



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

## SHEMOT > Tetzaveh

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February 28, 2015

Tetzaveh/Zachor

**Israel's Biggest Enemy**



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

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## **ABSTRACT**

What is the secret to joy? How do we achieve exuberant happiness? Is it about remembering only happy things and having only happy thoughts?

Who is our greatest enemy? What is the most powerful impediment to finding happiness and joy?

Interestingly enough, the first question is answered by the second: The key to achieving bliss is remembering your mortal enemy.

This Shabbat, which precedes Purim, is called *Zachor*. And it is all about remembering the biggest threat to our lives so that we may obliterate it and achieve true joy.

Some 2,900 years ago King Saul did not obliterate Agag, the Amalekite king. As a result, the Amalekites proliferated, and Haman, the villain of Purim, was born 500 years later.

It took Mordechai, a descendant of Saul, to finish off Haman, a descendant of Agag.

Amalek represents doubt and apathy. This is the greatest threat to the Jewish people.

It is our mission and obligation to obliterate all doubt and uproot all apathy.

And this leads to the immense and complete joy of Purim.

## WHO IS ISRAEL'S BIGGEST ENEMY?

### 1. Our Enemies Bring Us Joy (Joke)

A Jewish man was riding on the subway on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, reading the Tehran Times. A friend of his, who happened to be riding in the same subway car, noticed this strange phenomenon. Very upset, he approached the newspaper reader: "Moshe, have you lost your mind? Why are you reading such a virulently anti-Semitic newspaper?"

Moshe replied: "I used to read the Jewish newspaper, but what did I find? Jews being persecuted all over the world ... Israel being attacked ... Jews disappearing through assimilation and intermarriage ... Jews living in poverty ... One Jew fighting with another. It used to depress me terribly. So I started buying the Iranian papers. Now what do I read? Jews own all the banks ... Jews control the media ... Jews are all rich and powerful ... Jews rule the world. Now I'm a much happier man, much more joyful, hopeful, and optimistic about life!"

### 2. Secret To Joy

What is the secret to joy? How do we achieve exuberant happiness? Is it by staying away from the depressing news of anti-Semitism, assimilation, nuclear threats, and Israel's international isolation? Or, as this humorous anecdote suggests, perhaps it is by reading the newspapers of our enemies, hearing how successful and dominant we Jews are?

Well, the humorous aside this is not too far off. Although the secret to joy is not found in anti-Semitic newspapers or on Al Jazeera, it does have a lot to do with understanding our mortal enemies, acknowledging their threat, and obliterating their presence from the face of the earth.

Put more succinctly: achieving profound joy is predicated upon *remembering* its nemesis.

### 3. What Do We Remember?

All of us here today have a collection of memories stored in our brains – past events and experiences that have made an indelible impression and, in a healthy mind, are ready for retrieval.

The more important a past event, the easier it is for us to remember it. For example, most of us remember our wedding day (though some would sadly wish to forget it...). We remember the moment that our children were born. We remember that trip to an exotic location. We remember that big promotion. We remember life's magical moments.

We also remember the profoundly sad times, when (Heaven forefend) a loved one passed away, or when we faced some painful situation.

Both the important positive events and the darkly negative and challenging events mark our minds with their deep seal and are at the forefront of our memories.

Sometimes, as time passes, we forget some things. And this could be a blessing. But even if we can't recall them, those memories are always there, embedded within the depths of our being.

### 4. Adar: The Most Joyous Month

We are presently in the most joyous month of the Jewish calendar, the month of Adar. In fact, this coming Wednesday eve begins the most joyous day of the year, the holiday of Purim. So smile – this is a very happy time.

This Shabbat, which directly precedes Purim, is called *Zachor*, meaning “remember” or “remembrance.” It is so called after a special portion of the Torah, *Parshat Zachor*, which we read as the *Maftir*. Also, the *Haftorah*, a segment from prophets that we read after the Torah reading, is about remembering certain events and people.

One would think that we would remember the joyous times, like receiving the Torah at Mount Sinai or building the Temple in Jerusalem, but no – on *Shabbat Zachor* we remember a difficult time. In this most joyous time we remember our mortal enemy.

