

AVOIDING AMALEK: THREE APPROACHES

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INTRODUCTION

After the battle with Amalek, the first group to attack the Israelites after they left Egypt, we find God's proclamation, *I will erase the memory of Amalek, utterly, from under the heavens* (Ex. 17:14), and the statement of Moses that *The Lord will be at war with Amalek from generation to generation* (Ex. 17:16). The position of Amalek as the arch enemy of the Israelites is solidified with the command to destroy them in Deuteronomy 25, *Remember what Amalek did to you on your way as you left Egypt, how he attacked you on the way, when you were tired and exhausted, striking down all the stragglers in your rear, with no fear of God. And so, when the Lord your God gives you rest from all the enemies around you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from beneath the sky. Do not forget* (Deut. 25:17-19).

This command to destroy Amalek raises ethical questions. "While God's command to destroy the immoral generation of Amalek described in the Bible may be considered just retribution, the eternal imperative to annihilate all descendants of the Amalekite nation, including infants and those who were not involved in the biblical account, is ethically challenging."¹ In this article we will see three approaches to functionally sidestepping any ethical concerns.

WE CANNOT IDENTIFY AMALEK

Mishna *Yadayim* 4:4 tells the story of an Ammonite convert who wanted to be able to marry a Jewish woman. "On that day Judah, an Ammonite convert, came and stood before them in the house of study. He said to them: Do I have the right to enter into the assembly? Rabban Gamliel said to him: you are forbidden. Rabbi Joshua said to him: you are permitted. Rabban Gamliel said to him: the verse says, *An Ammonite or a Moabite shall not enter into the assembly of the Lord: even to the tenth generation* (Deut. 23:4). R. Joshua said to him: But are the Ammonites and Moabites still in their own territory? Sennacherib, the king of Assyria, has long since come up and mingled all the nations, as it is said, *In that I have removed the bounds of the peoples, and have robbed their treasures, and have brought down as one mighty the inhabitants* (Isa. 10:13)."

This teaching establishes the fact that in our time, and indeed already by the time of the Second Temple, we cannot know the nationality of an individual based on the region they are from as the original inhabitants have been displaced in the time of the Neo-Assyrian king Sennacherib (ruled 705 – 681 BCE). From that point on, any individual is considered to be part of the vast majority of the inhabitants of the world, who aren't prohibited to

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convert and become part of the Jewish People.² This concept was applied to Amalekites as well by R. Joseph ben Moses Babad (1801 – 1874) in his commentary to the *Sefer ha-Chinuch*, *Minchat Chinuch*. He writes that since there is no way to know who is an Amalekite today, “nowadays we are not commanded in this.”³ Note that biblical scholars do not have a clear identification for Amalek either, a group not mentioned in any extrabiblical sources.⁴

THE COMMAND APPLIES TO MESSIANIC TIMES

Rabbi Moses ben Jacob of Coucy (13th century) in his discussion of destroying Amalek in his *Sefer Mitzvot Gadol* (negative command 226) states that “This command is for the times of the Messiah after the Land is conquered, since it states, *when the Lord your God gives you rest from all the enemies around you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from beneath the sky* (Deut. 25:19).” This approach is quoted by *Haggahot Maimuniyyot* by R. Meir HaKohen (13th century) in his commentary to the Rambam’s *Mishneh Torah*.⁵

This is based on the opinion of R. Eliezer ben Samuel of Metz (died 1198) in his halachic work *Sefer Yereim* (siman 299) where he writes that the command to destroy Amalek is “placed on the king and not on the rest of the people.” This itself is based on his interpretation of TB *Sanhedrin* 20b, “And so would Rabbi Yehuda say: Three mitzvot were commanded to the Jewish people upon their entrance into the Land: To establish a king for themselves, and to cut off the seed of Amalek, and to build the Chosen House (Temple).” He understands that the command to destroy Amalek is activated only once the command to have a king is performed. Functionally, this delays any destroying of Amalek to future messianic times.

AMALEK HAS BEEN DESTROYED

Rambam in his *Mishneh Torah* (*Hilchot Melachim* 5:4-5) states, “It is a positive commandment to annihilate the seven nations who dwelled in the Land of Israel as it states, *You shall utterly destroy them* (Deut. 20:17). Anyone who chances upon one of them and does not kill him violates a negative commandment as it states, *Do not allow a soul to live* (Deut. 20:16). The memory of them has already been obliterated. Similarly, it is a positive commandment to destroy the memory of Amalek, as it states, *blot out the memory of Amalek* (Deut. 25:19). It is also a positive commandment to constantly remember their evil deeds and their ambush of Israel to arouse our hatred of them, as it states, *Remember what Amalek did to you* (Deut. 25:17). The Oral Tradition teaches: “Remember – with your mouths; . . . *Do not forget* – in your hearts.”⁶ For it is forbidden to forget our hatred and enmity for them.”

Rambam understands that the command to destroy Amalek applies to each individual, but by beginning his discussion of Amalek with the word “similarly” he seems to indicate that as with the seven nations, they have already been obliterated. This is confirmed in the

Torah commentary of R. Avraham the son of Rambam, where he writes that the obliteration of Amalek “isn’t in one generation but rather in various generations, and so it was.”⁷ In this understanding, the same way the seven nations are no longer in existence, and so there is no active command to destroy them anymore, the same applies to Amalek who have been wiped out long ago. This approach is stated without elaboration in the Netziv’s commentary to Exod. 17:14, “this evil kingdom has already been erased from the world.”

