

## Parshas Zachor

This week we will add *Parshas Zachor* to the weekly *Torah* reading. It was added by our sages to prepare us for *Purim* when we celebrate the downfall of *Haman*, the scion of *Amalek*. *Amalek* is the nation that staked its position in history by working on diminishing the influence of the Jewish people and creating enmity to everything we represent. Our sages say that the reading of *Zachor* is the preamble to *Purim*. It warns us that the memory of what *Amalek* did at the dawn of our history must remain with us for all time, and that this memory must lead to our destruction of this insidious nation. On *Purim* we actually made progress in this area when we succeeded in turning the tide against *Amalek* in destroying *Haman* and his influence.

*Rav Simcha Zisel Brodye* (the “Alter” of Kelm, a prominent *mussar* master and builder 1824-1898) elaborates on the theme of destroying *Amalek* as follows. When people build their self-worth on values that need external approval and appreciation, they are extremely vulnerable as the environment and the times change. If one has a strong identity based on principles that they hold as truths and will abide by them whether the world nods its approval or not, they can withstand all changes. This strong value system is essential when a people is charged with bearing a message that is often out of synch with society at large. It is our mission as the Jewish people to sustain and promote a unique set of values. Our success is completely dependent on whether we can create a strong and enduring appreciation on Jewish values which is insulated from the approval of those around us.

*Amalek* is accused of “cooling” the world’s strong impression of the Jewish people’s invincibility and of its visible protection by *Hashem* during the events of the Exodus from Egypt. When they attacked us shortly after we left Egypt, they didn’t expect to prevail but they hoped that the nations would lose their inhibition of challenging the Jews. They showed the world that you can attack the Jews and yet “live to tell the tale.” However, there was a much more serious damage that *Amalek* inflicted upon us. *Amalek* succeeded in sowing the seeds of insecurity and doubt in the hearts of the Jewish people. We had left Egypt on a high, knowing that *Hashem* was proclaiming to the world that we are his protected people and that we were marching to a glorious destiny. When *Amalek* attacked us and exposed the fact that we were still vulnerable, that dealt a body blow to our self-esteem. It is for this reason that whenever we face an attack from *Amalek*, he assaults our dignity and belief system as much as he attacks our physical existence. That is because he isn’t looking just to destroy us as a people; he seeks to destroy the message of Judaism and the acceptance of its values.

This was an issue in *Shushan* during the *Purim* story as well. Many Jews of that time could not understand why *Mordechai* insisted on defying *Haman* and provoking him with his refusal to bow to him. They would have preferred to appease the tyrant and to lay low. They hoped that *Mordechai* would “come to his senses” and capitulate to *Haman*’s demand for respect. This was completely turned on its head when they witnessed the public humiliation of *Haman* as he was forced to lead his nemesis *Mordechai* through the streets proclaiming that “so is done to the one that the King wishes to honor.” It jolted them into realizing that *Mordechai* was right; this was not a situation which called for submission and humility. It was critical to stand tall and wave Jewish values in the face of our adversaries. This lesson was perhaps even a greater redemption for our people than the physical salvation from the decree of annihilation.

Our response to this age-old epic struggle between ourselves and *Amalek* is to strengthen ourselves in our belief and knowledge of our mission. This is how we defeat *Amalek*. *Purim* is the time that we declare our confidence in the message and values of the Jewish people and we revel in the exceptionalism of being *Hashem*’s chosen nation. We say this even if we are mocked and discouraged by our enemies who ridicule us and tell us that we are worthless. When we succeed at doing this, it leads us to clarity and contentment as a people truly worthy of redemption and special protection by *Hashem*.