

Torah Table Talk

Amalek: Dealing with Anti-Semitism Memory, Action & Vigilance

Parshat Vayikra Leviticus 1:1 – 5:26

Shabbat Zachor Deuteronomy 25:17-16

I Samuel 15:2-34



Shabbat Zachor is one of four special Sabbaths which precede the celebration of Passover. It occurs in the month of Adar on the Shabbat before Purim. The only section of the Torah that we are biblically mandated to read publicly, Deuteronomy chapter 25 contains the commandment to destroy the nation of Amalek which attacked the Israelites after they left the land of Egypt. The Amalekites were a nation of terrorists of sorts; they purposely attacked the nation from behind so that they could kill the stragglers and the weakest people as they traveled through the desert. The special Haftorah which we read on Shabbat Zachor concerns the failure of Saul, the first king of Israel to fulfill the divine mandate to destroy Amalek. Saul and his men destroy the 'cheap and the worthless' but kept sheep, oxen and lambs, and worst of all, allowed Agog, the king of Amalek, to live. As a result of this infraction, Samuel tells Saul that the monarchy would be taken from his family.

Deuteronomy 25

17. Remember what Amalek did to you by the way, when you came forth out of Egypt;

18. How he met you by the way, and struck at your rear, all who were feeble behind you, when you were faint and weary; and he did not fear God. 19. Therefore it shall be, when the Lord your God has given you rest from all your enemies around, in the land which the Lord your God gives you for an inheritance to possess, that you shall blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven; you shall not forget it.

I Samuel 15:1-3, 9-11

Samuel also said to Saul, The Lord sent me to anoint you to be king over his people, over Israel; now therefore listen to the voice of the words of the Lord. 2. Thus said the Lord of hosts, I remember that which Amalek did to Israel, how he laid wait for him in the way, when he came up from Egypt. 3. And go and strike Amalek, and completely destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox, and sheep, camel and ass..... 9. But Saul and the people spared Agag, and the best of the sheep, and of the oxen, and of the fatlings, and the lambs, and all that was good, and would not completely destroy them; but every thing that was despised and worthless, that they destroyed completely. 10. Then came the word of the Lord to Samuel, saying, 11. I regret that I have set up Saul to be king; for he is turned back from following me, and has not performed my commandments.

Esther 3:1

After these things king Ahasuerus promoted Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, and advanced him, and set his seat above all the princes who were with him.

The Jewish Way: Living the Jewish Holidays, Rabbi Irving Greenberg

Zachor is a Mitzvah that has made modern Jews uncomfortable. The natural desire to forget and be happy collides with the ongoing pain of memory and analysis. When asked why President Ronald Reagan in 1985 initially declined to visit the Dachau concentration camp, a presidential aide explained that the president was an up type of person did not like to "grovel in a grisly thing." 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....Remembrance is the key to preventing recurrence.

Questions for Discussion

1. The Bible draws a line of connection between Amalek, Agog and Haman. Why do you think it does this? Do you believe that there is a historic, ideological, culture connection between hatred of Jews throughout the ages?
 2. Why is the Torah so much harsher in its dealings with the Amalekites than it is in dealing with other nations? After all we are told not to hate the Egyptians because we were strangers in their land but we are told that our enmity for the Amalekites shall last for ever? Is it ever appropriate to hold on to a grudge?
 3. Read the rest of today's Haftorah about Saul and Samuel. Do you think that Samuel received a "bum rap?" What other factors might have motivated the prophet to give such a harsh judgment of the first king of Israel? What could you say in defense of Saul?
 4. Jewish tradition associates the nation of Amalek with the Jewish people's worst foes throughout the ages such as Antiochus, Nebuchadnezer, Titus, Hadrian, Torquemada, Chelmnitzky, and Hitler and Eichmann. It is almost as if there were a mystical seed that was reborn in each generation that all goes back to the original haters of the Jewish people? What affect does this have on our attitude toward the larger world?
 5. Greenberg writes that loosing our memory condemns us to repeat past errors? Americans, he writes have short memories? Is it possible that Jewish people have memories that are too long and unforgiving? Should we associate past foes with our primordial enemies, the Amalekites?
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How to use Torah Table Talk

1. *Read the sheet out loud to one another. Discuss what it has to say.*
2. *Focus on the text in the box. It is taken from Biblical, post-biblical and modern Jewish sources. What does it mean? How does it make you feel?*
3. *Try to answer the questions following the text.*
4. *This is not a test and there are many correct answers and interpretations to each question. Share your ideas with one another. Be open and honest in sharing your ideas.*

***"All it takes to study Torah is an open heart, a curious mind
and a desire to grow a Jewish soul."***