

That I shall surely erase the memory of Amalek from under the heavens. (17:14)

The most powerful tool against the *yetzer hora*, evil-inclination, is pride. When one maintains a sense of pride, when one believes in himself, the *yetzer hora* will have great difficulty in undermining his self-esteem. While on the surface this may seem counterintuitive to the *middah*, character trait, of humility, it is anything but. A truly humble person is well aware of who he is and of what he is capable of achieving. He just does not allow it to go to his head. He has been blessed with specific talents as part of his mission on this world. He is just carrying out his function. Understandably, one who destroys a person's self-belief is guilty of a serious, unforgivable infraction. One whose self-belief has been undermined feels worthless, the foundation of his self-confidence and self-esteem compromised. He shies away from undertaking new challenges and is utterly shattered when confronted with a setback. What may be a "speed bump" to one who believes in himself can be devastating to one who lives with negative feelings about himself.

This introduction gives us an idea concerning the outrage Amalek committed against us. The Torah (*Devarim* 25:18) teaches, *Asher karcha ba'derech va'yezaveiv becha kol ha'necheshalim acharecha*, "How he happened upon you on the way and cut off all the stragglers at your rear." *Rashi* explains that these "stragglers at your rear" is a reference to those who had been banished from the protective cover of the *Ananei HaKavod*, Pillars of Cloud, due to their sinful behavior. Amalek approached these people and destroyed their hope of ever gaining acceptance among the Jewish People. He convinced them that their sins had created an insurmountable barrier between themselves and Hashem. Once their hopes for *teshuvah*, return, were dashed, they were putty in Amalek's hands. The name of any individual who tells a Jew that he has no hope should be blotted out.

"What about Pharaoh?" asks *Horav Meilech Biderman, Shlita*. Pharaoh was a despot who persecuted our ancestors in the most brutal and inhumane manner. He slaughtered Jewish babies in order to bathe in their blood. Yet we are not commanded to blot out his name. He explains that, while it is true that Pharaoh did not believe in Hashem, Amalek did something more reprehensible: He tried to convince Jews not to believe in themselves! He located the stragglers and convinced them that they were worthless sinners, with no hope that Hashem would ever welcome them back and once again embrace them.

Rav Biderman cites a letter of encouragement by the *Yesod Ha'Avodah (Horav Avraham, zl, m'Slonim)* to his *chassidim*. He related an incident concerning a powerful general whose army was at war. The general was in the control tent guiding the battle based upon the information he was receiving from the front. He received a sobering telegram informing him that the enemy had breached through the lines of defense and appeared poised to overwhelm his soldiers.

The general was not used to news of defeat, and, as a result, he fell into deep despair. His wife

walked in and took one look at her usually exuberant husband and asked what had happened to destroy his mood. He told her of the dreadful news that he had received from his field commander. She was a wise woman, and she immediately said, "I, too, received a telegram. However, my information was more grave than yours."

"What did it say?" the general asked.

"My telegram informed me that you, my husband, the great and revered general, has lost his confidence and spirit and has been overcome with melancholy. That, my dear husband, is worse than anything the opposing army could have done!"

This, explains Rav Biderman, is the *avodah*, function and service, of *mechiyas Amalek*, blotting out the memory of the accursed Amalek. We must always remember (and sear into our hearts and minds) how Amalek weakened us by taking advantage of our weakest link – the Jews who had erred and were now at the point where return was possible only if they worked at it. Amalek took these vulnerable Jews and disheartened them. Our revenge is to infuse ourselves with pride and hope in the belief that nothing separates us from Hashem – but ourselves. With determination, grit and self-confidence, we will make it. This is how we erase the memory of our archetypical nemesis.

It is sad how many people refuse to change their secular way of life because they think that they will not be accepted back into Hashem's arms. As mentioned, this is due to the wiles of Amalek who employs various "agents" to convince us that return is impossible. Once you leave – you cannot go back.

