



**Do Jews Have Holy War?
Amalek as a Model for Necessary and Just Warfare**

Amalek as a Foil to the Divine:

Exodus 17:8-16	שמות פרק יז
<p>8. And Amalek came and made war with Israel in Rifidim. 9. Moses said to Joshua, "Choose from our people and go out to make war with Amalek. Tomorrow, I will station myself on top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand." 10. Joshua did as Moses had told him, to make war with Amalek. And Moses, Aaron and Hur went up to the top of the hill. 11. And it was that whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel would prevail, but when he rested his hands, Amalek would prevail. 12. But Moses's hands grew heavy, so they took a stone and put it under him and he sat on it, while Aaron and Hur supported his hands, each one with one of them; thus his hands remained steady until the sun set. 13. And Joshua overwhelmed Amalek and his people with ths sword. 14. Then Hashem said to Moses, "Write this document as a reminder, and read it aloud to Joshua, for I will blot out the name of Amalek from under the heavens. 15. And Moses built an altar and called the place Adonai-Nisi. 16. He said, "It means, 'Hand on the throne of Hashem!" Hashem will be at war with Amalek forever.</p>	<p>(ח) ויבא עמלק וילחם עם ישראל ברפידים: (ט) ויאמר משה אל יהושע בחר לנו אנשים וצא הלחם בעמלק מחר אנכי נצב על ראש הגבעה ומטה האלהים בידים: (י) ויעש יהושע כאשר אמר לו משה להלחם בעמלק ומשה אהרן וחור עלו ראש הגבעה: (יא) והיה כאשר ירים משה ידו וגבר ישראל וכאשר יניח ידו וגבר עמלק: (יב) וידי משה כבדים ויקחו אבן וישמו תחתיו וישב עליה ואהרן וחור תמכו בידיו מזה אחד ומזה אחד ויהי ידיו אמונה עד בא השמש: (יג) ויחלש יהושע את עמלק ואת עמו לפי חרב: פ (יד) ויאמר יקוק אל משה כתב זאת זכרון בספר ושים באזני יהושע כי מחה אמחה את זכר עמלק מתחת השמים: (טו) ויבן משה מזבח ויקרא שמו יקוק נסי: (טז) ויאמר כי יד על כס יה מלחמה ליקוק בעמלק: מדר דר</p>

Rashi on Exodus 17:16	רש"י שמות פרק יז
<p>It means, "the hand is on the throne of Hashem": The hand of the Holy One, Blessed be He, is raised to swear on His throne, that there will be for Him war and animosity towards Amalek forever. And why does it say <i>kiseh</i> [chair, without the aleph at the end]? Because the Name is divided in half. The Holy One, Blessed be He, swore that His name will not be complete, and His throne will not be complete, until Amalek's name is totally</p>	<p>כי יד על כס יה - ידו של הקב"ה הורמה לישבע בכסאו להיות לו מלחמה ואיבה בעמלק עולמית, ומהו כס, ולא נאמר כסא, ואף השם נחלק לחציו, נשבע הקב"ה שאין שמו שלם ואין כסאו שלם עד שימחה שמו של עמלק כולו, וכשימחה שמו יהיה השם שלם והכסא שלם</p>

blotted out. And when his name is blotted out, God's name will be complete, and His throne will be complete.

Deuteronomy 25:17-19	דברים פרק כה
<p>17. Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey, after you left Egypt-- 18. How, undeterred by fear of God, he surprised you on the march, when you were famished and weary, and cut down the stragglers in your rear. 19. Therefore, when Hashem your God grants you safety from all your enemies around you, in the land that Hashem your God is giving you as a hereditary portion, you shall blot out the name of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget!</p>	<p>(ז) זכור את אשר עשה לך עמלק בדרך בצאתכם ממצרים: (יח) אשר קרה בדרך ויזנב בך כל הנחשלים אחריך ואתה עיף ויגע ולא ירא אלהים: (יט) והיה בהניח יקוק אלהיך לך מכל איביר מסביב בארץ אשר יקוק אלהיך נתן לך נחלה לרשתה תמחה את זכר עמלק מתחת השמים לא תשכח</p>

BT Brachot Chapter 9	
<p>"Hashem, sovereignty is yours"-- This is the war with Amalek. Thus it is written, "Hand on the throne of Hashem."</p>	<p>לך ה' הממלכה - זו מלחמת עמלק, וכן הוא אומר ... +שמות י"ז+ כי יד על כס יה</p>

- Compare how Amalek is portrayed in the two tellings of the story. What is similar and what is different? Is there anything in the Exodus version that suggests how evil Amalek is?
- What seems to be the relationship between Amalek and God? Is there anything in the text itself that would inform this relationship?
- According to Rashi, what is the importance of the war with Amalek? How do you think about this explanation for the importance of war? Does this idea strike you as "Jewish"?

Eliminate Amalek, Find Redemption?

