

God's Love is Here to Stay

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I'm going to make a bold conjecture: that Ki Tetzei was the Bar Mitzvah portion of George Gershwin, and that his older brother Ira was inspired by the haftarah that young Yankele chanted. The section was from Isaiah 54 and it constituted the seventh of the Haftarahs of Consolation (Shiva Denehemta) following Tishah Be'av.

As Isaiah would have it, the haftarah ended with the verse:

כִּי הָהָרִים יִמְּשֻׁוּ, וְהַגְּבָעוֹת תִּמְוִשְׁינָה--וְחֶסְדִּי מֵאֲתָדָּ לֹא-יִמּוּשׁ

Translated literally it reads:

The mountains may depart, the hills may be removed, but My loving kindness will not depart from you.

As big brother Ira famously translated it: "In time the Rockies may crumble/ Gibraltar may tumble/ they're only made of clay/ but, our love is here to stay."

This may be the best-known line of a haftarah ever: "God's love is here to stay."

What intrigues me is the exact relationship between the haftarah and the Torah reading, which is all too often an opaque pairing. Famously, Ki Tetzei (Deut. 21:10-25:19) contains more mitzvot than any other Torah portion. Some count as many as 74 commandments (that would be 27 positive and 47 negative). For our Rabbis who chose the haftarah, there could be no greater testament to God's love than the sheer abundance of commandments. For our sages, each commandment that God gave us and each time we obey that commandment, we add another knot that ties us One to another. The commandments and our observance are the stuff of our covenant with our Creator.

The many commandments of Ki Tetzei cover a very wide array of headings. There are interpersonal mitzvot such as returning lost items, paying daily workers in a timely fashion,

guidelines for divorce (yes, in a bad marriage, divorce is a mitzvah!).

There are commandments of compassion such as shooing away a mother bird before taking the chicks or prohibiting muzzling an ox while it treads grain. Also, one cannot yoke incompatible animals together (e.g. an ox and a donkey). We are commanded to assist an overloaded animal that has fallen on the road. This category is called tza'ar ba'alei hayyim – we show compassion for the travail of animals.

There are also commands for honesty in business, such as the prohibition against having false weights and measures. We are required to return lost property.

And then there are the mitzvot that are military regulations. The Torah commands that a military camp be kept clean and orderly. The Torah portion opens with the ethical commandment that if women are taken captive in war, they be treated with dignity and respect. I suspect that this commandment alone set us apart from all other ancient peoples.

The Torah portion ends with an odd commandment. We are exhorted to remember, not to forget what the tribe of Amalek did when they attacked us; cutting down the stragglers of our camp during our Exodus from Egypt. We are told to "blot out the memory of Amalek!" This is, of course, a paradox. We must remember them to blot out any memory of them.

Amalek are the quintessential bad guys of the Torah. To better understand the episode with Amalek, we need to turn back to the Book of Exodus (17:8-16) where we get the initial report of Amalek's attack.

Amalek came and fought with Israel at Rephidim...whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed; but whenever he let down his hand, Amalek prevailed. . . Aaron and Hur, one on each side, supported his hands; thus, his hands remained steady until the sun set. And Joshua overwhelmed Amalek and his people with the sword. Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Inscribe this in a document as a reminder and read it aloud to Joshua: I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven!' . . . The Lord will be at war with Amalek throughout the ages.

When the medieval Bible commentator Rashi notes the paradox in Deuteronomy, that we should remember to forget, he explains that were one to have spoils of war from Amalek, one should not mention that it came from Amalek. Forget to mention them, blot them out.

I recall as a child going to visit a widowed relative and my mother sternly instructing me: Don't forget not to mention your late uncle Irv, it might upset your aunt Rosie. So, too, we are commanded, don't forget not to mention Amalek.

When we go out to war with our enemies (Ki Tetzei), we are girded with mitzvot that keep us safe. God's love and covenant surround us. As it were, we fight under God's aegis. The many, many commandments of this week's Torah reading, in all their varied categories, separate us from our enemies, from Amalek.

I think that now, as we read Ki Tetzei, we must meditate upon what differentiates us from them. When we remember Amalek we must ask ourselves, Who is our Amalek? Just who is it that endangers us? Might, God forbid, we be our own Amalek!? Or is it still some unscrupulous outsider who attacks us when we are at our most vulnerable?

We need to remember who they are, and then, who we are. When we remember that, we also will know the most important lesson of this week's Torah reading: "God's love is here to stay."