

The Shabbat before Purim is called Shabbat Zachor, the Shabbat of Remembering, when we remember Amalek and his descendants and remind ourselves to never stop opposing the evil that still exists in our world. The special Maftir portion from Deuteronomy recalls Amalek's first attack: "... how it attacked you by chance, and injured all the weak ones at your rear. You were faint and weary, and they did not fear God." In other words, Amalek is the quintessential bully, sneaking up on the weak and picking on them because they are easy prey. Bullying is an ongoing, recurring theme in human history, from the schoolyard and the workplace to the highest governmental offices, even where it would have been unthinkable in more rational times. Midrash Tanchuma Metzora 1 quotes Rabbi Eleazar: "Anyone who becomes merciful upon the cruel one will end by being cruel to the merciful." This refers to our Haftarah reading: "And Saul and the people had pity on Agag (ancestor of Haman), and on the best of the sheep and the cattle ... and all that was good; and they did not want to destroy them; but everything that was vile and feeble, they utterly destroyed." This was in disobedience to HaShem's commandment to smite Amalek and completely destroy without pity everything that is his. Of course we recoil when we read that this even includes mothers and infants, especially in the light of recent events as well as the countless other times when our enemies did exactly that to us. And we are equally uncomfortable reading about the wholesale destruction of human life in Megillat Esther as well as in Parashah Matot. This is not who we are supposed to be. Our *mitzvot* instruct us to respect all life. How do we square that circle? Perhaps we can at least find a way forward through a possible etymology of the word Amalek. There is no conclusive proof, but the name may be a composite of the words *am* (people) and *lakak* (to lick up), i.e. greedy, selfish people who take what they please irrespective of the consequences. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch viewed Amalek as having values diametrically opposed to ours, and warned against succumbing to Amalek traits when they arise within us. When we see our toddler hit, or grab a toy away from another child, most of us immediately step in to correct this behavior. We are not born with social skills; these must be taught and modeled by conscientious, loving adults, and like any skill, they must be diligently practiced. It begins with teaching children that everyone has feelings. Empathy too, is a skill that must be honed. The abundance of bullies makes it obvious that the process of cultivating empathy can easily be derailed. Rashi notes that the word translated as by chance derives from the root קר which means cold, coldness. It is related to that unique word *keri* (קר) that we will encounter in Parashah Bechukotai. It denotes indifference, stubbornness, aversion, insensitivity, carelessness – Amalek traits. He offers a second interpretation based on cold. He likens it to a boiling hot bath. Someone reckless enough jump in despite the danger will cool it for others. Amalek's daring to attack the people under HaShem's protection weakens the fear other nations might have, sowing doubt in their minds that HaShem is really protecting the Israelites and thus opening a path for them to follow his lead. Anyone who has ever dealt with a narcissist, a particularly insidious kind of bully, has learned, often through painful experience, to maintain strict boundaries in order to avoid being drawn into exhausting and ultimately futile battles. Perhaps this is how we might observe the commandment to "erase Amalek" today without sacrificing our values in the process. We must oppose evil whenever we encounter it, but not in like kind. In Leviticus 19:16-17 we learn: "Do not stand idly by when you see your fellow's blood being shed. ... You must indeed rebuke your fellow, but do not sin on his account. We are also taught to avoid "Schadenfreude" – rejoicing over the misfortune of others. We demonstrate this in our Pesach Seder by removing a drop of wine from our glass for each of the 10 plagues. And despite the triumphal rejoicing in the "Song at the Sea" (Exodus 15), we acknowledge with deep gratitude that our delivery was neither through our own ability, nor was it pure happenstance; it was HaShem, Who made it possible. Our *mitzvot* emphasize compassion and respect – for our fellow humans, for animals, and for nature. Our parashah describes the vestments to be worn by the Kohen Gadol, the High Priest, which reflect both his status and his responsibility. It is noteworthy that he wears the names of the tribes twice: on his shoulders, symbolizing the burden of responsibility he bears for the people, and on his heart, for the empathy he also must have. With collective responsibility on his shoulders and individuals in his heart, the Kohen Gadol exemplifies balance and harmony between the collective and the individual, between duty and empathy, and between *gevurah* (power, judgment) and *chessed* (love, charity). The opening verses of our parashah describe the *ner tamid*, the eternal flame that must be fueled with the finest oil. Although "*attah tetzve* (you shall command) is obviously addressed to Moses, who is to command the Israelites to bring him this oil, we can view it as though it were addressed to each of us personally. We dare not fight Amalek with Amalek behavior. It is far more effective to be firmly indifferent to the goading of today's Amaleks. We observe the *mitzvah* to erase Amalek by kindling strong, bright lights of education, justice, and empathy to dispel the frigid darkness of their ignorance, arrogance, and indifference – dazzling their bedazzled followers by showing them better pathways to the success and happiness they, like all of us, seek. As usual, *aleinu* – it's upon us!

Shabbat shalom!