

As I mentioned in my youtube video this week, in addition to being Parashat Tetsaveh, this is also Shabbat Zachor, the Shabbat of “Remember.” That is because, as our final Torah reading, 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 Hashem your God grants you safety from all your enemies around you, in the land that Hashem your God is giving you as a hereditary portion, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget!”

We read this out of sequence, right before Purim, because 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.

Despite the many mitzvot that became inoperative with the various ancient conquests and Jewish exiles, this one remains in effect. In the 12<sup>th</sup> 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.

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.

But the question of how to blot out Amalek has more serious implications than the noise we make on Purim. Because in the contemporary era, there are two very divergent philosophical strands regarding what Amalek is and how we seek and destroy it.

Writing in 1956, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, a great thought leader and intellectual patriarch of Religious Zionism, wrote in his father's name that the commandment to war against Amalek applied not only to his literal descendants but also to "any other nation that stands ready to destroy us," and He specifically named the Nazis, and the Arab nations that were currently inciting against Israel.

Until this year, the most dramatic consequence of Soloveitchik's explicit equation of Amalek with contemporary Arabs occurred 29 years ago, in 1994, when an American-born physician named Baruch Goldstein murdered 29 Palestinians and injured more than others 100 with an assault rifle as they prayed during Ramadan, which overlapped that day with Purim. As Dr. David Slater points out, Goldstein was a follower of Meir Kahane, a Jewish nationalist whose views were so extreme that his political party was outlawed – though his followers are now part of the ruling governmental coalition today. Kahane argued that any nation that is "hostile" to Israel is Amalek and should be blotted out like Amalek. Though Goldstein's massacre was condemned by the Israeli government at the time, the current minister of National Security in the Knesset kept a portrait of Goldstein prominently displayed in his home in 2020.<sup>1</sup>

The philosophical approach of Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch, the 19<sup>th</sup> century German founder of Modern Orthodoxy is in many ways in opposition to the Kahanist approach. Contemporary Israeli scholar Gili Zivan quoted his position in a powerful dvar Torah 10 years ago:

---

<sup>1</sup> [https://evolve.reconstructingjudaism.org/confronting-the-legacy-of-amalek/?\\_gl=1\\*1h82c6q\\*\\_ga\\*MTc3MjlyMTc1MC4xNjc0NTAxMTQ3\\*\\_ga\\_WRW9SLZZ22\\*MTY3NzU5MjA4MS4xLjAuMTY3NzU5MjA4MS4wLjAuMA..](https://evolve.reconstructingjudaism.org/confronting-the-legacy-of-amalek/?_gl=1*1h82c6q*_ga*MTc3MjlyMTc1MC4xNjc0NTAxMTQ3*_ga_WRW9SLZZ22*MTY3NzU5MjA4MS4xLjAuMTY3NzU5MjA4MS4wLjAuMA..)

“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 a similar vein, she points out: “R. Moshe Avigdor Amiel, Rabbi of Tel Aviv who did in 1946, and was a leader of the Mizrachi, saw in the war against Amalek the war of God against militarism:

God, blessed be, does like wars in the world; on the contrary, "Shalom" is the name of the Holy One, blessed be. One obligatory war did [God] decree and that is the war against Amalek, **the war against wars in general. . .**”<sup>2</sup>

While understanding the commandment to blot out Amalek to still be in force, Rav Hirsch and Rav Amiel’s position lead to a completely different orientation. Instead of understanding Amalek as a group of people who need to be physically fought, over and over, they understand Amalek as a tendency that any, even we, can be susceptible to – and that fighting Amalek begins within ourselves – most particularly at the moment when we might have the power to unleash violence against those that we think of as our enemies.

This discussion could not be more timely. This week two Jewish settlers in the West Bank were murdered by terrorists. In response, Jews unleashed what can accurately be described as a pogrom against the Palestinian village of Huwara.

Rabbi Ethan Tucker writes about the tension:

---

<sup>2</sup> [http://ozveshalom.org.il/blog/shabath\\_en/tetzaveh-5773-gilayon-788/](http://ozveshalom.org.il/blog/shabath_en/tetzaveh-5773-gilayon-788/)

This week, we have once again experienced Jews being attacked and murdered with their guard down. It is thus natural to reach for Parashat Zakhor when seeking vengeance for what was taken from us. It can seem like a made-for-the-moment text: a passage in the Torah that calls out those who prey on the weak, and demands that we identify the external enemy who took them down and eradicate them.

But this week, we also saw a great desecration of God's name, as religious Jews torched hundreds of homes in the village whence the attackers came. Pausing to daven Maariv as the flames rose from the village, these young men, wearing their kippot and tzitzit, may have felt they were fulfilling the Biblical command we read about this week: taking revenge on our enemies. They may have felt triumphant echoes of the *megillah*—"בְּשָׂנְאֵיהֶם כָּרְצוּנָם"–the Jews dealing with their enemies as they see fit." (Esther 9:5)

In reality, though, they were reminding us about the real essence of the war against Amalek: how only a hair's breadth separates Israel from its arch enemy. The preying on the weak, the loss of moral compass, the pursuit of power within all of us, especially the people of Israel."

So as we celebrate Purim this year, by all means, let's blot out the name of Haman. But let's also remember that blotting out Amalek is as much internal as external work, and that we are not absolved from either facet of the work.

---