



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

## DEVARIM > Ki Teitzei

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September 9, 2011

Ki Teitzei

**The First Terrorist**



## Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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### ABSTRACT

Who ranks in history as the first terrorist? Hint: He is uncannily similar to the terrorists of today.

Just like today, the first terrorist was an invisible killer. His goals were invisible as well. He was a person but also an archetype. And he remains formidable. But he can be defeated, if only we are able to demystify his power, and learn what he has to teach us today ... in the post 9/11 age.

As we honor the tenth anniversary of 9/11 (this Sunday) – the date of the worst terrorist attack on American soil, which shook our confidence and ushered in a new era of uncertainty – it seems wise to reflect on the roots of terrorism, in order to better understand the meaning of these attacks, their lasting effects and, above all, to know what we can do about it all.

One of the most mysterious elements of the 9/11 attacks which we have not demystified until this day, 10 years later, is why? Why were we attacked and what do these terrorist want from us? Every war in history, no matter how grotesque, had defined goals: land conquest, taking over natural resources, vengeance. But what were the goals of the 9/11 attacks? We don't really know. And if we don't know the enemy's objective, how can we fight back?

This week we read in the Torah about the first terrorist attack in recorded history and that God decreed the perpetrator be wiped off the face of the earth. This seems like a very harsh command. And when we come to this part in the Torah we inevitably ask why?

As Al Qaeda did on 9/11, as terrorists do today, the terrorists of the past did not issue an open challenge to war, because such a war they knew they could not win. They attacked from behind, taking out the unarmed, the weak, the vulnerable and the defenseless. And as terrorists do today, their intent was to wreak psychological damage – to terrorize rather than to conquer – to paralyze the Israelites emotionally, to undermine their nascent self-confidence and fragile sense of confidence.

And *this* is what we are meant to obliterate from under the heavens.

## THE FIRST TERRORIST AND LESSONS FROM 9/11

### 1. Who Was the First Terrorist?

Who ranks in history as the first terrorist? Hint: He is uncannily similar to the terrorists of today.

Just like today, the first terrorist was an invisible killer. His goals were invisible as well. He was a person but also an archetype. And he remains undefeated. But he can be defeated, if only we are able to demystify his power, and learn what he has to teach us today ... in the post 9/11 age.

As we honor the tenth anniversary of 9/11 (this Sunday) – the date of the worst terrorist attack on American soil, which shook our confidence and ushered in a new era of uncertainty – it seems wise to reflect on the roots of terrorism, in order to better understand the meaning of these attacks, their lasting effects and, above all, to know what we can do about it all.

One of the most mysterious elements of the 9/11 attacks which we have not demystified until this day, 10 years later, is why? Why were we attacked and what do these terrorist want from us? Every war in history, no matter how grotesque, had defined goals: land conquest, taking over natural resources, vengeance. But what were the goals of the 9/11 attacks? We don't really know. And if we don't know the enemy's objective, how can we fight back?

## 2. Never Forget

As we ponder these questions, this week we read in the Torah about the first terrorist attack in recorded history and that God decreed the perpetrator, Amalek, be wiped off the face of the earth. This seems like a very harsh command. But let's take a closer look at what God had in mind:

Remember what [the nation of] Amalek did to you on your way out of Egypt. When it surprised you on the road, when you were tired and exhausted, and struck you from behind, at all the feeble ones in the rear. It had no fear of God. [Therefore,] when the Lord, your God, grants you rest from all your surrounding enemies in the land that the Lord, your God, is giving you as an inheritance, you shall obliterate the memory of Amalek from under the heavens. Do not forget!<sup>1</sup>

Note the dramatic command from God to “remember” to “obliterate the memory” and just to underscore the importance of this, the command ends with: “Do not forget!”

What is it about Amalek that is so important to remember and never forget? Why the adamant insistence on total annihilation of the entire nation? Can this really be a Godly command to commit mass genocide? And since, in our time, there is no nation named Amalek – what could it possibly mean to us?

## 3. Who is Amalek?

Before we consider these questions, let us first remind ourselves of who we are talking about here. Who is Amalek?

