

The Memory of Amalek
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Beth Shalom, Cambridge
27 February 2010
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When I was teaching at Washington University in Saint Louis, I had an older colleague named Steven Schwartzschild who taught Jewish philosophy. He had an iconoclastic temperament and a sardonic sense of humor. Although he was an anti-Zionist from unreconstructed socialist commitments, he used to say that he liked to be in Israel for Purim, because the holiday is celebrated one day later in Jerusalem, a walled city, than it is in the rest of the country. That way, he said, “When it is Purim in Tel Aviv, I can be in Jerusalem, and when it is Purim in Jerusalem, I can be in Tel Aviv.” It was clearly not his favourite holiday.

And indeed, Purim is not free of problems. In antiquity and into the Middle Ages, there was a widespread custom for Jews to burn an effigy of Haman hanging on a gallows, which many Christians understandably interpreted as a blasphemous parody of the crucifixion.¹ Most of us will remember Purim on February 25 1994, when Dr Baruch Goldstein, living in Kiryat Arba near Hebron, entered a room serving as a mosque in the Cave of the Patriarchs and opened fire on Arabs in the midst of their worship, killing 29 and wounding some 150—in what he apparently thought was a re-enactment of the ending of the Book of Esther.

This year, my Purim was almost ruined by an article in last week’s *JC* about a bomb detonated two weeks ago (14 February) at a popular restaurant called “German Bakery” in Pune, India. Eight people were killed, and dozens were injured, many seriously. The headline of the *JC* article read, “Was the Indian bomb meant for Chabad?” a question raised because the restaurant was right across the street from the Chabad House. Here is the statement quoted from the Chabad Rabbi: “We recognised the sound of the bomb—it was like a Katyusha rocket sent from Hamas. . . . When we found out there were no Jewish or Israeli victims, *it was like Purim*. Five minutes before the blast some Israelis were headed there, but they came into Chabad House instead.”²

“When we found out there were no Jewish or Israeli victims, it was like Purim” - a day of celebration for the rabbi because no Jews were killed, only Haman, his 10 sons, 800 men in Shushan, and 75,000 in the rest of the empire, according to the Book of Esther (9:6,15,16), which the Chabad rabbi undoubtedly accepts as literal historical truth.

This mindset that values Jewish lives but not the lives of the rest of the human population brings us to Amalek. In enumerating the 613 commandments in his *Sefer ha-Mitzvot*, Maimonides identifies two separate “mitzvot” in our verses. First, to “Remember what Amalek did to you” (Deut 25:17). “By this injunction (Maimonides writes), we are commanded to remember what Amalek did to us in attacking us unprovoked. We are to speak

of this at all times, and to arouse the people to make war upon him and bid them to hate him, . . .so that hatred of him be not weakened or lessened with the passage of time.” The second commandment is “blot out the memory of Amalek from under the heaven” (Deut. 25:19). “By this injunction (Maimonides continues), we are commanded that among the descendants of Esau we are to exterminate only the seed of Amalek, male and female, young and old.”³

What does this have to do with the real world? Are these commandments ever observed? We find one answer in the rather harrowing account of Samuel that we heard from our Haftarah a few moments ago. Speaking in God’s name, Samuel orders the newly anointed King Saul to “attack Amalek. . . spare no one, but kill alike men and women, infants and sucklings, oxen and sheep, camels and asses” (1 Sam. 15:3). When Saul took Agag the Amalekite king as his prisoner— apparently disliking the principle that kings could be summarily executed—Samuel rebukes him, and personally hacks Agag to pieces (15:33). And of course Haman is identified as “the son of Hammedatha the Agagite”, a descendent of the Amalekite king; we know how his life ended.

And in the post-biblical period? There have been various suggestions to make these commandments more compatible with our ethical sense. It was once a common practice for observant Jews whenever they received a new pen to test it by writing the word “Amalek” and then crossing it out; this was their way of performing the mitzvah.⁴ But the biblical text clearly seems to be talking not just about a word, but about actual people. One medieval legal authority asserted that the commandment to exterminate the seed of Amalek would apply only in the messianic age and not at present, but most authorities rejected that view.⁵

If you ever have a serious theological discussion with an Orthodox Jew, you might ask him whether these commandments to hate and to exterminate apply today. He will probably respond there are no pure, authentic Amalekites in the world. But, you continue, “Just theoretically, what would you do if you met someone who told you he was returning from an Amalekite Pride Parade, and claimed to be a pure-blooded Amalekite, possessing a genealogical family tree going back to Hammedatha or to King Agag himself? Do you really believe that it would be God’s commandment to kill him?” That is an excruciating ethical-religious problem with which sensitive Orthodox Jews wrestle (though probably not that Rabbi from Chabad).

We are not Orthodox Jews, and we all know the answer to that question for ourselves. But let’s think of another context. As many of you know, I have published a rather large book called *Jewish Preaching in Times of War, 1800-2001*. Every Jewish preacher speaking when his country goes to war needs to decide about whether to use Amalek in the present context. The rhetorical decision to apply Amalek to a real enemy in war removes the enemy from the category of ordinary human beings living under a different government, and transforms them into an aggregate mythic figure as close to demonic as most Jewish discourse will allow. It also removes the conflict

from its political and military dimensions and transforms it into a holy war, validated by divine command. Indeed I have found this rhetorical use by Jewish preachers in the context of the Franco-Prussian War, the Spanish-American War, and World War I—in all of which it seems rather problematic in retrospect. The definition of the enemy as Amalek in World War II seems more justified.

