

Amalek, Revenge Fantasies, and “The Zionist Challenge”

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This Shabbat—the one leading into Purim—is a special one called Shabbat Zakhor, the Shabbat on which we are commanded to remember: to remember what Haman tried to do to us and what his ancestor Amalek *did* to us in the wilderness.

Here’s the special Torah reading for Shabbat Zakhor: “Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey, after you left Egypt—how, undeterred by fear of God, he surprised you on the march, when you were famished and weary, and cut down all the stragglers in your rear.

“Therefore, when your God Adonai grants you safety from all your enemies around you, in the land that your God Adonai is giving you as a hereditary portion, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget!” (*Deut.* 25:17-19)

Based on this passage from *Deuteronomy*, Maimonides counts the obligation to blot out the memory of Amalek as commandment #188 of the 613.

David Roskies, a prominent scholar of Eastern European Jewish literature at The Jewish Theological Seminary here in New York, tells a story illustrating the depth to which this commandment has penetrated into Jewish culture and collective memory.

Roskies once brought a fountain pen as a gift to one of his mother’s friends, a woman named Regina.

“Regina, who studied...in Moscow and [was] the first professor of film history at an Israeli university, tested the pen just as her father had taught her to do in Bialystok before World War I: She wrote the word Amalek and then crossed it out.

“Here was a lapsed daughter of her people, heeding the ancient call of *Deuteronomy*. ... A quarter century of Yiddish secular life in Vilna followed by another quarter century of professional success in communist Poland had done nothing to dim what Regina had learned about memory from an ultraorthodox father in Bialystok. Memory is an aggressive act.”¹

“[M]emory is an aggressive act” —“particularly,” adds the Israeli scholar Elliott Horowitz, “among people with limited access to other means of aggression.”²

This year especially, the Amalek passage we read on Shabbat Zakhor feels particularly resonant.

On October 7, Hamas terrorists, like the biblical Amalek, “undeterred by the fear of God” surprised innocent Israelis at their most vulnerable, “cut[ting them] down” while they celebrated at a music festival or slept in their beds.

But as we consider how the commandment to wipe out Amalek from the world might apply to Israel’s situation today, Horowitz’s point is crucial.

From the destruction of the Davidic monarchy in the 6th century BCE until the State of Israel was established in 1948—with the exception of the Maccabees' short reign before they were supplanted by Rome—the Jewish people were essentially powerless politically.

Sure, there were “court Jews” who advised the Christian and Muslim rulers of Europe, but the Jewish people had no sovereign state of their own and commanded no army.

Consequently, whenever Jews were attacked—from the Crusades, to the expulsions from France and Spain and Portugal, to the Russian pogroms, to Nazi Germany—we had no recourse, no ability to fight back in any meaningful way.

That didn't stop us from imagining what it would be like if we could, though. “God, if we only we had an army, if only we could be in charge for just a day or two, just think what we would do to them.” People without any power can come up with the most outrageous and emotionally satisfying revenge fantasies.

The *Book of Esther*, at least part of it, may be one such fantasy.

Chapter 9 of *Esther*—the part we usually skip over in telling the story to children—is a violent, bloodthirsty, and obviously implausible story of how the Jews turned the tables on their enemies and slaughtered them in immense numbers. Here's the text:

“And so, on the 13th day of the 12th month—that is, the month of Adar—when the king's command and decree were to be executed, the very day on which the enemies of the Jews had expected to get them in their power, the opposite happened, and the Jews got their enemies in their power.

“Throughout the provinces of King Ahasuerus, the Jews mustered in their cities to attack those who sought their hurt; and no one could withstand them, for the fear of them had fallen upon all the peoples. Indeed, all the officials of the provinces...showed deference to the Jews, because the fear of Mordecai had fallen upon them.

“For Mordecai was now powerful in the royal palace, and his fame was spreading through all the provinces; the man Mordecai was growing ever more powerful. So, the Jews struck at their enemies with the sword, slaying and destroying; they wreaked their will upon their enemies.” (*Est.* 9:1-5)

The Megillah goes on to report that the Jews managed to kill more than 76,000 of their enemies in just two days—quite an amazing feat.

Later *halakhic* literature reflects the revenge-fantasy mindset, too.

In his magnum opus of Jewish law, the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides states the following about a Jewish king's conduct of war:

“When you approach a city to wage war against it, you should propose a peaceful settlement. If the enemy accepts the offer of peace and commits itself to the fulfillment of the seven *mitzvot* that were commanded to Noah's descendants, none of them should be killed. Rather, they should be subjugated as [the Torah] states: ‘They shall be your subjects and serve you.’