The nation of Amalek makes its first nefarious appearance in the Torah<sup>2</sup> right after the Exodus. God has just brought the world's mightiest civilization to its knees. Egypt is reeling after the plagues. Its army has been decimated at the Reed Sea. Its entire slave population has been liberated and is marching forward to the Promised Land.

<sup>1</sup>Deuteronomy 25:17-18.

<sup>2</sup>Exodus 17:8. His birth and lineage is noted in Genesis 36:12-16.

At this point, the freed Israelites are considered invincible by all the nations who have heard of their miraculous escape. All the nations but one. All the nations but Amalek.

Amalek sees its chance to attack when the Israelites voice their first doubts in God. There is no water in the desert, and they momentarily panic. Of course, Moses strikes a rock and water gushes forth. But Amalek sees that these vulnerable people are “tired and exhausted,” and can easily have their confidence shaken.

#### 4. First Terrorist Act in History

So Amalek attacks, perpetrating the first terrorist act in history – a terrorist act that was committed some 3,300 years ago in the Desert of Rephidim.

Is it a coincidence that as we approach the tenth anniversary of 9/11 – the date of the worst terrorist attack on American soil, which shook the world’s confidence to such a point that it has yet to recover – we read in the Torah about the first terrorist attack in recorded history?

Note the parallels:

As Al Qaeda did on 9/11, as terrorists do today, the Amalekites did not issue an open challenge to war, because such a war they knew they could not win. They attacked from behind, taking out the unarmed, the weak, the vulnerable and the defenseless. And as terrorists do today, their intent was to wreak psychological damage – to terrorize rather than to conquer – to paralyze the Israelites emotionally, to undermine their nascent self-confidence and fragile sense of reliance on God.

So that is the background we must keep in mind when pondering the command to “remember” to “obliterate the memory” of Amalek.

## 5. Amalek: Archetype of Doubt

The second thing we must keep in mind is that the Torah is, above all, a blueprint for life. Every character, episode and event related in the Torah is actually another piece of a comprehensive spiritual map – a spiritual map that lays out the inner nature of our lives and all our challenges. So the full implications of the command to obliterate Amalek can only be appreciated by understanding its *spiritual* dimensions. For Amalek is an archetype that lives with – and within – us today.

The pieces finally come together, and the deeper nature of this command becomes clear, when we consider that the very name Amalek conveys “doubt.” In fact, in Hebrew, the word Amalek and the word safek share the same numerical value (240).

Amalek embodies the most potent enemy we face. But that enemy is not an external force. It is not an enemy from without, but an enemy from within. Of all our enemies, of all the forces that impede our ability to grow, to love and to build, one root-cause stands out among them all: Doubt.

Doubt has many names and many faces: Insecurity. Distrust. Uncertainty. Skepticism. Cynicism. Indecisiveness. Avoidance. Ambiguity. Complacency. The list goes on.

Is there anyone among us, even among the most confident of people, who has not at some point been plagued by self-doubt? And then, how many of us are actually self-confident? Insecurity is arguably today’s norm. One can even argue that 9/11 ushered in a new age of uncertainty and unpredictability.

Of course, to have doubt for a short period of time is natural. But when doubt persists, it is something else altogether. Then, we are overwhelmed by a gnawing feeling that we don’t have the tools or the strength to go forward with confidence in our lives. This growing feeling can lead us to hesitate at every step. It can take the form of perpetual indecision which, with time, becomes a deep paralysis. Over an extended period, doubt becomes a debilitating poison that can paralyze us from making commitments. It becomes an all pervasive cancer that affects our every move and choice.

## 6. The Invisible Enemy

Perhaps the most insidious element of doubt is its invisibility. Doubt does not have a shape or form. On the surface, we can often appear completely functional. Lack of commitment to a course of action can be explained away and can even be justified as healthy caution, necessary introspection, sober skepticism. But, in truth, it is really nothing more than a mask for fear and doubt. Our deepest insecurities often hide behind sophisticated justifications and rationalizations, but these are just smokescreens to protect a frightened psyche, which is terrified of making the wrong move, the wrong choice.

Some people replace the need for certainty in their emotional and spiritual lives with an aggressive stance in business and the market place. Others do the same by showing off in scholarship or athletics, or in other forms of conquest, in the mistaken belief that their mind's or body's prowess compensates for the lack of true emotional and spiritual confidence.

