YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**On Being Chosen:**

**A Philosophical Investigation into the Election of the Jewish People**

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**Shiur #05: Amalek**

God is concerned for the welfare of all human beings. He also values a certain amount of cultural and linguistic diversity, so as to maximize the prospects for individual flourishing. In previous lessons, I have argued that these claims are the clarion call of the narrative frame of the entire Hebrew Bible.

I shall ultimately argue, in this series, that the Jews are not chosen because God values them more than others. Rather, the Jews are chosen because of God’s valuing *all* of humanity. This argument will surely be undermined – you might think – by the Biblical mandate to annihilate the nation of Amalek, and to ethnically cleanse the holy land of its seven indigenous peoples. These are, surely, the policies of a racist and uncaring God. In this lesson I attempt to respond to the question of Amalek, and in lesson 6, to that of the seven indigenous peoples.

I don’t think it wrong to echo what many apologists for the Hebrew Bible have said before: the ancient near east was a brutal place with horrifically violent customs and mores. To establish a new society – even one based upon justice and righteousness – in the midst of such a world, and to survive in the face of military threats, may have required drastic actions that couldn’t conceivably be justified in other contexts. It should also be said, in concert with our previous lesson about slavery, that what God was willing to be *thought* to endorse, in the ancient world, may be very far from what He really demands of us. You might think that – all on their own – these apologetic claims can explain why God allowed, or allowed himself to be thought to allow, the wiping out of entire nations in the ancient world. Nevertheless, I shall argue for a much bolder claim. I shall contend that the Hebrew Bible, despite appearances to the contrary, *never* demanded that the Jews wipe out any nation, ethnicity, or race from the face of this earth.

I’m painfully aware of the fact that, in this lesson and the next, some of the things I suggest will sound like fanciful readings of the original texts. It will sound as if I’m bending every sinew in order to make the most brutal Biblical data conform to my own values. But I ask two things of you. First, keep in mind that all of the troubling texts we confront do appear within the narrative frame that we’ve sketched in lessons 2 and 3. Second, please bear with me to the end of lesson 6. Many of my arguments are cumulative, and only in the concluding paragraphs of lesson 6, where various strands are woven together, might their full force be felt.

The first time we meet the nation of Amalek is in the book of Exodus, very soon after the Israelites have left Egypt. Here is the passage, in its entirety:

Amalek came and fought with Israel at Rephidim. Moses said to Joshua, “Pick some troops for us, and go out and do battle with Amalek. Tomorrow, I will station myself on the top of the hill, with the rod of God in my hand.” Joshua did as Moses told him and fought with Amalek, while Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. Then, whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed; but whenever he let down his hand, Amalek prevailed. But Moses’ hands grew heavy; so they took a stone and put it under him and he sat on it, while Aaron and Hur, one on each side, supported his hands; thus his hands remained steady until the sun set. And Joshua overwhelmed the people of Amalek with the sword. Then God said to Moses, “Write this in a book as a reminder, and read it aloud to Joshua: I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven!” And Moses built an altar and named it *Hashem*-*nissi*.[[1]](#footnote-1) He said, “It means, ‘Hand upon the throne of God!’ God will be at war with Amalek throughout the ages.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

I know that this text has traditionally been read as a Biblical mandate for the wiping out of Amalek. Nevertheless, I want to point out that, on a simple reading of the text, it doesn’t command us to wipe them out at all. On the contrary, God tells Moses that God will do it *Himself*.

The other Biblical source for the apparent mandate of genocide against Amalek can be found in the book of Deuteronomy. It reads:

Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey, after you left Egypt – how he happened upon you on the way, smiting you [and targeting] all the stragglers in your rear. And you were famished and weary, and he didn’t fear the Lord. 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 memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget![[3]](#footnote-3)

Without a doubt, this appears to be a much more explicit injunction to wipe out a nation. Admittedly, the Bible uses an idiom to express this mandate. It doesn’t literally tell us to kill anyone. But it’s pretty clear what the idiom of *blotting out a memory* amounts to: it is a mandate to kill. And that’s exactly how I would read those words too, if it weren’t for the fact that the idiom of *blotting out the memory* is sandwiched between the words “Remember,” at the beginning of the passage, and “Do not forget,” at its end. We have to remember, and not forget, to blot out a memory. Indeed, as this text has been understood by the Jewish tradition, we still have a halakhic obligation to *remember* this obligation, even once the people of Amalek no longer exist (as a distinct and identifiable national entity). That is to say, the Jewish tradition has always been sensitive to the paradoxical nature of this paragraph: an injunction never to forget the memory that we wipe out. But if you never forget a memory, then the memory hasn’t been wiped out at all.