BT Yoma 22b	
<p>At the time when the Holy One, Blessed be He, said to Saul, "Go and smite Amalek." He said, "If because of a single person, the Torah said to go smite a red heifer, how much more to all of these people!" And if a person sinned-- what sin does an animal do? And if the adults sinned-- what was the sin of the children?" A heavenly voice came out and said to him, "Do not be overly righteous."</p>	<p>בשעה שאמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא לשאול (שמואל א:טו) לך והכית את עמלק, אמר: ומה נפש אחת אמרה תורה הבא עגלה ערופה, כל הנפשות הללו על אחת כמה וכמה! ואם אדם חטא - בהמה מה חטאה? ואם גדולים חטאו - קטנים מה חטאו? יצאה בת קול ואמרה לו (קהלת ז) אל תהי צדיק הרבה</p>

BT Sanhedrin 20b	תלמוד בבלי מסכת סנהדרין דף כ עמוד ב
<p>And this was what Rabbi Yehuda said: There were three mitzvot that Israel needed to fulfill when entering the land-- appointing a king for themselves, eradicating the offspring of Amalek, and</p>	<p>וכן היה רבי יהודה אומר: שלש מצוות נצטוו ישראל בכניסתן לארץ: להעמיד להם מלך, ולהכרית זרעו של עמלק, ולבנות להם בית הבחירה</p>

building the Beit HaMikdash for themselves.	
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Rashi on Sanhedrin 20b	רש"י מסכת סנהדרין דף כ עמוד ב
Three mitzvot: From this, we derive three things, for they depend one on the other according to their order, as will be explained below: first the king, after that Amalek, and after that, the Beit HaMikdash.	שלוש מצות - להכי נקט שלש הללו, שהן תלויות זו בזו לעשותן כסדרן, כדמפרש לקמן: בתחלה מלך, ואחריה עמלק, ואחריה בית הבחירה

Rambam, Laws of Kings and Their Wars, Chapter 5, Law 6	רמב"ם הלכות מלכים פרק ה
And it is a positive mitzvah to destroy the memory of Amalek, as it is written, "Blot out the memory of Amalek." And it is a positive mitzvah to always remember their evil actions and their ambush, so that you can arouse hate of them, as it is written, "Remember what Amalek did to you." The oral tradition teaches that "remember" is in the mouth and "do not forget" is in the heart, for it is forbidden to forget their enmity and hatred.	וכן מצות עשה לאבד זכר עמלק, שנאמר תמחה את זכר עמלק, ומצות עשה לזכור תמיד מעשיו הרעים ואריבתו, כדי לעורר איבתו, שנאמר זכור את אשר עשה לך עמלק, מפי השמועה למדו זכור בפה לא תשכח בלב, שאסור לשכוח איבתו ושנאתו

- How do the rabbis' understanding of Amalek different from the model presented in the Chumash?
- Why do you think conquering Amalek is so crucial in the nation-building narrative of the Jewish people? What does he come to represent?
- The narrative in Yoma seems to violate many values we have as Jews. Is there ever a time when we can justify such mass destruction? What message does the heavenly voice try to send?
- How would these models of Amalek translate into modern day experiences? Can they? Should we want them to?
- Does the mandate for all-out destruction make the war against Amalek a just war?

Re-envisioning Amalek:

Iturei Torah on Deuteronomy 25:17	עטורי תורה, דברים כה:יז
If the community of Israel had not forgotten these stragglers, but rather, had brought them close under the wings of God's presence in order to return them underneath the clouds of glory so that they would be together with the whole house of Israel, then Amalek would not have overcome them. But because these stragglers were left behind, Amalek was successful. This is a sign for generations: When the entire community is supported and together, then Amalek cannot gain control.	עמלק לא היה יכול לנצח אלא את זה שהיה בפני עצמו, פרוש מן הכלל, שהענן היה פולטו, והוא נפל ביד עמלק. אבל הללו שהיו ביחד, מחוברים לכלל ישראל, היה הענן מגן עליהם ולא נפלו ביד עמלק. סימן הוא לדורות: כל זמן שישראל באחדות אין עמלק שולט בהם.

Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion*, 1937

Jews have to go back to their spiritual heritage and relearn it, and then reinterpret and apply it to the problems of industry, exchange and government... This is the modern analogue of the traditional behest to remember what Amalek had done unto Israel. The evil of Jew-hatred must be traced to its roots, and the spiritual values of Judaism must be set off as its foil, not in a spirit of self-glorification, but so that the Jew might learn to plead guilty to the very ideals with which he is so often charged and for which he is hated.

Rabbi Irving Greenberg, *The Jewish Way*, 1988

The primary lesson of Parshat Zachor is that true reconciliation comes through repentance and remembrance. Confronting the evils of the past is the most powerful generator of moral cleansing and fundamental reconciliation. Repentance is the key to overcoming the evils of the past. When people recognize injustice, they can correct the wrongdoing and conditions that lead to it... Remembrance is the key to preventing recurrence.

***Ohev Yisrael*, Rav Avraham Yehoshua Heschel**

It is not only the nation of Israel that is commanded regarding the destruction of Amalek. It is every single individual who must destroy that portion of evil hidden within all of our hearts and totally uproot it so that there is not the slightest remnant left. Since we believe that every human being is a miniature universe unto himself, there is in everyone that force of Amalek, that essence of evil, which works at all times to cause a person to sin.

- How do modern thinkers reframe the conversation about Amalek?
- Do you think these interpretations of Amalek can be read honestly into the text?
- How do these thinkers make Amalek more personal? What do you think of the idea of Amalek existing within us, instead of as an outside force?
- According to these interpretations, could war with Amalek still be justified today?