If your confidence is built on a false footing, when you stumble, you fall. What if new technology replaces the skill which has made you feel all-powerful and irreplaceable? What if the stock market takes a nose dive and the portfolio that gave you a false sense of security disappears overnight? What if you can't run or dance or play contact sports anymore to make yourself feel that your body is invincible?

## 7. Inspirational Story (Optional)

This is what happened to Jim MacLaren.

Defensive end for the Yale Bull Dogs and aspiring actor, Jim had a rude awakening one day. While riding his motorcycle on a Manhattan street, he was struck by a bus and ended up losing one leg. But Jim put all his faith in the power of his body, and he overcame what appeared to be insurmountable odds. He became a media sensation – a top-rated marathon and triathlon runner, breaking world records for an amputee and routinely beating out 80 percent of his two-legged competitors.

And then tragedy struck again. While bicycling in a triathlon in California, he was struck by a car. This time he was rendered a quadriplegic. And only then did Jim discover that his reliance on his body was misplaced. He was not his body. Only then did he begin to listen to an inner voice which gave him the self-confidence to move beyond his disabilities. To choose life.

At 43, he founded the Choose Living Foundation and, through it, has helped many people banish self-doubt and self-pity and confidently move on with life, no matter what the challenges. [MacLaren died in his sleep one year ago].

## 8. Never-Ending Battle

Facing doubt – a force that is with us at all times – is the never-ending battle with Amalek. It is a battle with all forms of lurking doubts that do not allow us the clarity and confidence to take risks, to make choices, to take on challenges and to forge ahead.

Amalek can attack at any given time. But it particularly likes to prey on us when we are “leaving Egypt.” The Hebrew word for Egypt – *Mitzrayim* – means “constraints.” So, just as we are being freed from our emotional or spiritual constraints – as we are feeling inspired and motivated – that is when Amalek attacks. It attacks as the voice of doubt, throwing cold water on our enthusiasm.

How often do we find that just as we feel inspired to make a move, just as we become upbeat, doubt creeps in telling us how it can’t be done, how we don’t have the strength or the will, how we are bound to fail in our attempts to excel. Doubt fuels all our insecurities and weakens our resolve.

This is Amalek attacking us just as we have found freedom and begin to feel confident. And it attacks our point of weakness – the part of us that is most vulnerable and defenseless.

## 9. How Do We Protect Ourselves?

How do we protect against and fend off this enemy? How do we build self-confidence in a world plagued with profound insecurity – especially in our vacillating post 9/11 world? How do we learn to trust in a life that can so often disappoint?

The answer lies in the Torah as well.

Just before the Amalekite attack, the Israelites had expressed doubt in God, asking “Is God with us or not?”<sup>3</sup> Because they allowed doubt to seep into their psyches, Amalek saw that their confidence was waning and that they were losing their trust in God. So then it was empowered to launch a full-fledged assault.

All doubts begin with the first cosmic doubt – “Is God with us or not?” This is the source of all maladies – the doubt that God is always with us. And therein also lies the solution.

## 10. Kabbalistic Insight (Optional)

According to Kabbalah, this doubt originates from the primordial *tzimtzum*, when God contracted His light, concealing His presence in this world. While this was necessary so that we human beings could have a free will, it also set the stage for all forms of uncertainty. Prior to that time, the Divine Presence was the all pervasive, all-consuming reality. In such a state of seamlessness – “above the heavens” – there were no doubts; all was crystal clear. But “under the heavens,” everything was wrapped in fog. Once the unifying presence of God was concealed, humanity felt alone, and doubt was the inevitable by-product: “Is God with us or not?”

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<sup>3</sup>Exodus 17:7.

Doubt is driven by this existential insecurity. We feel insecure because we live in a universe whose independent existence is possible only by virtue of the concealed light of God. But how can we change this state of things? Certainty is the converse of doubt, but how is it possible to find certainty in an uncertain world? Everything in this universe – its very nature – is forever changing in unpredictable ways. We can make the greatest plans, everything can seem right, but then things happen and all our plans are upset. We all age, everything erodes, everyone dies – how can we ever expect to find certainty in such an unstable environment?