The idea that Amalek was destroyed long ago is already found in Midrash Tanhuma (Ki Teitze 11). There a number of approaches are given to interpreting the generations mentioned in *The Lord will be at war with Amalek from generation to generation* (Ex. 17:16). “R. Eliezer says: From the generation of Moses to the generation of Samuel. R. Yehoshua says: From the generation of Samuel to the generation of Mordechai and Esther. R. Yossi says: From the generation of Mordechai and Esther until the king Messiah.” It would seem that according to R. Eliezer and R. Yehoshua the destruction of Amalek has already been achieved, while R. Yossi says it awaits completion in messianic times.

THE HOMILETICAL AMALEK

R. Joseph Soloveitchik famously stated in a 1956 address in the name of his father R. Moshe that “the notion of *the Lord will have war against Amalek from generation to generation* (Ex. 17:16) is not confined to a certain race, but includes a necessary attack against any nation or group infused with mad hatred that directs its enmity against the community of Israel. When a nation emblazon son its standard, *Come, let us cut them off from being a nation so that the name of Israel shall no longer be remembered* (Psa. 83:5), it becomes Amalek. In the 1930’s and 1940’s the Nazis, with Hitler at their helm, filled this role. In this most recent period they were the Amalekites, the representatives of insane hate. Today, the throngs of Nasser and the Mufti have taken their place. If we are again silent, I do not know how we will be judged before God. Do not rely on the justice of the “liberal world.” Those pious liberals were alive fifteen years ago and witnessed the destruction of millions of people with equanimity and did not lift a finger. They are liable to observe, God forbid, the repetition of the bloodbath and not lose a night’s sleep.”⁸

Homiletically, Amalek continues to appear in every generation, personified as the barbarous haters of the Jewish People. However, this is generally understood as a *drash*,⁹ and the actual biblical obligation to destroy the entire nation of Amalek has been functionally taken off the table by rabbinic commentators, relegating it to either the far flung messianic future or to the distant biblical past. While the actual moral question isn’t resolved, by making this commandment functionally inapplicable it is rendered a theoretical construct rather than a practical dilemma.

This is the same method found in TB *Sanhedrin* 71a in dealing with the rule of the rebellious child receiving a death penalty found in Deuteronomy 21:19-21. The Talmud brings the approach of R. Yehuda, who says: “If his mother was not identical to his father in voice, appearance, and height, he does not become a stubborn and rebellious son. What is the Vol. 51, No. 4, 2023

reason? As the verse states: *He will not obey our voices* [kolenu] (Deut. 21:20) (which indicates that they both have the same voice). And since we require that they be identical in voice, we also require that they be identical in appearance and height.” A baraita in accordance with the approach of R. Yehuda states that “There has never been a stubborn and rebellious son and there will never be one in the future,” as the requirements placed by R. Yehuda make it functionally impossible to apply the Torah’s rule. The fact that this practically avoids a perceived ethical problem with the law is indicated by R. Shimon there. “Rabbi Shimon says: And is it simply due to the fact that the boy ate a tarteimar of meat and drank a half-log of Italian wine that his father and his mother shall take him out to stone him? Rather, there has never been (a stubborn and rebellious son) and there will never be one in the future.” The Talmud concludes by stating that the reason the case was written in the Torah is “So that you may expound and receive reward” for learning about it. In other words, we learn a conceptual lesson from the case about the dangers of such a wayward offspring, but the death penalty isn’t ever administered.

In a similar manner, rabbinic interpretation has turned Amalek into a lesson about the baseless hatred and evil that man is capable of, but the actual application of the death penalty to an entire nation has been taken out of the realm of practical experience and relegated to the world of ideas.

NOTES

1. Shira Weiss, *Ethical Ambiguity in the Hebrew Bible: Philosophical Analysis of Scriptural Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 31. See also the discussion in Aharon Lichtenstein, *By His Light: Character and Values in the Service of God* (Jersey City, NJ: KTAV Publishing House, 2003), pp. 121-128.
2. See the commentary of R. Ovadia of Bartenura to Mishna *Yadayim* 4:4.
3. *Minchat Chinuch* on mitzva 604, section 5.
4. See Jeffrey Tigay, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), pp. 235-236.
5. *Hilchot Melachim* 5:5, note 1.
6. *Sifri* 296:16.
7. Efraim Vizenberg, ed., *Peirush Rabbeinu Avraham ben haRambam* (London: 1958), p. 294. Earlier in the work he states that “In the days of Saul Amalek was obliterated,” but clearly the intent wasn’t that Amalek was completely destroyed then, rather that they were mostly obliterated then. See there page 63, note 39.
8. Joseph Ber Soloveitchik, *Kol Dodi Dofek* (Jersey City, NJ: KTAV Publishing House, 2006), p. 79.
9. See Nahum Rabinovitz, *Melumadei Milchama* (Maale Adumim: Maaliot, 2003), p. 24. See also Eliyahu Ben-Zimra, “Kedushat haChayyim v’Mesirut Nefesh b’Yemei haShoa” in *Sinai* vol. 80:3-4 (1976), section 3 of the introduction, pp. 153-154.