



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

VAYIKRA > Vayikra

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March 19, 2016

Vayikra/Zachor

Obliterating Amalek



Meaningful Sermons

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ABSTRACT

Torah is the quintessential benevolent book – “Its ways are ways of pleasantness, and all its paths are peace.” How then can a benevolent Torah advocate the total obliteration of a nation: *You shall obliterate the remembrance of Amalek from beneath the heavens.*

Is this not something ISIS would do?

How can this be righteous? How can this be a mitzvah? How can this be the Torah way?

Indeed, how can slaughtering men, women and children be commanded by God just because of they have the wrong kind of DNA – the Amalekite DNA?

And how is this relevant today when this eradication is not applicable?

Perhaps the answer lies in Holocaust survivors’ concentration camp memory, which was retold in the post 9/11 episode of the hit TV show, *The West Wing*.

Vayikra

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Obliterating Amalek

IS OBLITERATING AMALEK DEMOCRATIC?

1. Opening Anecdote

Three weeks after September 11, on October 3, 2001, the hit television show, *The West Wing*, aired a special episode, titled, “Isaac and Ishmael,” that focused on the theme of terrorism, evil, where it comes from, why it festers, how it thrives, what inspires it, and where to recognize it.

Toward the middle of the episode, the White House Communications Director, Toby Ziegler (played by Jewish actor, Howard Schiff¹) shared the following anecdote with a group of high school students that were stuck in the White House under security lockdown:

When you think of Afghanistan, think of Poland. When you think of the Taliban, think of the Nazis. When you think of the citizens of Afghanistan, think of the Jews in concentration camps.

A friend of my dad’s was at one of the camps. He used to come over to the house, and he and my dad used to shoot some pinochle. He said he once saw a guy at the camp kneeling and praying.

He said, “What are you doing?” The guy said he was thanking God. And my dad’s friend said, “What could you possibly be thanking God for?” He said, “I’m thanking God for not making me like them.”

Bad people can’t be recognized on sight. There’s no point in trying.²

If this is true, we face a striking dilemma:

If we cannot recognize evil people on sight, how do we know to thank God for not creating us like them?

If we cannot recognize evil on sight, how can we obliterate it?

These questions are addressed by this week’s special Torah reading, *Parshat Zachor*.

¹ http://www.jewishtelegraph.com/artinf_6.html

² <http://communicationsoffice.tripod.com/3-00.txt>.

2. Parshat Zachor

This week we begin reading the third book of the Torah – known in Hebrew as *Vayikra* and in English as Leviticus. In addition to reading the first portion of this book, we also read a special portion (the *Maftir*) from the fifth book, *Devarim* or Deuteronomy, which relates the mitzvah of remembering. This is why this Shabbat is called the Shabbat of Remembrance, *Shabbat Zachor*.

What do we remember? One would think that, like Yizkor, today we remember our loved ones who have passed away. But interestingly, and begging deeper explanation, Shabbat Zachor spells out the mitzvah to remember the Nation of Amalek, Israel's archenemy, and to obliterate it. This is what the Torah says:

*You shall remember what Amalek did to you on the way, when you went out of Egypt, how he happened upon you on the way and cut off all the stragglers at your rear, when you were faint and weary, and he did not fear God. It will be, when the Lord your God grants you respite from all your enemies around in the land which the Lord, your God, gives to you as an inheritance to possess, that you shall obliterate the remembrance of Amalek from beneath the heavens. You shall not forget!*³

There are two Mitzvoth here – remembering Amalek and obliterating Amalek. And they lead to two immediate questions:

First: Why remember the bad? Would it not be healthier for our psyches to remember only the good times and forget the negative stuff? Would it not seem more beneficial to remember our loved ones and erase from our minds anyone who isn't?

Second: Doesn't obliterating an entire nation of people smack of ISIS? Without sounding flippant and disrespectful, doesn't this commandment to obliterate an entire nation warrant some further explanation? How does this make us different than all of Israel's enemies – now and throughout history – who desired (and still desire) to obliterate us from beneath the heavens?

³ Deuteronomy 25:17-19

It gets worse.

If the simple reading of the Torah verses seem not bad enough, the great 11th century Torah commentator, Rashi, makes it sound even harsher by quoting from the Book of Samuel:

*Now, go, and you shall smite Amalek, and you shall utterly destroy all that is his, and you shall not have pity on him: and you shall slay man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.*⁴

Is this what it means to be a Jew? To slaughter a baby because a parent is bad? To slay animals because their owner is part of a specific DNA group? What can this mean?

