



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

VAYIKRA > Vayikra

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March 19, 2016

Vayikra

**Is Obliterating Amalek
Democratic? ?**



Meaningful Sermons

*"Words from the Heart
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ABSTRACT

Is the Torah benevolent? Read the following verse from the Torah before you answer: *You shall obliterate the remembrance of Amalek from beneath the heavens.*

Is this democratic? Is this righteous? Is this the Torah way?

What makes this better than ISIS? How is slaughtering men, women, and children simple because of their Amalekite DNA kosher?

How about we pose this question from the opposite direction: Is there anything in existence that is meant to be obliterated? What?

And how are we meant to obliterate it?

Perhaps the answer lies in that most enlightening of places, television.

Perhaps the answer lies in a Jew's memory from one of the concentration camps, retold in the post 9/11 episode of the TV show, *The West Wing*.

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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

This poses a striking dilemma: If we cannot recognize evil on sight, how then to obliterate it?

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

These questions are addressed by this special week, *Parshat Zachor*.

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

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

2. Our Portion: Parshat Zachor

This week we begin reading the third book of the Torah, Vayikra/Leviticus. But this week we also read a very special portion, the portion that relates the Mitzvah of remembering and obliterating.

The Shabbat before the joyous festival of Purim is called Shabbat Zachor, the Shabbat of Remembrance. What do we remember? One would think that, like Yizkor, today we would remember our loved ones who have passed away, days of remembrance, memorial days. But interestingly, and begging deeper explanation, Shabbat Zachor is not a mitzvah to remember loved ones, but rather to remember Amalek, Israel's archenemy, the opposite of loved ones if there ever was one.

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.

First off: Should we not remember only the good times and forget the bad; would it not seem more beneficial to remember our loved ones and erase from our minds anyone who isn't? This leads us to our second (and more perplexing) question:

You shall obliterate the remembrance of Amalek from beneath the heavens. Without sounding flippant and disrespectful, this commandment warrants some further explanation. Does this, to be blunt, not sound like ISIS? Obliterating a people from the face of the earth? How is this different than all of Israel's enemies – now and throughout history –

³ Deuteronomy 25:17-19

⁴ I Samuel 15:3.

who do desire and who have desired to obliterate Israel – the people and the land – from beneath the heavens? What is this mitzvah, divine act, of remembering and obliterating Amalek?

The Mitzvah is even harsher than it would first seem. Rashi on the verse quotes 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 a suckling simply because he or she is part of a specific group of DNA? What does it mean?

3. Amalek: The Epitome of Evil

To understand what 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.

Rashi⁵ quotes Tanchuma⁶ with something horrifying: the newly freed Jewish nation was traveling to their destiny in the Promised Land. Amalek approached the Jews from the rear *and cut off all the stragglers at your rear, when you were faint and weary, and he did not fear God.*

What does it mean *he... cut off all the stragglers at your rear*? Cites Rashi: it means that Amalek dismembered all the Jewish males where they had been circumcised, tossing heavenward the dismembered flesh of the Jewish men while exclaiming to God: “You see! What good has Your commandment of circumcision done for them?”

⁵ To Deuteronomy 25:18.

⁶ See Deuteronomy 25:9.

This, my holy brothers and sisters, is the reality of Amalek, a nation who doesn't only desire to slaughter Jews but which takes the very connection a Jew has to God, a Mitzvah, and uses it in jest. The question then is not, How can you obliterate Amalek? The question is, How can you not obliterate Amalek?

And yet, the Torah continues with the Mitzvah.

What does this practically mean? Should we take sword in hand, go searching for such evil, and obliterate its men, women and children? This would pose many difficulties: 1) There is something called law and order; is the Torah commanding us to bypass the laws of the world and take justice into our own hands? 2) How to know who is and who isn't Amalek? Someone may be an anti-Semite and not be part of Amalek? 3) Even say we do know who is and isn't Amalek, should we obliterate a man's entire family because of something he did?

4. Redefining Our Relationship With Evil

There is a fabulously lucid explanation of amalek, so refined and subtle in its definition as to be utterly breathtaking⁷

The Mitzvah of obliterating Amalek is contingent upon two factors: 1) The Jewish People must be settled peacefully in their homeland, the Holy Land of Israel;⁸ 2) we must know exactly and with certainty who Amalek is. After Sancheirev intermingled all nations, discerning without any shred of doubt who is and isn't Amalek has become an impossibility.⁹

To note from the verse we just read in Maftir: *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.*

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

⁸ See *Likkutei Sichot* ibid fn. #24.

⁹ Ibid fn # 25.

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. This seems a little counterproductive: 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. Redefining Our Relationship With Evil

As with all things, when we wish to understand them, it is always best to understand their nucleus, the essence of an entity to understand what and why it does what it does.

There are two types of negative in this world: 1) Negative that thrives on ignorance and insecurity; darkness can entrench and fester simply because there isn't enough light. This is negativity, but one that is easily dispelled – simply add light and that darkness is gone. But then there is a second type of negativity: 2) Negative that thrives on light and holiness; the more light the more this negativity shows up. Negative that knows God, takes something holy (like circumcision) and mocks it, rebels against it even as it knows that it is true.

