



Combating Cruelty: Amalek Within and Without

Rabbi Shai Held

Appalled by its savage offensive against Israel, the Torah considers Amalek a perpetual enemy of both God and Israel. While Amalek's behavior is undoubtedly abhorrent, there is something worrying about both the depth and the duration of hatred prescribed: If Amalek is detestable, why must its children be denounced as enemies of God? And by mandating Israel to kill every last Amalekite, does not the Torah run the risk of inculcating in Israel the very cruelty it so detests? To read the Torah's troubling charge to wipe out Amalek is, of necessity, to struggle with it.



Inching closer to Mount Sinai after their miraculous liberation from Egypt, the Israelites are attacked by Amalek, and a heated battle ensues. While Moses holds up God's staff, Joshua and his troops defeat the enemy (Exodus 17:8-13). But Amalek's aggression leaves an indelible scar. God instructs Moses, "Inscribe this in a document as a reminder,¹ and read it aloud to Joshua: I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven!" Moses builds an altar and names it *Hashem-nissi* (The Lord is my banner): "It means, 'Hand upon the throne of the Lord!' The Lord will be at war with Amalek throughout the ages" (17:14-16).

¹ This is, interestingly, the first reference in the Torah to anyone writing anything.



Walter Brueggemann explains that “the altar and the banner are to make it clear for all time that hostility toward Amalek is deep, for perpetuity, and authorized by [God].”²

The logic of these verses is difficult to discern. Other nations treat Israel cruelly but do not thereby become objects of enduring enmity. Edom, for example, callously refuses Israel passage through its land (Numbers 20:14-21), yet Israel is taught: “You shall not abhor an Edomite, for he is your brother” (Deuteronomy 23:8).³ Egypt enslaves and oppresses Israel for generations, yet the Torah commands: “You shall not abhor an Egyptian, for you were a stranger in his land” (23:8). Why is Amalek different? What is it about Amalek’s attack that so incurs the wrath of God?

Exodus offers no obvious answers. According to one scholar, “we have no evidence of more than conventional conflict, and nothing is noticeably barbaric in the relationship between the two peoples.”⁴ But Bible scholar Stephen Chapman finds Exodus’ silence about the impetus for Amalek’s assault highly suggestive. On his account, “the Amalekite attack may have been perceived as particularly egregious precisely because there was no cause for it.”⁵ Yet the text may hint at another explanation. Moses tells Joshua that before the battle he will station

² Walter Brueggemann, “Exodus,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 1 (1994), p. 820.

³ I have explored the troubling dynamic between Edom and Israel in “Putting Down Ancient Grudges (and Learning Kindness): Between Israel and Edom,” CJLI Parashat Hukkat 5775, available [here](#).

⁴ Brueggemann, “Exodus,” p. 820.

⁵ Stephen B. Chapman, “Perpetual War: The Case of Amalek,” in J. Gordon McConville, et al, eds., *The Bible and Spirituality: Exploratory Essays in Reading Scripture Spiritually* (2013), pp. 1-19; passage cited is on p. 12. Cf. Deuteronomy 25:18’s use of “*karkha*,” or “fell upon you,” to suggest the total unexpectedness of Amalek’s offensive. Chapman adds, astutely, that “the abruptness of this story’s introduction into the Exodus narrative... mirrors the abruptness of the Amalekite incursion.” I do not find Chapman’s broader arguments that Exodus and Deuteronomy intend for Amalek to be taken “symbolically” convincing (though I wish I did).



himself on top of the hill “with the staff
(*matteh*) of God in [his] hand” (Exodus

Amalek is Pharaoh redivivus.

