

Drasha for Shabbat Zachor – March 23, 2024

Today is Shabbat Zachor, the Shabbat before Purim when we are commanded, in the words from Devarim that we read today “Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey out of Egypt, how he attacked you on the way, when you were faint and weary, and struck down all who lagged behind you; he did not fear God. Therefore, when the LORD your God has given you rest from all your enemies on every hand, in the land that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, **you shall blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven; do not forget.**”

I have been thinking about this directive since last Purim, when we learned about the vicious attacks by Israeli settlers on the Palestinian village of Hawara in the West Bank, and with each subsequent attack that was reported. I have been thinking about this since October 7<sup>th</sup>, when members of Hamas attacked, killed and tortured Israeli civilians who were attending a dance concert, who were doing their daily tasks in their homes; when more than 200 Israeli civilians were taken hostage by people who reveled in their own depravity. I have been thinking about this directive as more than 30,000 Palestinians have died under Israeli bombs or rifles, of starvation and illness under the command of Israel’s leaders who are determined to blot out the existence of the attackers; as Hezbollah is attacking Northern Israel; as settlers are still killing Palestinians in the West Bank. And I wonder, if I am giving this drash too late, or too soon. But the time I have is now, and these are my thoughts.

The first thing that caught my interest is the apparently contradictory commandment to remember what Amalek did to you and blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven. How can we both remember and not remember at the same time? To that end, I researched memory.

When we encounter new information, our brains encode it with changes in neurons in the hippocampus as well as other areas. Much of this information is lost unless it is stored during memory consolidation, which often happens during sleep, making the memories more stable and long-term. The memory is also redistributed to the cortex for longer term storage. When we retrieve a memory, the memory trace neurons in the hippocampus and cortex are reactivated.

Notably, memories are not fixed and permanent. The memory is subject to change each time we access it. Despite our strong tendency to view memory as an accurate depiction of past events, scientific analysis suggests that memories are not fixed entities but are instead a dynamic process. The **retrieval** and expression of an existing memory places it into a labile state. What this means is that the **reactivated** memory becomes vulnerable to interference. In real life, new experience can interweave with the memory it triggers and modify future recollections.

What we remember tends to be distinctive, emotionally loaded and deemed worthy of processing and reflecting upon in our heads after the event happened. Our strongest memories are centered on our life stories and what affected us personally the most. And anyone who has shared memories with family members or friends has been shocked to discover that they have different memories of the same events. Similarly, eyewitness testimony is also often flawed by the expectations and the prejudices that the witness brings to the event.

Emotionally evocative and dramatic events are more likely to be remembered, but even those memories fade and distort. Remembering the past is something we do in the present, with all our current emotions, knowledge and attitudes. In other words, memories are stories we tell ourselves about the past, and what we remember and what we forget are based on our own experiences.

Now, let us turn to Amalek. The Torah tells us that Amalek attacked the laggards, that is, the vulnerable, the unarmed civilians. This was not an honorable fight. It makes sense that people who can do that sort of act should be punished, or at least rendered incapable of future violence. But the text we read on Purim indicates that Amalek will arise in every generation. And, Jews have, over the generations, described our greatest enemies as Amalek. Enemies such as the Roman Empire, Hitler, and the person we read about tonight, Haman. We are commanded to blot out their memories. But evil cannot be eradicated. And people, made b'Tzelem Elohim, are not inherently evil, though they may do evil acts. What then are we eradicating? If we blot out the memory of Amalek, could we be less prepared to deal with evil acts in the future?

Next, let's look more closely at who Amalek is. Amalek is the grandchild of Esau, who was denied his birthright and the blessing of the eldest through trickery.

