



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

VAYIKRA > Tzav > Shabbat Zachor

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March 18, 2011

Tzav - Shabbat Zachor

**Banishing Doubt,
The Invisible Killer**



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

One of our most formidable psychological adversaries is invisible. It is called doubt. Plaguing doubts, fears and uncertainties paralyze and demoralize us. “There is no joy,” our sages tell us, “as the resolution of doubts.” What can we do about this debilitating force in our lives?

We must obliterate it.

In the Torah, the archetype of doubt is represented by the Nation of Amalek. And we are commanded to obliterate Amalek from under the heavens. Why? What has Amalek done?

In the first terrorist attack of recorded history, Amalek exploited the shaky confidence of the Israelites, attacking them from behind, undermining the nascent self-confidence of the newly liberated slaves and their fragile reliance on God, causing them to wonder “Is God with us or not?”

Amalek thus sowed doubt in the cosmic fabric of human psyche. So it is no accident that Amalek represents doubt and uncertainty, and this is what we are meant to obliterate from under the heavens.

In today’s accelerated world, we are particularly plagued by many doubts. The volatile Middle East, rising oil prices, a shaky economy, personal instability – these and many other factors, all amplified by the media, are eroding our sense of security and confidence in our old “reliable systems.” People everywhere are wondering what will be tomorrow, let alone in a month or year from now.

All doubts begin with the first cosmic doubt – “Is God with us or not?” This is the source of all maladies.

BANISHING DOUBT, THE INVISIBLE KILLER

1. Don't Forget (Two Jokes)

WRITE IT DOWN

An elderly husband and wife find that they are both very forgetful, and fearing Alzheimer's, they get a check-up. Everything proves fine, and the doctor advises them that their lives will be made much easier if they just write things down.

That night, they are already in bed, when the husband gets up to make sure they didn't forget to lock the front door.

-“While you are up, Stan,” says his wife, “will you get me a dish of ice cream?”

-“Sure thing, Rose,” obliges the husband.

-“And while you are at it,” she continues, “would you put some strawberries on top?”

-“Sure.”

-“Write it down so you don't forget, like the doctor said.”

-“Nah ... what's to forget? Dish of ice cream with strawberries.”

-“And put some whip cream on it too. Write it down Stan.”

-“Nah ... ice cream, strawberries, whipped cream. I don't need to write it down.”

A while later, Stan comes back with a plate of gefilte fish. And Rose is dismayed: “You forgot the toast!”

FORGOT TO REMEMBER

Two men met in a bar and shared a few drinks together. As they were heading out the door, one of them exhibited a string tied around a finger and confided, “I don't dare to go home. There's something my wife told me to do, without fail, and to make sure I wouldn't forget, she tied that string around my finger. But for the life of me I can't remember what the thing was that I am to do. And I don't dare to go home!”

A few days later the two men met again, this time in the afternoon. “Well,” the one asked, “did you finally remember what that string was to remind you of?”

The other showed great gloom in his expression, as he replied: “I didn't go home until the next night, just because I was scared, and then my wife told me what the string was for all right ... She certainly did! ... The string was to remind me to be sure to come home early.”

What ... ahem ... *reminded* me of these jokes?

2. Shabbat Zachor

Well, this Shabbat, as every Shabbat just before Purim, is known as *Shabbat Zachor* (“Shabbat of Remembering”).

On this Shabbat, in addition to the scheduled Torah reading from the Book of Leviticus, we also read this dramatic admonition from the Book of Deuteronomy:

Remember what [the nation of] Amalek did to you on your way out of Egypt. When it surprised you on the road, when you were tired and exhausted, and struck you from behind, at all the feeble ones in the rear. It had no fear of God. [Therefore,] when the Lord, your God, grants you rest from all your surrounding enemies in the land that the Lord, your God, is giving you as an inheritance, you shall obliterate the memory of Amalek from under the heavens. Do not forget!¹

What is it about Amalek that is so important to remember and never forget? Why the adamant insistence on total annihilation of the entire nation? Can this really be a Godly command to commit mass genocide? And since, in our time, there is no nation named Amalek – what could it possibly mean to us?

While we're at it, isn't it interesting that we are commanded to remember to obliterate Amalek from memory – in other words, we are

¹Exodus 17:8. His birth and lineage is noted in Genesis 36:12-16.

commanded to forget! Nowhere else in the Torah – or in human experience – do we find a need to remember something in order to forget it. Why here? Why remind us in the first place?

