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Like everyone else, I've been shocked to learn of the atrocities in the Ukraine: especially this week's target – a maternity ward, of all places, where life is meant to begin, not to end. What a chilling message this unconscionable act sends to the world.

This week's special maftir for Shabbat Zachor teaches us that we must never forget this sort of act. It begins: *Zachor! Remember!* "Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey, after you left Egypt" – we're supposed to always remember that the tribe of Amalek attacked the Israelites as they made their way through the wilderness, escaping slavery. The reading says: *Remember! how, undeterred by fear of God, this tribe surprised you on the march, when you were famished and weary, and cut down all the stragglers bringing up the rear.* From this the sages teach that the real heartlessness of Amalek was that they went after the most vulnerable, the women, and the children. Who's more famished and weary than someone who's just given birth? Who's more helpless than a newborn baby. What happened in the Ukraine was a crime of Amalek. And we're commanded to remember this.

Yet the Torah reading continues saying we are also to *blot out the memory of Amalek*. How do we remember *and* blot out Amalek? Each year at Purim, we tell the story of a villain descended from Amalek named Haman, and every time his name comes up in the story, we drown it out with our noise. It's fun to do, and it's a night of silliness, but the seriousness that underlies the custom is the Jewish idea that in every generation, a villain will rise up to destroy the Jews – *b'chol dor va'dor, omdim aleinu l'chaloteinu*. In the wilderness, that villain was Amalek. In Persia, it was Haman. In WW2, it was Hitler. So we need to be vigilant – will Putin be the next?

But Russia isn't specifically targeting Jews, at least, not at this stage. It could – if, for instance, Israel were to respond to Russia's aggression in the Ukraine in a way that angers Putin. If that happens, Israel's actions could put the Ukraine's large Jewish population at risk. So Israel's plan to airlift Ukrainian Jews to safety in Israel and help them make Aliyah seems logical. But of course it's not that simple.

Because some Jews – including the Ukraine's own president – want to stay and fight! The Jews have a homeland and a safe place to be airlifted to, yet some choose instead to risk their lives to defend their country and remain in diaspora. The early Zionists wanted Israel to become a safe haven for our people, and it has, but what should be its role in supporting those who have made their home in and grown so devoted to other lands? Does Israel have an obligation to protect Jewish lives in countries outside of Israel? Not just by removing them from danger and taking them in, but by arming them with missile defence systems and ammunition? It's an odd and somewhat unexpected dilemma.

But it's just one of the many complexities for us of the current situation. Another is how Israel relies on its relationship with Russia to ensure its security interests in Syria and

Iran; so not having Russia on side could also affect the safety of our people, *wherever* we may live.

Another complexity is our history in the region – the Ukraine being the birthplace of Chasidism, but also stained by the blood of Jews who died in countless pogroms—a place where Jews were enlisted by Nazis to massacre their own people. As Hartman Institute scholar Elana Stein Hain concludes, there are so “many Jewish narratives engaged” in the Ukraine crisis,ⁱ along with the more universal moral concerns that impact everyone. What are we, as Jews, to do? How are we to feel? What are we to pray for? What role do we want Israel’s leaders to take? Or our own leaders to take?

We’re not going to solve the Ukrainian crisis in one drash. But I’ve found the words of Ukrainian born Natan Sharansky, who spent years of his life in Russian prisons before rebuilding his life in Israel – I’ve found his words to be particularly clarifying amidst the complexity, and inspirational amidst the tragedy.

Regarding our history, he says that we mustn’t let what *their* great grandparents did to *our* great grandparents dictate how we behave today. If we took that approach, he says, we’d spend all our time thinking about “how to build our past, not how to build our futures.”ⁱⁱ There’s a Jewish concept that comes from the story of Ishmael, when he was cast out of Abraham’s house as a baby. Ishmael’s descendants would become enemies to Israel, but nevertheless God heard and heeded his cry *ba’asher hu sham* – from where he was at the time. We have a moral obligation to respond when there is suffering, and we’ll deal with the history another time.

Sharansky says that none of our bloodied history in the region should “undermine for even a second our sympathy for the Ukrainians who are fighting at this moment – and paying with their lives – exactly for the things that are very important for us.”ⁱⁱⁱ In this, he points out that Jews and Jewish life have thrived in democratic lands, which allowed for their self-actualisation without persecution and fear at every turn. Those who want to stay and defend this way of life should be supported by the Jewish community, because there is much at stake that is dear to Jews. He says:

“This is not a fight between Russia and Ukraine about a piece of land; it is not even a fight about the future of Ukraine. It is, rather, an attempt to change all the principles on which the free world stands, to dismiss all the understandings and agreements that guarantee people that they will not lose their freedom.”^{iv}

So Sharansky has high expectations of Israel. “Israel,” he says, “should be standing more firmly with the free world against Russia.” He also believes, however, that “so, too, should the free world be standing more firmly with Israel against Iran and Iranian bases in Syria.”^v Not just because they’re deserving of our support, but also because then Israel wouldn’t have to tread so carefully around Russia’s feelings, and could support not only those Jews who wish to leave the Ukraine, but also those who wish to stay. That is, if they felt our support, they could take a bolder ideological and military stand, in addition to the humanitarian one.

So what's the appropriate Jewish response, given the politics and nuances of the situation in the Ukraine? To hear the cries *ba'asher hu sham* from wherever they come, and act to ease the suffering. We can support Israel in extracting and absorbing those Jews who are crying because they want to leave the war zone. At the same time, we can urge world leaders, including Israel's, to support those who stay in the Ukraine and fight for their country, their freedom, and their lives. At the same time, we can urge our countries in diaspora to stand more firmly with Israel against its own existential threat from Iran, acknowledging that Israel is crying out in the wilderness too, with few places to turn. And at the same time, we can urge our diaspora governments to take in their share of Ukrainian refugees, be they Jewish or non-Jewish, knowing that not everyone is as fortunate as we are to be part of an extended family that looks out for one another, whenever there is danger, and from wherever the cry comes.

May we remember and blot out the name of Amalek, in every generation that he arises to tear down our society's most vulnerable people and most cherished, and vulnerable, institutions.

ⁱ "For Heaven's Sake" podcast by the Hartman Institute, episode #45: Ukraine's Aliyah of Despair.

ⁱⁱ "The Ukrainian crisis according to Natan Sharansky" in The Jerusalem Post, 11 March 2022:

<https://www.jpost.com/international/article-700972>

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid

^{iv} Ibid

^v Ibid