We do not reflect upon and remember a joyous occasion, but rather the polar opposite. We remember a devastating historical occurrence and our worst enemy – Amalek.

Who is Amalek? And why must we remember him now? Isn't the joyous month of Adar, the month of Purim, the wrong time to be remembering this dark and depressing entity (whoever he may be)?

Apparently the Torah doesn't think so.

## 5. Maftir and Haftarah

Let me repeat the final verses that we just read in the *Maftir*:

*You shall remember what Amalek did to you on the way, when you went out of Egypt, for he happened upon you on the way and cut off all the stragglers at your rear, when you were faint and weary, and he did not fear God. Thus it will be, when the Lord, your God, grants you respite from all your enemies around you in the land which the Lord, your God, gives to you as an inheritance to possess, that you shall obliterate the remembrance of Amalek from beneath the heavens. You shall not forget!*<sup>1</sup>

Does that make you leap for joy? Does that send you right into the joyous Purim spirit?

No? So why do we read this today?

Our sages teach that upon entering the Holy Land the Jews were commanded to do three things: 1) appoint a king, 2) obliterate the seed of Amalek, and 3) build the Temple.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 25:17-19.

<sup>2</sup> Sanhedrin 20b

Some 2,900 years ago, Saul was appointed and anointed as the first king of Israel. In the *Haftarah*,<sup>3</sup> we read that God, through the prophet Samuel, instructed Saul to obliterate the Nation of Amalek down to its last molecule, including all its people and all its livestock. This, God said, would ensure Israel's peace.

To make a long story short, Saul did follow most of God's instructions. He wiped out all the Amalekites, except for their king, Agag, and their choicest livestock, which he intended to offer as a sacrifice to God.

This did not make God happy. In fact, God was very angry as Saul learned when the prophet Samuel rebuked him and told him he would soon lose his throne. Samuel then slaughtered Agag himself.

But not soon enough – not before Agag fathered a child.<sup>4</sup>

## 6. The Purim Connection

Some 500 years later, Mordechai, the hero of the Purim story and descendant of King Saul faced off against the arch-enemy of the Jewish people, Haman, the Agagite – descendant of Agag, the Amalekite king whom Saul had spared.<sup>5</sup>

As we all know from the Purim story, Haman tried to obliterate all the Jews of Persia but, instead, a miracle happened which completely reversed events. Jews, led by Mordechai, obliterated Haman.

This was the joy of Purim. And this is why, every year, we read about Amalek right before Purim.

Which still leaves one unanswered question:

Who is Amalek today? And why are we still obligated to obliterate him and his seed down to the last molecule? What does all this mean to us?

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<sup>3</sup> I Samuel 15:2-34 (some communities start from verse 1).

<sup>4</sup> See Targum and Targum Sheni to Esther 3:1. See also Likkutei Sichot vol. 3 p. 913.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

## 7. An Analogy

Let me supply the answer by way of this analogy:

Imagine a patient who is battling cancer (God forbid). The doctor instructs this patient to take a certain medication that will uproot every single cancerous cell and return the patient to perfect health.

The patient heeds the doctor's advice. However, right before the cancer is completely gone, the patient stops taking the medication and allows one sick cell to live.

Comes along the nurse and immediately destroys that dangerous cell – but not before it spawns more evil cells.

For a while, the patient is healthy, travels, builds a home, and all is good. Then, suddenly, out of the blue, the cancer returns. Why? All because one single cell was spared all those years ago.

The Jew's purpose in life is to bring life and health and gladness and joy and goodness and light into this world – *orah, simcha, sasson, and yakar*. But there is a cancerous entity that fights this purpose. This entity is called Amalek.

How does Amalek try to weaken the healthy body of the Jew? With two evil tools: doubt and apathy.

## 8. Doubt

As we remember from the Torah readings of the past few weeks, the Jews left Egypt with supreme confidence, joy and trust in their mission to change the world. Then, the newly free and confident people were attacked by Amalek, by a plague of doubt.

