

AMALEK

(to the tune of “Mack The Knife”)

Enter Haman ben Hamdasa,
And he’s claimin’, he’s an Agagite.¹
Better look out, oh Hadassah²
For that Haman—he’s an Amalekite.³

And though Haman, he’s in power now,
That old Mordy, will not bow down.
Haman’s ego, it takes a powder now.
And just like that—Amalek’s in town!⁴

Lucky Haman, he cast the *pur*, dontcha know,
In forewarning, it fell on Adar.⁵
Thank God Haman’s an amateur—doesn’t know
Moshe was born under that same star.⁶

Haman’s hand is on the throne, babe,⁷
And the king, he just isn’t awake.⁸
Gives his ring⁹ and the seeds are sown, babe—
And by chance and happenstance there is Amalek.¹⁰

¹ Esther 3:3

² I.e., Esther, also called Hadassah (Esther 2:7).

³ Because I Samuel 15 mentions a King Agag of Amalek, the tradition understood Haman the Agagite to be an Amalekite, a descendant of Amalek, the personification of evil and paradigmatic enemy of God and the Jews. The story of Amalek is told in Exodus 17:8-16, and recounted by Moses in Deuteronomy 25:17-19. The Deuteronomy version is read in the synagogue on the Shabbat before Purim (Shabbat Zakhor). The Exodus account is the Torah reading for Purim morning.

⁴ See Esther 3:1-6.

⁵ Esther 3:7. *Pur* refers to the lottery; Adar is the last month in the Jewish calendar, and the month in which Purim is observed.

⁶ The tradition teaches that Haman rejoiced when the lot fell on the month of Adar, the month in which Moses died, because he assumed it was a month of bad luck for the Jews. He was unaware that Moses was also born in that month, on the 7th of Adar, the same day as his death.

⁷ In the story of Amalek, the Torah states: “For there is a hand on the throne of God: God maintains a war against Amalek, from generation to generation” (Exod. 17:16). In the book of Esther, Haman similarly seeks the throne and power of King Ahashverosh, perhaps symbolic of God.

⁸ Ahashverosh grants Haman’s request without paying attention; later he seems not to remember having signed the edict. Elsewhere, the Megillah makes reference to the king being awakened from sleep (Esther 6:1), interpreted by the midrash to be a veiled reference to God.

⁹ Esther 3:10.

¹⁰ Amalek appears in the Torah and attacks the Israelite people just after they journey out of the enslavement in Egypt. In the Deuteronomic version, the text refers to Amalek “happening upon” the people (Deut. 17:18), suggesting that sometimes evil simply arises randomly, by chance.

But ah that dog bites,¹¹ with his teeth, dear,
When your weak ones, they are in the rear.¹²
Where there's doubt and disbelief, dear,
Then know Amalek will soon be here.¹³

Where there's envy, or egoism,¹⁴
Lack of justice, oh lies¹⁵ and pride,
Lack of vision, cynicism—¹⁶
That's old Amalek, he is there inside.

So remember, don't forget, sir,¹⁷
Blot his name, for when your guard is down—
Out of sight, sir, deep down that *yetzer*¹⁸
Tells you Amalek is back in town!

Look out, Amalek's back!

¹¹ The traditional midrash analogizes Amalek to a dog who came and bit the people Israel (see Tanhuma, Yitro 3; Shemot Rabbah 26:2, and Rashi on Exod. 17:8). In contrast to the suggestion in Deuteronomy 17:18 that Amalek “happened upon” the people just by chance, other verses and midrashim suggest that the people became vulnerable to Amalek attack's because of their own behavior.

¹² The Deuteronomic version of the Amalek story related that Amalek killed “all the weaklings in your rear” (Deut. 25:18); many commentators interpret this to mean that we are vulnerable to evil when we as a community lack social justice and fail to protect and nurture the most vulnerable among us, leaving them to straggle along “in the rear”.

¹³ Very soon after being redeemed from slavery in Egypt through the miraculous display of God's power and commitment to social justice, the people nevertheless ask, “Is God in our midst or not?” (Exod. 17:7). Immediately thereafter, “then came Amalek” (Exod. 17:8), raising the suggestion that Amalek has power when we lack faith.

¹⁴ The Hasidic tradition understands Purim to remind us to wage war against not only the external Amaleks who attack the people Israel, but the internal Amalek, i.e., the *yetzer hara* (the evil impulse) within each of us. Specifically, that evil impulse is associated with the needs of the ego.

¹⁵ In Deuteronomy, Moses reminds the people of the dangers of Amalek immediately after commanding them to maintain honest weights and measures in commercial dealings, prompting commentators to suggest that Amalek comes as a result of failures of business ethics.

¹⁶ A pun on the language *asher kar'kha*, “who happened upon you” (Deut. 17:18) yields instead “who cooled you down.” Playing on this, the midrash teaches that coming out of Egypt, the Israelite people were “hot”—that all the other nations were in awe and fear of them. Along came Amalek and “cooled” them down, i.e., revealed their vulnerability. Nechama Leibowitz very poignantly suggests that there are moments of opportunity, when humankind can take a step forward in acknowledging God and embodying a new vision and way of being; then along comes Amalek with discouragement and cynicism, and the opportunity for transformation is lost.

¹⁷ The Torah enjoins us, “Remember what Amalek did to you . . . you shall wipe out the remembrance of Amalek from under the heaven—do not forget!” (Deut. 25:17, 19). Similarly, “God said to Moses, ‘Write this as a remembrance in the Book and recite it in the ears of Joshua, because I shall surely wipe out the memory of Amalek from under the heavens’” (Exod. 17:14).

¹⁸ *Yetzer*: the *yetzer hara*, the evil impulse within each of us.