

# Shabbat Zachor: Amalek - Out There, or In Here?

*A text study - prepared by Rabbi Michael Fessler*

## Out There?

### 1. *Rashi on Deuteronomy 25:19*

“*blot out the memory*”: Every man and every woman, every babe and every suckling, every ox and every sheep. The memory of Amalek cannot be said to survive even in an animal, such that someone could say, ‘This animal once belonged to an Amalekite.’

### 2. *Midrash Tanhuma B, Ki Tetzei 18*

R. Levi said in the name of R. Hama bar Hanina: The Name of God will not be complete and the throne of Adonai will not be whole as long as Amalek's seed remains in the world. Only after the seed of Amalek is blotted out from the world will the throne of Adonai be whole and the Name of God complete.

### 3. *Maimonides, Laws of Kings 5:4-5*

“It is a positive commandment to destroy the seven Canaanite nations.” -- *Deut. 20:17*

If one does not kill any of them that falls into one's power, one transgresses a negative commandment. But their *zecher* (memory/identity) has long since perished. [since Sennecherib's conquests intermixed all the nations by 586 BCE - cf. *Tosefta Kiddushin 5:6*. The implication is that this commandment has had no real-world force since that time.]

### 4. *Me'am Loez on Ki Teitzei*

But you should know that in every generation it is Amalek that rises to destroy us, and each time he clothes himself in a different nation.

### 5. *Leon Wieseltier, “Hitler is Dead” (The New Republic, 5/27/02)*

All violence is not like all other violence. Every Jewish death is not like every other Jewish death. To believe otherwise is to revive the old typological thinking about Jewish history, according to which every enemy of the Jews is the same enemy, and there is only one war, and it is a war against extinction, and it is a timeless war... It is ahistorical thinking. It obscures and obliterates all the differences between historical circumstances in favor of a gross, immutable, edifying similarity. It is an insufficiently worldly way to judge the world... A historiosophy is not a strategy. Is Hamas Amalek? I have no idea. Also I do not care. It is bad enough that Hamas is Hamas. (Was Hitler Amalek? No, he was worse.) Anyway, Amalek is not all that justifies the use of force. But the important point is that Amalek justifies nothing but the use of force. There is no other solution to the Amalek problem. It is a view of history that provides no foundation for... restraint, and sometimes restraint is the intelligent policy.

## In Here?

### 5. *Kedushat Levi*, R. Levi Yitzvhak of Berdichev

Not only are Jews commanded to wipe out Amalek, who is the descendant of Esau, but each Jew has to wipe out that negative part that is called Amalek hidden in his or her heart. So long as the descendants of Amalek are in the world – and since each of us is also a small world, when the power of evil in each of us arises [that which leads us to sin], Amalek *is* still in the world – the reminder [to wipe out Amalek] calls out from the Torah.

### 6. R. Samson Raphael Hirsch, Germany, c. 1860

***Do not forget*** - Do not forget this thing, if the day comes and you will want to become like Amalek, and, like Amalek, you fail to recognize your obligation and do not know God -- and rather, you only seek opportunities, in matters small or great, to exploit your advantage in order to harm your fellows. Do not forget this if the day comes and you ask to relieve your heart of its role and its mission as Israel that you have taken upon yourself amongst humanity. Do not envy the laurels which a foolish world throws to those happy with having destroyed the happiness of others. Remember the tear-soaked soil which nurtures the laurels of those wreaths...Keep standing straight! Preserve the humanity and values of justice that you learned from your God. The future belongs to them, and in the end humanity and justice will overcome coarseness and violence. You yourself were sent in order to announce and to bring near – with your very example – that overcoming and that future. *Do not forget* – and in order that you not forget, remember from time to time, renew in your heart the memory of Amalek and what you have been told of its future.

### 7. *Itturei Torah*

Had the children of Israel not forgotten about the slower ones in back but instead, brought them closer under the protecting wings of God's Presence, binding the slower to all of Israel, the Amalekites would not have succeeded in their attack. But because you allowed the slower ones to be *aharekha* (meaning both "behind you" and "other"), because you separated them off from you and made them "other", forgetting [them], Amalek could viciously attack them. Therefore, the Torah tells us to remember Amalek, so that we never forget to bring our brothers and sisters who need special attention into our midst.

### 8. *Darash Moshe* (Rabbi Moshe Feinstein)

In my humble opinion, the point of this mitzvah is to remind us now that it is possible for any creature of flesh and blood to become as wicked as Amalek...that each of us, however great our spiritual accomplishments, must worry that we ourselves might be tricked into committing the most serious sins... even those that everyone considers to be the worst.