And of course, as illustrated by Baruch Goldstein, we find a tendency among some of the extremist West Bank settlers. In 1980, a veteran from Gush Emunim wrote an article called “The Right to Hate” in the movement’s journal, stating “In every generation there is an Amalek. In our generation, our Amalek is the Arabs who oppose the renewal of our national existence in the land of our fathers.”⁶ And this rhetoric associating the Palestinians with Amalek continues in some circles today.⁷

In order to find a way out of this morass, let me share with you an insight that I first heard from an American woman named Sue Klau; she and her husband are major benefactors of the Hebrew Union College, especially its magnificent Cincinnati Library, the World Union for Progressive Judaism, and recently the Leo Baeck College. Once our conversation somehow turned to Amalek and the verses we read from the Torah, and Sue Klau raised a very simple question that I confess I had never thought of before. OK: the Amalekites did something terrible by attacking the weak stragglers, lagging behind the lines of the Israelite people as they moved through the wilderness. That was a cynical, cowardly thing to do. But, she continued, why did we allow the stragglers to remain unprotected? Why didn’t the rest of the people slow down rather than leave them behind? And if they simply couldn’t keep up, why didn’t we make certain that there were enough soldiers to protect them?

Suddenly the whole issue took on a new dimension for me. Why put all the blame on the enemy for this loss of life? Surely we shared some of the blame as well. Perhaps indeed it was a recognition of this fact on some level that produced a psychological reaction to over-compensate by demonizing the enemy to the point where they no longer deserved to live. Because every living Amalekite would be a reminder not only of their own cynical military tactics, but of our own dereliction of duty and responsibility.

And the same approach can be used in the Purim story? The entire narrative is triggered by the Mordecai’s refusal to obey the king’s command to bow before the royal official Haman as all the other courtiers did. Medieval Jewish commentators were puzzled by this, noting that Abraham bowed before the Hittites (Gen. 23:6), and that contemporary Jewish courtiers bowed to royal officials every day. The only explanation they could find was that Haman had pinned an idolatrous image on his cloak, knowing that Mordecai could not bow before the idol, in order to foment the trouble⁸—an explanation, obviously not in the biblical narrative, shifting the blame to a descendant of Amalek, rather than examining the possibly reckless and arrogant behaviour of the Jew.

Sue Klau's question suggested to me a different approach to Amalek: not to be content with projecting all evil onto an eternal enemy, but to make Amalek a vehicle for self-examination and even self-criticism. I published in my book a powerful sermon by David Einhorn, a Reform Rabbi who emigrated from Germany to the United States. He delivered it in Philadelphia on 19 March 1864, when our *parashah* was read, and he called his sermon "War With Amalek". In the midst of the Civil War, he certainly could have applied Amalek to the enemy. Instead, he insists that the war against Amalek is a war against the enslavement of race (slavery); a war against the enslavement of conscience (religious prejudice); war against the enslavement of the spirit (worldliness, materialism, including a denunciation of Jewish profiteering and smuggling). In this way, he uses Amalek not to demonize of the army of the enemy, but to criticize elements of his own society, and indeed the behaviour of some from his own people.⁹

There is a haunting statement by Chief Rabbi Hertz, in a sermon he delivered on Rosh Hashanah 1918, when the end of the Great War was not yet in sight: "Blessed is the people that in its conflict with Amalek, does not copy the ways of Amalek."¹⁰ How resonant that sentence sounds when we think of Guantanamo, civilians in Iraq and Afghanistan killed not just by the enemy but by our own forces, and—dare I say it—the assassination in Dubai of a leader from Hamas. "Blessed is the people that in its conflict with Amalek, does not copy the ways of Amalek."

So let us celebrate in joy the Purim holiday tonight. But let us be aware of the potential in that holiday, and in our Torah verses, for constructing a mythical enemy on whom we can project all of our own capacity for negligence, recklessness, and evil. As we remember what Amalek did to us, let us also remember that statement attributed to Walt Kelly's comic strip character Pogo, "I have met the enemy, and he is us."

¹ Cecil Roth, "The Feast of Purim and the Origins of the Blood Accusation", *Speculum* 8 (1933: 520–26), reprinted in *The Blood Libel Legend*, ed. Alan Dundes (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), pp. 261–72.

² *Jewish Chronicle*, 19 February 2010, p. 10.

³ Moses Maimonides, *The Commandments: Sefer ha-Mitzvot*, Positive commandments 188 and 189, ed. Charles Chavel (London: Soncino Press, 1967), 1:202–203.

⁴ See Elliott Horowitz, *Reckless Rites: Purim and the Legacy of Jewish Violence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 107–9.

⁵ See *Hagahot Maimuniyot* on Maimonides, *Hilkhot Melakhim* 5,5, rejected by RaDBaZ ad loc. Cf. Horowitz, *Reckless Rites*, p. 134 on subsequent Codes omitting the legal obligation to destroy the descendants of Amalek.

⁶ Ian Lustick, *For the Land and the Lord: Jewish Fundamentalism in Israel* (New York: Council of Foreign Relations Books, 1988, citing *Nekudah*, No. 15, August 28, 1980, p. 12

⁷ Horowitz, *Reckless Rites*, pp. 1–4, 145–46.

⁸ See on this Barry Walfish, *Esther in Medieval Garb* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), p. 161, and for a fuller survey, Horowitz, *Reckless Rites*, pp. 63–80.

⁹ Marc Saperstein, *Jewish Preaching in Times of War* (Oxford: Littman Library 2008), pp. 210–21.

¹⁰ Joseph H. Hertz, *Sermons, Addresses and Studies*, 3 vols. (London: Soncino Press, 1938), 1:32,33). On Hertz's use of Amalek in war-time sermons and his Torah commentary, see Horowitz, *Reckless Rites*, pp. 137–39, 143.