The one and only answer is that we have within us an inherent connection to the Eternal, to the Absolute – and that gives us a sense of utter certainty. Some call this faith. This is not the blind faith of the fool, but the sophisticated belief in something greater than arbitrary logic or randomly-changing circumstances.

This connection to the Eternal, to the Absolute, is the power of the soul. The body and everything material, by its very nature, is in a state of flux, and thus always shrouded in doubt. What will come next? But the soul is a burning flame that cannot be extinguished – it is consistent, always sure of itself, always connected to its source. It is the sense within that we are not alone. And when we really feel that we are not alone because God is with us, all doubt melts away.

If we are surrounded by loving families and friends, if we have strong support systems that nurture us, we are able to cultivate our soul's natural connection to its source. We have a sense of belonging. We have a sense of certainty. Our self-confidence is high. But when our nurturing network is compromised, doubts begin to fill up our psyches.

And doubt breeds doubt.

Thus we are commanded to not just fight against Amalek but to “obliterate the memory of Amalek from under the heavens.” Note the emphasis on the words “under the heavens.” Because “under the heavens” doubt is our greatest enemy. When we doubt ourselves, every difficulty becomes a monster. When doubt is vanquished, we can take on any challenge. So we are commanded to “obliterate Amalek” – to obliterate every doubt, even the memory of doubt – from under the heavens. Because above the heavens there is no such thing as doubt.

We can achieve this victory only by connecting to God.

## 11. Connecting to God

It is no accident that six of the Twelve Steps to Recovery as listed by Alcoholics Anonymous – that’s half of the Twelve Steps – refer to a connection with God. Connection to God is considered the essential life-line out of the pit of self-doubt and insecurity that underlies all addictions.

Some might argue that there are many confident and secure people who don’t have any connection to God, but consider that if they are, indeed, that secure, they are connected to the Divine, even if they may be called it by another name.

Connection to God – to that which is “above the heavens” – is the surest way to reach clarity and certainty. Just as all doubt stems from the cosmic concealment, all certainty originates from the discovery that “God is with us” and the concealment is just that – concealment of Divine Presence, which really never leaves us. Though it is not obvious, the Divine Presence is there. Of this we can be certain.

And just as doubt breeds doubt, certainty breeds certainty. Once we open the doors of certainty in our life – once we see that God is always with us – a new confidence begins to spill over into other areas of our life.

The battle against Amalek – the battle against doubt – goes on in every generation and in every situation. Perhaps it is the single most important battle of our lives. When we overcome our doubts and conquer our fears, then everything – and I mean everything – becomes possible. [Amen.]

## 12. Conclusion (Optional)

You may remember the 1972 tongue-in-cheek ad for the observation deck of the newly-built World Trade Center – an ad which now has a macabre ring to it – “the closest some of us will ever get to heaven.”

Tragically, on 9/11 ten years ago this came all too true for close to 3000 innocent people, leaving their families shattered. As we remember them all and include them in our prayers, we must also honor them by transforming the destruction of the WTC into even greater rebuilding and growth.

The man-made World Trade Centers and Pentagon attacked on 9/11 were only an assault on that which is “beneath the heavens” – perpetrated by terrorists that dwell and thrive on the weaknesses and fears of a mortal world that rests below. But through connecting to our faith and confidence in that which is “above the heavens,” we can access and channel into our lives unwavering strength, and in the process obliterate the memory of Amalek – and every terrorist, every doubt, every form of Amalek in every one of his manifestations – from under the heavens.

Man-made structures and institutions “under the heavens” can be destroyed by other men. But faith – that eternal reservoir of energy in every soul which originates from “above the heavens” – is indestructible.

Ironically then, the 9/11 attacks ought to wake us up to the realities that are “above the heavens,” and empower us with the courage, fortitude and drive to forge ahead and build a better world.

The carnage of 9/11 will ultimately give way to new and better structures. But what will last forever – and this is our calling today – is to ensure that something far greater endures: Our absolute certainty in the power of good. Our total and complete commitment in bringing light into this dark and doubt-ridden world. And our unwavering confidence that good will prevail over all other forces.

Amen.