



## ZACHOR

# An Enemy on Many Fronts

Three very different individuals inspired me to write this week's column. One was a newspaper editor who "dared" to censor a sentence in one of my submissions. The other was a very wise sage whose pre-Purim lecture I was privileged to hear many years ago. And the third was an anonymous Jew who was fond of the use of gematria, the technique by which special significance is given to the numerical value of the Hebrew letters which comprise a biblical word or phrase.

Let me begin by telling you about the editor. I have been writing columns on the weekly Torah portion for many years. My columns have been reviewed by quite a few editors, coming from quite a variety of backgrounds. Only once did an editor insist upon censoring a phrase, and a critical one at that, from one of my columns.

As a pulpit rabbi in the community in which I then served, I was invited to

be part of a rotation of rabbis, each of whom would submit a column once a month to the local Jewish newspaper. My turn in the rotation coincided with this week's special additional Torah reading, Parshat Zachor. In it, we read the verses from D'varim 25:17-19, in which we remember the treachery of our ancient enemy, Amalek. We are commanded to eradicate every trace of this vicious foe from the face of the earth.

I no longer recall all that I had written in this connection way back then. But I concluded my remarks by quoting from the Midrash (Bamidbar Rabba 21:4) which enunciates the principal of self-defense: HABA L'HORG'CHA HASHKEIM L'HORGO, When someone attempts to kill you, kill him first." That is to say, there are situations in which one's life is threatened and which justify killing another person in self-defense. Kill or be killed.

The Jewish people have found themselves in such dire circumstances many times in our history. Aggressive responses to mortal threats are not merely permissible, they are correct and proper. The editor of the newspaper found my words objectionable, and, without requesting my permission, simply omitted them.

I protested then, and continue to maintain, that when we face an



enemy, we must respond firmly and assertively. In those hopefully rare circumstances in which our very lives are threatened, we must be prepared to "kill or be killed". In less extreme situations, we must resort to less extreme responses, but we must not forget that we are dealing with an enemy and must respond in kind. I refer specifically to the recent rise of anti-Semitism all over the world. We are misguided if we limit our responses to attempts at dialogue, efforts at persuasion, and programs designed to educate our opponents. We are dealing with enemies who must be stopped by whatever effective means are at our disposal. To borrow a phrase from an article I recently read, "no more Mr. Nice Jew".

This age-old archenemy, Amalek, operates on many fronts. Often, as in the biblical story, he is murderous. But sometimes he adopts more subtle methods of doing us in. Thus, another Midrash (Sh'mot Rabba 27:6) quotes a phrase from the Book of Mishlei (19:25) to define Amalek. In Hebrew, this verse reads, LEITZ TAKEH UFESI YAARIM. One translation renders this: "Strike a scoffer and the simpleton may become shrewd." Traditional Jewish readers understand LEITZ to mean not merely a "scoffer, but a "joker", or, perhaps, a "clown".

This brings me to the second source

of inspiration for this column. I was but a teenager when I joined an old friend at one of the pre-Purim talks of the late Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner. He proposed a different translation for the term LEITZ. He suggested that a LEITZ was a "cynic", and he went on to define "cynic" as a person who, when confronted with another person's accomplishments, feels compelled to belittle those accomplishments, and therefore exclaims, "big deal!" or, "so what!"

This, for Rabbi Hutner, was and remains Amalek's strategy. When faced with the Israelites' triumphant enthusiasm during the early weeks of the Exodus, Amalek "cooled off" their enthusiasm by sneaking up upon them and attacking them. To this very day, we have individuals, including some in our own ranks, who diminish the spiritual enthusiasm of others by deriding them, teasing them, or otherwise denigrating their achievements.

Rabbi Hutner concluded his remarks by urging his audience to avoid such cynicism and to remain ever appreciative of the accomplishments of others.

Besides physical hostility, and in addition to scoffery and scorn, there is yet another technique that Amalek utilizes to attack people of the Jewish faith. He takes aim at our basic belief system and attempts to instill philosophical doubts in our



minds. For the linkage of Amalek to agnosticism, I return to the third source of inspiration for this column.

He was an elderly gentleman who frequented the same tiny synagogue as did I in the early years of my marriage. He was adept at a homiletic technique known as gematria, sometimes referred to as "numerology". Every letter in the Hebrew alphabet has a numerical value, and profound meanings can be found by comparing the numerical values of different words and phrases in the Bible. The letters that spell out "Amalek" total 240. The letters of the Hebrew word for "doubt", safek, also total precisely 240.

"This", proposed my elderly gentleman friend, "is Amalek's secret weapon. Get people to doubt the principles of our faith. Amalek does not only dress in the guise of a Gestapo officer. He sometimes sits in a lounge chair, or across a table over a cup of coffee, and says things that get young Jews to doubt the Almighty and His benevolence."

Amalek is a tricky adversary and operates on many fronts. He can be murderous. He can be abusive. He can be cynical or insulting, persuasive or even seductive. No wonder we are commanded to devote this particular Shabbat to contemplating this ancient enemy, against whom we must always be on guard, and

whose final elimination must be our ultimate goal. 📌

