

On Shabbat Zachor (Shabbat of Remembrance), the second of the 4 special Shabbatot leading up to Pesach and the one immediately preceding Purim, we read the passage in Deuteronomy recounting Amalek's attack as the Israelites were leaving Egypt. It contains a strange oxymoron: "... you shall obliterate the remembrance of Amalek from beneath the heavens. You shall not forget!" Remember to forget – how do we manage to square that circle? We Jews are experts at remembering, but sadly, some of us dwell excessively on the past to the detriment of our future. Others take forgetting to the extreme, suppressing bad memories, which eventually fester and cause equally great harm. Therein lies the lesson of this oxymoron 'remember to obliterate the memory'. Amalek is the embodiment of the *yetzer ha-ra*, our evil instinct. Or put in spiritual terms, Amalek is the archetypal representative of godlessness. We cannot simply deny evil; our history is too full of tragedy for that. But it is futile to fight evil with hate and vengeance. Remember to forget is not an oxymoron after all, but rather, a call to engage in constructive remembering and creative forgetting. Every time we engage in any act of *teshuvah* (repentance/atonement) on a personal or on a communal level we are doing exactly that. We are channeling the memory of past misdeeds into positive action that helps create a better future. We dare not forget the past lest we be drawn to repeat it; but we must use its lessons to help root out evil and replace it with good. The Torah, which we received after we escaped the evil constraints of slavery teaches us that although we are free from slavery, we are not free from responsibility. Last week we received an overview of the laws that both define us as a people and ensure equity and compassion in our dealings with each other. One of the most frequently repeated commands throughout our Torah is to remember that we were once slaves and strangers – not as license to treat others as we were treated, but as our sacred duty to make sure everyone is treated with fairness and respect.

In parashah Terumah the scene shifts to a building campaign. Because our covenant with its accompanying laws is not easy to understand, the people need a tangible focal point. To this end, they are asked to contribute toward outfitting and constructing a worthy "sanctuary in which HaShem will dwell." Every detail is laid out with utmost precision, and it all carries enormous symbolic power. If Amalek is the epitome of godlessness, the *mishkan* is the polar opposite. At its innermost point is the Ark, which is to house the *edut* – the Tablets of Testimony containing HaShem's Ten Utterances. It is to be made of precious, polished wood, and lined inside and out with gold. Why inside, where no one can see it? Because our innermost self and our outward appearance are reflected in each other. This is illustrated in a Talmud discussion (Yoma 72b): "... Rava said, 'This alludes to the idea that any Torah scholar whose inside is not like his outside, i.e., whose outward expression of righteousness is insincere, is not to be considered a Torah scholar.'" And why wood on the inside? Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch teaches that life demands that we change and grow, pushing ever higher like the trees. Guarding the Ark at its top are the *keruvim*, those strange winged creatures fashioned out of a single piece of hammered gold. The word *keruvim* is related to words for "drawing near" such as *korban*, *karov*. What are these seemingly pagan figures doing in the place where our invisible God is to dwell? Throughout the centuries our sages have provided a variety of answers, the sum of which is the fact that far from being objects of worship, they are hugely symbolic. Rashi viewed them as a tool for focusing on the Divine Source. They face each other in mutual respect, some say in the manner of Torah scholars like Hillel and Shammai, who may disagree with each other, but who do so in mutual respect. They are to be made of one single piece of gold, although it would be far easier to weld two separate pieces together. Perhaps this is to teach us the meaning of the unfathomable *echad* of HaShem, of which we and all the things that make up our universe are an indivisible part. Most importantly, HaShem does not speak to Moses from the mouths of the *keruvim*, but rather, from the empty space between them. In music, it is often the rests, the silent spaces between the notes, that carry deep meaning. The reciprocity between sound and silence, which has its own intrinsic rhythm, is another way to view the *keruvim* and all they symbolize. HaShem is not in them, nor does HaShem's voice emanate from them. They merely frame the endless space within which communication with our invisible God takes place – that otherworldly place where space and time are suspended. These ancient holy places have long vanished, but the memory of what they symbolize is manifested in the myriad ways we fulfill our part of our eternal covenant – through the awe that ideally accompanies prayer, and through our deeds in the world. It is what admonishes us to remember to blot out Haman, the manifestation of Amalek in Megillat Esther, which we will read Thursday evening. Remember your enemies but counter their evil not with vengeance, but by striving to do good. Do not forget who – and Whose – you are.

Shabbat shalom – and an early Chag Purim sameach!