Whatever its halakhic significance, we should at least recognize that something strange is going on with this text, which points us back to the strange elements of the first text. God says there that He’s going to wipe out their memory, but then we’re told that He will be fighting them for all time. Which will it be? It can’t be both! Indeed, Amalek appears on the scene just after God wiped out the entire army of Egypt in the Sea of Reeds. If He wanted to wipe out the entirety of Amalek, he could have done it then and there, with or without the raised hands of Moses.

If this is something that an all-powerful God is going to be working to eliminate for all time, then it’s inconceivable that we’re talking about a physical group of human beings, who could be dispatched within an instant. Instead, it seems more likely that we are talking about something conceptual, which cannot simply be blotted out and forgotten. This might also explain why we’re commanded to remember always to wipe out a memory that we’re not allowed to forget. We are being conscripted into some sort of conceptual battle. Amalek, as an eternal enemy, is a symbol. Of course, Amalek wasn’t a symbol when Samuel commanded Saul to wipe them out in battle, but we’ll come to that later.

The idea that the Biblical war against Amalek, at least as it appears in the Pentateuch, is – in the long-term – symbolic rather than military is supported by the locations in which these two texts appear. The attack, in the book of Exodus, occurs just after the Jews complain to Moses about the lack of water – a challenge which had caused such a crisis of faith that they were led to ask, “Is God in our midst, or is He not?”[[4]](#footnote-4) In the very next verse, Amalek attacks. In the book of Deuteronomy, the reminder never to forget to wipe out the memory of Amalek appears immediately after the laws of honest dealings in business transactions. Those laws end with a condemnation of dishonest practice – “For everyone who does those things, everyone who deals dishonestly, is abhorrent to your God.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Immediately after that condemnation, the reminder of Amalek appears. As Reuven Kimelman puts the point, “The appearance of Amalek is thus correlated with the absence of faith and morality. Its presence signifies their absence.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

This line of thinking is not new. Avi Sagi has documented a trend in later Jewish thought that sought to transform the battle between Israel and Amalek into something more metaphysical and symbolic.[[7]](#footnote-7) He traces its roots to the *Zohar*,[[8]](#footnote-8) with some earlier Rabbinic intimations,[[9]](#footnote-9) and he notes that, especially after the Holocaust, it became commonplace for Jewish thinkers to associate anti-Semitism, especially in its most demonic manifestations, as the work of Amalek. That is to say, Amalek was no longer thought of as a national identity, but as a description that appropriately applies to any person or group of people who manifest an extreme hatred of the Jews.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Rabbi Moshe Amiel takes a different symbolic route. He views Amalek as the paradigmatic symbol of military force – after all, they are the first nation to attack the Jewish people, and they do so with no provocation. In his view, there is a permanent war between the sword and the book, and “one can only be built on the ruins of the other.”[[11]](#footnote-11) This is what the battle between Israel and Amalek became for him. Rav Amiel takes this symbolism so far that he cannot accept, even on the halakhic plane, that there is any mandate to wipe the real, concrete, human Amalekites out, by way of the sword, since that would be to descend to the use of *their* weapon. According to Rav Amiel, the war against Amalek can only be waged with the book – “Write this in a book as a reminder.”[[12]](#footnote-12) What we have to wipe out, Rav Amiel contends, is not the people, but their *memory*. Whenever their militaristic memory or culture becomes some sort of “lofty ideal, or sublime notion,”[[13]](#footnote-13) then we are commanded to blot it out, with the power of a better alternative.