Breshit Rabba states that Esau cried with a great cry, when he learned he had lost the blessing. Amalek also inherited grievance from his mother, Timna. The Gemara states, in Tractate Sanhedrin, that Timna came to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and tried to convert, however she was refused. Still trying to be connected to the clan, she became a concubine of Esau's son Eliphaz, and Amalek was their child. What kind of memories do you think that Amalek was told? Who is the wronged party in his story? Is he not justified in seeking revenge as the Israelites are making their way to the land that was promised to them and not to him? And what memories have we blotted out? Amalek and Amalek's descendants are our cousins. They are family. Their story could have been ours, and ours theirs. Maybe we should remember how the actions of our forefathers helped to make Amalek our enemy. Therefore, to erase Amalek's memory, we must make certain not to recreate our worst enemy. For those whom we deny their birthright, those whom we discriminate against, leave out -- they become the new Amalek.

And what about Haman? Haman is stated in Megillat Esther, to be a descendant of Agag, king of Amalek. Haman ordered, under the name of King Ahasuerus that all Jews, both young and old, little children and women were to be destroyed, to be slain and caused to perish. And while, Haman was deposed and hanged, the decree could not be revoked, so the text states that the Jews were granted the right to gather in every city and to defend themselves, to destroy and to slay all the forces of the people and the provinces that would assault them. The Megillah goes on to say that, in the day that the enemies of the Jews hoped to destroy them, the Jews gathered together, with the support of the princes of the provinces, and the satraps and the governors, and they that did the king's business. And the Jews smote their enemies, 800 in Shushan over two days and 75,000 in the outer provinces. The Megillah states the Jews had rule over them that hated them and avenged themselves on their enemies. But is revenge the right reason to fight? Sure, some of those who were killed may have hated Jews; others may have gathered because it had been the king's original decree to do so. When does self-defense change into revenge? And, while the Jews were fighting in the streets, were all the casualties their enemies? How easy it is to use self-defense as a justification. Maybe we need to blot out the impulses of Amalek in our own hearts.

There is a midrash which states that it was when Israel did not fear God and follow God's *mitzvot*, then Israel became weak and vulnerable. When we lose our moral compass, we become vulnerable to Amalek without and Amalek within.

So where does that leave us today. Yes, Hamas vows to destroy Israel, if not all Jews. Hamas is selling an idea, radical jihad, and a story of a particular future for Palestinians who have often felt forgotten. The violence embraced by Hamas creates a sense of agency which replaces feelings of powerlessness. But, ideologies and stories cannot be eradicated, only disempowered, discredited, rendered irrelevant as better alternatives arise. Using labels such as Amalek to categorize our enemies blinds us to the complexity of the situation and dehumanizes the people behind the label.

I have grave doubts about a positive outcome to this war. Despite what Smotritch, Ben Gvir and other messianic Zionists are saying, the Palestinians are not going away. They are a people with memories of expulsion, and of massacres. They are not going to be expelled from the land that is their home, and certainly are not going to be eradicated. Despite the radical jihadists funded by Iran, neither are the Israelis. The only way to end this cycle of trauma, grief and revenge is to look for a different path; to listen to each other's memories and stories, to feel each other's pain, to recognize that we are family, and must live together. Only this way can we disempower Hamas and like ideologies and empower Israelis and Palestinians who are open to dialogue and cooperation. Only then, with people on both sides, partners committed to doing the work together, can we ensure a better future for both peoples. We can use this catastrophe as an opportunity to rewrite the narrative, to create a new path. Only this way can we wipe out the memory of Amalek and never forget.

I was going to end this drash here, but I decided that another voice was needed, that of Mahmoud Darwish, considered before his death in 2008 to be the Palestinian National Poet. Here is his poem, [Think of Others](#).

## **Think of Others**

As you prepare your breakfast, think of others  
(do not forget the pigeon's food).

As you conduct your wars, think of others  
(do not forget those who seek peace).

As you pay your water bill, think of others  
(those who are nursed by clouds).

As you return home, to your home, think of others  
(do not forget the people of the camps).

As you sleep and count the stars, think of others  
(those who have nowhere to sleep).

As you liberate yourself in metaphor, think of others  
(those who have lost the right to speak).

As you think of others far away, think of yourself  
(say: "If only I were a candle in the dark").