

Reconsidering Amalek
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***Shabbat Zachor* — Special Maftir, Deuteronomy 25:17-19**

The Maftir (additional Torah reading) for Shabbat Zachor, the Shabbat immediately before Purim, describes the tribe of Amalek's attack on the Israelites, not long after they left Egypt:

Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey, after you left Egypt — how, undeterred by fear of God, he surprised you on the march when you were famished and weary, and cut down all the stragglers in your rear. Therefore, when Adonai your God grants you safety from all your enemies around you, in the land that Adonai your God is giving you as a hereditary portion, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget!
(Deuteronomy 25:17-19).

The reading of this section on the Shabbat before Purim makes explicit the traditional understanding, based on a textual inference, that Haman is a direct descendent of Amalek. The juxtaposition of the biblical story of Amalek with Megillat Esther leads us to understand the Purim story as a fulfillment of the biblical command to wipe out Amalek.

Divrei Torah about Amalek often remind us of the moral imperative, rooted in the Bible, to fight attacks on "stragglers" — children, the elderly, and others whom society leaves behind. Yet we cannot ignore the extent to which, at various points in Jewish history, the command for perpetual war against Amalek has been taken literally, as a justification for war against a particular people.

In *halakhic* (Jewish legal) sources, the war against Amalek is classified as a *milhemet mitzvah* — a war that we are commanded to fight. The obligation is so important that the Talmud (Sanhedrin 20b) debates which of two obligations — that of destroying Amalek or that of building the Temple — will take priority when Jews eventually reconquer the land of Israel.

Another Talmudic text (Bava Batra 21b), commenting on a story in I Kings 11, explicitly faults Yoav, a servant of King David, for only killing the male members of Edom, the nation from which Amalek is descended according to Genesis. According to this source, Yoav misunderstands the command to wipe out the memory (*zekher*) of Amalek as a command to wipe out the males (*zakhar*) of Amalek. Upon learning of his mistake, Yoav threatens to kill the teacher who failed to ensure that Yoav understood the correct pronunciation of *zekher*.

Discussions about the nature of the command for perpetual war against Amalek are not merely academic. Within the Purim story itself, the Jews appear to understand the divine grace that brings about the fall of Haman as permission for a large-scale

massacre of an entire people, along the lines envisioned in this week's *maftir* from Deuteronomy. Even more disturbingly, in contemporary times, some Jews have characterized the Palestinians as modern-day representations of Amalek. Last year, a prominent lawyer suggested that the biblical imperative to wipe out Amalek allows the execution of families of suicide bombers. It is no accident that Baruch Goldstein chose Purim for his 1994 massacre of Palestinians praying in a mosque. Defining the Palestinians as Amalek has allowed some to justify any attack on this people.

Even as we reject out of hand the equation of Amalek with any contemporary people, we are compelled to reinterpret the troubling commandment for perpetual war against Amalek in such a way as to preclude using the text to incite violence.

We can begin by noticing the dichotomy between the command to attack Amalek and the story of *yetziat mitzrayim* (the exodus from Egypt), the context in which this command first appears (Exodus 17:8-13). The primary lesson of *yetziat mitzrayim* is that human beings have inherent dignity and therefore should not be enslaved. In contrast, the commandment to fight Amalek and his descendants suggests that certain people, by dint of their ancestry, are not even worthy of life.

Perhaps in response to this ideological inconsistency, some Jewish sources, particularly mystical and *chasidic* texts, read the fight against Amalek as a metaphor for a fight against inner evils. One passage in the *Zohar*, the central text of Jewish mysticism, understands Amalek as the "grave evil" that leads to dissatisfaction with one's lot. Similarly, a number of chasidic writers interpret Amalek as the *yetzer hara* — the evil instinct within each of us.

By defining the war against Amalek as an inward struggle, we simultaneously rid ourselves of the dangers associated with identifying particular individuals as Amalek and reconcile the seemingly opposite poles of *yetziat mitzrayim* and *milhemet Amalek*, the obligatory war against Amalek. As long as *milhemet Amalek* remains a war against a specific people, we cannot respond fully to the call for human dignity that is the foundation of the exodus narrative. When we define the fight against Amalek as an inward struggle, we redefine it as part of *yetziat mitzrayim*, and not in opposition to *yetziat mitzrayim*.

In the context of the current conflict, we might define the fight against Amalek as our internal Jewish fight against justifying the oppression of another people, and as our attempt to guarantee that this people may live in dignity.

According to one midrash, God's throne remains incomplete until Amalek is destroyed (P'sikta Rabati 12). In overcoming Amalek and restoring dignity to all people, we can transform Israel — and eventually, the world — into a place in which the divine presence is fully manifest.

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