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Why we must ‘Remember Amalek’

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Tomorrow is a special Shabbat on our calendar—one of a group of four Shabbatot that precede Passover. This particular Shabbat is called Shabbat Zachor, the “Sabbath of Remember.”

It got that name because on the Shabbat before Purim every year, we add three verses (Deuteronomy 25:17-19) to the Torah reading scheduled for that week. The three Deuteronomy verses begin with the word “zachor,” remember.

Just as Judaism is a living, breathing, constantly growing and expanding system, it is also a system rooted in memory. Everything we do involves memory. Everything we are involves memory. “For remember that you were slaves in the Land of Egypt and the Lord took you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.” (See Deuteronomy 5:15.)

That event, the Torah informs us over and again, is why we observe Shabbat, feed the hungry, grant equal protection of the law to the stranger, keep our weights honest and our wages fair and paid on time.

And, of course, that is why we will celebrate Pesach, Passover, in five weeks’ time. Pesach would have no point if not for memory. Memory is especially evident in its signature ritual, the Seder.

All of our feast days and fast days, in fact, are about memory of one kind or another.

Our prayer services are suffused with memory, as well, including a specific optional reading at the end of every weekday morning service; in the Ashkenazic rite it is known as “The Six Remembrances”; in the Sephardi rite, “The Ten Remembrances.” Both include remembering Amalek.

Remembering is constantly before us, so why do we need to set aside a special Shabbat dedicated to remembering?

To answer that, we need to take a close look at Deuteronomy 25:17-19:

"Remember what Amalek did to you on your way out of Egypt, that he surprised you on the road, when you were tired and hungry, and attacked your stragglers in the rear—he did not fear God. And it shall be—when you are settled in the land of your inheritance that the Lord your God gives you, and…[He has given you] rest from all your enemies around you—that you shall blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under the heavens; do not forget."

“Amalek” actually refers to the tribe of that name, not to its founder (and our cousin, grandson of Esau and grand-nephew of Jacob). It is what the Amalekite tribe did to us that we are supposed to remember on this Shabbat, because it is the Shabbat before Purim. That was when the Amalek of his day, the evil Haman, tried to finish what Amalek began.

So it is not just “Amalek” we are supposed to remember, but all of the “Amaleks” throughout history.

That raises three questions: Who qualifies as an Amalek? Why should we remember these evil people and their evil deeds? And most pointedly, why choose Amalek to symbolize all those who oppressed us and sought to destroy us, when there is a much better candidate—Pharaoh, the biggest biblical bad guy of them all.

There is a difference between Pharaoh and Amalek, however. Pharaoh did not enslave Israel because it was Israel; he enslaved Israel for reasons of state, two of which we hear him give in Exodus 1.

1. Israel was from the same region of Canaan as the Semites who ruled the northern part of the country for over a hundred years, until they were overcome and chased out of Egypt. Pharaoh feared Israel might help them attempt a return to power. “Let us deal shrewdly with them,” he says, “so that they may not increase; otherwise, in the event of war, they may join our enemies in fighting against us….”

2. Fear of war aside, Pharaoh was concerned that the “much too numerous” Israelites would become so numerous that they would either upset the status quo of Egyptian life, or that Egypt would be unable to prevent them from returning to Canaan should they decide to “go up from the land,” which would create a serious economic crisis.

And then there was a historical reality Pharaoh of the Enslavement had to contend with: the much too recent heresy of the Pharaoh Akhenaten and his attempt to exchange Egyptian religious belief for a precursor of monotheism. That attempt may have been influenced by Israelite belief, or it may simply have been much too similar for Pharaoh’s comfort. In either case, he would have felt the need to suppress it.

Amalek, on the other hand, had none of these concerns. His (its) concern was about what Israel was about to become—God’s messengers to the world, bringing a message that all people are equal, that all have the same basic rights and entitlements, that all spring from a single source and thus there is no one people who is better than any other; no one people more deserving than another.

Amalek was not out to kill the People Israel; he was out to kill God’s messengers to humankind. He wanted to stop them in the hopes of stopping their mission.

And that is what distinguishes the Amalek wannabes from the rest of our enemies. They do not hate for who we are; they hate us for what we represent—not just our monotheistic belief, but our belief that our existence is predicated on creating a just, moral and ethical world because God gave us that task.

By attacking the rear, where the elderly and infirm were, and where the children were, Amalek wanted to demoralize us; to turn us away from the God of our deliverance from Egypt; to make us think that this God was a false god who was powerless to protect us.

The Book of Esther traces Haman’s roots to the tribe of Amalek, and specifically to one of its kings, Agag by name.

Heritage aside, however, Haman is a classic example of Amalek. He did not hate the Jews as a people; he hated them for what they represented. Mordechai would not bow down to Haman because Judaism teaches that no one person is better than anyone else and, therefore, no one has a right to lord it over anyone else. Haman could not accept that. To him, such a philosophy would gnaw away at the casteism and philosophical racism he held so dear, and so he schemed to destroy the Jews of Persia.

Throughout history, Amaleks such as Haman have challenged, not who we are, but what we are about. They make laws to prohibit the study of Torah, the practice of ritual circumcision (a subject that keeps coming up in Europe especially), the observance of Shabbat (signs in New York and elsewhere once read, “If you don’t come to work on Saturday, don’t bother to come on Sunday”), and adherence to the kosher laws (for example, Belgium’s ban on kosher slaughter and the European Union’s tendency toward a continent-wide ban).

These Amaleks understand that to get rid of the Jews, you only need to separate them from their holy texts and prevent them from observing their special laws. Keep it up long enough and, eventually, they will not even remember that they are Jews.

The irony is that, while we survived the schemes of all of history’s Amaleks, we have ignored the Amalek closest to us—the Amalek within ourselves.

Voluntarily, we have separated ourselves from our holy texts because we cannot read the language, much less understand what actually is being said. For too many of us, a hospital circumcision is as good as a brit milah. For a growing number of us, circumcision at all is barbaric and outdated. Not only do too many of us ignore Shabbat and kashrut, we voluntarily and with great anticipation bite into forbidden foods.

And that is why we need the “Shabbat of Remember,” Shabbat Zachor. It is not to remember the people who sought to destroy us, but to remember how they sought to do it, so that we can avoid destroying ourselves.

Simply stated, we need to ask ourselves these questions: Is this how Amalek would have wanted me to behave? Is what I am doing giving Amalek a posthumous victory?

We need to ask those questions—and then we need to answer them honestly, and decide what we are prepared to do about it.