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Fall 2021

Parashat B'shalach Lesson Plan

Core Concept:

The first major battle with Amalek leads to an ongoing battle with not only a nation, but with an idea that persists throughout Jewish thought of good versus evil.

Text: Exodus 17:6-16, Parashat B'shalach

Note: This is designed for my current pulpit where I teach Torah study each week, it is usually around 15-20 people and the group shares space and ideas nicely (hence why there is mostly all-group discussion over small groups. If I taught this lesson to a group over 20/25 people, then I would probably suggest hevruta or small group discussion for Exodus 17:8 through the Exodus 17:9-13 texts and questions and I would jump in and out of groups)

Timed Outline

- 5mins: Intro
- 10/15mins: Set induction, including first few texts
- 10mins: The Battle Scene
- 10/15mins Amalek in Memory
- 10mins Additional texts (depending on the group and discussion, either the first two or last few)
- 10mins Concluding Discussion

Introduction: Welcome and Boker Tov, I am so excited to see all of your faces this morning and to be studying together. Before we begin, I would like to do a check-in on what sorts of thoughts or energy you are bringing into this space this morning? If you would like to unmute and share or put something in the chat, please take a moment. (Respond to how people are feeling). With all of that, we will dive into our Torah study today and begin by blessing, so let's read together:

Note: If on zoom, invite folks to unmute, if they are comfortable.

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו,
וְצִוָּנוּ לַעֲסוֹק בְּדִבְרֵי תוֹרָה.

*Baruch atah, Adonai Eloheinu, Melech haolam, asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu
laasok b'divrei Torah.*

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of all, who hallows us with mitzvot, commanding us to engage with words of Torah.

Set Induction

Explain: As we enter into Exodus 17, we enter in the middle of parasha B'shalach. Throughout this portion, the Israelites have just crossed the Sea of Reeds and have witnessed that moment of God separating the waters for them to cross into safety. But after this, the Israelites fall into the habit of something many of us may be familiar with: kvetching, or complaining. They complain about drinking water, food, and even question God multiple times and each time, God responds with some sort of miracle, such as providing water from a rock, turning bitter water sweet, making food fall from the sky and so on. God continues to prove God's self to the people and yet they continue with the same old kvetching and questioning. Even by Exodus 17:6, as we conclude one of these miraculous stories, we see the trend.

I Read:

Exodus 17:6-7

שמות י"ז:ו-ז

6 “Behold, I will be standing before you there upon the rock in Horeb and I will strike the rock and water will come from it and the people may drink it.” And Moses did this. 7 He named the place there Massah^[1] and Meribah^[2], because it is where the children of Israel fought^[3] and because they tested God saying, “Is God among^[4] us or not?”

(ו) הַנְּגִי עֹמֵד לְפָנַי שָׁם | עַל־הַצּוּר בְּהַר־בְּזוֹר
וַיִּצְאוּ מִמִּנְּו מַיִם וְשָׁתָה הָעָם וַיַּעַשׂ כֵּן מִשֶּׁה לְעֵינַי זָקֵנִי
יִשְׂרָאֵל: (ז) וַיִּקְרָא שָׁם הַמָּקוֹם מַסָּה וּמְרִיבָה עַל־רִיב |
בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְעַל נִסְתָּם אֶת־יְהוָה לֵאמֹר הֲיֵשׁ יְהוָה בְּקִרְבָּנוּ
אִם־אֵין: {פ}

Explain God's intervention in this and the previous miracles serves to prove God's power and presence among the people in their journey throughout Exodus. The final question to that narrative feels so relevant to the wandering Israelites, to our own world. The parasha now transitions into the story of Amalek. As we dive in and discover who this is and his impact, let's hold that final question in our minds: "Is God among us or not?"

Note: For zoom, ask for volunteers who would like to read to put their names in the chat. In person, go around the room and invite that if people would not like to read, they are always welcome to pass.

Exodus 17:8

שמות י"ז:ח

^[1] Massah literally means

^[2] Meribah literally means

^[3] Also can be translated as quarreled or an act of contention

^[4] Among us or literally close to us

^[5] Defined by Strong's dictionary as meaning a "resting places" or a station of Israel in the wilderness between Egypt and Sinai

^[6] Hebrew root is related to a war or battle

^[7] Same root again relating to war or battle

^[8] From the same root of strength or might, hence they succeeded with might

^[9] Literally, in the book, this is a specific reference due to the preposition on the noun

^[10] Read it aloud, or rather, put it in the ears of Joshua

^[11] Placing the name: "The Lord is my banner."

(8) 8 And Amalek came and fought with Israel at Rephidim^[5].