Another trend in symbolic interpretation of the war against Amalek is to see it as an internal psychological battle that we must all wage within ourselves. Amalek, on this reading, becomes the symbol for the evil inclination. This view, popular among the Chasidic masters, suggests that we all have an internal Amalek and we must all work, together with God, to blot it out.[[14]](#footnote-14) Though not a Chasidic thinker, Rabbi Yaakov Charlap echoes this way of thinking. For him, the obligation to blot out Amalek represents the yearning to eliminate, within all of us, the will to power (i.e., the desire to gain and wield power for its own sake).[[15]](#footnote-15)

The point that Reuven Kimelman persuasively makes is that these flights of fancy, which result in various symbolic reconstruals of the war against Amalek, are actually not so fanciful at all, when one returns to the key Pentateuchal texts that contain the commandment to blot Amalek out. These are texts that emerge in the context of a lack of faith or morality, and they describe a metaphysical battle in which the troops succeed only if the hands of Moses are held upwards, in a steadfast position, which the Bible describes using a word that also means “faithful” – *emunah*.[[16]](#footnote-16) These are not subtle hints. They make it seem almost obvious that we’re talking about a battle that takes place on a plane that transcends any physical battlefield. We’re talking about a war that even *God* must wage for all time, and an injunction never to forget the memory that we’re supposed to blot out. A symbolic interpretation of this battle is, therefore, not a flight of fancy but a compelling interpretation of the most straightforward meaning of these otherwise baffling texts.

This is all very well for me to say, but didn’t we, for centuries, take these texts literally and actually wipe the Amalekites out – slaying men, women, and children? Well, in actual fact, the Biblical record suggests otherwise. Admittedly, King Saul was commanded to annihilate the Amalekites, and lost his throne because he didn’t properly fulfil this duty.[[17]](#footnote-17) But years later, when David was king of Israel, we find a different story. The Amalekites (and note that there were apparently plenty remaining, despite Saul’s near-annihilation of them, as we will discuss below) launched raids against his territory, taking plunder and human captives.[[18]](#footnote-18) David inquired of God, via the high priest, what should be done; Kimelman summarizes this episode with the surprising observation that:

Evidently, there was no recourse to any standing order to kill Amalek. Indeed, nothing is made of the fact that they are Amalekites… David’s counterattack sought only to recoup his own. Amalekites who fled are left alone.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Indeed, Kimelman points out, “there is no condemnation of David, á la Saul, for not slaying Amalek or for taking the spoil.”[[20]](#footnote-20) This all goes to suggest that the episode with Saul, where he really *was* commanded to wipe out every single Amalekite – man, woman, and child – at least in a certain locale – was an exception rather than a norm.

As far as Maimonides was concerned, there is only ever a halakhic obligation to annihilate Amalekites if the Amalekites in question don’t accept terms of surrender – since this is, as he understands it, a general principle in the Biblical laws of war.[[21]](#footnote-21) There have been other opinions, of course, that call for more bloodshed. But I hope to have shown that a blanket call to genocide is far from the only way to understand the Hebrew Bible’s presentation of Amalek (at least if we put the incident of Saul – to which I’ll return in a moment – to one side). Moreover, when one sees these texts in the context of the wider Biblical story that we’ve been telling, it becomes more natural to search for those readings, philosophical and halakhic, that are consistent with God’s overall agenda to create a world in which all human beings can flourish, irrespective of nationality, ethnicity, or race.

But what of the explicit commandment that Saul received, to kill every single Amalekite – man, woman, child, and livestock?[[22]](#footnote-22) Saul lost his throne because he didn’t fulfill this commandment to the letter, but instead spared the livestock and the king. Doesn’t this conclusively show that the injunction to wipe out Amalek really wasn’t symbolic at all? No. As we’ve already established, this commandment seems to have been an exception, not the norm. In general, Amalekites *were* allowed to live in the presence of Jews, both before Saul and afterwards. King David, and others, were not criticized for failing to wipe them out.[[23]](#footnote-23) The indication is that there was no such expectation, other than in the case of Saul. What happened, in his case?

