



Parshat Zachor: Remembering Amalek

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This coming Shabbat, Jewish communities around the world will read Parshat Zachor, in fulfillment, according to many opinions, of the biblical obligation to remember Amalek's attack on the Jewish people as they journeyed through the wilderness. This passage in the Torah has always posed interpretative and ethical questions, yet all this has taken on new meaning in the context of the ongoing war.

Tembeka Ngcukaitobi, the lawyer who recently served on the South African legal team charging Israel with genocide, [claimed in his statement](#) that "The Prime Minister's invocation of 'Amalek' is being used by soldiers to justify the killing of civilians, including children." While the referenced [statement by PM Netanyahu](#) only cited the obligation to *remember* the deeds of Amalek, in a manner no different from the Hague's very own [Holocaust memorial](#), as noted in a [clarification](#) issued by the Prime Minister's Office, this and other incidents have thrown the question of Amalek and its contemporary relevance into the limelight.

For us, as Jews committed to Torah and mitzvot as well as to the security and flourishing of the modern State of Israel, what do we make of this element of the Torah, which has contributed to accusations against us over the past few months?

At face value, the obligation to annihilate Amalek cannot be fulfilled today, since King Sancheriv, as described by Chazal, "shuffled the nations" and caused us to permanently lose track of the authentic descendants of Amalek and other ancient nations (Mishna Yadayim 4:4). Nonetheless, Maimonides views the destruction of Amalek as a Biblical commandment.

In his *Kol Dodi Dofek*, Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik claims there remains an application of the mitzva of Amalek in the modern day context. Citing his father, Rabbi Moshe Soloveitchik, he contends that Amalek is not merely a nation from the biblical period, but rather "any group infused with mad hatred that directs its enmity against the community of Israel" (footnote 23). Amalek is not a matter of the past - on the contrary, the notion of defending the Jewish people from those who wish us harm remains in full force.

Significantly, though, Rabbi Soloveitchik clarifies that the application of Amalek today does not entail total annihilation of a people, particularly those not directly involved in attacking Israel. On the contrary, it is to wage a just and moral war against those who seek to destroy us.



This is, by Rabbi Soloveitchik's account, the modern Amalek paradigm: simply a directive to fight a defensive war, in a manner consistent with the Torah's view of "just warfare," against our sworn enemies.

As we have seen in these past few months, the IDF has taken extreme precautions to minimize the civilian toll of the war - sending evacuation warnings, opening and maintaining humanitarian corridors, and fighting not only with courage, but also with conscience and caution. Agree or disagree: all of us living in Israel know of soldiers who have been injured or have tragically fallen while upholding the exemplary moral standard of the IDF. There is a contemporary application to Amalek that we will read about on Shabbat - it is Hamas combatants alone, and not the entirety of the population of Gaza. No one wishes for the death or injury of innocent civilians. Hamas are solely and squarely to blame for this war - and for all of its tragic consequences.

Some rabbinic scholars have questioned Rabbi Soloveitchik's approach. Rabbi Nachum Rabinovich, in his [Melumdei Milchama](#), argues, based on his own careful reading of Rambam, that Rabbi Soloveitchik's claim should be read homiletically, rather than halakhically. It is both halakhically tenuous and morally and politically dangerous, argues R. Rabinovich, to assign the role of Amalek to other enemies of the Jewish people, and he cites R. Tzvi Yehuda Kook as having the same assessment of Rabbi Soloveitchik's position. Similarly, [R. Eliezer Melamed warns against](#) identifying any contemporary group or movement with the halakhic category of Amalek.

Even so, these rabbinic voices find in Rabbi Soloveitchik's homiletic interpretation of Amalek a sober reminder to us, that we must stand up to those who attack the weak and the uninvolved, and who seek our wholesale annihilation.

In our loyalty to Judaism and the Jewish nation, we insist on fighting in accordance with the Torah's moral approach to warfare. I am in awe of our soldiers for their bravery on the battlefield, and consistently inspired by the morality they carry with them despite the tremendous physical and emotional challenges this war has brought upon them. If Hamas would lay down their weapons and return our brothers, sisters, parents and grandparents still in Gaza – tomorrow the humanitarian crisis would be over. If the IDF would lay down its arms, tomorrow Israel could God forbid be annihilated and World Jewry would be put in perilous danger. That is the description of Hamas, of Amalek.

This Shabbat, the same Torah that asks of us multiple times to protect and care for the downtrodden and persecuted commands us to also remember that evil exists in the world. We must name it and, even at great sacrifice, root it out. Our historical consciousness stays with us, even as we commit ourselves to the Torah's principles of moral integrity and justice.