17:8). Victory, as we’ve seen, is tied to Moses’ raising his hand (*yado*) (17:11-12). The centrality of Moses’ hand and staff in the story calls to mind Israel’s recent departure from Egypt. When the sea is about to be split so that the Israelites may cross, God instructs Moses, “You lift up your rod (*matteh*) and hold out your hand (*yadkha*) over the sea and split it” (14:16).⁶ In light of the parallel, Terence Fretheim suggests that what we have in our story is “Pharaonic conflict revisited... Pharaoh may be dead, but Israel is not thereby forever free from such chaotic powers embodied in historical enemies.”⁷ In its savage strike against Israel, Amalek makes clear that the brutality of Egypt lives on; Amalek is thus “Pharaoh redivivus.”⁸

But if Amalek is hated because it is akin to Egypt, why is Egypt itself not reviled in the same way? Perhaps the answer lies in the timing of Amalek’s attack. Israel has just been liberated from Egypt; in the wake of that stunning event, the nations of the world have heard of God’s salvation and are “trembling” in fear (15:14).⁹ The Israelites are on their way to Sinai and from there to the Promised Land. Amalek strikes at precisely the moment that God’s promises are about to be fulfilled. Cornelius Houtman observes that “Amalek’s attack is essentially an attempt to cut short the exodus out of Egypt and to frustrate the fulfillment of

⁶ Cf. also Exodus 14:21, 26-27.

⁷ Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus* (1991), p. 192. Fretheim adds that in contrast to Israel’s experience at the sea, when it could rely entirely on God’s salvation, this time “trustworthy human leadership and active community defense will be needed to join with the divine will in the elimination of such an evil threat.”

⁸ Cornelius Houtman, *Exodus*, vol. 2 (2011), p. 377.

⁹ Cf. the comments of Rashi (1040-1105) to Deuteronomy 25:18 and Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Devarim-Deuteronomy*, trans. Aryeh Newman (1993), pp. 254-256.



Amalek commits the ultimate crime: the promises.” For this reason, according to
They are merciless to the weak. Houtman, Amalek becomes not just *any*
enemy but “*the enemy*.”¹⁰

Deuteronomy offers another explanation (and justification) of Amalek’s ignominious status. Parashat Ki Teitzei concludes with a fiery mandate: “Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey, after you left Egypt—how, undeterred by fear of God, he fell upon you on the march, when you were famished and weary, and cut down all the stragglers in your rear.” Israel is charged to act on this horrific memory: “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 memory¹¹ of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget!” (Deuteronomy 25:17-19). (Note the important shift: Where in Exodus God had pledged to wipe out Amalek, in Deuteronomy God assigns the task to Israel.) In cutting down the stragglers in the rear, Amalek commits what to Deuteronomy is the ultimate crime: “They [are] merciless to the weak.”¹² To attack a long-degraded people just as it is given its first taste of freedom would be bad enough, but Amalek goes much further: It specifically

¹⁰ Cornelius Houtman, *Exodus*, vol. 2 (2011), pp. 370, 377. In a related vein, Benno Jacob understands Amalek as seeking to prevent the revelation at Sinai, where, it feared, Israel’s covenant with God would render it “invincible.” It thus “sought to minimize, or remove, the glory of Sinai from Israel.” Benno Jacob, *The Second Book of the Bible: Exodus*, trans. Walter Jacob and Yaakov Elman (1992), p. 488. Jacob adds that Israel was not only a refugee but also a “pilgrim to Sinai. A pilgrim dedicated to God must not be harmed; this has been universally accepted” (490). If only.

¹¹ The Hebrew “*zekher*” actually means “name” but is derived from the root meaning remembrance. Robert Alter rightly notes that “it is important to retain the idea of remembering in translation because the [text] is pointedly playing with ‘remembrance... do not forget.’” Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (2004), p. 1003. Because that play is absent in Exodus, Alter renders *zekher* there as “name.”

¹² Christopher J.H. Wright, *Deuteronomy* (1996), p. 267.



directs its assault against those who lag behind—the elderly, the very young, the ailing, etc.—and thus betrays a lack of “even the most elementary decency.”¹³ To set upon the weak in this way “is a sign of extreme human callousness, which in turn is evidence of no fear of God.”¹⁴ Amalek thus represents everything Deuteronomy hopes Israel itself will not be.¹⁵ Where Amalek is barbarous and cruel, Israel is to build a society in which the weak and defenseless are protected and cared for.¹⁶ Israel disdains Amalek, but at least as important, *it disdains what Amalek stands for*.

