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Center for Modern Torah Leadership



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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

AMALEK AND EVIL By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

Whatever the so-called International Court of Justice's interim ruling on the genocide accusation – you will know their decision before reading this – two things should be clear. The first is that Israel is not committing genocide in Gaza. The second is that it was and is incredibly irresponsible for Israelis, whether they be Prime Minister, cabinet ministers, rabbis, or just people, to say anything that can be plausibly misunderstood to indicate that they would commit genocide, or believe that genocide could be justified.

This is also true for Jewish Zionists everywhere, and especially in America. We are blessed with a body politic much less morally absurd than the ICJ. But we also need to maintain positive support and not just avoid negative verdicts.

In my honest opinion, the use of Amalek as an analogy for any current situation violates our responsibility. Moreover, it is sometimes in fact a dogwhistle to the worst elements of our community.

I appreciate and understand why [Summer Beit Midrash alum \(and Atlantic columnist\) Yair Rosenberg](#) and other serious people have defended PM Netanyahu's use of the term. It is certainly true that the commandment in Devarim to blot out the memory of Amalek does not automatically translate into the attempted genocide of 1 Samuel. My friend [Rabbi David Debow](#) argues further on his Times of Israel blog that the Torah categorizes the war with Amalek as eternal (*from generation to generation*) to teach us that ideologies cannot be wiped out militarily, But the merits of these arguments cannot disguise the fact that they apparently require separating the meaning of Torah from halakhah.

The strongest argument I've heard for continuing to use the Amalek analogy is that it serves as a necessary reminder that evil genuinely exists. That argument assumes that Amalek is a unique signifier of evil in Jewish tradition. I challenge two aspects of that assumption below.

Amalek came and gave battle to Israel in Refidim . . .
Yehoshua weakened Amalek and his nation by swordmouth . . .
It happened that when Mosheh raised his arm – Israel triumphed,
but when (he) lowered his arm – Amalek triumphed . . .
Aharon and Chur supported (Mosheh's) arms . . .
Hashem said to Mosheh:
Write this as a memorial in a scroll,
and place (it) in the ears of Yehoshua
that I will surely erase the memory of Amalek from under the
heavens . . .

The account of the war with Amalek in this week's parshah resembles a G-rated movie trailer. There are no explicit deaths on either side. What happens to Amalek is described, perhaps euphemistically, as "weakening". There are no women. The major action scene (probably) focuses on appealing to G-d. G-d gets the key line of dialogue.

It's unclear why any of this would appeal to viewers of the Plagues miniseries, which is famed for special effects, the sharply drawn characters-in-conflict of Mosheh and Pharaoh, and the terrifying Massacre of the Firstborn. Nonetheless, the trailer ends with a promise or threat of infinite sequels.

The second trailer, released in Sefer Devarim, Parshat Ki Teitzei, mostly adds to our confusion. It's a sort of flashback in which none of the characters from Beshalach reappear – no Mosheh, Yehoshua, Aharon, or Chur. Amalek is presented as picking off stragglers rather than as offering battle. The obligation to remember Amalek is transferred from Yehoshua to all Israel, while the commandment to destroy the remembrance of Amalek is apparently transferred from G-d to all Israel. However, Israel's obligation is suspended pending a hypothetical future in which the Jews are ensconced in the Land of Israel with peace on all its borders.

In Star Wars fashion (*l'havdil*), Nakh presents two sequels even though the original movie was never released.

1Shmuel 15 harks back to Devarim but take place several centuries later. Shmuel tells Shaul that G-d recalls (*pkd* rather than *zakar*, however) what Amalek did in the original war and (therefore) has commanded its extirpation. Shaul defeats Amalek and massacres them entire, but he and 'the nation' choose to spare its king Agag and best cattle. Shmuel informs Shaul that this choice has ended his reign and dynasty. Shmuel then kills Agag in a dramatic and bloody scene, and so far as we know Amalek is finished.

Megillat Esther does not mention the name Amalek, but refers to Haman five times as "the Aggagite". Tradition understands this to mean that Agag sired a child during the time that Shaul spared him, and that Haman is a direct descendant of that child. (Note: "Amalekites" also appear twice in Shmuel **after** Shaul's war, but as "the Field of Amalek" also appears in Bereishit 14:7, its not clear that the valence is consistently ethnic.)

The plot of Esther initially seems parallel to Shemot. Amalek initiates the war, and the Jews respond with human initiatives

explicitly dependent on G-d's help. But the last several chapters are mostly graphic mass killing and execution scenes. This perhaps forces us to recognize that the fundamental driver of the action in the book is the rape culture modeled by King Achashverosh, which Haman takes advantage of, and Esther redirects (because only the king is entitled to rape her). Megillat Esther is anything but G-rated.