What we’re told is that God had decided to execute judgement over the nation of Amalek for what they did all those years ago, in the aftermath of the exodus from Egypt.[[24]](#footnote-24) Accordingly, Samuel tells Saul, in the name of God, that he is to kill all the “men and women, infants and sucklings, oxen and sheep, camels and donkeys.”[[25]](#footnote-25) We are further told that Saul complied with every detail, other than sparing some livestock and the king, Agag.[[26]](#footnote-26) But if that’s right, it makes no sense that there were, just a few years later (less than a generation), whole tribes of marauding Amalekite raiders, against whom King David would struggle. For a more plausible interpretation of events, therefore, we might suggest that Saul was commanded to wipe out an entire Amalekite *settlement*, and its king – who would somehow stand in, symbolically, for the rest of the nation, who wouldn’t be attacked at all. As the Sochatchover Rebbe, Rabbi Avraham Bornsztain, reminds us:

And we know that it is written “Fathers shall not die for [the sins of their] children, nor shall children die for [the sins of their] fathers” (Deuteronomy 24:16)… [Thus,] if they have repented and accepted the seven [Noahide] commandments, which means that they do not persist in their ancestor’s deeds, they should not be punished for their iniquities.[[27]](#footnote-27)

And thus, we would have to assume that the particular Amalekite settlement that Saul was commanded to annihilate were not mere stand-ins for their ancestors, but persisted in their evil ways. Indeed, when Samuel finally executes King Agag, who had been spared by Saul, he says: “As your sword has bereaved women, so shall your mother be bereaved among women.”[[28]](#footnote-28) In other words, Agag wasn’t a reformed descendant of Amalek. He walked in the paths of his ancestors, bereaving women with his sword. On this reading, we have limited what Saul was commanded to do: he wasn’t to wipe out the entire nation, but just one settlement – and the members of that settlement were condemned not for their race but for their continued systemic depravity.

But even so, what about the children, who must surely have been innocent of the sins of the adults and their ancestors?

Here, I can offer no theodicy – no defense of God. But if anyone *is* in a position to judge when children would be better off dead than living – living either as orphaned refugees in the ancient world, or along with their parents, allowed to continue on in their depravity – then that someone is God, who not only is omniscient but can offer people posthumous compensation. We are talking about the same God who tells Abraham that he would have spared the wicked residents of Sodom and Gomorrah, if only there were a sufficient number of righteous people in their midst to make a difference and create a chance for social reform.[[29]](#footnote-29) Certainly, no human being can ever judge that a society is in such a desperate situation that their death would be better than their continued life. Only God can make that call. Since we don’t know the Divine calculations, this commandment can only, and perhaps should only, look horrific to us – even if our faith in God leads us to trust that it isn’t.

In fact, it could be argued that this episode was to function as a crucial test for the first ever king of Israel – and perhaps that is why Saul was asked to do it, when other leaders of Israel were not. Would this king place himself in a position that only God can occupy? In the very rare circumstance in which an entire settlement is to be wiped away, it is God and only God who can make the call. According to Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein’s reading of the story, it is that precise test that Saul failed, revealing him to be unfit for the monarchy. This is how R. Lichtenstein put the point:

Shaul had been commanded to take a whole people and kill them—and this is, morally, a frightful thing. The only justification lies in it being a response to an unequivocal divine command. Therefore, if Shaul had been motivated in his actions purely by fear of God, by obedience to the *tzav* [i.e., the *command*], then he should have followed the command to the letter. God didn’t say, “Kill Amalek but spare Agag.” Now, if he didn’t kill Agag but killed everybody else, what does that indicate? It indicates that what motivated him in killing the others was not the *tzav* of God, but rather some baser impulse, some instinctive violence… Shaul was not punished for sparing Agag: rather, he had to be punished because of the Amalekites he did kill![[30]](#footnote-30)

To kill out of racial hatred, or any other motivation, is a “frightful thing.” The only being who can ever sanction the killing of men, women, and children, and surely as an exception, rather than as a norm, is the all-knowing, all-loving God. But, by taking the law into his own hands, and sparing Agag, King Saul trespassed upon a Divine prerogative. This reduced all of the other killing he had done, allegedly in the name of God, into cold-blooded murder, for which he would have to pay. And he did pay, with the revocation of his throne. Did he think that being king made him king of kings?