In the Jewish imagination, Amalek comes to be *Israel disdains what Amalek stands*
seen as the “archetype of murderous evil,”¹⁷ *for*.

¹³ Jeffrey H. Tigay, *Deuteronomy* (1996), p. 236. In light of our verses, Benno Jacob maintains that Amalek’s behavior was in fact worse than Egypt’s: “Egyptian oppression of Israel and his restraint of Israel from the service of God was motivated by ‘national interest.’... The Amalekites were dogs who yelped after refugees and sought to bite their legs; this was not a political enemy, but rather a moral pariah.” Jacob, *Exodus*, p. 490.

¹⁴ Wright, *Deuteronomy*, p. 267-268. The striking assumption of the text is that all nations—and not just Israel—are “assumed to be morally accountable to God for fundamental norms of human behavior.” In other words, “the Amalekites are to be judged... not just because they had been *anti-Israel*, but because they had been *anti-human* by disregarding basic human obligations instilled by the creator God” (268). Cf. also the oracles against the nations in Amos 1-2. Richard Nelson writes similarly that “the ethical horizon [of our text] is universal, transcending narrow ethnic rivalries. Amalek committed a ‘war crime,’ a violation of universally accepted principles of war.” Richard D. Nelson, *Deuteronomy: A Commentary* (2002), p. 302.

¹⁵ Diana Lipton observes that when Israel is settled in the land, “it is the socially deprived who correspond to the weak and sick at the back of the line that left Egypt.” Diana Lipton, “Remembering Amalek: A Positive Biblical Model for Dealing with Negative Scriptural Types,” in David F. Ford and Graham Stanton, eds., *Reading Texts, Seeking Wisdom: Scripture and Theology* (2004), pp.140-153; passage cited is on p. 149. I am not persuaded by Lipton’s (noble) attempt to relocate Deuteronomy’s concern entirely from what happened to Israel in the past to how Israel itself will behave in the future.

¹⁶ On the social-theological vision of Deuteronomy, cf. what I have written in in “Opening Our Hearts and Our Hands: Deuteronomy and the Poor,” CJLI Parashat Re’eh 5774, available [here](#); “Let Him Live Wherever He Chooses, Or: Why Runaway Slave are Like God,” CJLI Parashat Ki Teitzei 5774, available [here](#); and “Turning Memory into Empathy,” CJLI Parashat Mishpatim 5774, available [here](#).

¹⁷ Jon D. Levenson, “Is There a Counterpart in the Hebrew Bible to New Testament Anti-Semitism?” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 22 (1985), pp. 242-260; passage cited is on p. 249.



“the personification of eternal inhumanity and lack of scruples.”¹⁸ Thus, for example, the genocidal Haman is said to be descended from Agag, an Amalekite king (Esther 3:1). For Rabbinic tradition, Amalek represents a kind of cosmic evil: A Talmudic Sage teaches that “as long as the descendants of Amalek are in the world, neither the Name [of God] nor the throne [of God] is whole. When the descendants of Amalek have disappeared, the Name is whole and the throne is whole” (Tanhuma, Ki Teitzei, 10).¹⁹ There is something profoundly disturbing about all this. It is one thing to abhor Amalek’s inhumanity; it is quite another to condemn all Amalekites, present and future, as eternal enemies of God.

Two competing impulses play themselves out in Rabbinic texts. On the one hand, as we’ve seen, there is the insistence that

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Amalek is a monster, and must therefore remain a pariah for all eternity. This is intended to have concrete, this-worldly ramifications. As the Talmudic Sage R. Eliezer teaches, “If anyone from any of the nations of the world comes to convert [to Judaism], they must accept him, but from the House of Amalek, they must not accept him” (Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, Amalek 2). Yet on the other hand, a softer Rabbinic voice declares that “descendants of Haman studied Torah [among the Rabbis] in Benei-Berak” (BT, Gittin 57b and Sanhedrin 96b).²⁰ As Avi Sagi explains, “according to this source, descendants of Amalek were not only accepted as

¹⁸ Jacob, *Exodus*, p. 491.