Before we consider these questions, let us first remind ourselves of who we are talking about here. Who is Amalek?

3. Who is Amalek?

The nation of Amalek makes its first nefarious appearance in the Torah² right after the Exodus.

God has just brought the world's mightiest civilization to its knees. Egypt is reeling after the plagues. Its army has been decimated at the Red Sea. Its entire slave population has been liberated and is marching forward to the Promised Land. At this point, the freed Israelites are considered invincible by all the nations who have heard of their miraculous escape. All the nations but one. All the nations but Amalek.

Amalek sees its chance to attack when the Israelites voice their first doubts in God. There is no water in the desert, and they momentarily panic. Of course, Moses strikes a rock and water gushes forth. But Amalek sees that these brow-beaten slaves can easily have their confidence shaken.

4. The First Terrorist in History

Amalek attacks, perpetrating the first terrorist act in history – a terrorist act that was committed some 3,300 years ago in the Desert of Rephidim.

As terrorists do today, the Amalekites did not issue an open challenge to war, because such a war they knew they could not win. They attacked from behind, taking out the unarmed, the weak, the vulnerable and the

² Deuteronomy 25:17-18.

defenseless. And as terrorists do today, their intent was to wreak psychological damage – to terrorize rather than to conquer – to paralyze the Israelites emotionally, to undermine their nascent self-confidence and fragile sense of reliance on God.

So that is the background we must keep in mind when pondering the command to “remember” to “obliterate the memory” of Amalek.

5. Amalek: Archetype of Doubt

The second thing we must keep in mind is that the Torah is, above all, a blueprint for life. Every character, episode and event related in the Torah is actually another piece of a comprehensive spiritual map – a spiritual map that lays out the inner nature of our lives and all our challenges. So the full implications of the command to obliterate Amalek can only be appreciated by understanding its *spiritual* dimensions.

The pieces finally come together, and the deeper nature of this command becomes clear, when we consider that the very name Amalek conveys doubt. In fact, in Hebrew, the word “Amalek” and the word for “doubt” (*safek*) share the same numerical value (240).

Amalek embodies the most potent enemy we face. But that enemy is not an external force. It is not an enemy from without, but an enemy from within. Of all our enemies, of all the forces that impede our ability to grow, to love and to build, one root-cause stands out among them all: Doubt.

Doubt has many names and many faces: Insecurity. Distrust. Uncertainty. Skepticism. Cynicism. Indecisiveness. Avoidance. Ambiguity. Complacency. The list goes on.

A fellow once asked his friend, “Which is worse – ignorance or apathy?” The friend replied: “I don’t know and I don’t care.”

Is there anyone among us, even among the most confident of people, who has not at some point been plagued by self-doubt? And then, how many of us are actually self-confident? Insecurity is arguably today’s norm.

As someone said to me the other day: “I am certain of only one thing – that I’m not sure...”

Of course, to have doubt for a short period of time is natural. But when doubt persists, it is something else altogether. Then, we are overwhelmed by a gnawing feeling that we don’t have the tools or the strength to go forward with confidence in our lives. This growing feeling can lead us to hesitate at every step. It can take the form of persistent indecision which, with time, becomes a deep, silent paralysis. Over an extended period, doubt becomes a debilitating poison that can paralyze us from making commitments. It can affect our every move and choice.

6. The Invisible Enemy

Perhaps the most insidious element of doubt is its invisibility. Doubt does not have a shape or form. On the surface, we can often appear completely functional. Lack of commitment to a course of action can be explained away and can even be justified as healthy caution, necessary introspection, sober skepticism. But, in truth, it is really nothing more than a mask for fear and doubt. Our deepest insecurities often hide behind sophisticated justifications and rationalizations, but these are just smokescreens to protect a frightened psyche, which is terrified of making the wrong move, the wrong choice.

Some people replace the need for certainty in their emotional and spiritual lives with an aggressive stance in business and the market place. Others do the same by showing off in scholarship or athletics, in the mistaken belief that their mind’s or body’s prowess compensates for the lack of true emotional and spiritual confidence.

