

שמות פרק יז:ח-טז

וַיִּבֹא עַמְלֵק וַיִּלָּחֶם עִם יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּרִפְדִּים:

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל יְהוָה בְּתוֹךְ לִנּוּ אֲנִי יֵם וְצָא הַלָּחֶם בְּעַמְלֵק! מִחֲשָׁנִי כִּי נִצָּב עַל רֹאשׁ הַגִּבְעָה וְהִנֵּמְטָה הָאֵל -
הֵים בְּיָדִי:

וַיַּעַשׂ יְהוָה כְּדִבְרֵי מֹשֶׁה וַיִּלָּחֶם בְּעַמְלֵק וּמֹשֶׁה אֶתְּרֹן נְחֹר עָלָיו רֹאשׁ הַגִּבְעָה:

וַתָּהָה כָּאֲשֶׁר יָרִים מֹשֶׁה יָדוֹ וְגִבֹר יִשְׂרָאֵל וְכָאֲשֶׁר יָנִיחַ יָדוֹ וְגִבֹר עַמְלֵק:

וַיִּדְּי מֹשֶׁה הַכֹּבְדִים וַיִּקְחוּ אֶבֶן וַיִּשְׂימוּ תַּחְשִׁיב עָלֶיהָ וְאֶתְּרֹן נְחֹר תָּמְכוּ בְּיָדָיו מִזֶּה אֶתְּד וּמִזֶּה אֶתְּד וַיְהִי יָדָיו
אֶמֻנָה עַד בֹּא הַשָּׁמֶשׁ:

וַיִּתֵּלֶשׁ יְהוָה עִתָּה עַמְלֵק וְאֵת עַמְלֵק וְאֵת עַמּוֹ לְפִי תִרְבִּי: פ

וַיֹּאמֶר הָאֵל מֹשֶׁה הִכָּלֹתִיב זֹאת זָכְרוֹן בְּסֵפֶר מִזְמֹר יְהוָה עִי מִחֲזֵה אֲמַתָּה אֵת זָכָר עַמְלֵק מִתַּחַת
הַשָּׁמַיִם:

וַיִּבֶן מֹשֶׁה פֶּהַח וַיִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ ה'נְסִי:

וַיֹּאמֶר: לִפִּי יָד עַל פֶּסַח מִלַּחֲמָה לְדַבַּעַמְלֵק מִדֹּר דֹּר: פ

דברים פרק כה:יז-יט

זָכוֹר אֵת אֲשֶׁה עָלָה עַמְלֵק בְּדַרְךְךָ בְּצֵאתְךָ מִמִּצְרָיִם:

אֲשֶׁר קָרָךְ בְּדַרְךְךָ וַיִּזְנֶב בְּךָ כָּל הַנָּתַשׁ לִים אֶתְרִיךָ וְאֶתָּה עִיר וַיִּגַּע וְלֹא יָרָא אֵל-הֵים:

וַתָּהָה בְּהִנֵּית ה'אֵלֶיךָ לֶךְ מִכָּל אֲיִהֶפֶסֶדֶיב בְּאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר יִהְיֶה לְךָ נִתְּלָה לְרִשְׁתָּהּ תִּמְתָּה אֵת זָכָר

עַמְלֵק מִתַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם לֹא תִשָּׁכַח: פ

פירוש אברבנאל לדברים כה:יז

1. . . . ואם לפי שה' יתברך בעצמו אמר
2. "כתוב זאת זכרון בספר ושים באזני יהושע כי מחה אמה את זכר עמלק",
3. שהוא המורה שיריב עמו לא בחיל ולא בכח כי אם ברוחו,
4. הנה להסיר מהם המחשבה הזאת
5. אמר כאן "זכור את אשר עשה לך עמלק",
6. רוצה לומר
7. "אל תאמר בלבבך
8. 'מלחמה לה' וישראל ישכון לבטח,
9. אין לי בזה דבר',
10. כי הנה עמלק לא היתה כוונתו כי אם למחוק זרעכם ושמכם מן העולם,
11. ועמכם נלחם לא אם הא-ל,
12. ולכן לכם תאות הנקמה ממנו.
13. ואין חיוב הזכירה ליהושע כי אם במה שהוא שר צבא העם.
14. וכלל עוד במאמר הזה כונה שנית, והוא
15. שהאדם שקבל חמס ועלבון מן אדם אחר,
16. וירצה להנקם ממנו,
17. צריך שיזכור תמיד העלבון והחרפה ההיא שקבל ממנו,
18. כי הזכירה ההיא תעורר אותו אל הנקימה.
19. אמנם כאשר יתן אל לבו שגם כן עשה הוא עמו קלונות וחרפות,
20. יתישב לבו ולא יתעורר להנקם עוד.
21. ולזה אמר
22. "אל תזכור דבר ממה שעשית אתה לעמלק,
23. ולא ממה שהחלישו יהושע לפי חרב,
24. ולא מהחרפה והקלון שקבל במלחמתו,
25. אל תזכור דבר מזה,
26. אבל 'זכור את אשר עשה לך עמלק',
27. כי אז, בזכרון זה, תחפוץ ותשתדל בנקימה" . . .