Nothing anywhere in the story arc explains Amalek's motivation directly. Some Chazalic texts suggest that Amalek became the repository of Esav's worst feeling about his brother Yaakov. Others suggest that his mother Timna was a rejected convert who took rejection badly; her reaction is presented as overdone but not wholly unjustifiable.

Bil'am's stand-alone movie provides an Easter egg describing Amalek as *reishit goyim*. Oddly, Rashi does not list Amalek as one of the things for which the world was created, "*b'reishit*", even though he does mention Israel as "*reishit tevuato*". But many others understand Bil'am as establishing some sort of parallel between Israel and Amalek. Here is Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch going full Hegel:

Yehoshua only weakened Amalek,
whose ultimate downfall will happen only in the end-days.
Israel had also not matured sufficiently.
Until Israel achieves adulthood,
there is a need for the existence of Amalek as an opposition,
for the sake of Israel's development.

Rav Hirsch (along with the majority of halakhists) recognizes a distinct eschatological tinge throughout the narratives and laws regarding Amalek. Bil'am predicts that Amalek's *acharit* will be utter devastation, but *acharit* itself suggests that this will happen at the **very** end. Shaul and Shmuel apparently wipe out Amalek, and yet Haman happens. Both Beshalach and Ki Teitzei contain contradictory obligations of memory and erasure of memory, and Beshalach seems to suggest an eternal war.

If the obligation to wipe out Amalek is eschatological; especially if Rambam is correct that it can be fulfilled either by converting them or by killing them; and especially if Rav Hirsch is correct that Israel cannot develop properly in the absence of Amalek, why did Shmuel order Shaul to attempt a genocide? The halakhic explanation that this was a *bor'at sha'ab*, a one-time measure rather than an attempt to fulfill the law, only intensifies the question.

The best explanation I can see is that Shmuel thought he was living in the end-time, *yemot hamoshiach*. His original opposition to the monarchy was based on a sense that the Jews were not fully mature yet as a people, and therefore not ready for an anointed king/*moshiach*. But Shaul's success in rallying them against the Pelishtim changed his mind. That's why he takes it so hard when Shaul fails. Shmuel – and through him, the Jewish people – needs to learn that there is a very long way between a successful king

and a Messiah, and everything goes blooey when we mistake one for the other. This lesson is reinforced when Shaul dies in a battle that seemingly reverses all his military accomplishments. (Lest the lesson be taken too far, G-d also insists that Shmuel anoint Shaul's successor. It is necessary to hope for and believe in the possibility of the Messiah.)

Why is Amalek's continued existence necessary in ordinary time? The most parsimonious explanation is that Amalek's continued existence reminds us that the times are not Messianic, that much work remains to be done before Jewish and world society can deserve Redemption. In such times, the halakhah agrees with Rabbi Debow that total violence is no solution, and calls for the physical destruction of Amalek are a marker of false messianism.

Amalek is therefore the symbol of **ordinary** evil in Jewish tradition. Amalek *arrives* in Beshalach as the rude awakening for a Jewish people that believes it can demand miracles from G-d. Ordinary villains seek out weakness rather than head-on attacking the center of the enemy's strength. The Jewish people are defined in part by our hope for Messiah, which entails a belief in the possibility of progress. Ordinary villains deny progress. Amalek is not the symbol of extraordinary evil.

We have better candidates for that position, and better traditional analogies to current villains and evils. For example, as Rabbi Jonathan Ziring pointed out to me, Pharaoh's depraved indifference to his people's suffering during the Plagues is right on point for Hamas and Gazans. But we have no record of Amalek on this issue. Similarly, while Eikhah 5:11 describes rape as a Babylonian weapon of war, Amalek is never associated with misogyny.

Two elements nonetheless make the Amalek analogy attractive nowadays. The first is the Soloveitchik family derashah that takes Haman as the exclusively defining representation of Amalek, and therefore associates Amalek with all forms of genocidal antisemitism. The second is the belief that we in fact live in protoMessianic times.

I have explained many times why the first is wrong – see for example <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/how-not-to-talk-about-amalek/>. Surely anyone who reads the Haggadah understands that Lavan is at least as good a symbol of genocidal antisemitism. (Amalek is also a grandchild of Esav and unrelated to Yishmael). But I understand why and how the analogy can be defended. Rhetoric can be defensible in principle and yet irresponsible in context.

The graver danger is that we repeat the mistake of Shmuel HaNavi, and risk subjecting the state of Israel to the fate of Shaul. (Like Shmuel, we might then blame the State for not being genocidal enough). And as we are not prophets, this time we might have a very long wait for the next annointee.

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