

## Shabbat Zachor 5772 – Protecting the Ones on the Margins

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Shabbat Shalom. As Brianna explained earlier, this Shabbat before Purim is a special one, named Zachor after the first words of the special Maftir – “זכור את אשר עשה לך עמלק”, remember what Amalek did to you on the way when you left Egypt.”

I want to invite you to open your *humashim* to p. 1135, to that passage. The fuller story of the battle with Amalek is told in Exodus. Moses observed the fighting and whenever he would raise his hands, the Israelites would be victorious, while the Amalekites would win when his hands dropped. Aaron and Hur held up Moses’s hands until Amalek was defeated. According to Esther, Haman is a descendant of Amalek, and so we read this passage on the Shabbat before Purim to prepare for the holiday.

But there is a *halakhic* curiosity about this reading. With most Torah readings, there is an obligation for the community to read the Torah, but not necessarily for every individual to hear it. But the Maftir for Zachor is an exception. There is a specific commandment from the Torah that every individual has to hear this passage being read in order to fulfill the *mitzvah* of remembering Amalek.

And the question is: Why this reading? Verse 19 (p. 1136) commands that when we were settled in the land of Israel, “תמחה את זכר עמלק”, we were to blot out/ erase the memory of Amalek from under heaven.” As Brianna explained, Samuel took the commandment so seriously that even leaving one person alive – just the king and some cattle – was a serious transgression; and this all seems rather harsh. We Jews don’t particularly fancy ourselves as a warlike people, and yet of all the 613 commandments, this is the one that the Torah tells us “לא תשכח”, Do not forget it!” Why this one?

From the Haftarah and the narrative in Exodus, you might think the issue was the military victory. You might think the point is to have faith in God’s and our ability to annihilate our enemies. But these three verses in Deuteronomy point to a different detail.

Let’s look at the text (p. 1135): “Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey, after you left Egypt – how, undeterred by fear of God” (There is debate as to whether these words וּלֹא יִרָא אֱלֹהִים refer to Amalek or to the Israelites who were not following the ethical commandments described earlier in this chapter.) “he surprised you on the march, when you were famished and weary (again debate – if the weariness refers to the stresses of the journey or a lackadaisical approach to the commandments), וַיִּזְנֹב בְּךָ כָּל הַנַּחְשָׁלִים אַחֲרָיִךְ, and cut down all the stragglers in your rear.”

It’s the stragglers, the נחשלים. The Rabbis say that נחשלים is an inversion of נחלשים, meaning “the weak ones”. The 10th century scholar Saadya Gaon says these were the קיצונים, the folks on the margins.

The 12<sup>th</sup> century Rabbi Joseph Bekhor Shor says that these people were easily preyed upon. He imagines that Amalek attracted them by posing as merchants (of all things); and while they were caught in negotiations and falling further behind, Amalek pounced upon them. And why the margins? Bekhor Shor explains that Amalek was actually weak. They knew they couldn't defeat the totality of a united people, but they figured they could successfully attack the weak ones at the rear.

The 13<sup>th</sup> century mystic Rabeinu Bahya ben Asher connects the name Amalek is to the word לִקֵּק, which means to lick, or lap up. Amalek is like a dog that sees blood and comes to lick it up. They find the most disadvantaged members of society and attack while they are down.

Put these comments together and this major *mitzvah* makes more sense. It is not just that Amalek is evil or cowardly or eager to attack. The evil of this episode is also that we Israelites left so many people at the margins, vulnerable to their attack. Our people were marching along, celebrating a miracle at the Red Sea while complaining that they didn't have water or food – and then that the manna they did have wasn't good enough because they wanted meat, they wanted more; all while the truly vulnerable among them were becoming "sitting ducks".

The Rabbis expound that this commandment to remember is the essence of Judaism – follow it and experience the promises due the children of Abraham, or let it go and descend to the level of servitude in Egypt. The near defeat against Amalek gets to the core of Judaism: We can't just worry about ourselves. Liberty and opportunity and personal success is not enough. We have a mandate, a divine responsibility to protect the people at the margins who aren't able to protect themselves. It's the second part of Hillel's dictum: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? וְכִשְׂאֵנִי לְעַצְמִי מִה אֲנִי, but if I am only out for myself, what am I?"

Apply the lesson of Amalek to the other evils in our midst. We can't just fight evil; we must also protect its most likely victims. It is not enough that researchers are working to eradicate cancer; we have to support those who are stricken and ensure that even the poorest among us have access to quality treatment and care.

Take poverty. We can tell ourselves that ours is an opportunity society, an individualist society where every person need only work hard and reap the benefits. But we can't eradicate poverty just by tinkering at the top. We must recognize that some people suffer more because of their place in the system and this is not all their fault and we have a responsibility to look out for those people at the margins. I don't think it's an accident that one of the core *mitzvot* of Purim is *Matanot La'evyonim*, gifts to the poor. It's not enough to celebrate the victory over evil Haman. We also affirm our responsibility to look out for the נְחֻשְׁלִים on the margins who are most vulnerable to the other evils in our midst.

About a week ago, a leader in the community visited me on behalf of the Darfur Interfaith Network. Some of you remember the rally on the Mall in 2006 and George Clooney's movie to promote awareness of the suffering in Darfur. President Omar Al-Bashir of Sudan has been indicted in the International Criminal Court for 10 counts of war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide. But the conflict is complex and International attention to the original genocide and the deteriorating situation has lost momentum. Even after the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement that ended 22 years of civil war and the 2011 secession of South Sudan from the North, there are border skirmishes, cases of ethnic cleansing, and an estimated 1 million orphaned Sudanese children who fall prey to wild animals, slave traders, and child traffickers every day. South Sudan is a country roughly the size of France ... with 50 miles of paved roads.

These are the *necheshalim* of our day – on the margins and vulnerable. And we have a responsibility. The Darfur Interfaith Network has invited us to participate in three projects:

1. There will be a Hope for Darfur/Justice in Sudan Rally on Sunday, April 29. Flyers are outside on the Shabbat Table.
2. We are being invited to create posters for a Wall of Unity. I have all the materials – including photos, slogans, and more – for anyone who wants to send a message that we care and that we need an intensified US leadership role to foster security, peace, and justice.
3. And they are working to raise \$20,000 to rehabilitate the kitchen at a school in Turalae, South Sudan – the town where Manute Bol comes from – in order for the school to remain eligible for critically needed food from the UN World Food program.

And there are other נחשלים, other stragglers on the margins: The mentally ill whose problems are so easy to ignore. ...

Victims of domestic abuse, which occurs outside our immediate field of vision, but which is a serious problem we dare not ignore. ...

Recently I read that Lady Gaga (of all people) teamed up with Harvard University to unveil her Born This Way Foundation meant to empower kids and fight bullying. Researchers know about the effect of bullying on school dropout rates, teen suicide, and overall school success. ...

The civilians in Syria who are being attacked by a failed dictatorial government determined to maintain its power. ...

The message of Amalek is that we share responsibility for protecting victims on the margins, even as we continue to fight evil at the top. This is the essence of Judaism and it is why each of us has a personal obligation to hear that commandment every year. Remember what they did and learn from the experience.

May our celebration of Purim this week be fun and meaningful. And may we attain the courage of Esther in accepting the responsibility to stand up for the נחשלים, the vulnerable ones in our own community, the Jewish world, and beyond who are most in need of our voice. לא תשכח, Do not forget! Shabbat Shalom.