

## What to Do About Amalek?

### Amalek attacks

In this week's portion, *Beshallah*, the Israelites are attacked in the desert by Amalek (עַמְלֵק), a grandson of the wicked Esau [Gen. 36:12], and prevail:

The children of Israel ... tested the Lord, saying, "Is the Lord in our midst or not?" Amalek came and fought with Israel in Rephidim. So Moses said to Joshua, Pick men for us, and go out and fight against Amalek... Joshua did as Moses had told him... and weakened Amalek and his people [with God's help]. [Ex. 17:7-13]

God then tells Moses to blot out the memory of Amalek:

The Lord said to Moses, "Inscribe this [as] a remembrance in the Book, and impress it on Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven." ... The Lord will be at war with Amalek throughout all generations.

[מִלְחָמָה לַיהוָה בְּעַמְלֵק מִדֹּר דָּר] [Ex. 17:14-16]

This injunction is repeated in Deuteronomy:

Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey, after you left Egypt; how, with no awe of God, he surprised you on the march, when you were famished and weary, and cut down all the stragglers in your rear. Therefore, when the Lord your God grants you safety from all your enemies around you, in the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a hereditary portion, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. לֹא תִשְׁכַּח : Do not forget! [Deut. 25:17-19]

The injunction is acted upon centuries later in the days of King Saul, first king of Israel:

And Samuel said to Saul ... "Thus said the Lord of Hosts: I am exacting the penalty for what Amalek did to Israel, for the assault he made upon them on the road, on their way up from Egypt. Now go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and do not spare them. Slay man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass." ...

And Saul smote the Amalekites ... but he took Agag, the king of the Amalekites, alive [and allowed his people to keep some of the spoils]...

Then God told Samuel: "I repent that I made Saul king, for he has turned back from ... performing My commandments."... Then Samuel said: "Bring me Agag the king of the Amalekites." And Agag came to him in chains... And Samuel said:

“As your sword has made women childless, so shall your mother be childless”...  
And Samuel killed Agag. [1Sam 15:1-33]

Doesn't this complete the eradication of the Amalekites? No, because a Midrash says that between his capture and his death, Agag had a child, the ancestor of Haman. [Seder Eliyahu Rabbah 20, Targum Sheni on Esther 4:13.]

Indeed, The Book of Esther identifies Haman as an Agagite [Esther 3:1]. The Torah [Numbers 24:7] identifies Agagites and Amalekites. So Haman was a descendant of Amalek.

On Purim, the Book of Esther is read to commemorate the saving of the Jewish people from Haman. The audience makes noises to “blot out his name”, as instructed in Torah.

Why kill the animals too?

-Rashi: The Amalekites were sorcerers who could turn into animals to avoid capture.

-Midrash: So that Amalek should never be mentioned even in connection with a beast, as in: “This beast belonged to Amalek.” [Midrash Pesikta Zutarta].

Rambam: Three mitzvot pertain to Amalek:

-P188- Wipe out the descendants of Amalek [Deut. 25:19]

Rabbi Yehuda said: Three mitzvot were commanded to the Jewish people when they entered the Land of Israel: Establish a king for themselves [Deut. 17:14–15], cut off the seed of Amalek in war [Deut. 25:17–19], and build the Temple in Jerusalem [Deut. 12:10–12]. [Sanhedrin 20b]

-P189- Remember what Amalek did to the Israelites. [Deut. 25:17]

-N59- Don't forget what Amalek did to the Israelites. [Deut. 25:19]

(Are the last two the same?)

## **What did the Amalekites do wrong?**

-They were cowards, who attacked without provocation weak refugees untrained for war who were just passing through, from the rear, including their women and children.

-But is what they did not common back then -- attack an isolated group in desert for pillage?

-Amalek was first in a long line of antisemites, the archetypal enemy of the Jews, and represents them all. Injunction to uproot really applies to all antisemites.

-Amalek weakened the nations' fear of God. Midrash:

When Israel came out of Egypt, and God split the sea before them and drowned the Egyptians within it, the fear of Israel fell upon all the nations. But when Amalek came and challenged them, although he received his due from them, he cooled the fear of them for the nations of the world. [Midrash Tanchuma, Ki Tetze 9]

-So Amalek knew who the Jews were and what just happened to them, and wanted to kill the very knowledge of God. So he attacked precisely at a time when our faith was at a low point.

