

*Vayikra/Shabbat Zakhor*  
**Zekhirah: Remembering, to Forget**  
**Leviticus 1:1 – 5:26**  
**Deuteronomy 25:17 - 25:19**  
**Rabbi Marc J. Margolius**

This week we begin a new book of the Torah, *sefer Vayikra/Leviticus*, the first portion of which falls this year on Shabbat *Zakhor*, the Shabbat before Purim. The *maftir*, the additional special reading for Shabbat *Zakhor* (Deuteronomy 25:17-19) describes Amalek's attack on the Israelites after they cross the Reed Sea. We read this passage just before Purim because Jewish tradition understands Haman, the antihero of the *megillah*/Book of Esther, as descended from Amalek, the Jewish prototype for evil.

The passage we read from Deuteronomy represents one of the Torah's great paradoxical teachings. In it, Moses admonishes the people, and all future generations, to remember and, simultaneously, eradicate the memory of Amalek:

יז זכור את אשר עשה לך עמלק בדרך  
בצאתכם ממצרים. 17 Remember what Amalek did to you,  
when you were leaving Egypt,

יה אשר קרה בדרך ויזנב בך כל  
הנחשלים אחריה ואסה עגף ויגע ולא ירא  
אלהים. 18 how he happened upon you by the  
way, and struck those of you who were  
stragglers, when you were tired and  
exhausted, and he did not revere God.

יט והיה בהנחת ידוהו אלקיה לך מקל  
איביה מסביב בארץ אשר ה אלקיה נתן  
לך נחלה לרשתה תמחה את זכר עמלק  
מתחת השמים לא תשכח. 19 When YHVH your God gives you  
respite from all your enemies around  
you, in the land which YHVH your God  
gives you, **wipe out the memory of  
Amalek from under the heavens; do  
not forget.**

Moses refers here to an incident in Exodus 17:8-16, in which Amalek attacks the newly-freed Israelites. In that battle Moses, assisted by Aaron and Hur, leads the Israelites to victory, following which God offers this enigmatic injunction:

ויאמר ה' אל משה כתב זאת זכרון בספר  
ושים באזני יהושע יהושע פי מזה אמחה את  
זכר עמלק מתחת השמים 14 YHVH said to Moses: 'Write this as  
a remembrance in the book, and  
rehearse it in the ears of Joshua: **I will  
utterly blot out the remembrance of  
Amalek from under heaven.'**



In the Exodus account of the Amalek incident, God vows to eradicate of the memory of Amalek; in the Deuteronomic version, Moses charges the Israelites with that role. For much of Jewish history, Amalek has stood as an archetype of evil associated with *external enemies* of the Jewish people. In the mystical stream of Jewish tradition, Amalek has also been associated with an *internal process* present within every human being.<sup>1</sup> For Hasidic master Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev (1740-1809),

not only are the Children of Israel commanded to blot out [the external] Amalek, but also every individual Jew must blot out that evil part called 'Amalek' which is hidden in his heart. As long as the seed of Amalek is in the world, since a person is a miniature world (a microcosm), Amalek exists in the evil potential within the person, which awakens anew again and again to cause him to sin.<sup>2</sup>

Levi Yitzhak here cautions against the tendency to demonize adversaries as Amalek. In his view, Amalek represents a universal human inclination of which we must be cognizant (*zakhor*, remember), presenting dangers to which we must constant attend (*timcheh et zecher Amalek*, “wipe out the memory of Amalek”). We each have an “inner Amalek,” a mean streak, a tendency to pick on the vulnerabilities in others and ourselves. The Torah here cautions us to be vigilant about our “shadow,” to redirect its energy towards the light.

The *mitzvah* of remembering Amalek is one of six traditional daily “remembrances” incumbent upon Jews and, in the traditional Ashkenazic daily prayer book, recited at the conclusion of morning prayers. The six are: the Exodus from Egypt, receiving of Torah at Sinai, Amalek, building of the Golden Calf, Miriam's punishment for speaking ill of Moses, and Shabbat. At least one midrash wonders about the apparent contradiction between being enjoined at the same time to remember that which is sacred (such as Shabbat), and that which is profane (such as Amalek):

[When Moses said to the people of Israel,] “Remember what Amalek did to you on the way when you were leaving Egypt,” the people of Israel said to him: “Moses our master! One verse [in Torah] states: ‘Remember what Amalek did to you.’ Another verse states: ‘Remember the day of Shabbat, to sanctify it.’ How can both be fulfilled? This one is ‘Remember’ and that one is ‘Remember’!”

