

## Shabbat Zachor 2011: Massacre in Itamar

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Zachor. Remember. Today is Shabbat Zachor, the Sabbath of remembrance. Is it a plea, an imperative, a commandment? We are usually told to remember something that happened some time ago. We are implored to remember in order to keep the memory of a past event, or person alive.

Shabbat Zachor calls upon us to remember the barbaric nature of the Amalekites. They were considered particularly despicable because they attacked the rear of the procession that left Egypt, meaning they preyed upon the weak, the elderly, the infirm, the children, those incapable of fighting back. In the commandment to remember them we are implored to wipe out their memory. I have always understood this commandment coupled with the juxtaposition of the portrayal of King Saul negatively for sparing the Amalekite king as the haftarah for this week to mean that we have an obligation to oppose and root out evil.

We remember all the embodiments and personifications of Amalek throughout history who have been guided by the same perverse desire to prey upon the weak among us.

If only it were a distant memory, and the deeds we were to recall were ancient and embedded in the recesses of our mind. But unfortunately, the attack on the defenseless occurred not just in Biblical times, but this past week, as once again we were reminded that Amalek is still with us.

With all the news about the uprisings in the Arab world, as well as the horror caused by the tragic earthquake, tsunami and threat posed by the nuclear reactor situation in Japan you may have missed what happened last Shabbat in a town known as Itamar in Israel. But as an official at the Israeli embassy told me the other day, there is not a person in Israel who is not familiar with the Fogel family.

Five members of the Fogel family were brutally and sadistically massacred, stabbed to death while sleeping in their beds in Itamar, a development in the West Bank last Friday night. Udi and his wife Ruth, and their children 11 year old Yoav, 4 year old Elad, and Hadas, 3 months old were stabbed to death by a terrorist who infiltrated the settlement. Two other children sleeping in another room were not discovered by the terrorist. One child who was with her youth group came home to discover the mutilated bodies of her family.

You might have missed the story because of everything else that was going on in the world this past week. But you also might have overlooked it because the magnitude of the cruelty of the butchery was not described in our press accounts. Instead they ran small stories on inside pages mentioning in relatively benign terms that settlers had been killed.

Although the act was strongly condemned by Salam Fayad and Mahmud Abbas of the Palestinian Authority, we cannot overlook the distribution of candy and sweets to children in Palestinian cities to celebrate the murders.

Equally disturbing is the attempt to blame the victims for the attack. Even though these good people would never apply the same logic in other cases, there are those who attempt to explain these heinous acts of violence by attributing them to frustration over settlements. To do so excuses and justifies murder and misses the true motivation behind these acts.

The root cause is a society which embraces and celebrates suicide bombers and views perpetrators of these kinds of attacks as heroes, martyrs, and even role models. A day before the attack, PA TV broadcast a program honoring the woman who drove the suicide terrorist to the Sbarro pizza restaurant in August, 2001 when 15 people, including 7 children were murdered. And one week before the family was murdered in cold blood in their home, PA TV honored Fahami Mashahara who drove a suicide bomber to Gilo in Jerusalem in 2001 and who killed 19 and injured more than hundred. His daughter was invited to perform a song on PA TV. A few days ago, one of Mahmoud Abbas's senior advisers called for the naming of a square in an Arab town in honor of Dalal Mughrabi, a leader of the Coastal Road Massacre in 1978, in which close to 40 Israeli civilians were burned alive in a hijacked bus; a few days before that, the PA's official newspaper announced that a youth club in Ramallah would hold a soccer tournament in honor of Wafa Idris, a suicide bomber who used a Palestinian ambulance to enter Israel; and a few days before that, the governor of Jenin awarded \$2,000 to the family of a Fatah suicide bomber.

What does this celebration and glorification of violence by a society that views mass murderers as heroes tell us about their values?

Commentators have noted the absence of looting, the quiet dignity and sense of obligation of those who are risking their lives to save others from nuclear disaster in Japan. Much as it is unfashionable to admit, the way societies and people act reflects their values. So it irks me when people, especially Jews say there are extremists on both sides. Israelis do not commit these kinds of acts, and more importantly, the rare act of violence is an aberration, immediately condemned by all, including official governmental sources. They are not feted or hailed as heroes. Soccer tournaments and schools are not named in their honor, but rather they are ostracized, prosecuted and placed in jail.

Ironically at the same time that the Fogel family was sitting shiva, a Palestinian cab raced towards the community's entrance. Israeli soldiers and paramedics discovered a Palestinian woman in advanced stages of labor and facing a life-threatening situation: The umbilical cord was wrapped around the young baby girl's neck, endangering both her and her mother. Even though these same medics saw the fireworks going off in nearby towns celebrating the massacre at Itamar they immediately acted to save the life of the Palestinian baby and mother.

And as if all of this is not enough to remind us of the nature of Israel, of what it is up against, of the nature and intent of its enemies, there was another ominous reminder as well.

This past week Israel intercepted a German owned ship, the Victoria 200 miles off the coast of Israel that had set off from Syria and that had been berthed in Turkey on its way to Egypt. Commandoes boarded the ship and discovered concealed and buried deep amidst containers of cotton and lentil bags 50 tons of weapons, including C-704 radar-guided anti-ship missiles, thousands of mortar shells and almost 67,000 assault rifle bullets for AK-47s,

The next time someone questions the Israeli blockade of Gaza, remember “Victoria’s Secret,” and the deception involving Syria, Lebanon, Hezbollah, Turkey, and the mastermind of it all, Iran. Remember.

Giulio Meotti, an Italian journalist, is the author of the haunting book *A New Shoah: The Untold Story of Israel’s Victims of Terrorism*, dedicated to making sure that these victims are known and not forgotten. We will remember them. . Remember Itamar and the Fogel family. Remember the Palestinian baby and her mother. Remember that as Jews we feel the unique pain of our fellow Jews.

I conclude with “A Prayer for the Fogel Family written by my colleague Rabbi Randall J. Konigsburg.

Not one of us can feel your pain.  
Not one of us knows what it means to have our heart shattered as yours.  
Your grief only point out to us how empty words can be  
in the face of tragedy and sorrow.  
The tears of our pain are but a shadow of your pain.  
The hurt in our soul is only the smallest fraction of the hurt you bear.  
The ones you loved so deeply are gone,  
and the pain of loss ripples through the Jewish People.  
We cannot heal your heart;  
we can only offer you our own hearts and hands,  
to stand with you when you need support  
and to cry with you when you need to cry.  
*Haverim Kol Yisrael –*  
All Israel, both near and far, are your brothers and sisters.  
We express our commitment to be with you,  
to strengthen you in the days ahead and to help to bring to justice  
those who have attacked you,  
and through you, all of us.  
We do not speak in your name,  
nor can we give voice to the pain in your heart.  
We can only offer our compassion and our love  
and we pray to God that it will be enough to see you  
through the days, weeks, months and years ahead.  
May God comfort you and may God comfort us all.

And may we remember you.

Amen.

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