

BLOT OUT AMALEK—BUT DON'T FORGET

Magidah Khulda bat Sarah & Rabbi Moshe ben Asher, Ph.D.

At the end of *parasha* (weekly Torah reading) Ki Teitzei appear the following verses:

“A perfect and honest weight you shall have, a perfect and honest measure you shall have, that your days may be lengthened on the land which Adonai, your God gives you. For an abomination of Adonai your God are all who do this, all who act corruptly. Remember what Amalek did to you, on the way when you were leaving Egypt; he surprised you on the way and cut down all those who were in the rear, when you were faint and exhausted and he did not fear God. Therefore it shall be, when Adonai, your God gives you rest from all your enemies all around, in the land which Adonai your God is giving you for an inheritance to take possession of it, you will blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under the heaven; you shall not forget!” (Deuteronomy 25:15-19)

So, it says, blot it out, but at the same time, don't forget it!

How does that work? And why would the Torah put these two concepts next to each other? What have weights and measures got to do with Amalek?

We have taken our cues from Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888) in offering answers to these questions.

Let's consider the passage having to do with weights and measures. The injunction to weigh and measure honestly is one of a list of many social laws in this Torah reading for those now about to settle in the Land. And if we keep these laws, the Torah says, then we will prolong our days in the land. And if we don't, it's an abomination. That seems pretty extreme.

But what does it mean?

According to Rabbi Hirsch, the acts of “. . . measuring, weighing, counting, reckoning, etc., are characterized as acts of justice entrusted to every individual person. . . .” (Hirsch on Deuteronomy 25:13-14) That is, the Torah considers anyone who counts, measures, or weighs anything and then declares the amount “. . . to have the responsibility of a שופט [judge]. He is an officer of justice, he pronounces judgment as to what is right and fair; his word is משפט [judgment], a declaration of what is right.” (Hirsch on Leviticus 19:35-36)

“His word is judgment.” What does it mean, that his word is judgment? Who does his word affect?

Suppose that you come to me to buy food for your family. And as I weigh it out, I cheat you in the amount. I tip the scale. Perhaps I say to myself, sure, it's a bad thing—but it's such a small amount,

it doesn't seem like an *abomination*. Why get excited?

Our rabbis have said that it's not about the amount I steal; if we were only talking about stealing, it wouldn't be so bad. But the trouble is, if I'm cheating you, I'm probably swindling a lot of other people too. So the circle of those affected by my cheating may be very wide. And if that's the case, then I probably won't remember everyone I've cheated and those I haven't cheated.

What's the difference, you might say, as long as I'm sorry for what I did?

In the Torah the concept of being sorry includes making things right with the person I've wronged. It isn't enough that I tell you I'm sorry, I need to pay back what I've dishonestly obtained. But now, because I don't know who I've wronged, I can't give back what I've taken from you, and I've effectively prevented myself from being fully able to make *teshuvah*, to make right the wrong. So I've put my own soul at risk.

And what of the soul of the person I cheated? Is that also at risk?

Over a handful of grain, you might say, of course not! But consider the last time that you depended on someone, and they cheated you. Think about exactly what it was that they cheated you of.

The Talmud explains the larger meaning of this verse about weights and measures: “It comes to teach you that your ‘yes’ should be honest, and your ‘no’ should be honest”—as Abaya [278-338 C.E.] said: אבוי שלא ידבר אחד בפה ואחד בלב [with the mouth] and one with the heart, Baba Metzia 49a)—“. . . the word of a Jew must be a holy thing which can be utterly depended on. . . . [and] every measure and everything that is measured is nothing else but the most simple, and therefore the far reaching embodiment of a word. It is on the truthfulness of your word that your pound is actually a pound, for people must be able to take your word for it. It is on the sanctity and reliability of your word that the whole fair and honest social intercourse rests, and the simplest and first representative of your word is a correct weight and a correct measure.” (Hirsch on Leviticus 19:35-36)

If all this seems extreme, consider this story:

One day, many years ago, in the late spring, Rabbi Moshe went to the bank to make a deposit. As he stepped away from the teller, checking his deposit receipt, he realized that there was a large amount of money missing from both our savings and checking accounts. In fact, both accounts showed no other funds present than the amounts he had just deposited.