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

Amalek is defined by this *modus operandi*: “Knowing his Master and intending to defy Him.”¹⁰

There is what type of negativity, of evil, of darkness that does not know light, that does not know God, and therefore is negative. Then there is an evil that “knows his Master and intends to defy Him,”

¹⁰ See sources cited in Likkutei Sichot fn. #38.

an evil that knows exactly what circumcision (or any mitzvah is) and defiantly and audaciously still “dismembers” that holiness, shaking it at heaven in blatant chutzpah.

This is Amalek.

In order to obliterate this Amalek, however, a Jew must first obliterate from within himself that part that “knows his Master and intends to defy Him,” making sure that s/he “knows his Master and does not intend to defy Him.”

If a Jew does not know His Master and intends to defy Him – most any sin today, really – then a Jew is in no place to erase Amalek, and should probably spend the time getting to “know his Master.” And if a Jew does know his Master and chooses to defy Him, then how could such a Jew ever address Aamalek?

This is why a Jew who is not at peace in the Jewish homeland, the Holy Land of Israel, and who cannot clearly define amalek, cannot erase it.

This is why half of the Mitzvah, the half that applies today, is zachor, to remember: to remember the purity you need in order to remove the impurity. In other words: less emphasis on finding amalek outside of you, those who “know the Master and intentionally defy Him,” and more emphasis on the amalek within us all, the parts that “know the Master and wish to defy Him,” or the parts that don’t know the Master at all.

Remember to remove the defiance and remember to educate the parts that don’t know the Master.

6. Do You Know You (Joke)

Rebecca was a kindergarten teacher. One day, during her art lesson, as she was walking around the class observing the children while they were drawing, she stopped at little Leah’s desk. Leah was working very diligently at her work.

Rebecca said, “What are you drawing, Leah?”

Leah replied, “I’m drawing God, teacher.”

Rebecca paused and then said, “But, little Leah, no one knows what God looks like.”

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

Not knowing what God looks like is normal; knowing what God “looks” like, what the Divine is and what it represents, and nevertheless defying God anyway, now that is Amalek.

7. Personal Lesson: Placeholders & Bookmarks

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

The quest and goal is not to recognize evil and see it on sight; the quest and goal is to recognize the good in ourselves and see it on sight. This will automatically allow us to see everything that is not good or holy. By remembering who we are, by remembering God, 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, then is Amalek addressed as a direct result: If every Jew connected with his/her purpose Amalek would self-destruct, it will be obliterated automatically.

You disagree? Why don’t we try it? Let’s experiment; let us inspire every Jew to remember who he or she is and see what happens. If Amalek still exists after, 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 is obliterated. If every single Jew knows God and follows His ways, achieving peace in the Holy Land, the result will be the obliteration of Amalek. Remembering Amalek is ensuring we have not a shred of Amalek within, not even an ounce of defying the God we know.

The question is: How to remember? So let's get practical:

If every Jew knew God and followed his ways, the result would be the obliteration of any one or any thing that tries to question it.

The question is not, What does evil look like? The question is: 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 not like He created 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 mobilize an example from something quite simple.

You are reading a book. The book is engrossing. Life calls 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 a Jewish soul performs a Mitzvah it is reminded of who it is. Then in consequence anything that "knows its Master and defies it" will be obliterated.

Imagine driving to a destination. How do you remember the way? By placing street signs and place marks. You remember to turn right on a certain street, or light, when you come to that street or light.

Placeholders, place them at the places you value.

8. Purim Bookmarks (Conclusion)

We often forget who we are. When we remember, we are the best we can be.

Every single Jewish experience, every single Mitzvah is a reminder of who you are. This upcoming Wednesday night and Thursday is the joyous festival of Purim. Perhaps more than any other holiday, Purim epitomizes the identity – and the remembering of the identity – of the Jew. It is for this reason that we read Zachor prior to Purim. Amalek tried to defy and belittle who we are; we were victorious over Amalek – to the extent that Amalek doesn't even know who it is. When we remember who we are all evil forgets what and who it is and it becomes obliterated, nullified and voided.

On Purim there are four special Mitzvot, bookmarks and placeholders, to remind us of who we are. These are:

1. Megillah
2. Charity (Matanot L'evyonim)
3. Gift Baskets (Meshalach Manot)
4. Feast (Seudaht Purim)

1. Megillah: By reading and listening and *internalizing* our story, there is no way we can forget who we are or our purpose.

2. Charity: Giving to the poor epitomizes the Jew. If you as a Jew ever have an identity crisis – and which Jew in this present time doesn't – simply take a dollar (or a million, the amount matters less) and give it to an individual or institution in need. You will remember your identity immediately. No Jew giving charity questions who he or she is.

3. Gift Baskets: Another essential to remember who you are is to look at your family, your community, your nation, your tribe, your people. Handing our gift baskets, building communal and interpersonal connections, reminds us indelibly that we are one nation unified under one banner of Torah and under one Creator, God.

4. Feast: In the thralls of joy and celebration people do not question who they are, nor wonder why they are here. This is perhaps Judaism's best-kept secret: have the people feast, celebrate, eat some food, share some drink, make a l'chaim and every identity crises will fade by the tableside. This is why every Shabbat and every festival is anchored by festive feasts and marvelous meals – and this is especially profound and true with 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 have come into this world.

Shabbat Shalom and a Frelichen (Happy) Purim!