¹⁹ R. Abba b. Hanina derives this idea through a remarkable midrashic interpretation. Exodus 17:16 refers to God’s throne with the term “*kes*” instead of the usual “*kisei*” and to God as “YH” instead of the fuller “YHWH”—thus neither God’s throne nor God’s name is “complete” (*shalem*).

²⁰ Cf. Jon Levenson, “Is There A Counterpart,” pp. 249-252.



converts, but also belonged to the cultural elite of the Jewish people and were counted among its most distinguished teachers.”²¹

Unease with the idea that God would command Israel to hate one particular nation for all time leads some traditional thinkers to interpret the mandate to blot out Amalek symbolically. R. Moshe Avigdor Amiel (1883-1946), for example, sees an eternal struggle between the culture of the book, on the one hand, and the culture of the sword, on the other; whereas Israel represents the former, Amalek stands for the latter. The triumph of the book over the sword is Judaism’s ultimate ideal. Since the sword cannot ultimately be abolished by the sword—“Evil cannot be extirpated by evil means”—what Israel aspires to is a cultural victory, when the brutality and barbarism embodied by the sword will finally be defeated.²²

***We may become the very thing we
set out to combat.***

There is another mode of interpretation which is at once symbolic and concrete. During the Shoah many Jewish thinkers equated

anti-semitism with Amalek.²³ One can easily imagine a Jewish thinker extending the image in a more generalized way to people who behave in monstrous ways, brazenly and remorselessly attacking the innocent. (Think, for example, of ISIS.) This is eminently understandable: Amalek is the rhetorical device in Judaism’s arsenal for speaking of utter

²¹ Avi Sagi, “The Punishment of Amalek in the Jewish Tradition: Coping with the Moral Problem,” *Harvard Theological Review* 87 (1994), pp. 323-346; passage cited is on p. 338.

²² Moshe Avigdor Amiel, *Derashot El Ami*, volume 3 (1964), p. 132. And cf. Sagi, “The Punishment of Amalek,” pp. 333-334, who labels this “the conceptual trend” in Jewish interpretation of Amalek. Cf. also the comments of R. Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) to Exodus 17:14 and Deuteronomy 25:17, 19.

²³ Mendel Piekarz, *Hasidut Polin Bein Shtei Milhamot Ha-Olam* (Hebrew) (1990). p. 327.



ruthlessness and inhumanity. And yet such moves are also extremely dangerous: In labeling someone an Amalekite, and thus raising them to the level of metaphysical evil, we run the risk of giving ourselves license to behave in savage ways in attempting to root out savagery. In the process we may become the very thing we set out to combat.

If we wish to employ the language of evil, we must be vigilant lest it pave the way for us to behave in evil ways. The Hasidic Master Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev (1740-1809) teaches: “It seems that not only are the Children of Israel commanded to blot out Amalek, but also every individual Jew must blot out that evil part called ‘Amalek’ which is hidden in his heart. As long as the seed of Amalek is in the world, since a person is a miniature world (a microcosm), Amalek exists in the evil potential within the person, which awakens anew again and again to cause him to sin” (Kedushat Levi, Purim). Although Levi Yitzhak no doubt intends to offer a psychological-spiritual interpretation of the mandate to blot out Amalek,²⁴ his comments have important implications for the moral-political realm as well. We should not invoke the language of Amalek—and of evil more generally—unless and until we are willing to recognize “the evil potential” within ourselves as well.²⁵

Shabbat Shalom.

²⁴ Gershom Scholem notes that Hasidic thought in general tends to be marked by a turn inward, whereby theological concepts are often interpreted in psychological terms. Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (1974), pp. 340-341.

²⁵ Stephen Chapman tries to learn a similar lesson from the Torah itself. Noting that Amalek is descended from Esau (Genesis 36:12), he writes: “Although the demonization of Amalek is real, it carries with it an impulse toward self-examination. Is Israel finally completely different from Amalek? How could that be, since they both descend from common stock?” Chapman, “Perpetual War,” p. 15.



See Shai Held's other *divrei Torah* on parashat Ki Teitzei:

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