the first time that a group of people was slated for extermination; recall that such a decree had been issued against the generation of the Flood. Only there, we find a curious difference in the phraseology. As it states: וַיִּרְא ד' כִּי רַבָּה רָעַת הָאָדָם... וַיֹּאמֶר ד' אֶמְחָה – “And Hashem saw that the evil of man was great... And Hashem said: ‘I shall wipe out man that I have created **from off the face of the earth**’” (*Bereishis 6:5,6*). Why, when it comes to Amalek, did the Torah speak of their destruction “from under the heavens,” while in connection with the Generation of the Flood, the focus of their removal was “from off the face of the earth”?

A Magical Solution

R’ Chayim Kanievsky (*Ta’ama D’kra, parshas Beshalach*) offers an intriguing resolution to this issue based on a pair of comments from Rashi in different places.

The first comes from the narrative recorded in Shmuel I (*ch. 15*) regarding the battle of King Shaul against Amalek. The Navi instructs the king to smite Amalek and everything connected with them – down to their livestock. As to why the animals were included in this directive, Rashi there (*v. 3*) explains that the Amalekim were accomplished sorcerers; as such, they would resort to black magic to adopt the form of animals and hide therein.

Another pertinent piece of information comes from the episode of the Midianite war recorded in the Torah in parshas Matos. There we discover an innovative use of sorcery employed by the wicked Bilam; Rashi (*Bamidbar 31:6*) tells us that he used this medium to cause himself and the kings of Midian to fly through the air.

Putting these two items together, R’ Chayim explains that such a concern thus existed in connection with the Amalekim, as well. That is, as expert sorcerers, they, too may have employed this method of taking flight in order to gain ascendancy in battle – a prospect that posed an obvious threat. This explains why the *passuk* casts their imminent destruction in such terms: “I will wipe them out **from under the heavens.**” The Torah was guaranteeing that they would find no safe haven – not even by taking to the air.

When it came to the Generation of the Flood, however, it was not necessary for the Torah to make any such provision. This is because their demise involved the use of water. As such, even if they were to attempt to engage in sorcery, it would have no effect, for the Gemara

informs us that water neutralizes the power of black magic (*Sanhedrin 67b*). And so it was sufficient for the Torah to state merely that “I will wipe out man from off the face of the earth.”

R' Chayim proceeds to offer yet another approach to account for the Torah's emphasis on the skies when it comes to Amalek. The Mechilta actually interprets this *passuk* in a very specific way, understanding the demise mentioned therein as referring to Haman, scion of Amalek. Now Haman, as we know, met his end by hanging; thus, as matters turned out, he in fact never reached the ground. As this is what the Torah is referring to, it appropriately spoke of a destruction that occurred in a state of suspension. This is similar to the Navi's description of the demise of Avshalom, who was caught by his hair in an oak tree: וַיִּתֵּן בֵּין הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבֵין הָאָרֶץ – “And he was suspended between the heavens and the earth” (*Shmuel II 18:9*).

Peering Heavenward

Perhaps we may suggest an alternative explanation, based on the well-known Mishnah that features the war with Amalek. Chazal were addressing the phenomenon of Moshe's hands, as the Torah relates that Yisrael would prevail as long as Moshe held up his hands. The Mishnah states (*Rosh Hashanah 3:8*):

וְהָיָה כַּאֲשֶׁר יָרִים מֹשֶׁה יָדוֹ וַיִּגְבַּר יִשְׂרָאֵל וְגו'. וְכִי יִדְּיוֹ שָׁל מֹשֶׁה עוֹשֹׂת מְלַחְמָה אוֹ שׁוֹבְרוֹת מְלַחְמָה. אֶלָּא לֹאמַר לָךְ, כָּל זְמַן שֶׁהָיוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל מְסַתְּפָלִים כָּל־פִּי מַעֲלָה וּמִשְׁעַבְדֵּיךְ אֶת לְבָבָם לְאַבְיָהֶם שְׂבֻשְׁמִים הָיוּ מִתְגַּבְּרִים. וְאִם לֹא, הָיוּ נוֹפְלִין.

“And it was, when Moshe would uplift his hand, then Yisrael would prevail...’ (*Shemos 17:11*). Now, could the hands of Moshe truly ‘make or break’ the war? Rather, this comes to teach you: As long as Yisrael would direct their gaze upward, subjugating their hearts to their Father in Heaven – they would prevail. And if not, they would falter.”

Thus, we see that the key factor determining Yisrael's victory in this battle is the maintenance of their allegiance toward Hashem in Heaven. To allude to this important aspect, then, the Torah's treatment of this topic includes an emphasis on “the Heavens” – “*macho emcheh es zeicher Amalek mitachas haShamayim*.” This serves to remind us to where we must direct our focus at all times: gazing upward, and subjugating our hearts to our Father in Heaven.

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