If your confidence is built on a false footing, when you stumble, you fall. What if new technology replaces the skill which has made you feel irreplaceable? What if the stock market takes a nose dive and the portfolio that gave you a false sense of security disappears overnight? What if you can’t run or dance or play contact sports anymore to make yourself feel that your body is invincible?

This is what happened to Jim MacLaren. Defensive end for the Yale Bull Dogs and aspiring actor, Jim had a rude awakening one day. While riding his motorcycle on a Manhattan street, he was struck by a bus and ended up tragically losing one leg. But Jim put all his faith in the power of his body, and he overcame what appeared to be insurmountable odds. He became a media sensation – a top-rated marathon and triathlon runner, breaking world records for an amputee and routinely beating out 80 percent of his two-legged competitors. And then tragedy struck again. While bicycling in a triathlon in California, he was struck by a car. This time he was rendered a quadriplegic. And only then did Jim discover that his reliance on his body was misplaced. He was not his body. Only then did he begin to listen to an inner voice which gave him the self-confidence to move beyond his disabilities. To choose life. At 43, he founded the Choose Living Foundation and, through it, has helped many people banish self-doubt and self-pity and confidently move on with life, no matter what the challenges.

Facing doubt – a force that is with us at all times – is the never-ending battle with Amalek. It is a battle with all forms of lurking doubts that do not allow us the clarity and confidence to take risks, to make choices, to take on challenges and to forge ahead.

Amalek can attack at any given time. But it particularly likes to prey on us when we are “leaving Egypt.” The Hebrew word for Egypt – *Mitzrayim* – means “constraints.” So, just as we are being freed from our emotional or spiritual constraints – as we are feeling inspired and motivated – that is when Amalek attacks. It attacks as the voice of doubt, throwing cold water on our enthusiasm.

How often do we find that just as we feel inspired to make a move, just as we become upbeat, doubt creeps in telling us how it can’t be done, how we don’t have the strength or the will, how we are bound to fail in our attempts to excel. Doubt fuels all our insecurities and weakens our resolve.

This is Amalek attacking us just as we have found freedom and begin to feel confident. And it attacks our point of weakness – the part of us that is most vulnerable and defenseless.

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7. How Do We Protect Ourselves?

How do we protect against and fend off this enemy? How do we build self-confidence in a world plagued with profound insecurity? How do we learn to trust in a life that can so often disappoint?

The answer lies in the Torah as well.

Just before the Amalekite attack, the Israelites had expressed doubt in God, asking “Is God with us or not?”³ Because they allowed doubt to seep into their psyches, Amalek saw that their confidence was waning and that they were losing their trust in God. So then it was empowered to launch a full-fledged assault.

To better explain this, the famed 11th century biblical commentator, Rashi, cites a Midrash which compares Amalek to a biting dog:

[God said to the Israelites:] “I am always among you, always supplying all your necessities, but you say, ‘Is God with us or not?’ By your life, a dog will come and bite you, and you will cry out to Me, and then you will know where I am.” This can be compared to a man who put his son on his shoulders and set out on the road. Whenever his son saw something, he would say, “Father, take that thing and give it to me,” and the father would do so. They met a man, and the son said to him, “Have you seen my father?” So his father said to him, “How can you not know where I am?” He threw his son down to the ground, and [as he was lying there] a dog came and bit him.⁴

³ Exodus 17:7.

⁴ *Tanchuma Yitro 3; Shemot Rabbah 26:2.*

8. Cosmic Doubt

All doubts begin with the first cosmic doubt - with "Where is my father?" or, "Is God with us or not?" This is the source of all maladies - the doubt that God is always with us.

According to Kabbalah, this doubt originates from the primordial *tzimtzum*, when God contracted His light, concealing His presence in this world. While this was necessary so that we human beings could have a free will, it also set the stage for all forms of uncertainty. Prior to that time, the Divine Presence was the all pervasive, all-consuming reality. In such a state of seamlessness - "above the heavens" - there were no doubts; all was crystal clear. But "under the heavens," everything was wrapped in fog. Once the unifying presence of God was concealed, humanity felt alone, and doubt was the inevitable by-product: "Is God with us or not?"

Doubt is driven by this existential insecurity. We feel insecure because we live in a universe whose independent existence is possible only by virtue of the concealed light of God. But how can we change this state of things? Certainty is the converse of doubt, but how is it possible to find certainty in an uncertain world? Everything in this universe - its very nature - is forever changing in unpredictable ways. We can make the greatest plans, everything can seem right, but then things happen and all our plans are upset. We all age, everything erodes, everyone dies - how can we ever expect to find certainty in such an unstable environment?