Exodus 17:8-16

Amalek came, and he entered into battle with Israel in Refidim.

Mosheh said to Yehoshua: "Choose men for us, and go out, enter into battle with Amalek! Tomorrow I will be established on the top of the hill, with the staff of Hashem in my hand."

Yehoshua did as Mosheh has said to him, to enter into battle with Amalek, while Mosheh, Aharon, and Chur went up to the top of the hill.

It came to be that when Mosheh raised his hand, then Israel dominated, and when he rested his hand, then Amalek dominated.

But the hands of Mosheh were heavy, so they took a stone and placed it underneath him and he sat on it, while Aharon and Chur supported his hands, on this side one and on the other side one, so that it was that his hands were faithful until the sun set.

So Yehoshua overpowered Amalek and his people by the mouth of the sword.

Hashem said to Mosheh: "Write this as a memorial on a scroll, and place it in the ears of Yehoshua, that I will surely erase the memory of Amalek from underneath the Heavens."

Mosheh built an altar, and he called it "Hashem is my banner".

He said: "An oath by the thron of Gd! There is a battle for Hashem with Amalek from generation to generation."

Devarim 25:17-19

Remember that which Amalek did to you on the way, when you went out of Egypt.

That he chilled you on the way, and he attacked your tail, all who straggled after you, while you were famished and exhausted, and not a reverer of G-d.

So it will be, when Hashem your G-d gives you rest from all your enemies surrounding, in the land which Hashem your G-d is giving you as a homestead, to inherit it – You must erase the memory of Amalek from underneath the Heavens. You must not forget.

Abravanel to Devarim 25:17

1. . . . Because Hashem May He Be Blessed said Himself
2. “Write this as a memorial on a scroll and place it in the ears of Yehoshua that I will surely erase the memory of Amalek”,
3. which indicates that He will fight him not with strength and not with soldiers and not with power but rather with His spirit,
4. in order to remove from them this thought
5. He said here “Remember that which Amalek did to you”,
6. meaning
7. “Don’t say in your heart
8. ‘The war is for Hashem and Israel will dwell in security,
9. I have nothing to do in this matter’,
10. because actually the intent of Amalek was to erase your descendants and name from the world,
11. and he warred with you not with Hashem,
12. and therefore you have the desire to take revenge from him.
13. The obligation to remind Yehoshua specifically is only because he is the national military leader.
14. A second intent is included within the statement, namely
15. that a person who has received unjust violence and shame at the hands of another,
16. and wishes to take his revenge from him,
17. must continuously remember that shame and denigration that he received from him,
18. for that remembering will arouse him toward vengeance.
19. But when he considers that he has also done shaming and disgracing things to him,
20. he will settle down and not be further aroused to take vengeance.
21. For this reason He said
22. “Do not remember anything that you did to Amalek,
23. and not that Yehoshua vanquished him by the sword,
24. and not any of the shame and humiliation he received in your war,
25. don’t remember a thing of this,
26. but rather ‘Remember that which Amalek did to you’,
27. for then, with that memory, you will wish and strive for vengeance” . . .

Abravanel begins by synthesizing the two commands for memory regarding Amalek. The first, after the actual battle in Beshallach, assures the Jews that G-d will eternally war with Amalek, implying that He will be on their side against Amalek in the future as he was in their first encounter. The second tells them that they may not rely on G-d to punish Amalek, however, but must participate in the war themselves.

Here, however, Abravanel runs into a philosophical problem; Why should the Jews remember this ancient battle? Why does G-d in fact not deal Himself with Amalek's punishment, as He presumably does with all other issues of justice in the world when the normal statute of limitations for human beings, i.e. the persistence of memory, has expired?

There are a number of options available to Abravanel at this point. He might for example take the approach that Amalek is a permanent danger to Israel, and constant vigilance is the price of Jewish survival; or he might take the approach, which I find attractive, of seeing the war with Amalek as the paradigm for mature religiosity, in which faith can never be an excuse for avoiding works.

Abravanel instead meets the challenge head on – he acknowledges that the war with Amalek is one of permanent revenge, and justifies revenge as a moral category. Because Amalek sought to commit genocide against the Jews, it is legitimate and desirable for the Jews to seek to commit genocide on Amalek even when Amalek is not engaged in attacking Jews.

