

Amalek, the Taliban, and Confronting Evil

Parashat Ki Teitzei

August 21, 2021; 13 Elul 5781

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I usually don't put a whole lot of stock in gematria. This is the tradition of deriving meaning from the numerical values of Hebrew words, usually by comparing them to other Hebrew words with the same meaning. Sometimes gematria is the source of time honored Jewish traditions, like not eating nuts on Rosh Hashanah, because the numerical value of *egoz*, the Hebrew word for nuts, is the same as *cheit*, the Hebrew word for sin.¹ It's why Jews give *tzedakah* in units of 18, because 18 is the numerical value of life, *chai*. A clever interpretation of the commandment to honor your mother and father notes that the word for honor, *Kabed*, is equal to 26. The word for love, *ahava*, is equal to half that, 13. So we fulfill the commandment to honor our parents by bestowing upon them a double portion of love. (I hope my kids are paying attention!). These are all sweet, cute, clever numerical associations. But I've been thinking about another gematria with more serious implications this week.

We just read the maftir portion that instructs us never to forget to blot out the legacy of Amalek. The arch-enemy of the Jewish people, Amalek attacked the weakest members of our people as they wearily dragged their tired bodies out of bondage in Egypt and through the harsh terrain of the wilderness. Out of nowhere, the tribe of Amalek viciously massacred the old, the infirm, the vulnerable, the stragglers. Amalek became the embodiment of the worst kind of evil, the most deplorable behavior imaginable...and the Jewish people are instructed for all times, for eternity, to be on the lookout for it, and to stand in opposition to it. Over the years, Jews have argued that Amalek took the form of Haman, the Babylonians, the Roman Emperors, Christendom, the Nazis, and other perceived modern enemies of the Jewish people. But I am reminded of that gematria about the word Amalek. It shares the same numerical value as the Hebrew word "*safek*," which means doubt, uncertainty, skepticism. Now this gematria was marshalled as a way to transform the idea of Amalek from a specific people or tribe or nation to a malignant force in the world...namely, to doubt our faith or our purpose in life is now the enemy we have to do battle with. But I have understood the connection between Amalek and *safek*, between this ancient tribe and the idea of doubt or uncertainty to also mean that we can never really be sure who or what is truly Amalek in our day and age. Many of our classical commentators were wary of identifying new versions of Amalek and declaring them worthy of being blotted out. Who can really say with certainty that this person or people, with the exception of the most egregiously evil, like Hitler, is the actual modern manifestation of Amalek?

But then I watched, as we all have for much of this week, a literal warrior tribe overrun an entire nation. A militant clan known for violence, and killing; that has massacred untold numbers of civilians, destroyed homes and burned fertile land; that has deprived girls and women of independence, basic human rights, and education; that has conscripted children as soldiers and discriminated against ethnic and religious minorities; a tribe that has committed what many call a "cultural genocide," obliterating artifacts and monuments that have stood in Afghanistan since antiquity; a clan that has cultivated a hub

¹ In various texts "*chet*" is (mis)spelled without the aleph, חט

of radicalism that has supported some of the world's worst exporters of terror. And I wonder, is there any *safek*? Is there any doubt that the Taliban could in fact be today's Amalek? They prey on the most vulnerable, they wantonly attack innocent people, and they shed blood indiscriminately.

Watching the fear, the horror in the eyes of Afghans contemplating their future under this extremist, medieval military rule is heartbreaking. I have no authority or expertise to offer commentary on policy, or exit strategies and I will not do so. I just want to acknowledge the fear, the sadness, and the pain.

But I am also drawn to another detail in the text. The first place that Amalek is mentioned is not in our parasha, but in Exodus 17. And in the verse just before Amalek's attack is described, the Jewish people are in a quandary about whether God is truly among them; they have been quarreling amongst each other; fighting and disagreeing with Moses and the leaders of the Jewish people, and they say: *Hayeish Hashem be'kirbeinu im ayin?* Is God really with us or not? Is God with us or has God abandoned us?²

I've been listening to the interviews from soldiers and members of the armed forces as many wonder out loud if their decade of service in Afghanistan meant anything. If the loss of comrades and loved ones in battle was pointless. If the wounds, both physical and psychological that veterans of this conflict still bear is the result of a failed expedition. If any of the progress or infrastructure our nation and military built up over the past ten years will collapse under Taliban control. And then I came across a letter that the Commandant and Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps wrote to their troops...General David Berger and Sgt. Major Troy Black wrote:

As each of us tries to comprehend the speed and scope of events in Afghanistan this week, some may be struggling with a simple question: "Was it all worth it?"

We both believe – without question – that your service was meaningful, powerful, and important. You answered the call to serve, proudly carrying the torch of so many generations of Marines before you. You put the good of others before yourself. You fought to defend your country, your family, your friends, and your neighbors. You fought to prevent terror from returning to our shores. You fought for the liberty of young Afghan girls, women, boys, and men who want the same individual freedoms we enjoy as Americans. You fought for the Marine to your left and the Marine to your right. You never let them down. You never, ever gave up. You lived with purpose, with intention. Whether you realize it or not, you set an example for subsequent generations of Marines – and Americans – by living our core values of Honor, Courage, and Commitment. Was it worth it? Yes. Does it still hurt? Yes.³

I was so moved by both the honesty and compassion expressed in these words. This message reminds me of a Midrash in Pesikta Rabbati, a 9th century collection of aggadic commentaries. The Midrash frighteningly states that those who do not remember the evils committed by Amalek will be sent back to bondage in Egypt: *She'ani machazir etchem le'shi-abudam shel mitzrayim!*⁴ There is real danger in not confronting evil, whether that evil is truly Amalek or in some other guise. I believe our troops did that with honor and sacrifice for ten long years. Let us pray for all those girls and women, the children, the people who now have to contend with the rule of a brutal and benighted tribe; and let us hope that the family of nations does not sit by silently if and when that tribe cultivates more violence and chaos. And

² Exodus 17:7

³ <https://news.usni.org/2021/08/18/letter-to-marines-on-afghanistan-from-cmc-berger-smmc-black>

⁴ Pesikta Rabbati 12

to the question *Ha'yeish Hashem be'kirbeinu im ayin?* Is God still with us...I will answer with the words of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, of blessed memory, who wrote:

“Abraham’s God is the power that rescues the powerless, the God of glory who turns the radiance of his face to those without worldly glory: the poor, the destitute, the lonely, the marginal, the outsiders of the world. God hears the cry of the unheard, and so, if we follow him, do we.”⁵

Amen.

⁵ Sacks, Jonathan. “Not in God’s Name, Confronting Religious Violence,” 2015. Page 280.