In short: the war against Amalek, even in the Bible, is best understood as (a) primarily symbolic, and (b) as excluding any Amalekites who repent of their ancestors’ wickedness. Because of (a), even wicked Amalekites are generally left alone, as we see in the life of King David. Properly understood, and properly integrated into the overriding vision of the Hebrew Bible’s narrative frame, the phenomenon of Amalek fails to undermine my contention: the God of the Hebrew Bible is ultimately concerned for the welfare of all human beings.

In the next lesson, we shall turn to the issue of the seven nations of ancient Canaan.

1. The meaning of this phrase is open to multiple interpretations. It could mean, “God is my banner,” or it could mean “God is He who performs miracles for me.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Exodus 17:8-16. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Deuteronomy 25:17-19. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Exodus 17:7. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Deuteronomy 25:16. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Reuven Kimelman, “Israel’s Election and the Moral Dilemma of Amalek,” in Alon Goshen-Gottstein (ed), *Judaism’s Challenge: Election, Divine Love, and Human Enmity* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2020), 143-173, pp. 150-151. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Avi Sagi, “The Punishment of Amalek in Jewish Tradition: Coping with the Moral Problem,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 87/3 (1994): 323-346. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See, for example, *Zohar* III:205-207. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. He cites *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana*, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. This line of thought is echoed by Rabbi Soloveitchik in his *Fate and Destiny: From the Holocaust to the State of Israel* (Hoboken, NJ.: Ktav Publishing House, 2000), p. 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Rav Moshe Amiel, *Derashot el Ami* (3 vols., Tel-Aviv: Va’ad le-Hotsa’at Kitvei ha-Rav Amiel, 1964) vol. 3, p. 132. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Exodus 17:14. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Derashot el Ami*, p. 143. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Avi Sagi cites, as examples of this trend, the Maggid of Kozhenits, *Avodat Yisra’el* (Bnei Brak: 1973) 22b; Rav Elimelech of Lyzhansk, *No’am Elimelekh al Chamisha Chumshei Torah* (New York: Schlesinger, 1942) 81; and Rav Tzadok ha-Cohen of Lublin, *Peri Tzaddik* (Lublin: 1907), p. 172. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Rabbi Ya’akov Harlap, *Mei Marom* (Jerusalem: Beit Zabul, 1972) 1.79. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Exodus 17:12. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. I Samuel 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. I Samuel 30:1-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. “Israel’s Election and the Moral Dilemma of Amalek,” pp. 153-154. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid., p. 154. The assumption here is that the spoil of a proscribed people is supposed to be proscribed, and yet David took the spoil and spared the people. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Kings and Wars, 6:4. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. I Samuel 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Indeed, there is a debate as to whether David killed the young Amalekite who had assisted Saul’s suicide because of his involvement in regicide, or because he was an Amalekite. A *midrash* endorses the latter opinion, but Maimonides follows the simple reading, according to which his ethnic identity wasn’t relevant at all. In fact, Maimonides thought that the Amalekite in question had converted to Judaism. See *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael*, 17:16, and *Mishneh Torah*: Laws of Sanhedrin, 18:6. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. I Samuel 15:2. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. I Samuel 15:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. I Samuel 15:9. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. *Avnei Nezer*, *Orach Chaim*, 2:508. He also argues against any notion that the provision of Deuteronomy 24:16 applies only to Jews. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. I Samuel 15:33. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Genesis 18:23-33. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, “Being *Frum* and Being Good: On the Relationship Between Religion and Morality,” in *By His Light: Character and Values in the Service of God* (Jerusalem: Maggid Books, 2016), 89-116, pp. 110-111. In this reading, Rabbi Lichtenstein was (unbeknownst to him) echoing the approach of the *Chafetz Chaim*. See *Chafetz Chaim al-HaTorah* on *Parsahat Zachor*. Thanks to Rabbi Reuven Zeigler for notifying me about this source, which, to Rabbi LichtenstAein’s delight, was later pointed out to him. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)