Torah is the quintessential benevolent book – “Its ways are ways of pleasantness, and all its paths are peace.”⁵ How then can a benevolent Torah advocate the total obliteration of a nation?

3. Who is Amalek?

To understand who exactly Amalek is and what Amalek represents allow me to speak frankly. This is not for dramatic effect but rather to put things into context.

The Midrash⁶ adds horrifying details in explaining what Amalek had done to deserve this death sentence:

The newly freed Jewish nation was traveling to the Promised Land. Amalek approached the Jews *and cut off all the stragglers at the rear...* This means, says the Midrash, that Amalek castrated all the Jewish males, tossing heavenward the dismembered flesh while exclaiming to God: “You see! What good has Your commandment of circumcision done for them?”

⁴ I Samuel 15:3.

⁵ Proverbs 3:17.

⁶ Tanchuma 9, cited by Rashi on Deuteronomy 25:18.

This, my holy brothers and sisters, is the reality of Amalek, a nation which doesn't only desire to slaughter Jews but which takes the very connection a Jew has to God and uses it in jest. Exactly as the Nazis did (have you ever seen the photos of them laughing and mocking as they forced Jews to don Tefillin or forcefully shaved their beards and made them get on their hands and knees to wash the streets?!...

The question then is not, "How can you obliterate Amalek?" The question is, "How can you not obliterate Amalek?"

What does this practically mean today?

Should we take sword in hand, go searching for such evil, and slaughter men, women and children?

If so, then this would pose many difficulties:

- There is something called law and order. The Torah is the epitome of justice and righteousness; the Torah cannot be commanding us to take justice into our own hands.
- We'd have to be able to identify Amalek without a shred of doubt. Someone may be an anti-Semite, even evil, and not be a descendant of the Nation of Amalek.
- Even if we identify the right people, how can we obliterate entire families because of something their ancestors did?

4. The Two Factors

It turns out that the mitzvah of obliterating Amalak is contingent upon two conditions:⁷

- 1) The Jewish people must be settled peacefully in their homeland, the Holy Land of Israel.⁸

⁷ See Derech Mitzvotcha, *Mitzvat Zechirat Amalek* (p. 94a); *Likkutei Sichot* XXI, p. 190ff.

⁸ See Sanhedrin 20b. Rambam Laws of Kings 1:1.

2) We must know exactly and with certainty who Amalek is. (But due to the intermingling of nations, this has become an impossibility.)⁹

The Torah states this unequivocally:

It will be, when the Lord your God grants you respite from all your enemies in the land which the Lord, your God, gives to you as an inheritance, that you shall obliterate the remembrance of Amalek from beneath the heavens. You shall not forget!

We must have respite from our enemies and be in our ancestral homeland in order to obliterate the memory of Amalek. But if we are at peace in our homeland, why go after Amalek? And how to achieve peace without first destroying the obstacle in our path?

What does this teach us?

5. Two Types of Evil

As with all things, when we wish to understand them well, it is always best to explore their nucleus, their essence, their core. So, too, here.

Thus, we need to understand that there are two types of evil in this world:

- 1) Evil that thrives on ignorance and insecurity. For example, darkness can fester simply because there isn't enough light. This is relatively easily dispelled – bring in light and the darkness is gone.
- 2) But then there is the second type: Evil that thrives on power and strength, and even on light and holiness. A darkness that is not due to the absence of light, but one that is very deliberate in its choice of selfishness and destroying anything in its way. The more light, the more this type of evil thrives. It knows God and truth and deliberately defiles and rebels against it.

⁹ See Minchas Chinuch Mitzvah 604.

A psychological application of these two forms using an example from marital conflict:

- 1) Due to simple immaturity and insecurity a spouse is unable to acknowledge mistakes, and is in the habit of criticizing his/her mate. He or she is not malicious, simply clueless.

In this case the therapeutic process would entail guiding, educating and making the spouse aware of the ingredients of a healthy relationship and appropriate communication, and how to mature and grow in this direction.

- 2) A selfish, narcissistic spouse who is intelligent and very aware of his or her own strengths as well as of their partner's needs and vulnerabilities, yet is utterly self-absorbed and chooses to deliberately take advantage and exploit the other's weaknesses. This person has seen light and love, and knows its power, and yet defiles it. This person thrives on the love of their spouse, and abuses it.