-Chassidic Masters : Amalek represents doubt. The gematria of Amalek is 240, same as *safek*, meaning "doubt". Israel had succumbed to the "Amalek" in their souls, so they became vulnerable to Amalek in their body.

-It says: "The Lord will be at war with Amalek throughout the ages." That's because God knew Amalek's heart -- it's not so much what Amalek *did* at that time, bad as it was. It's really a war between the forces of good and the forces of evil *in every generation*.

## **Why did God allow Amalek to proceed?**

-Amalek's attack was punishment for Jews doubting God even after miracles of Exodus. Midrash:

Amalek is mentioned right after the Israelites said: "Is the Lord in our midst or not?" How could they doubt it after the miracles they saw? [Midrash Tanchuma, Yitro 3]

-“Rephidim” (place of the battle with Amalek) is contraction of *rafu yedehem min haTorah* – “they loosened their grip on the Torah”, whence the Amalek punishment. [Mechilta d'Rabbi Yishmael 17:8]

-Or: from *rippu* – “They became lax”. [Bechorot 5b]

## **Can Amalekites repent and convert to Judaism?**

-The Midrash says no:

Rabbi Eliezer says: The Lord swore by His throne of glory: If a gentile comes to convert to Judaism, he will be accepted. But Amalek and his household will not be accepted. [Mechilta d'Rabbi Yishmael 17:16]

-But Talmud seems to say yes:

The descendants of the wicked Haman studied Torah in Bnei-Brak. [Gittin 57b].

In answer:

-Some say they were converted by mistake, but once converted, they are considered Jews.

-Some say a descendant of Haman raped a Jewish woman, and she had a son who is therefore Jewish.

## Should we go out and kill Amalekites today?

No.

-We must not try to kill Amalekites today because we lost the ability to recognize them (and other peoples living back then). The Talmud says this happened when a king deported and redistributed close to five million people in the 7th century BCE:

But Sennacherib, King of Assyria, had come up already and confused all the lands as it is said in Isaiah, "I have removed the bounds of the peoples," [Isaiah 10:13] So the rabbis decreed that the seven nations of Canaan no longer exist because the Assyrians [and not the Israelites] wiped them out. [Yoma 54a]

On this basis, 19th-century Turkish rabbi Hayyim Palaggi said that we lost the tradition of how to recognize Amalekites, so we cannot fulfill the commandment to wipe them out. [Eynei Kol Hai, 73, on Sanhedrin 96b]

-Some said the command was never to *kill* Amalekites:

-Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch: the command was to destroy "the remembrance of Amalek", not kill Amalekites. [Hirsch on Deut. 25]

-The Sfot Emek: the command was to hate Amalek, not perform any action. [Shemot Zachor 346]

-The Chafetz Chaim: God will eliminate Amalek. Jews are only commanded to remember what Amalek did to them.

-Rabbi Simcha Bunim: the Torah says "blot out the memory of Amalek" (כִּי-מָחָה) (אֶמְחָה אֶת-זֵכַר עַמֶּלֶק מִתַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם) in the singular, not the plural. Not the Amalekites, but Amalek.

-Rambam: It is forbidden to declare war on anybody without first attempting to settle things peacefully. The main condition is acceptance of the Seven Noahide laws. [Mishneh Torah, Kings and Wars 6:1] This rule includes Amalek.

-Rabbi Yosef Karo (Shulchan Aruch) adds: "If they do this, they are no longer Amalekites, but Noahides."

-Some ruled that only a king or an organized community can perform the commandment, not an individual. [Rambam in Sefer Hamitzvot, Ramban on Exodus 17:16, Sefer HaYereim 435, Hagahot Maimoniyot (Hilchot Melachim 5:5)]

-Some question the ethics of collective punishment. Others argue that pre-emptive violence is acceptable against such enemies as Haman, the Romans, Hitler, Stalin, etc., whose evil behavior is a matter of consensus.

-I tend to agree with the last interpretation. The commandment may be that we must fight evil mercilessly all the time, with no pause, until it is eradicated.