

Shabbat Zachor 2020
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Rabbi Carl M. Perkins
Temple Aliyah, Needham

AS LEO REMINDED US, TODAY IS SHABBAT ZACHOR. It's the Shabbat on which we read of the *mitzvah*, the commandment, to remember what Amalek did to us as we were leaving Egypt: how they heartlessly picked on the weakest among us. We must never forget!

Of course, it's not the only place in the Torah where we're commanded to remember. Remembering -- remembering all sorts of things -- is central to Judaism. We are, in many respects, a religion *grounded* in memory.

We are supposed to remember the Exodus from Egypt. We're supposed to remember the story of the Golden Calf. We're supposed to remember the Giving of the Torah. We're supposed to remember the Sabbath Day, to set it aside. We're supposed to remember what happened when Miriam gossiped in the wilderness. There are specific verses in the Bible in which we're told to remember each one of these things.

Ironically, of all of these, the one remembrance that is perhaps *most easily accomplished* is the one we are doing today and on Purim, namely, remembering what the Amalekites did to us. (Haman was an Amalekite.)

How can we forget that? Nothing sticks more than an insult. Nothing is more searing than a threat, or an assault. Nothing is more devastating than an effort to destroy us. So we are unlikely ever to forget Amalek.

And yet, we have a whole Shabbat focused on remembering what Amalek did to us.



It must then mean something other than simply remembering. What might it mean?

Well, Leo suggested **one** answer to the question, when he said that we have to remember to obliterate evil in every generation. Memory alone isn't enough. It's what we **do** with that memory that counts.

Let me suggest another answer to the question, also suggested by his dvar torah.

Leo told the story of a family, one member of which is here with us today; a family that preserved an artifact, an object that had once belonged to Leo's ancestor, "Leo the Elder," for 75 years. A family that then handed that artifact back to Leo's family, so that it could be displayed here today at "Leo the Younger"'s bar mitzvah.

That act didn't alter the elder Leo's fate. Leo the Elder was deported and murdered. Murdered because he was a Jew.

But that French family's loyalty and kindness -- toward Leo, his family, and his people -- reverberates within us. Why? What is it about that kindness that is so striking, so powerful?

The answer, I think, is that it is an act of **resistance**. It's an act that says: I do not accept. I do not acquiesce. I know that what is happening around me, around my town, around my country, is **wrong**. I may not be able to stop it, but I can assert my independence and teach my children and my children's children that it's wrong. I can "keep faith with those who sleep in the dust" (to paraphrase the Amidah) -- by preserving the memory of Leo the Elder.

This act of resistance -- actually, this *series* of acts of defiance, integrity and decency through three generations -- creates yet another duty on our part. We, hearing of such acts, have a duty not only to remember the evil that was done to us, but also to remember the good that was done to us as well -- especially during times of evil. Remembering these and other acts of kindness becomes part of the duty of remembering Amalek.

The other night, I had the privilege of speaking at Newbridge on the Charles, a continual care community in our area, about antisemitism. I was very conscious as I spoke that I was speaking to men and women who were older than I, many of whom had lived through World War II. I've experienced what I think it's accurate to call antisemitism, but in some cases they experienced -- they certainly lived through -- an era in which far greater violence was perpetrated against the Jewish people than has occurred in my lifetime.

I felt very sad. Think about it: some of these folks had lived through the Holocaust, had come to this country as refugees, had settled down and raised families, and were now living out their days in a retirement community ... yet they were not at peace, for they were witnessing the rise and spread of antisemitism all over the globe in ways not seen since the end of World War II.

I shared some of the same things that I said here when I spoke about antisemitism on Rosh Hashanah. I shared with them the three points that Professor Deborah Lipstadt makes in her recent book on antisemitism. **First**, in the face of antisemitism, we must react. We mustn't ignore it. **Second**, we mustn't overreact. We must be thoughtful, strategic, wise. We mustn't see only ourselves as the only possible actors in the face of antisemitism. We must think about reaching out, as Queen Esther does in the Book of Esther, to others who can join with us to resist it.

And **finally**, we should not make antisemitism the central focus of our Jewish identities. That grants those who hate Jews and hate Judaism too much influence over our behavior, our thinking, our lives.

Instead, the focus of our Jewish identities should be living joyful, fulfilled, inspired Jewish lives.

Survival is important. It's critical. **But collectively it is insufficient.** We didn't survive merely to survive. We survived in order to continue to live our lives as we know we should, furthering Jewish values in the world and transmitting our legacy to the next generation and beyond.

It is not at all coincidental that, in addition to fulfilling the mitzvah of remembering what Amalek did to us, we party on the night of Purim. That exemplifies what is so remarkable about Jews and Judaism. **We are a resilient people.** We remember the assaults, we remember the pain, we remember the suffering -- but we also remember to celebrate. What do we say when we encounter Jews? *“Af simchas!”* We should come together again at times of joy!

We remember the past, but we don't dwell on the past.

That's one of the reasons that Purim follows Shabbat Zachor, the Shabbat of Remembrance. For on it we demonstrate that we are not going to allow any person or any ideology to defeat us. **We are here to stay.** Yes, there may be challenges, but we will overcome them.

After my talk the other night, one person asked me a question. “What would you advise us to do?” she asked. “We've formed a committee to try to address antisemitism in our area. What should we do?”

I told her that I thought that the first step was to reach out to the non-Jewish clergy in town. She might find them much more supportive than she thought. Then, it would be a good idea to reach out to other town leaders: leaders in town government, in the schools, in the town's civic clubs.

Yes, there is antisemitism, and there are antisemites, all over the world. But there are also people like the owner of Hotel George. There are people like his granddaughter, Jeanne. There are people like that all over the world, too.

So yes, let's remember what Amalek did to us: by resolving to stamp out oppression in our own day and age, and by honoring those who resist Amalek in each and every generation.

Shabbat Shalom.