

Targum 'Yonatan' to Devarim 25:17-19

(יז) הוּו דכירין ית דעבדו לכוּן דבית עמלק בארחה במפקכוּן ממצרים:

(יח) דארעו יתכוּן בארחה והוּו קטיל בכוּן כל דהוּו מהרהר למסטי בתר מימרי הינוּן גובריא משבטא דבית דן דהוּו בידיהוּן פולחנא נוכראה והוּו עננא פליט יתהוּן ודבית עמלק מקבל יתהוּן וקטע בית גבריהוּן ושדי לעילא ואתוּן בית ישראל הוּויתוּן לעיין ומשלהין מסוגי שעבודא דמצראי ומן דלוּחי גלילי ימא דעברתוּן במצעהוּן ולא דחלוּן בית עמלק מן קדם יי:

(יט) ויהי כד יניח יי אלהכוּן לכוּן מן כל בעלי דבכיכוּן מן חזור חזור בארעא דיי אלהכוּן יהיב לכוּן אחסנא למירתה תמחוּן ית דוכרנא דעמלק מתחות שמיא ואפילו ליומי מלכא משיחא לא תתנשי:

Be mindful of that which the House of Amalek did to you on the way when you were going out of Egypt, that they met you on the way and would kill all those among you whose thoughts strayed after the words of those men of the Tribe of Dan who had idols in their hands, so that the Cloud would eject them, and the House of Amalek would receive them and cut off their manhoods and throw them upward, when you the House of Israel were tired and worn out from the suffering of your slavery in Egypt and from the travails of the waves of the sea you passed through the middle of, and the House of Amalek did not fear G-d. Now when Hashem your G-d gives you rest from all the enemies all round you, in the land that Hashem your G-d is giving you as a home to inherit, you must erase the memory of Amalek from under the Heavens, and even in the days of the Messianic King you must not forget.

The Etz Chaim chumash published by the Conservative movement some years ago includes separate sections for “Pshat” and “Drash”. Parshat Zakhor provides an excellent example of the confusion those terms engender. In the “pshat” commentary”, we are informed that Amalek was a nomadic group who feared that the Israelites were infringing on their trade routes, whereas in the “drash”, we are told that Amalek’s attack was motiveless and thus can serve as a useful metaphor for anti-Semitism.

Presumably the authors intend by this that the historical Amalek had a motive, but as Jews in subsequent centuries experienced motiveless anti-Semitism, it became more meaningful to see Amalek as the historical exemplar of such motiveless anti-Semitism.

Now the texts of Shmot and Devarim never mention any motive for Amalek’s actions, and indeed seem to go out of their way to avoid doing so. In what sense, then, can the trade-route motive be called “pshat”? It seems clear to me that what we have here is not a literary interpretation, but rather an attempt to counter the text. In other words, Chumash asserts, or at least wants us to react as if, Amalek was motiveless, but we know that this is not true historically. This seems ironic – why should we believe in motiveless anti-Semitism in other historical circumstances, where we often have the antiSemites self-justifications, and yet not in chumash? Calling that interpretation derash seems to be a way of distancing ourselves from it, or perhaps of distancing chumash from it.

A somewhat parallel ambivalence is betrayed in the fascinating midrash at the core of the Targum Yonatan to Parashat Zakhor. This midrash, working within the presumption that the Jews travelled within the Cloud of Glory, which made them impervious to attack, wonders why Amalek was any concern. The answer is that there were Jews who, because of their inclination to idolatry (a reference to yet another midrash and the story of Pesel Mikhah at the end of the Judges), were spit out by the

cloud. Amalek would take these Jews and cut off their genitals, i.e. their circumcisions, and throw them up toward Heaven. It was to protect those Jews that Mosheh commanded Yehoshua to leave the cloud and battle Amalek, and it is the memory of those Jews that we are commanded to battle Amalek eternally, and not forget this even in the time of the Messianic king.

So Amalek could harm only those Jews who deserved harm, and we needed to protect, and now remember the harm done to, only those Jews whom G-d Himself refused to protect. What, then, was the great evil of Amalek?

There is a sense in which this is just a version of the broader issue of how humans can ever be held responsible for their actions if every action is part of G-d's plan. The locus classicus for this discussion is how the Egyptians could be punished for enslaving the Jews if that slavery was foretold in the Covenant Between the Pieces.

But I think there is also a sense in which this midrash is working on a different theological plane, namely how we can justify G-d for allowing us to suffer at the hands of others without justifying those others in inflicting that harm. The solution here is that anti-Semitism specifically is always an attack on G-d, and so culpable. Anti-Semites see Jews as the People of G-d no matter how badly they behave, even if they have incontrovertible evidence that G-d dislikes them, and see their capacity to harm Jews as a triumph over Him.

It therefore becomes a religious obligation to protect Jews from harm, even, perhaps especially, when they do not deserve Divine protection.

Shabbat shalom

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