(ח) וַיָּבֹא עַמְלֵק וַיִּלָּחֶם עִם־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּרֶפְדִּים:

Ibn Ezra on Exodus 17:8:1

אבן עזרא על שמות י"ז:ח:א'

THEN CAME AMALEK. A nation that dwelled in the Negev (see Numbers 13:29)

ויבא. גוי עמלק. הוא היושב בארץ הנגב:

The Torah: A Women's Commentary on 17:8

AMALEK. The Amalekites are traditional enemies of the Israelites, especially in the pre-monarchic era. That they are also related to the Israelites- Amalek is the grandson of Esau (Genesis 36:11-12)- makes their traditional enmity all the more tragic.

- How do these commentaries affect our understanding of who Amalek is?
 - Anticipated Answers: The fact that they are just a people in the Negev, does not give much detail other than the fact that they are a nation that we will and obviously are about to encounter.
 - Anticipated Answers: The relation to Esau in way makes them almost family. How do we deal with the fact that we are going to war with a nation of distant cousins?
- What kind of preconceived notions do we have about Amalek before moving into the rest of the narrative?
 - Anticipated Answers: There is already a complicated relationship that is understood, even if not explicitly in the text.

Note: After some responses, I say that now that we have a bit of an understanding of who Amalek is, we will continue into the battle with him. Ask for volunteer to read next:

The Battle Scene

Exodus 17:9-13

שמות י"ז:ט'-י"ג

9 Moses said to Joshua, "Choose some men for us, and go out and fight^[6] with Amalek. Tomorrow I will station myself on the top of the hill, with the staff of God in my hand." 10

(ט) וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בְּחַר־לָנוּ אַנְשִׁים וְצֵא הִלָּחֶם בְּעַמְלֵק מִחֵר אֲנֹכִי נֹצֵב עַל־רֹאשׁ הַגְּבֻעָה וּמָטֵה הָאֵלֶּהִים בְּיָדִי: (י) וַיַּעַשׂ יְהוֹשֻׁעַ כְּאֲשֶׁר אָמַר־לוֹ מֹשֶׁה לְהִלָּחֶם בְּעַמְלֵק וּמָשָׁה אַחֲרָיו וְחֹזֵר עָלוּ רֹאשׁ הַגְּבֻעָה: (יא) וַהֲלָה כְּאֲשֶׁר גָּרִים מֹשֶׁה יָדוֹ וַגִּבֹּר יִשְׂרָאֵל וּכְאֲשֶׁר גָּרִים יָדוֹ וַגִּבֹּר

Joshua did as Moses had said to him and fought^[7] with Amalek; and Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. 11 Thus, when Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed^[8]; but when he let down his hand, Amalek prevailed. 12 But Moses' hands became heavy, so they took a stone and put it under him and sat on it; Aaron and Hur supported his hands, one on each side of him, and thus his hands were steady until the sun went down.13 Joshua weakened Amalek and his people with the sword.

עמלק: (יב) ויגד משה כבדים ויקחו־אָבֶן וישעמו תחתיו
 וישב עליה ואהרן וחור תמכו בגדיו מגה אֶחָד ומגה אֶחָד
 ויהי יגיו אמונה עד־כא השמש: (יג) ויחלש יהושע את־
 עמלק ואת־עמו לפי־חַרֶב: {פ}

- What sort of imagery is created in this scene?
 - Anticipated Answers: A battle scene, as if in the movies. Very dramatic. Moses, Aaron and Hur on the high ground make them seem both closer to God, elevated in a way and also interesting that while they have God on their side, that they are not actually on the battlefield with the Israelites.
- What is this text saying in general about war?
 - Anticipated Answers: God is involved and war and our relationship to the divine are completely intertwined
 - Also, that during war we only look at the battlefield. Only the men are fighting, so where are the rest of the Israelites while this is happening.
- How does this influence your understanding of war throughout Biblical and modern history?
 - Anticipated Answers: Throughout Biblical descriptions of war, God always seems involved, people may offer other examples that they are familiar with.
 - Anticipated Answers:

Note: After some discussion, I would reflect back and try to summarize some of the thoughts and reflects that were revealed by participants during the conversation before moving on.

Amalek in Memory

Exodus 17:14-16

שמות י"ז:ד-ט"ז

(14) And God said to Moses, "Write this as a memory in the book and put it in the ears of Joshua; I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heave." (15) And Moses built an alter and named it for Adonai as a sign. (16) He said, "Because the hand upon the throne of God;" God will be at war with Amalek throughout the generations

(יד) ויאמר יהוה אל־משה כתב זאת זכרון בספר
 ושים באזני יהושע כי־מחה אֶמְחֶה אֶת־זְכוֹר עַמְלֵק
 מִתַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם: (טו) ויבן משה מזבֶּח ויקרא שְׁמוֹ
 יְהוָה | נָסִי: (טז) ויאמר כִּי־יָד עַל־כֶּסֶלְהָ מִלְחָמָה
 לַיהוָה בְּעַמְלֵק מְדַר דָּר: {פ}

