

## **Genocide in the Torah: The existential threat of Amalek**

**BY SHMULY YANKLOWITZ**

In 2006 Conservative Rabbi Jack Reimer, Bill Clinton's rabbinic counsel during his presidency, created a stir when he associated Islamic fundamentalism with the biblical nation of *Amalek*.

"I am becoming convinced that Islamic Fundamentalism, or, as some people prefer to call it, 'Islamofascism,' is the most dangerous force that we have ever faced and that it is worthy of the name: Amalek... We must recognize who Amalek is in our generation, and we must prepare to fight it in every way we can. And may God help us in this task."

### **Who is Amalek?**

According to the book of Exodus, Amalek is the nation that attacked the weakest among the Israelites as they fled from Egypt. This transgression was not to go unpunished. The Torah has a harsh prescription for Amalek: annihilation.

"It shall be that when Hashem, your God, gives you rest from all your enemies all around, in the Land that Hashem, your God, gives you as an inheritance to possess it, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under the heaven. Do not forget it!" (*Deuteronomy 25: 19; also see Exodus 17:14 and Numbers 24:20*)

Blotting out the memory of Amalek was no mere psychological activity. The Israelites were expected to kill every Amalekite--man, woman, and child. But was this just a theoretical imperative or was it meant to be carried out?

The book of Samuel implies that it required actual fulfillment: "Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox, and sheep, camel and ass," (Samuel I, 15:3). King Saul struck down Amalek as he was commanded but he then took mercy upon King Agag and upon some of the Amalekite animals. God and the prophet Samuel harshly criticized Saul for not fulfilling God's word.

The point, of course, is that an invocation of Amalek is serious business. Rabbi Reimer wasn't issuing a literal call to arms, but by associating "Islamofascists" with Amalek, Rabbi Reimer was referencing the Jewish tradition's genocidal instincts. Jewish authorities have struggled with this commandment for centuries, but the issue is perhaps even more urgent now.

For the last 2,000 years the Jewish people have lacked political sovereignty. With the return to the land of Israel, however, this is no longer the case. Invoking Amalek during the centuries of military impotency was one thing. Today, when there is a Jewish state with an army--and armed citizenry--it is quite another.

## A Complicated History

The exegetical history of the commandment to destroy Amalek is complicated. The Talmud argues that the attacks and exiles of Sancherib, the king of Assyria and destroyer of Samaria, "mixed up the nations" over 2,500 years ago and thus all identity of the biblical nations has been lost (*Berakhot 28a*). This implies that all commands of exterminating nations were dismissed and that it is not appropriate to label any contemporary peoples as descendants of Amalek.

However, the *Sefer HaHinnuch*, a 13th century Spanish work, claims that the commandment still exists, demanding that every individual Jew kill every individual Amalekite man, woman, and child (mitzvah 604). Maimonides, on the other hand, argues that the command applies not to every individual, but to the Jewish nation as a whole (*Hilkhot Melakhim 6*).

Yet Maimonides also stated that the Jewish nation could accept converts from any nation in the world, including Amalek (*Hilkhot Issurei Bia 12:17*).

Most significantly, Maimonides contends that the Jewish nation can never launch a war with any nation (uniquely including Amalek and the seven Canaanite nations together) without first offering "a call to peace," (*keri'a l'shalom*). If in this call to peace, the seven Noahide laws are accepted and peace is made, then no war is required (*Hilkhot Melachim 6:1*).

In the *Guide for the Perplexed*, Maimonides explains further that the command to wipe out Amalek isn't based on hatred, but on removing Amalek-like behavior from the world (3:41). For Maimonides, then, the commandment is not necessarily fulfilled through killing; it can be fulfilled through moral influence and education.

*Deuteronomy 20* distinguishes between the obligatory war of conquest against the seven nations of Canaan and other wars. However, according to Maimonides and Nahmanides, the obligation to offer a call for peace is applied to both. Nahmanides, in quoting a midrash, also claims that there is an obligation of a Jewish army, laying siege upon a town, to provide an open direction to escape for those of the enemy who do not wish to fight (*Sefer Hamitzvot 5*).

Some legal authorities were more eager to remove the command entirely from being applicable in our era. For example, in the 19th century, Rabbi Abraham Sachatchover argued: "If they repent from their ways and accept the Noahide commandments, and they no longer continue in the path of their forefathers, they are no longer held responsible for the sins of their forefathers." (*Avnei Neizer Orat Hayyim 2:508*)

The Sachatchover Rebbe, like Maimonides, suggests that Amalek is a way of being, not a genetic trait. Shouldn't it be justified, then, for us to label contemporary enemies of the Jewish people Amalek? It appears, however, according to these interpretations, that the intention of the enemy must be first and foremost to destroy the Jewish people.

In addition to the rational legalists, the mystical thinkers in the Jewish tradition have also provided useful reinterpretations. Professor Avi Sagi demonstrated the claim of many Hasidic sources that the battle against Amalek was only intended to be a spiritual war.

### **Invoking Amalek**

Even if most people would not invoke the commandment to destroy Amalek today, there are certainly those, like Rabbi Riemer, who have ventured to do so. And there has been no dearth of similar, violent invocations in reference to the Palestinians, as well. For example, Benzi Lieberman, the chairman of the Council of Settlements said in no uncertain terms: "The Palestinians are Amalek! We will destroy them. We won't kill them all. But we will destroy their ability to think as a nation. We will destroy Palestinian nationalism."

The general consensus among today's Jewish community seems to be that our energies can and must be used to stop the perpetuation of genocidal activity occurring throughout the world, to become agents for peace, and to dismiss any contemporary comparisons to the biblical paradigm. But clearly there are difficult texts and teaching that remain in our tradition that must be remembered and reckoned with.