

Shabbat Zachor: Remembering Amalek

Rabbinic Midrash

1) 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. (*Tanhuma B, Ki Tetze 18*)

2) *These are the clans of the children of Esau...The sons of Lotan were Hori and Hemam, and Lotan's sister was Timna* (Gen. 36): What is the purpose of writing, “*And Lotan's sister was Timna*”? Timna was a royal princess...Desiring to convert (to Judaism), she 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 this people than a mistress of another nation.” From her Amalek descended, who afflicted Israel. Why so? Because they should not have repulsed her. (Talmud, *Sanhedrin 99b*)

In Jewish Law

3) It is a positive commandment to destroy the memory of Amalek, for it says, *You shall blot out the memory of Amalek* (Deut. 25:19). It is also a positive commandment to always recall its evil deeds and ambush [of Israel] in order to inflame hatred against it, for it is said, *remember what Amalek did to you* (Deut. 25:17). Tradition teaches that *remember* is performed with the mouth, *do not forget* with the heart, for it is forbidden to forget to bear hostility and hatred towards it. (Maimonides, *Hilkhot Melakhim 5:5*)

Hasidic Teachings

4) 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 each of us is also a small world, so 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. (*Kedushat Levi*, R. Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev)

5) Why do we read *parshat Zachor* on the Shabbat before Purim, and not on Purim itself? This is the reason: It is written, *Take some of the blood that is upon the altar and some of the anointing oil and sprinkle [them] upon Aaron* (Ex. 29:21). Here, blood signifies the attribute of justice/strictness, and anointing oil symbolizes the attribute of compassion. And what is the reason that Aaron needed both of them, and the oil alone wasn't sufficient, as with the *mishkan* and its vessels, which didn't have blood sprinkled on them at all? For Aaron and his sons were sanctified for service, and it is written in the holy Zohar that “service” means bringing close the forces of holiness, and making distant the forces of impurity. And precisely because the priest exemplifies *hesed*/compassion, hatred must grow and anger become strengthened against those who disturb [this service], who destroy and slaughter. As love grows—so must hate grow. For “love is as fierce as death” (*Song of Songs*, 8:6). And it is the same with the remembering of Amalek. In order to awaken enmity and hatred in the heart against the Amalekites, we begin the remembering on Shabbat, a day of love and favor among Jews for their God in heaven. And from within this love grows the hate for Amalek. (*Shem Mishmu'el*, Rabbi Shmuel Bornstein, in *Iturei Torah*)

Modern & Contemporary Reflections

6) '*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. 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 wreathes. Do not forget this thing when the day comes and you yourself suffer Amalek's violence and coarseness. 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. (Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, Germany, c. 1860)

7) The Sages of the Midrash see in Amalek the archetype of the enemy who deviates from the accepted rules of warfare behavior, who - without cause - exploits a situation which seems to him to be easy and convenient, starting a war which does not bring glory to its warriors, choosing a tactic of "*attacked the stragglers at the rear*" - particularly those who are feeble, weak, and unprotected...

It should be emphasized that in its broader significance, "the War Against Amalek" is the war against wrong and evil in the world, traits which existed from time immemorial in all human nature without exception, and in this respect Jews are no different from the rest of the peoples of the world and the nations of the lands... from this it follows that this is not a *milhemet mitzvah* - an obligatory war - commanded upon Israel alone, but it is even "*a war of God against Amalek*", and as such in its very essence it is an eternal struggle. (Y. Leibowitz, *Seven Years of Discussions on the Weekly Parasha*, modern Orthodox Israeli commentator)

- **Which, if any, of these treatments of “Amalek” resonate for you?**
- **Does the memory of Jewish persecution play an important role in your own Jewish identity? Is it a healthy role?**
- **Compare text #5—which sees a positive role for hate in combating those forces that seek to destroy Godliness and humanity—and text #6, which emphasizes a different kind of “remembering.” Can hate ever play a positive role in fighting injustice and oppression?**