- What might it mean to create a document that reminds us to blot out the memory of an enemy?
- How does this text relate to our lives today? How can we find value in recording evil in our own history?
 - Anticipated Answers: Is Amalek, the descendants or embodiments of Amalek still in our world today? Maybe we connect other forms of evil to this moment in the Torah.
 - Anticipated Answers: Religious war and religion's involvement in war is a clear part of world history. Everything from the crusades to ISIS show the belief that people have in their God supporting war-like endeavors.
 - Anticipated Answers: We don't really think much about Amalek today anymore, so what is with this talk of a memorial and throughout the ages?
 - Anticipate Answers: Finding value in remembering the actions of Confederate generals, of slave holding founding fathers, of abusers in virtually every imaginable workplace. As part of cancel culture we are fully trying to blot out some memories of these people in our American history, but maybe blot is not canceling, since the memory of Amalek is recorded.

If time allows, some additional commentaries that a simple, what does this text mean/mean to you, could lead to good concluding discussion. Definitely not enough time for all of these but I think the Women's commentary could help bring the text back to our own lives best.

Rashi on Exodus 17:14:1

רש"י על שמות י"ז:י"ד:א'

WRITE THIS FOR A MEMORIAL, that Amalek came to wage war against Israel before any other nation.

כתב זאת זכרון. שְׁבֵא עֲמֶלֶק לְהַזְדַּנֵּג לְיִשְׂרָאֵל קִדְמָה לְכָל הָאֲמוֹת:

Ramban on Exodus 17:14:1

רמב"ן על שמות י"ז:י"ד:א'

WRITE THIS FOR A MEMORIAL IN THE BOOK. Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra identifies this as the known book of, *the book of the wars of the Lord*, which tells of the wars that God fought for those who fear Him, and which may date to the days of Abraham. But he merely used this as a pretext. I think the "document" is the Torah. "Write this down in the Torah so the Israelites will remember what the Amalekites did to them."
[...]

כתוב זאת זכרון בספר אמר רבי אברהם (אבן עזרא על שמות י"ז:י"ד) כי הוא ספר נודע, והוא "ספר מלחמות ה'" (במדבר כא יד), וכתוב בו המלחמות שעשה השם בעבור יראיו, ויתכן שהיה מימות אברהם. ואין בדבריו אלה רק תואנה. והנכון בעיני, כי "בספר" ירמוז לספר התורה, כענין שכתוב (דברים לא כו)

Explain: Rashi notes here that the recording of the occurrences of Amalek are not necessarily because he is so evil, but because he was merely the first fight with Israel. Rambam, on the other hand, explains the recording to be a reference to a specific document or book. Rambam thus tries to bring deeper value to the narrative in connecting it to the Torah, itself.

**The Torah: A Women's Commentary on
17:14**

“Utterly blot out their memory” The total destruction of Amalek will not only be genocidal but will also preclude existence in memory. This is harsh and troubling language for expressing divine power.

- How does this description leave you feeling in the modern day era? Do you often think of God or the Jewish people being tied to this kind of extreme violence?

Sforno on Exodus 17:16:1

ספורנו על שמות י"ז:ט"ז:א'

ויאמר כי יד על כס יה אמר טעם תפלתי זאת הוא מפני שהאל יתברך נשבע שתהיה לו מלחמה בעמלק מדר דר, וחייבים אנו להלחם מלחמתו בכל דור ודור, כאמרם ג' מצוות נצטוו ישראל בכניסתן לארץ, להעמיד להם מלך ולהכרית זרעו של עמלק, ולבנות בית המקדש, ולכן התפללתי שיהיה הוא נסי ורוממותי על האויב:

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**The Torah: A Women's Commentary on
17:16**

“Throughout the ages”

If Amalek symbolizes Israel's enemies, this notice acknowledges the sad fact that military crises will always be part of Israelite life. [...]

- How does these texts relate to the modern or historical experience of Jews?
 - Anticipated Answers: Our history of oppression and hate against the Jewish people

- Anticipated Answer: Israel as a modern state is also constantly under military strife, maybe this could somehow be intertwined

Concluding Discussion: Sum up some of the thoughts and reflections that others have expressed throughout the session.

Concluding Questions:

- More than the character of Amalek or a single people, this story represents the continued battle of good versus evil. What do we do with the memory of Amalek and understanding that evil is a continued battle in our world? How should we tackle the evils of the past and present with this knowledge?

Concluding Thoughts that I hope the group come to:

- The God of the Torah is deeply invested in an active player in war with the enemies of the Israelites
- Amalek clearly represents more than just one singular people, but the ongoing presence of evil and war in our world today
- While we are told to blot of the memory of Amalek, we record and retell his story, understanding that there is value in remembering evil in the world

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