*Amalek* (composed of four Hebrew letters, *ayin, mem, lamed, kuf*) has the numerical value of 240. This is the same numerical value as the word *safek* (*samach, pei, kuf*), meaning "doubt." In the mystical numerical system called *gematria*, this is highly significant, for it indicates an equivalence between Amalek and doubt.

Doubt (also known as Amalek) is the mortal enemy of a life of confidence, trust and faith that a Jew is supposed to lead.

For, as we know, if we leave even a minuscule shred of doubt, it tends to fester and grow. And eventually it can undermine our entire world.

So God commanded us to have complete and utter confidence in our mission. This is how we achieve joy.

God commanded us to remember doubt and obliterate it even down to its last molecule – for doubt has no place in the Land of Israel, and it is our mortal enemy.

## 9. Apathy

That brings us to the second manifestation of Amalek – apathy.

To get the idea across, the Midrash<sup>6</sup> uses the analogy of a boiling tub of water so scalding hot that no one can touch it. Along comes one monster and jumps right into it. The callous creature is burned, but he cools it down for the others.

When Israel left Egypt in glory and freedom, God split the sea before them and drowned the Egyptians in it. At that moment all the nations of the world stood in awestruck humility before the nation of Israel – Israel was like an untouchable pot of boiling water. But then came the nation of Amalek and issued a challenge. Although Amalek was burned, it nevertheless cooled down Jewish passion and confidence. And, thanks to Amalek, the world became indifferent to the burning fire and untouchable energy that is the Jewish people.

This teaching is based on the verse from our *Maftir*: for he happened upon you on the way, which reads in Hebrew: *asher karcha baderech*. The word *karcha* means “he happened upon you” but it can also mean “he cooled you,” for he cooled you on the way.

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<sup>6</sup> Tanchuma, Ki Teitzei 9.



We come out of the confinement of Egypt with a supreme confidence to change the world. Amalek tried to sow doubt into our confidence and tried to “cool us on the way.”

We must obliterate every last shred of this cancerous doubt and apathy, for it stands in the way of our confidence and passion. If we allow even one cell to fester, it will be devastating.

And this is why we remember this commandment right before Purim.

Haman, the descendent of Agag, tried to destroy the Jews. But Mordechai, the descendent of Saul, destroyed Haman instead. This led to the joy and celebration that we have tried to recreate every Purim since then.

## 10. Two Tee-Shirts (Humor)

I recently saw two tee-shirts. The first read:

*I don't suffer from depression. I enjoy every minute.*

And the second said:

*I don't really care if I'm apathetic.*

## 11. Our Greatest Enemy

The greatest challenge to our existence, our purpose and our joy is self-doubt and apathy.

Our greatest threat, our greatest enemy does not surround us – it dwells within us.

And our greatest joy is when we overcome the doubt that plagues us and the apathy that bogs us down. For the wise say that, “There is no joy greater than the resolution of doubts.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See Metzudat Tzion to Mishlei 30:15; Igrot Kodesh vol. 22 (5722-5723) #8488 (p. 294).

We Jews must behave today as we did when we left Egypt – before we were attacked and cooled by Amalek. We must be infinitely proud, we must be supremely confident, and we must be deeply in touch with our purpose here in this world.

Imagine if life were a major business deal. There would be two ways that you could enter the boardroom. You could walk in with hunched shoulders, filled with self-doubt, and certain of defeat. The outcome of the deal would then likely be depressing and detrimental to your company.

Or you could shatter to smithereens any shred of doubt, stand up proud and tall, wearing confidence like a ten-thousand-dollar suit. You would then stride into the boardroom knowing exactly what you planned to accomplish and how victorious you would be.

This is the divine personality of Israel in action.

And this is what the holiday of Purim is all about: overcoming adversity, deleting doubt, and standing tall and proud. This is joy with a capital J.

May we, in these days, transform all of the days of doubt and suffering, into days of complete joy and utter confidence. May we remember Amalek and remove this threat from our midst. And let us say Amen!

Shabbat Shalom!