In this instance simple therapy will not help. Trying to clarify and educate this person will not work. He or she has become too toxic. Compromise and negotiation will usually also not be beneficial. Often the only way to deal with this type of person is with absolute authority, with an ultimatum: either shape up or you will destroy your marriage.

Obviously, this is only an example, and cannot be in any way compared to the evil of Amalek, which requires total obliteration. But it gives a sense of the two types of evil.

Amalek's evil was utter and deliberate.

The act of taking a Jew's innate connection – circumcision, an eternal bond – and exclaiming heavenward that this bond, this mitzvah is meaningless, demonstrates exactly what Amalek is all about: evil at the core.

Amalek is defined by this modus operandi: “knowing God and deliberately defying Him.”¹⁰

¹⁰ Literally: “Knowing his Master and intending to defy him.” See sources cited in Likkutei Sichot fn. #38.

There is evil that is darkness, it does not know light, it does not know God, and therefore it is evil by default. And then there is evil that knows God, but nevertheless intentionally defies Him. This evil that knows exactly what circumcision (or any mitzvah) is and defiantly and audaciously still “dismembers” that holiness, shaking it at heaven in an act of blatant chutzpah.

This is Amalek.

In our day this was the Nazi.

If you were to know for certain that a nation would arise whose men, women and children would be Nazis ready to hunt down and massacre every Jew like an animal, and do so with utter contempt and mockery of everything divine –what would you do?

Amalek was exactly that: a nation that demonstrated their utter evil and hatred in their actions of attacking the Jewish nation, just as they were coming out of Egypt, after 210 years of torturous labor and genocide.

Who would attack a people under such conditions?! Only Nazis. With His commandment to *smite Amalek, and you shall utterly destroy all that is his, and you shall not have pity on him, including man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and donkey* – God (Who knew for certain the nature of this nation and what they would do left to their own accord) was preempting the possibility of this Nazi Amalek from destroying the Jewish people and the world.

Benevolence is when you destroy an evil that will destroy you and all that stand in its way.

6. Amalek Today

The above explains the need to obliterate Amalek, eliminating such toxic evil from our midst.

But this was only then and only under the conditions the Torah proscribes. Today, however, we are not in the position to do so,

because we are not living peacefully in the Holy Land and we cannot identify Amalek. Today the only way we fulfill this is through Zachor – remembering Amalek and what they did, and obliterating that memory. Remembering and thanking God for not making us like them.

What this means for us today is that in order to obliterate this evil, a Jew must first obliterate from within himself the part that “knows God and intends to defy Him.”

If a Jew does not know God and defies Him – most any sinner today, really – then that Jew is in no place to erase Amalek and should best spend his time getting to know God first.

But if a Jew does know God and chooses to defy Him, then how could such a Jew ever stand up to Amalek?

This explains why a Jew who is not at peace in the Jewish homeland, the Holy Land of Israel (which signifies divine awareness), and who cannot clearly define Amalek, cannot erase this evil.

This is also why the only part of this commandment that applies today is *Zachor*, remembrance. We must remember that we need purity in order to remove impurity.

In other words: we need to put less emphasis on finding Amalek outside of ourselves, and more emphasis on the Amalek within ourselves, the parts that know God and wish to defy Him, or the parts that don't know God at all.

And then we need to educate the ignorant parts and obliterate the defiance.

7. The Divine Image (Joke)

One day, during her art class, the kindergarten teacher was walking around the room observing the children while they were drawing. She stopped at the desk of little Leah, who was working very diligently.

“What are you drawing, Leah?” the teacher asked.

Leah replied, "I'm drawing God."

The teacher paused and then said, "But, Leah, no one knows what God looks like."

Without looking up from her work, Leah replied, "They will in a minute."

Our calling is to study and discover what "God looks like," so that we can embrace Him, and eliminate the cynicism within that is tempted to defy Him.

8. Answers to Opening Questions

We can now answer two of our opening questions: If we cannot recognize evil on sight, how can we obliterate it? If we cannot recognize evil people on sight, how do we know to thank God for not creating us like them?

The quest and goal is not to recognize evil on sight; the quest and goal is to recognize the good in ourselves on sight. This will automatically also allow us to see everything that is not good or holy. By remembering who we are, by remembering God, by seeking out what is divine and sacred in our lives, we see and remember everything that is not.