"If they agree to tribute, but do not accept subjugation or if they accept subjugation, but do not agree to tribute, their offer should not be heeded. They must accept both.

"The subjugation they must accept consists of being on a lower level, scorned and humble. They must never raise their heads against Israel but must remain subjugated under their rule. They may never be appointed over a Jew in any matter whatsoever." (*Kings and Their Wars* 6:1)

All this is stated matter-of-factly, as though there's no possibility that we'll face any impediment to this plan for absolute domination of our enemy.

Plausible? No. But when you don't have any power anyway, what does it matter?

People without power are free to fantasize about vengeance and subjugating the haters without worrying about what would happen if they actually got their wish.

But if that was the political reality in which our classical texts took shape, it is not the reality today.

Today, we Jews *do* have a sovereign state; we *do* have an army—and a powerful one at that.

The advent of the State of Israel changed the equation entirely, and this created a dissonance between our religious vengeance-fantasy literature, on the one hand, and our present political and military reality, on the other.

What happens when a modern country empowered with all the tools of political sovereignty seeks to be guided by a moral and legal tradition that was forged over the course of centuries in a crucible of powerlessness?

The late Rabbi David Hartman calls this "the Zionist challenge."³

"The central norm of the covenantal framework," Hartman explains, "is the assumption of moral responsibility."⁴

Pre-1948, that meant doing *mitzvot*, ritual observance, ethical interactions with others, duties to the community, and personal morality.

Over time, *halakhah*—the body of Jewish law—evolved to address every minute detail of these aspects of life, because these were the things Jewish individuals and the Jewish community could control.

At the same time, laws pertaining to government, public policy, war, and defense were stunted in their growth because there was no venue in which they could be applied and tested. So, they remained in the realm of the theoretical and the fantastical.

As Rabbi Hartman puts it, a new "stage of the covenant began when Jews felt responsibility for their own history and not only for implementing *mitzvot*. ..."⁵

That is to say, the post-1948 reality of Jewish political sovereignty both expanded the Jewish people's sphere of concern from the personal and communal exclusively to those *plus* the realms of the national-historical, political governance, and the exercise of military power.

The "Zionist challenge" is for the Jewish people to figure out how to adapt the *halakhic*, moral, and spiritual principles of Judaism to a reality in which *we* are the powerful ones. To do that, Israel has to grow fields of law that have remained dormant for centuries and resist the temptation to indulge revenge fantasies that, for the first time, have actually become possible.

This is not easy—especially if we view Hamas terrorists as modern-day Amaleks—as it is, of course, so understandable to do.

Maimonides says that blotting out the memory of Amalek means that "it is forbidden to forget our hatred and enmity for them." (*MT*, Kings 5:5) We're commanded to "exterminate the seed of Amalek—males, females, adults, and children." (*Sefer HaMitzvot*, Positive #188)

Maimonides likely never imagined we could actually do this; but today, well, we probably could.

It's not a fantasy anymore. It's a *choice*.

In 1918, not many years after Regina's father had taught her how to test her pen, the prominent British Orthodox Rabbi Joseph Hertz spoke to a congregation gathered at London's Great Synagogue. Though he spoke in the context of World War I, his words are eerily resonant today:

"As the conflict ebbs and flows, a tidal wave of hysteria often sweeps over the masses; race prejudice blinds their vision. ... A veritable epidemic of moral incendiarism is promoted by the unscrupulous; and the wildest aspersions, often as unfounded as they are cruel, are hurled wholesale against groups and communities."⁶

Horowitz explains that "Hertz exhorted his audience always to continue looking heavenward, and stressed that patriotism should not become an excuse for 'senseless malice against the weak and defenseless,' nor should the 'ways of Amalek' be emulated:

"Blessed is the people that in its conflict with Amalek does not copy the ways of Amalek [Hertz said], but can, like Moses, lift pure hands Heavenwards. The hands of such a nation shall remain steady till the day's work is done, till the fight against Amalek is at end, till the Dominion of Arrogance has passed away from earth."⁷

So, on this Shabbat Zakhor, I ask: How do you feel about Israel's response to the Zionist challenge?

1 From Roskies's book *Against the Apocalypse*, as quoted by Elliott Horowitz, *Reckless Rites: Purim and the Legacy of Jewish Violence*, 107

2 Horowitz, 110

3 David Hartman, *A Heart of Many Rooms: Celebrating the Many Voices Within Judaism*, 23

4 *Ibid.*, 30

5 *Ibid.*, 34

6 As quoted in Horowitz, 138

7 *Ibid.*, 138-139