

"ON CHOOSING THE RIGHT WEAPONS"

The battle of Israel against Amalek, described at the very end of today's Sidra, is of more than local significance as a minor detail in the ancient history of our people. The Torah itself refers to this engagement as "a war by the Lord against Amalek from generation to generation." Amalek throughout history has come to represent to us the very symbol of evil, of heartlessness and cruelty, of Godlessness and anti-Semitism. It is therefore of interest to note that in entering upon this crucial episode in the life of Israel, with so much meaning for future generations, Moses departed from his usual procedure. He, the great military chieftain and warrior of Israel who had led the campaign against Egypt and just now completed the exodus from that house of slavery, did not personally lead his troops in battle against Amalek. He did not give the task over to any accomplished general. Instead, he turned to his disciple, Joshua, and asked him to undertake the leadership in this historic battle.

Why did not Moses himself lead his troops? Why Joshua? Our rabbis too were troubled by that question, and the answer they gave is of paramount significance for our lives and the lives of Jews of all generations. This is what they say: Lamah li li'Yehoshuah? -- Amar leih: zekenekha amar "et ha-elohim ani varei," u-va'zeh ketiv "ve'lo varei elohim"; yavo ben beno she-amar "et ha-elohim ani varei" ve-yipara mi'mi she-ne'amar alav "ve'lo varei elohim" (Shem. Rab. 26) Joshua, unlike Moses, was descended from Joseph of whom the Bible says that before he revealed himself to his brothers, he declared to them: Et ha'elohim ani varei -- I fear God. Joshua, like his grandfather Joseph, was a deeply religious individual who openly proclaimed his religiousness: Et ha'elohim ani

yarei. He was therefore particularly appropriate as the leader of Israel in its encounter with Amalek, for of Amalek it was said ve'lo yarei elohim -- that this nation did not fear God. Precisely because the major strength for evil of Amalek was their Godlessness, was it necessary to pit against them the one man whose major strength of virtue was his -- Godliness.

What our Rabbis meant to teach, then, was a principle as permanent as it is profound, and as pertinent today as it was then. They meant to tell us that the way to battle the way of a life of Amalek is not by compromising your principles with his, not by meeting his ideology half-way, but, on the contrary, by sharpening the ideological encounter, by confronting his Godlessness with your Godliness, his vice with your virtue, his evil with your good. Do not conceal your ideals, or pare down your principles, or dilute your standards when challenged by Amalek. When Amalek declares arrogantly ve'lo yarei elohim -- I do not fear God -- you must proclaim proudly, with a voice loud and clear: Et ha'elohim ani yarei -- I do fear God. It is the only way to triumph over the Amalekite forces in life. Only by being a Joshua, by inheriting the fearless Godliness of a Joseph, can you hope to establish victory over the Godlessness of Amalek.

When Judaism was first confronted with the Godless and Torah-less Amalekism of the modern day, about one hundred and fifty years ago, at the beginning of that era called the Emancipation, it found itself largely incapable of effectively engaging the opponent in battle. The modern spirit, with it despite its many noble, progressive, and humane features, also brought cynicism, the rejection of the Jewish uniqueness, the assertion that the spirits of free inquiry must necessarily deny Torah and a personal God; this spirit made inroads into the ghetto, it

destroyed its walls, and it threatened to capture the very fortress of Judaism.

Initially authentic Jews reacted in two ways -- both of which were inadequate. The first way was to shy away from the battle. It was the way of isolation, of a desperate will to return to a physical and spiritual ghetto, oblivious to all modernity. This point of view represented those who thought that they could escape Amalek by ignoring him. But this was not in keeping with the tactics of a Joshua or the ideas of a Moses who said clearly: Behar lanu anashim, ve'tzei ve'hilahem im Amalek -- choose for us men who will do war with Amalek. The method of the Bible was to face up to Amalek, not to ignore his existence.

The second approach was diametrically opposed to the first. It held that the only way successfully to meet Amalek in battle was, so to speak, to bribe him: to yield the character of Jewishness and compromise it with the character of Amalekism; to whittle down the principles of Torah and accept some of the ways of Amalek. Thus many Jews forgot that ve'lo yarei elohim can be defeated only by presenting a stronger et ha'elohim ani yarei. They forgot that Godlessness can be met only with Godliness. And so they chose the wrong weapon with which to decide the great battle of modern history.

For this is indeed what happened. They tried to deal with the Amalekim of modernity by having less yirat Elohim, less prayer, less Torah, less enthusiasm. For instance, we were faced with a problem in education -- Jewish studies were regarded as immigrant baggage, as antiquated pilpulism, so awkward in the American pragmatic atmosphere. Forget, we were told, about these outdated studies in a queer and un-

necessary language. You are Americans now! And how did we respond? Was it with the proclamation of Moses and Joshua, et ha'elohim ani yarei? Was it by building bigger and better schools and acquainting both our people and the Gentiles with whom we came in contact, with the fact that our way of life was the divine way of life, that our Bible spoke a living and relevant judgment upon life? No! Instead we answered with Sunday schools -- we reduced education to an hour a week and tried to convince ourselves that this farcical gesture, so devoid of yirat Elohim, was really Jewish education!

