

Shabbat Zakhor: Remembering Not to Forget

There is an additional Torah reading on this, the Shabbat that immediately precedes Purim. In addition to the scheduled reading from the beginning of the Book of Leviticus (*Vayikra*), we also read a short passage from the Book of Deuteronomy. This powerful paragraph recalls the role of Amalek, an ancient tribe of bandits that terrorized our ancestors when they were most vulnerable, weak and wandering refugees in the wilderness. The cruelty of Amalek was so profound that we were instructed to “*Zakhor*, remember” and “never forget” that such cruelty is a real and ever-present danger. It is from the commandment to remember (*zakhor*) that this Shabbat receives its name.

זְכוֹר אֶת אֲשֶׁר־עָשָׂה לְךָ עַמְלֵק בְּדֶרֶךְ בְּצֵאתְכֶם מִמִּצְרָיִם:
אֲשֶׁר קָרָא בְּדֶרֶךְ וַיִּזְנֹב בְּךָ פֶּלִי-הַגִּתּוֹ שְׁלִים אֶת־רִיב וְאִתָּה עֵינָי וַיִּגָּע וְלֹא יָרָא אֱלֹהִים:
וְהָיָה בְּהִגִּיתְךָ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן לְךָ נִחְלָה לְרִשְׁתָּהּ תִּמְחָה
אֶת־זִכְרֵ עַמְלֵק מִתַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם לֹא תִשְׁכַּח:

Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey, after you left Egypt –how he attacked you on the way and cut down all those struggled to keep up, and you were famished and exhausted and he did not fear God. Therefore, when Adonai your God grants you safety from all your enemies around you, in the land that Adonai your God is about to give you as a hereditary portion, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget! (Deut 25:17-19)

Why does the text tell us both to “remember” and “not to forget”? Perhaps it is an invitation to each of us to consider the subtle differences between remembering and not forgetting. The *midrashim* and commentaries are filled with interesting responses to that question. One common answer is that we are commanded both to remember what happened and not to forget that there are those like Amalek who plague every generation. Indeed, we might have presumed that in the 21st century, in this blessed nation that champions freedom and justice for all, that anti-Semitism would no longer afflict us. We might have presumed that after the Holocaust, no member of Congress would fling slurs against Jews. We might have presumed that mainstream newspapers and media outlets would not print inflammatory articles and editorial cartoons that attack

Jews and howl in protest that we dare have the audacity to organize support for Israel. Alas, our presumptions have proven false. We did not remember. We forgot.

Lest we focus all our attention on a few rogue and maniacal members of Congress or on perverse gangs of mindless bigots like the KKK and neo-Nazis, the real Amalek, the real danger, is the sin and not the sinner. Consider this lesson from Beruriah, one of the great female sages in the Talmud:

There were certain bandits in Rabbi Meir's neighborhood that caused him considerable distress. Rabbi Meir was so upset that he prayed that the bandits would die. His wife, Beruria, questioned him, "What is your justification for such a prayer?" He responded, "Because it is written, 'Let sinners cease from the earth'" (Psalm 104.35).

She corrected him, "Is it written *chotim* (sinners)? No! Rather it is written "*chataim*" (that which causes sin). - - - Therefore, you should pray for the mercy of these boors so they should repent their wickedness. It is only in this way that the wicked will be no more!" (Babylonian Talmud, *Berakhot* 10a)

On this Shabbat *Zakhor*, this Sabbath of Remembrance, let us recall that our challenging task is two-fold: both to remember that there are always going to be people who are filled with violent rage and hatred that afflict the vulnerable among us and not to forget that the true evil is in the sin of cruelty, bigotry and injustice. People learn hurtful and hateful behavior. We can best eradicate anti-social behavior by teaching and nurturing that which is moral and ethical. Our mitzvah is to role-model compassionate and respectful behavior. Even so, will Amalek ever be truly erased from the world? For that we can only pray.

Shabbat Shalom.

Rick

Rabbi Rick Rheins