And this is also how we obliterate it. When all of Israel is at peace in our homeland, aware of their divine in their lives, then Amalek is obliterated as a direct result. For if every Jew is connected to his or her purpose Amalek automatically self-destructs.

You disagree?

Why don't you try it?

I propose an experiment: Let's inspire every Jew to remember who he or she is, to remember our eternal heritage and moral mandate, and see what happens. Once Jews embrace the spiritual light and do everything in their power to spread it, the dark and negative forces will dissipate. If Amalek still exists after that, then we can recalibrate our mission.

The logical conclusion of all this is that we have one goal – to purify ourselves to such a point that Amalek (the nucleus of evil) is obliterated. If every single Jew knows God and follows His ways, then peace will reign in the Holy Land and the result will be that evil ceases to exist.

Meanwhile, remembering Amalek is ensuring we have do not harbor a shred of Amalek within ourselves, not even an ounce of defying the God we know.

9. Practical Lessons

Don't ask: What does evil look like? Ask: What do I look like?

Remembering what you look like automatically opens your eyes to what is evil and wrong.

First thank God for creating you unlike them.

This is why the mitzvah of remembering Amalek is essential: it is remembering to recognize ourselves for what we truly are.

How do we practically do this?

Let us use an example of something quite simple:

You are reading a book. The book is engrossing. Life calls, your daily chores beckon, and you have to put down the book for a while to deal with life. How to remember your place? A bookmark, a placeholder, that marks your spot so that when you return to your book you can immediately find where you were and continue reading.

Life is the same way. To remember who you are, you need bookmarks and placeholders. These are called mitzvot. When as Jews we perform a mitzvah, it reminds us of who we are. When you know and connect to who you truly are, consequentially you disconnect from things that you are not. And anything that “knows God and defies Him” is obliterated.

Imagine driving to a destination. How do you remember the way? By putting place marks on the map. By initiating your GPS. This reminds you to make the right turns at the different streets in your journey, and arrive intact at your destination.

Placeholders, place them at the places you value.

10. Purim (Conclusion)

Every single Jewish experience, every single mitzvah is a reminder of who we are. This upcoming Wednesday night begins the joyous festival of Purim, celebrating the Jewish victory over the descendent of Amalek, Haman. And it is for this reason that we read *Parshat Zachor* just prior to Purim – to remind us of the needs to obliterate Haman and Amalek (this is why we stamp our feet when Haman's name is read in the Megillah).

Perhaps more than any other holiday, Purim reminds us of our Jewish identity – the *Yehudi* each of us is. *Yehudi* (the word used for Jew through Megillas Esther) means to acknowledge (from the word *hoda'ah, modeh*) – to accept God and deny anything antithetical to God. As Mordechai HaYehudi demonstrated for all of us in his refusing to bow to Haman as everyone else did.

Purim reminds us that when we remember who we are, evil forgets what and who it is and becomes obliterated and nullified.

On Purim there are four special mitzvot – let's call them bookmarks and placeholders – to remind us of who we are. These are:

1. Reading the *Megillah* (the Book of Esther)
2. Giving charity (*matanot l'evyonim*)
3. Sending gift baskets to friends (*meshalach manot*)
4. Eating a festive meal (*seudat Purim*)

By reading and listening and *internalizing* the story told in the *Megillah*, we ensure that there is no way we can forget who we are or our purpose.

Ditto when we give charity to the poor.

If you ever face an identity crises, there is no better remedy than simply taking a dollar (or a million) and giving it to an individual or institution in need. You will remember your identity immediately.

Another way to remember who you are is to look at your family, your community, your nation, your tribe, your people. Handing out gift baskets builds communal and interpersonal connections, and reminds us all that we are one nation unified under one banner of Torah and under one Creator, God.

While feasting and celebrating, we do not question who we are, nor wonder why we are here. This is perhaps Judaism's best-kept secret is eating together – when we eat some food, share some drink, and make a *l'chaim*, every identity crises fades. This is why every Shabbat and every holiday is anchored by festive feasts and marvelous meals – and this is especially true for Purim, when it is a unique and special mitzvah to have a feast, invite guests and be merry.

These four ingredients guarantee that we never forget who we are and always remember why we've come into this world.

Shabbat Shalom and a Frelichen (Happy) Purim!