The synagogue was threatened by the Amalek kind of house of worship. The authentic Jewish character of a synagogue was somehow out of place in the scene of America with its pressure for uniformity -- the melting pot psychology. And so we responded by a diminution of yirat Elohim: We de-Judaized the character of the synagogue, and adopted all the trappings of the Christian church. We compromised by making our synagogues less Jewish.

And so it was too with the practical precepts of Judaism. Amalek laughed at our practical mitzvot. So we yielded -- kosher became kosher-style, Shabbat just a day-off, and all the sacred commandments were reduced to pallid, petty and superficial "customs and ceremonies" -- a kind of Jewish Elks ritual.

Foolishly, we tried to win over Amalek by reducing our own strength. We were like an army, threatened by a strong opponent, which, instead of building up its arsenal, panics -- and throws its weapons away!

Has this posture of bending over backwards to Amalek proved successful? Has presenting less yirat Elohim in the face of an enemy

who proclaims ve'lo varei elohim been the right approach?

The answer is: absolutely not. I draw your attention to a phrase which we recite on the occasions of Selihat, some of us reciting it every Monday and Thursday: Sarnu mi-mitzvotekha u-mi-mishpatekha ha-tovim, ve'lo shavah lanu. We departed from God's commandments and his righteous ordinances -- we imagined that only by watering down Judaism would we succeed in preserving in our midst the Jewish youth. We tried to convince ourselves that only by making life easier -- which involved disposing of nine-tenths of Jewish law -- would we succeed in stemming the tide of assimilation and in filling our synagogues with youth. But to our utter dismay we discovered that sarnu mi-mitzvotekha ha-tovim, ve'lo shavah lanu. We departed from God's commandments and his righteous ordinances -- we imagined that only by watering down Judaism would we succeed in preserving in our midst the Jewish youth. We tried to convince ourselves that only by making life easier ---which involved disposing of nine-tenths of Jewish law -- would we succeed in stemming the tide of assimilation and in filling our synagogues with youth. But to our utter dismay we discovered that sarnu mi-mitzvotekha u-mi-mishpatekha ha-tovim -- the attempt to keep Jews alive by diluting Judaism resulted in ve'lo shavah lanu -- it was not worth it! Despite all our attempts, we were frustrated. The weak schools we set up were ve'lo shavah lanu -- worthless and meaningless caricatures that failed to impress growing young minds. The Christianized synagogues were also not worth the destruction we wrought in the body of Judaism -- they were ineffective in making Jews and totally lacking in Jewish warmth and in true inspiration. Our non-observance and our excuses proved to be spiritually fraudulent and ineffective. Ve'lo shavah lanu -- the results have been miserable. We have learned that when faced with an



enemy whose standard is ve'lo yarei elohim, Godlessness, the only way to succeed against him is by increasing our own yirat Elohim, our own devotion to Torah and to God, and by proclaiming in proud opposition et ha'elohim ani yarei.

Orthodoxy today must return to the advice of Moses and the strategy of Joshua. We must not flee from the fight and we must not run from the encounter. The best of the modern world is not strange to us. We have abandoned the ghettos forever and have taken to heart the words of Moses -- Behar lanu anashim, ve'tzei ve'hilahem im Amalek. We are living in the modern world -- as businessmen and scientists, as physicians and novelists -- and to a great extent we have helped to shape part of the modern world. We have engaged the forces of Godlessness with a doubly renewed effort of Godliness. We have decided to advance in the name of Torah and go forth proudly and confidently on behalf of yirat Elohim. We have learned to be tough without being rough, to be aggressive without being offensive to disagree without being disagreeable. We have learned to proclaim et ha'elohim ani yarei.

This has been the lesson taught by Joseph, effected by Joshua, neglected by many generations, but one which we must now espouse and which we are now indeed using. Our answer to Amalek is et ha'elohim ani yarei -- more and better day schools, a resurgence of real kashruth, a new flickering of interest in Shabbat and in family purity. We must abide by the command of Moses: Bechar lanu anashim, we must be anashim -- "menschen," real men and real women, completely modern and yet utterly and thoroughly devoted to Torah and Judaism. These are the weapons with which American Orthodoxy has chosen to do battle with

Amalek. We have weapons in our hand -- but they are neither those of fear and coercion, nor those of submission and surrender. Ki yad al Keis Yah -- our hand is upon the throne of the Lord! Our strongest and best weapon is yirat Elohim -- more religion, more devotion to Torah, more Jewishness. Milhamah la-shem ba'Amalek mi-dor dor -- we are carrying on the war of God against Amalek and all that Amalek stands for from generation to generation.

May God grant that we in our generation, with the Godly weapon in our hands, with the fear of God in our hearts, and with the knowledge of the Torah of God in our minds, be privileged to bear the standard of Israel to eternal victory over Amalek. Amen.