These two accounts contained all of our worldly wealth, so to speak.

When he asked the teller to explain, she made a phone call and discovered that the IRS had frozen both accounts, but she couldn't tell him anymore than that. He came away from the bank in a state of shock.

Why on earth would the IRS freeze our accounts? We had always paid our taxes, and on time.

Upon arriving home, he called the IRS and discovered that we had been audited many months before. A computer used for business had not been properly depreciated. Perhaps our tax preparer thought that he would tip the scale in our favor, and therefore in his, and who would know about it. We had relied on his word. And since the six IRS letters regarding the audit report went directly to our tax preparer's business address, and he had failed to notify us, we had no knowledge of it.

We called the tax preparer, but for a long time he did not answer his phone. We left urgent messages for over a week, asking him to please send us the audit report. Finally, we called his congregation to ask if something had happened to him. The person we talked to said that no, they had seen him at synagogue. We kept calling, and finally he answered the phone. We asked him why he hadn't sent us the six notices that the IRS had sent him. We told him that our accounts had been frozen and that we had no other monies to live on. We asked him if he had received the letters. He said he didn't know. Maybe he had put them in a file somewhere, he wasn't sure. And that he would get back to us in a half-hour. We're still waiting for that phone call.

It took us over a year and a half and more than 50 hours on the phone with the IRS to straighten it out. Actually, the people from the IRS were very kind and patient with us. But in regard to how we felt about the experience with this Jew. We felt the worst of all was that he did not keep his word. Which is essentially what the judge said when we took him to small claims court and won. Unfortunately, he appealed the case to superior court, and we couldn't afford at that time to pursue the matter.

What was the result? We felt cheated. But not just of money. We felt cheated of the trust that we had extended to him. We felt betrayed. And we felt a loss of confidence.

Rabbi Hirsch describes one who cheats with weights and measures as misusing the confidence that one person must place in the other if it is to be possible for people to live together. He goes on to comment (on Deuteronomy 25:17): "The people in whose national character the traits of sympathy, consideration, kindness and doing good to every living creature are to shine forth . . . the people to whom 'doing harm' should be an impossibility . . . are to show themselves as *ישׂר* [upright] . . . in the words of the Prophet, to be those 'who do no wrong, speak no deceit, and in whose mouths no word of fraud is to be found. . . .'"

And what is the opposite of *yashar* (*ישׂר*)—to be upright? Amalek.

"Amalek, which only finds its strength in the might of its sword and its love of glory in treading down all unprepared weaker ones." Picture a nation on a journey, occupied with other thoughts and worries than those of war. Imagine a wandering, homeless multitude of people with women and children, whose position could be expected to arouse feelings of sympathy and pity and not hostility in every one who has human feelings. Amalek attacked all the *necheshalim* (*נחשלים*—the weaklings) at the rear. The word designates a weak condition, all those who could only weakly trail behind. The whole nation was ". . . faint and worn out. It was, accordingly, the weakest of the weak, who could not keep up even with a slow march, upon whom Amalek pounced." He *karcha* (*קרח*—surprised you), related to the word *mikrah* (*מקרה*), that ". . . which happens to somebody beyond all reckoning or expectation. . . . You were just proceeding on your way and had no cause to have any idea of a sudden assault. His attack was entirely unprovoked and was urged by the pure joy of massacre. . . ." (Hirsch on Deuteronomy 25:17-18)

In the words, "don't forget," Israel is exhorted to consider itself, and to prove itself a co-worker with God against Amalek's leading humankind astray with the blinding glitter of military fame and the glory of physical might.

So we have the explanation.

Forget Amalek! *But* remember not to be like Amalek. Keep upright! Keep your humaneness and respect for that which is right and just.

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