Abravanel then goes one step further – he admits that the Jewish case against Amalek is not a matter of black and white. In a spectacular exegetical move, he reads “Remember what Amalek did to *you*” as implying that we are commanded *not* to remember anything we might have done to Amalek. He at least seems to acknowledge that the damage to Amalek's pride in the first encounter might legitimately motivate them to revenge, and may well be open to the possibility that we have committed wrongs against Amalek in the millennia since – for one thing. King Shaul came within a king of successful genocide - but sees it as therefore imperative that we keep this out of mind,

and their offenses in mind, because moral outrage, and the concomitant desire for revenge, cannot survive ambiguity¹.

This is a very difficult text for me – revenge as a moral motive is foreign to me, and the notion of deliberately ignoring the other’s perspective is against the whole ethos of modernity. At the same time, I cannot deny the intuitive appeal of his causal claim about the price of recognizing that perspective, along the lines of Voltaire (as I heard him cited by Rav Lichtenstein) responding to “To understand all is to forgive all” with “Let us therefore not understand too much, lest we forgive too much”.

That point can be sharpened, based on my experience in discussions of Mideast politics. There is a real difference between openmindedness, which is the capacity to examine the evidence objectively from within one’s own narrative, and the willingness to inhabit someone else’s perspective (I’m open to suggestions as to a term for that). The first is grounded in epistemological confidence, and is unlikely to lead to paralyzing doubt; the second can shake one’s confidence that one knows anything.

Two other contexts for the same idea:

- 1) Aviva Zornberg argues, as I recall, that Yaakov genuinely saw things as Esav during his imposture, and spent his life between then and the fight with the angel wondering whether his Yaakov persona was only a mask.
- 2) I argue [here](#) that Rabbi Soloveitchik’s limits on interfaith dialogue in **Confrontation** stem from a claim that one’s identity is always affected by the adoption of another’s perspective, even temporarily.

If we take Amalek as the paradigm of amorality², the lesson here would be that while one can be open to many different notions of the good, one must never waver from the conviction that the good is one’s purpose. Put differently, one must always recognize that one has obligations. But this is a reductionist reading of Amalek, and does not account for the morality of revenge.

We might suggest that what legitimates revenge in this instance is the explicit declaration that G-d is at war with Amalek, so that while we learn how to behave from

¹ Abravanel actually argues that the initial battle with Amalek had two stages: On the first day, Amalek attacked the stragglers, and on the second day, Yehoshua went out to attack Amalek with a small group, so as to emphasize Amalek’s humiliation when defeated. Devarim deliberately refers only to the first day.

² Not of immorality, as interestingly enough, Amalek is never accused of debauchery or idolatry, or indeed of any sin beyond the initial attack

G-d's mercy and not from His vengefulness, we may/must participate in His vengefulness when ordered to. This follows the general approach of Rav Lichtenstein and Chafetz Chayyim to the mitzvah of mechiyyat Amalek, of treating it as an exception that has no implications anywhere outside its own legal confines – *ayn lekha bo ela chiddusho*. I have dealt extensively with that approach elsewhere, but here will just say that it is clearly *bediavad* (less than ideal) to be forced to segregate areas of Halakhah away from *hashakafah*.

I have also suggested elsewhere, to my wife's deep censure, that perhaps eschatological mitzvot (and much halakhic opinion sees mechiyyat Amalek as applicable only in the early stages of the Messianic era) are not subject to consequentialist standards of right and wrong, as they create new worlds in which old-world actions have no consequences. If one adds the caveat that one requires explicit prophetic notification to be allowed to act on the presumption that one will bring the eschaton, this seems to largely eliminate the threat that mechiyyat Amalek might be used as a practical halakhic mandate. But this does not seem to me a plausible reading of Abravanel.

It is also important to note the position that allows us to accept converts from Amalek, and even if one *paskens* otherwise, it still seems likely that the legal status of Amalekite depends on cultural identification in addition to (patrilineal?) descent. This may enable us to understand Abravanel as making a theoretical rather than a practical point.

But there seems to me no escaping the underlying opinion of Abravanel that the desire for vengeance is sometimes legitimate, and this also seems to be the straightforward message of the institution of the blood-avenger in Bamidbar 35. There is also a rabbinic maxim that Torah scholars must, under some circumstances, seek revenge when they are maltreated, which the Talmud on Yoma 23a sees as compatible with Vayikra 19:18's ban against the same.

I could try to develop an account, but it is not clear to me that it would be responsible to do so. Instead, I will close with reference to another obvious tension here, the paradox that it is only the mitzvah to remember to erase the memory of Amalek that keeps the memory of Amalek alive. Put differently, the only way to fulfill the mitzvah '*timcheh et zekher*' would be to fail to fulfill '*zakhor*'. (This same paradox occurs when

we try to shout down Haman, which only draws attention to him and often leads to his name being repeated.) Perhaps this paradox is deliberately set up to ensure that the mitzvah of erasing the memory is never carried out in practice.

Shabbat Shalom

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