The one and only answer is that we have within us an inherent connection to the Eternal, to the Absolute - and that gives us a sense of utter certainty. Some call this faith. This is not the blind faith of the fool, but the sophisticated belief in something greater than arbitrary logic or randomly-changing circumstances.

This connection to the Eternal, to the Absolute, is the power of the soul. The body and everything material, by its very nature, is in a state of flux, and thus always shrouded in doubt. What will come next? But the soul is a burning flame that cannot be extinguished - it is consistent, always sure of itself, because it is always connected to its source. It is the sense within that we are not alone. And when we really feel that we are not

alone because God is with us, all doubt melts away. This unwavering certainty which stems from our connection to the Divine naturally extends into our daily lives.

If we are surrounded by loving families and friends, if we have strong support systems that nurture us, we are able to cultivate our soul's natural connection to its source. We have a sense of belonging. We have a sense of certainty. Our self-confidence is high. But when our nurturing network is compromised, doubts begin to fill up our psyches.

And doubt breeds doubt.

Thus we are commanded to not just fight against Amalek but to "obliterate the memory of Amalek from under the heavens." Because doubt is our greatest enemy. When we doubt ourselves, every difficulty becomes a monster. When doubt is vanquished, we can take on any challenge. So we are commanded to "obliterate Amalek" – to obliterate every doubt, even the memory of doubt – from under the heavens. Because above the heavens there is no such thing as doubt.

And since doubt is invisible and can easily be overlooked, we are commanded: "Remember, never forget this concealed enemy in your midst, this silent killer within your psyche." Doubt thrives in the shadows, in remaining unseen. Exposure through remembering is thus its undoing. "Remember, expose the enemy and stand vigilant, so that you can then obliterate its power from under the heavens."

9. Connecting to Above

We can achieve this victory only by connecting to God.

It is no accident that six of the Twelve Steps to Recovery as listed by Alcoholics Anonymous – that's half of the Twelve Steps – refer to a connection to God. Connection to God is considered the essential life-line out of the pit of self-doubt and insecurity that underlies and feeds all addictions.

Some might argue that there are many confident and secure people who don't have any connection to God, but consider that if they are, indeed, that secure, they are connected to the Divine, even if they may call it by another name.

Connection to God is the surest way to reach clarity and certainty. Just as all doubt stems from the cosmic concealment, all certainty originates from the discovery that "God is with us" and the concealment is just that - concealment of Divine Presence, which really never leaves us. Though it may not be obvious to our eyes, the Divine Presence is always there. Of this we can be certain.

This in essence is the story of Purim: God's name is never mentioned in the entire *Megillah*, teaching us that the Divine Hand often works behind the scenes. And when we connect the dots, a pattern emerges leading us to salvation. Purim instills in us the certainty of this fact.

And just as doubt breeds doubt, certainty breeds certainty. Once we open the doors of certainty in our life - once we see that God is always with us - a new confidence begins to spill over into other areas of our life.

The battle against Amalek - the battle against doubt - goes on in every generation and in every situation. Perhaps it is the single most important battle of our lives. When we overcome our doubts and conquer our fears, then everything - and I mean everything - becomes possible.

10. A Three-Step Plan: Call to Action

I offer here a three-step plan out of the mire of doubt: 1) Awareness 2) Prayer 3) Action. These three steps will attune you to the sublime and connect you to God, building your self-confidence in a way that no self-improvement program can.

1) Awareness

Nothing connects us more to God than seeing Him in nature. So pick up a book - any book on the wonders of biology. Or take a

hike in the mountains, or in the forest, or walk the beach at midnight. Or consider the amazing design of your body.

2) Prayer

Pray from the heart or pray from a book. Or just talk to God. Ask for anything you may need. You will come to feel that He is listening and responding in subtle ways.

3) Action

Do something good. Something you haven't done before. Not because you feel like it, but because God asked that you do it. There are plenty of options: visit the sick, give charity to the poor, return a lost object, take a dip in the *mikveh*.

As we celebrate Purim this year, let us rejoice in the knowledge that God is with us – there is no doubt. Amen.