

Beyond all the drama and miracles in our action-packed parashah, two kindred spirits stand out, not because they are heroes, but because they epitomize the boundless evil that we humans are capable of unleashing. In addition to our *yetzer ha-tov*, our good inclination, we all have its opposite – our *yetzer ha-ra*, that evil inclination, and most of us can keep the two in balance. Curiously, our sages teach that these are not polar opposites, but rather, that ideally they should work together for our own good, and for the good of the world. As a wonderful midrash in Talmud Tractate Yoma teaches, without the *yetzer ha-ra*, nothing would ever be accomplished. Disgusted with the evil in the world, the sages imprisoned the *yetzer ha-ra* for three days, and the world came to a standstill. Why? Because the desire to assert, acquire, win, and procreate was absent. But when that desire is allowed to overpower the *yetzer ha-tov*, which the rabbis define as the desire to nurture, protect, give, and help, it runs amok and causes untold devastation and suffering. These two anti-heroes are Pharaoh and Amalek, each in his own way profoundly destructive. In Pharaoh we see a classic case of extreme narcissism driven by an obsessive desire to possess and an equally pathological fear of losing. From the perceived threat of the Israelites' outnumbering the Egyptians, to their enslavement, and culminating in the draconian measures he institutes to limit their growth, his intransigence ossifies into a habit he can no longer break. Narcissism is both a core component of addiction as well as an addiction in itself. The German word for narcissism – *Selbstsucht* (self-addiction) expresses this perfectly. Narcissists have such an inflated sense of importance and profound need for admiration, that they are incapable of empathy. When Pharaoh orders all newborn boys to be drowned in the Nile, he does not specify Israelites only. "Every son who is born you shall cast into the Nile, and every daughter you shall allow to live." (Shemot 1:22) Indeed, far more tragic than his own downfall is the devastation his behavior brings upon his people. Fortunately, not all destructive narcissists live on the world stage, but when they do, untold lives are impacted, often for generations. Sadly, we are seeing this played out once again by the pharaohs of today, aided by their loyal followers, whose gullible minds they have poisoned with righteous wrath and delusions of empowerment to enact their concept of justice. We all know who they are. Amalek stands for something far more insidious. According to Rav Moshe Soloveitchik, Amalek is a state of mind, here among us from the dawn of time, and with us until the messianic age. According to him, Amalek is the mortal enemy of HaShem and HaShem's people. He first appears as Esau's son in Parashah Vayishlach, Genesis 36:12: "And Timna was a concubine to Eliphaz, son of Esau, and she bore to Eliphaz Amalek." In verse 22, we learn that she is the sister of the Horite chieftain Lothan, i.e., "the daughter of kings ... albeit without a crown," as Talmud Tractate Sanhedrin 99b explains: "Timna sought to convert. She came before Abraham, Isaac, and Jakob, and they did not accept her. ... Ultimately, Amalek, son of Eliphaz, emerged from her, and that tribe afflicted the Jewish people. What is the reason? ... It is due to the fact that they should not have rejected her when she sought to convert." Unfortunately, we do our utmost to find reasons for our suffering, often turning against ourselves in the process. A recurring passage in our High Holiday liturgy, "Because of our sins, we were exiled from our land." – something I find odious and either omit or point out in a discussion about its difficulty – epitomizes this attitude, which has also featured prominently in the playbooks of our detractors, from the early Church fathers, to the libelous "Protocols of the Elders of Zion" and other defamatory material, and on to the radical Christian, Muslim – and yes, our own Jewish extreme fundamentalists. They each have their own laundry list of the sins they believe have led to our calamities, from not being strictly observant according to their standards, to our choices of profession and prominence in our chosen fields, to our policies regarding Israel. Based on Amalek's introduction at this juncture in our history, right after the complaining and quarrels about food and water, it's easy to understand this association. Emerging from their difficult, but predictable world of slavery into the wide, daunting world of freedom, these justifiably frightened and confused people continually refuse to trust HaShem, and HaShem punishes them with this sudden, unprovoked attack. But knowing what we now know about human psychology, this simple conclusion is not only woefully insufficient, it continues to nurture harmful, simplistic answers to complex problems. There are countless reasons why some people succumb like Pharaoh to the evil concept of a certain people being the source of all their woes. They have bought into the concept of Amalek, which has distorted their sense of righteousness and given them a pernicious feeling of empowerment to redress perceived wrongs and protect their world from apparent danger. As we read in our Pesach Haggadah, "In every generation they rise up against us ..." We humans are so impervious to the lessons of the past that even the horrors of the 20th century are being forgotten or ignored today by far too many people. Amalek is stirring right here in Europe, and all over the world. It is upon us – *aleinu* – to do all we can to counter the actions of those fanatics whose minds are locked in the *mitzrayim* – the narrow places – of Amalek thought, by constantly advocating for true justice and righteousness, not only for our own small world, but for larger world we all share.

Shabbat shalom!