This idea cannot be further from the truth. I take the liberty of relating (in brief) the story of *Horav (Dr.) Chaim David Bernhard, zl*, one of the most distinguished *baalei teshuvah* who rose to the position of being the *Rebbe* Doctor of Pietrekov. *Rav* Chaim David was born in Poland some time in the 1770's. His parents had received a *brachah* from the saintly *Horav Elimelech, zl, m'Lishensk*. Apparently, his father had spent an incredible amount of money, more than he could afford, to redeem an imprisoned fellow Jew who had fallen in arrears in his taxes. *Rav* Elimelech promised his father that, in this merit, he would be blessed with a son who would illuminate the entire world.

In his early teens, *Rav* Chaim David became ill and required constant medical supervision. He was not always home in the pristine environment of Torah and sanctity. As a result of his exposure to the secular world, and its focus on culture and enlightenment, his relationship with the spiritual dimension in which he had been raised began to wane. Ultimately, he went to medical school, became a doctor, married, and settled into a completely secular lifestyle, totally devoid of Torah and *mitzvos*. He became the private physician of the kings of both Prussia and Poland. Well respected in the medical field, he was sought after by – and corresponded with – the greatest medical minds of his day. For all intents and purposes, to the casual observer, *Rav* Chaim David was on his way to becoming a completely alienated Jew.

Hashem, however, had other plans for him. Through Divine intervention, the brilliant doctor crossed paths with *Horav David Biderman, zl, Lelover Rebbe*, an individual whose love for his fellow Jews was boundless. His personal saintliness was legendary and second only to his emphasis on outreach to seek out and return those “wandering” souls who had gravitated to the secular world.

The story (that seems most accepted) goes that *Rav Chaim David* had occasion to be traveling through Lelov on *Yom Kippur*. As he was passing the *Lelover shul* where the *Rebbe* was leading his congregation in the *tefillos* of *Yom Kippur*, with the congregation pouring out their hearts in supplication to Hashem, a shout was heard in the neighborhood, “Doctor! Doctor! Does anybody know where there is a doctor?” Dr. Bernhard immediately came to the rescue. A young woman in labor was having great difficulty and was fighting with her last ounce of strength to survive the ordeal and give birth to a healthy child. Dr. Bernhard guided and encouraged her until she gave birth to a healthy child. The young woman’s father-in-law, *Rav David Lelover*, had been notified and came running.

After offering his profound gratitude to the doctor for assisting his daughter-in-law, he began a serious conversation with *Rav Chaim David* which ensued for hours. They discussed all the pertinent topics concerning Judaism, Hashem and a Jew's obligation to the Almighty. *Rav David* bid farewell to the doctor with the words: “Chaim David! Return!”

Every Jew has a “restart button,” the *Pintele Yid*, the soul that remains pristine despite the external layer of accumulated dross. Once that button had been depressed, *Rav Chaim David* stayed in Lelov and studied at the feet of the *Lelover*, as the *Rebbe* guided his return to observance. The *Lelover* introduced his “student” to the *Chozeh, zl, m’Lublin*, who told *Rav Chaim David*, “You, doctor, will heal my frail and weak body, and I will help you heal your soul.”

When the Rabbi Doctor (as he was now called) was asked to see a patient, he would recite *Tehillim* on the way there and write *Baruch Hashem* on top of each prescription. He moved to Pietrekov where he acquiesced to the requests of the community to be their spiritual leader. He acted like a *chassidic Rebbe*, and he formed deep, personal relationships with all of the great *Admorim* of his time. He was an extraordinary *baal tzedakah*, generous with his money and his time to help all Jews in need. He was loved by all – Jew and gentile alike.

Rav Chaim David's journey back to observance served in many ways as the harbinger for the *teshuvah* movement. He showed us that we really have no exit strategy from Judaism. Hashem is always waiting for our return, when He will welcome us with His embrace.