

There is a little known mitzvah that you can do tomorrow morning, unless going to services once per weekend is the max for you. Traditionally, this Shabbat is the only Shabbat of the year when every Jew, male and female, is commanded to hear the special Torah reading on Shabbat morning.

And I am not talking about the reading of Parashat Tetsaveh, interesting as it is, with all of the detail work of the priestly garments. I am referring to the special maftir, the special additional reading that is always commanded on the Shabbat before Purim, known as Shabbat Zachor, the Shabbat of Remembrance. We are commanded to read from Deuteronomy 25, starting with verse 17. The passage is typically translated something like this:

“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 the LORD your God grants you safety from all your enemies around you, in the land that the LORD your God is giving you as a hereditary portion, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget!”

Why do we read this out of sequence, right before Purim? Well, the first verse of chapter 3 of the Book of Esther tells us that Haman himself is an Agagite. Agag is described in I Samuel as the king of the Amalekites, so Haman is a hereditary enemy of the Jewish people. By reading “zachor” – Remember Amalek, right before Purim, we place the Purim story in a more cosmic context. Haman is not just Haman, but one manifestation in one historical moment of recurring, cyclical

evil – an evil whose very memory we are puzzlingly commanded to remember to blot out.

That is one reason, by the way, that we make noise when we hear Haman's name – it is a blotting out the memory of a descendant of Amalek.

And my mother, who among her many other talents, is a traditional scribe, taught me that the way scribes test their ink and quills before sitting down to write anything is by writing the word "Amalek" and then blotting it out. Cute, isn't it?

Sometimes blotting just means blotting. So for those of you who are troubled by this whole business of blotting out, I want to assure you that as far back as the Mishnah in the 2nd century, it was already considered that since the time of the Assyrian conquest of the Middle East back in the 8th century bce, that the nations had all been mixed up. Therefore, Amalekites were no longer an identifiable people who should actually be sought for extermination.

Even so, in the 12th century Mishnah Torah code of law, Maimonides lists the commandment to destroy Amalek as a positive commandment that is still at least hypothetically binding on all Jewish people.

So even though Torah commands us in other places to welcome Egyptians, Moabites, Amorites and other peoples who persecuted the Israelite people, the absolute blotting of the Amalekites remains in force.

Why is that? Well, Abarbanel, a 15th century commentator looking at the biblical text noted that in the plain narrative, Amalek did things that were completely inhumane, and against the conventions of ancient warfare: he attacked without provocation; that is, the Israelites were not even wandering into his territory. He

attacked from behind, targeting the poor and the weak, and he attacked without warning, without issuing a formal declaration.

But as contemporary Israeli scholar Gili Zivan wrote in a dvar Torah 5 years ago, Amalek does is not just about literal behaviors, but about allegorical evil. She points to a moving and I think prescient passage from Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsh, one of the 19th century founders of modern Orthodoxy, who wrote: Forget not this, should the day come and you will desire to resemble Amalek and like him [...] seek opportunities through means small and great to exploit your superiority in order to hurt people [...] do not forget this thing . . . There will come a day that you - the Jewish nation - will be powerful, and then in particular must be you careful not to be infected by that Amalekite-ism which is expressed through the exploitation of your strength in order to demean and to destroy those weaker than yourself.

In other words, the commandment to destroy Amalek must be turned inward, to destroy the aspects in our own society that would attack the weak, unprovoked.

Lest you think this is all apologetics for a genocidal revenge fantasy, I want to point out that the Torah itself complicates the relationship between Amalek and Israel in ways that make it hard to just write off Amalek as an evil person or nation. I want to explore two points of complication in the Torah's text. First of all, at the beginning of my remarks, I told you the way the passage is typically translated, particularly verse 18: "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."

That's not actually an accurate translation. The more accurate translation is unfortunately ambiguous in an important respect and would be rendered: "How he surprised you on the march and attacked the stragglers in your rear, when you were famished and weary; and did not fear God."

Who then, did not fear God? Amalek, or ourselves? And if it was us, what was the evidence of our lack of humility? Contemporary Rabbi Regina Sandler-Phillips suggested this morning on a rabbinic listserve, that the verse itself provides the answer: "What kind of community rushes ahead and leaves its weakest members vulnerable to attack from behind?"

Perhaps it was our lack of humility, our carelessness in structuring our community, that left us vulnerable to attack in the first place. Perhaps the most effective way to blot out the memory of Amalek is to ensure that we structure our community in ways such that the helpless are not left to fend for themselves.

Or perhaps the best way is to make sure that we do not create Amalek in the first place, which brings me to the second hint I mentioned. Way back in Genesis Chapter 36, in a genealogy of the descendants of Esau, verse 12 says, "Timna was concubine to Eliphaz, Esau's son; and she bore to Eliphaz Amalek. . ." So Amalek is considered a grandson of Esau, a great-grandson of our common ancestor Isaac.

The Babylonian Talmud, Masechet Sanhedrin, imagines how this cousin wound up an enemy, teaching, "Desiring to become a convert [to Judaism], [Timna] went to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but they did not accept her. So she went and became a concubine to Eliphaz the son of Esau, saying, 'I had rather be a servant to the [Jewish] people than the lady of another nation.' From her Amalek was descended who afflicted Israel. Why so? — Because they should not have rejected her."

The Talmud imagines that our own ancestors created the very conditions of enmity with Amalek, by rejecting someone and sending her to the margins.

In light of this context, here's what I think we are supposed to remember a few days before gathering for the collective revenge fantasy that is the holiday of Purim, why we are all commanded to listen to Parashat Zachor, the reading of "remember:"

"Remember that enemies are created when humans are shoved to the margins. Remember that our whole community is weakened when we leave the vulnerable at the margins. Remember that the most evil thing is to exploit this weakness and destroy through division. Do not just forbid this from happening – blot out the very conditions that could allow this to happen."

Shabbat Shalom.