

Parshat Tetzaveh/ Zachor  
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By Margy-Ruth Davis



## **Amalek: Four Great Questions (...but answers, not so much.)**

### **Amalek makes war on Israel**

*Amalek came and made war with Israel in Rephidim...And the Lord said to Moshe: record this as a memorial in the book and place in Yehoshua's ears that I will destroy the memory of Amalek under the heavens. And Moshe .... said: For God's hand has sworn by His throne that He will wage war against Amalek from generation to generation (Shemot 17: 8-16)*

### **We are commanded to remember and to erase Amalek's memory**

*Remember what Amalek did to you on the way when you came out of Egypt. That he met you on the way and attacked your rear – all the weak ones trailing behind – when you were weary and faint, and did not fear God. And it shall be when the Lord your God gives you rest from all the enemies around, in the land that the Lord your God gives you as an inheritance to possess it, you shall wipe out the memory of Amalek from beneath the heavens; you shall not forget (Devarim 25:17-19)*

### **King Saul is to annihilate every man, woman and child of the Amalekites – even its livestock**

*Samuel said to Saul: ...So says God, the Lord of Hosts: I have remembered what Amalek did to Israel – that [Amalek] met [Israel] on the way, as it went up from Egypt. Now go and strike down Amalek and destroy everything he has. Have no pity on him – kill man and woman alike, infant and suckling alike, ox and sheep alike, camel and donkey, alike. (1 Samuel 15:1-3)*

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The Amalek story sends chills down the spine. We encounter Amalek throughout Tanakh, from his first appearance as Esau's grandson to his last incarnation, as Haman the Agagite. But is the story so clear-cut? Do its lessons change as we read the texts with modern sensibilities? Here are some questions that have been nagging at me; I welcome your thoughts and comments.

### **Question 1: Was Amalek intrinsically evil? Or, was Amalek a Divine response?**

Amalek attacked the Israelites "on the way" to the Land of Israel – hoping to deflect God's plan of redemption. Some say, it was God whom they hated. The midrash suggests that Amalek were atheists, without any belief at all in a higher power; no mention of Amalek has a reference to a god.

As the opening text in Shemot tells us, Amalek did battle in Rephidim. This episode immediately follows Israel's harsh demands for water. Moshe throws up at his hands at the lack of trust. The ensuing waters are named Mei Meriva, the waters of quarrel. In an alternate reading of the Amalek story, these complaints – coming so soon after the Splitting of the Sea – gave Amalek its opening.

The second Amalek text, in Devarim, is ambiguous, perhaps deliberately so. *That he met you on the way and attacked your rear – all the weak ones trailing behind – when you were weary and faint, and did not fear God.* The last three words are "velo yarei Elokim." This can either be read as "and he [Amalek] did not fear God." Or it can be read as "and you [Israel] do not fear God."

Perhaps Amalek could swoop in because the Israelites were vulnerable. Can it be that Amalek's evil has no independent existence, but was made possible through Israelite frailty?

### **Question 2: How do we feel about collective responsibility?**

The prophet Samuel is very clear. Although Amalek's war in the desert has taken place some 400 years earlier, God now wants King Saul to administer the punishment. He is to wipe out every man, woman and child and even the livestock. Saul kills everyone – except Agag the king and the best of the livestock. For this serious misjudgment, Saul loses the kingship.

Our culture values individual accountability – but the Torah insists on the collective. The individual's deeds – his own reward and punishment – are subsumed by the group. The Lord wiped out all the generation of the flood; were there no children who had not yet sinned? As Abraham's negotiations with God over Sodom and Amorah remind us, only a critical mass of innocents could have saved them. If there were fewer than ten good people among the Sodomites, they were wiped out with the rest.

If we are ready to impose national punishments on an entire people, we need to be honest about ourselves. Does the Almighty also judge *us* collectively? On Yom Kippur, we ask forgiveness for sins in the plural (*Ashamnu, bogadnu...*). We say, *Kol Yisrael areivim zeh bazeh*, all Israel is connected. We are accountable for our own sins, but also need to care about the collective goodness of the Jewish people.

### **Question 3: Are there still Amalekites in the world?**

The Talmud in tractate Berachot (28a) tells us that the Assyrian King Sennacherib's program of forcible population transfer (c. 700 B.C.E.) mixed up the nations and erased ethnic identities. Thus, the nation of Amalek may no longer exist.

Rav Soloveitchik broadens the issue: *I heard the answer from my father of blessed memory. Every nation that conspires to destroy the Jewish people is considered by the halakha to be Amalek... With relation to any other nation that stands ready to destroy us, we are [now after the time of Sennacherib] commanded to wage war against it [even] while it prepares for war against us, and our war against it is a "War of Mitzvah", in accordance with the command of the Torah that "The Lord will wage war with Amalek from generation to generation."* (Kol Dodi Dofek, pp 113-114)

This position carries its own dangers; it is far too easy to consider all our enemies to be "the new Amalek," with the direct consequences that name entails. God has not decreed the same punishment on other enemies, even those aiming for our genocide – Mitzrayim, Ammon, Moab among them.

### **Question 4: What should our response be? Must we still wage war?**

Is the war with Amalek an eternal one? The Sefer Hachinuch claims that the commandment still exists, devolving on every Jew to kill every Amalekite.

Maimonides disagrees. He tells us that – after Sennacherib's forced migrations – converts from all nations, including Amalek, can be accepted into the Jewish people. In his opinion, the command is to wipe out Amalek's behavior and this can be done through moral influence and education.

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The act of erasure is also the act of remembering. We remember the act of wiping the blackboard clean. And because we wipe the board clean every year, year after year, we are also remembering the name "Amalek" which disappears and yet reappears again. We remember always that Amalek's evil must be erased from the world. May Amalek in all its forms be erased forever.