Moses said to them: ‘A cup of spiced wine is not the same as a cup of vinegar; yet one is a cup and the other is a cup. There is a remembrance to keep and sanctify the day of Shabbat, and there is a remembrance to punish [Amalek].’”<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> In spite of demonizing Amalek and his lineage, at least some rabbis allowed for the possibility of redemption, noting that “descendants of Haman [himself a descendant of Amalek] studied Torah [among the Rabbis] in B'nei Brak” (Babylonian Talmud, *Gittin* 57b and *Sanhedrin* 96b).

<sup>2</sup> *Kedushat Levi* on Purim, trans. Rabbi Jonathan Slater.

<sup>3</sup> *Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer*, chapter 44

Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, founder of Chabad Hasidism, comments on this midrashic analogy of two cups: one sweet and ready to drink (Shabbat), the other equally essential even if unpleasant (vinegar), therefore requiring human effort to transform it:

This is the deeper significance of the verse, ‘Make for me delicacies, such as I love’ (Genesis 27:4): delicacies, in the plural, to indicate two types of gratification... The analogy is to earthly food, in which there likewise exist two kinds of relishes: sweet and luscious foods, and tart and sour foods which have been spiced and fixed in such a way that they are made into delicacies which revive the soul....This is the meaning of the verse, ‘God has made everything for God's own sake, even the evildoer for the day of evil’ (Proverbs 16:4), meaning that the evildoer should repent of his evil and turn his evil into ‘day’ and light.”<sup>4</sup>

In other words, even Amalek, the internal foe, plays an essential role and awaits our attention and effort to turn it towards redemptive ends. The *yetzer hara* is likened here to a “cup of vinegar,” a soured wine which is, nevertheless, sacred in origin and waiting to be “sweetened.” Each human error or “missing of the mark” flows out of a sacred impulse distorted by exaggerated, self-centered fear. We must remember our “inner Amalek” in order to sweeten it, so its energy may redirect towards redemptive ends.

As I’ve noted previously in this series, this requires our willingness to identify and admit to our own inner Amalek—that which Jung famously described as our “shadow:”

There is no light without shadow and no psychic wholeness without imperfection. To round itself out, life calls not for perfection but for completeness; and for this the ‘thorn in the flesh’ is needed, the suffering of defects without which there is no progress and no ascent.<sup>5</sup>

In terms which truly speak to our day, Jung observes that “remembering our Amalek” requires surrendering our instinct to project our shadow onto others, to begin by admitting that it is an inescapable presence within ourselves:

[one who is] brave enough to withdraw all projections [is] an individual who is conscious of a pretty thick shadow. Such a [one] is saddled with new problems and conflicts. [That person] has become a serious problem to himself ... unable to say that they do this or that, they are wrong, and they must be fought against... Such a [person] knows that whatever is wrong in the world is in [themselves], and if [one] only learns to deal with [one’s] own shadow [one] has done something real for the world. [That person] has

---

<sup>4</sup> *Tanya* chapter 27.

<sup>5</sup> C.G. Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy* (Routledge: 2014), p. 159.

succeeded in shouldering at least an infinitesimal part of the gigantic, unsolved social problems of our day.<sup>6</sup>

What does it mean then, in terms of our practice, to “remember Amalek?” The Hasidic master Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk, a principal disciple of the Maggid of Mezritch, in his Torah commentary *Pri Ha'aretz* notes that

Torah is itself remembrance/mindfulness (*zekhirah*), which is the commandment of bringing to mind (*zikaron*) standing at the revelation at Mt. Sinai (Deut. 4:10). God created the world through the Torah (Zohar I:5a) and it is the tool of God's craft (Genesis Rabbah 1:1). Certainly the power of the person who brings something to mind (*hazokher*) who was created through it [Torah] is the commandment of these remembrances (*zekhirot*) mentioned above (remembering Amalek and Mt. Sinai).<sup>7</sup>

The biblical scholar Nachum Sarna observes that the Hebrew root *z-k-r* “connotes much more than the recall of things past. It means, rather, to be mindful, to pay heed, signifying a sharp focusing of attention upon someone or something. It embraces concern and involvement and is active not passive, so that it eventuates in action.”<sup>8</sup>

My friend and colleague Rabbi Sam Feinsmith describes the role of *zekhirah* clearly and concisely:

Mindfulness or *zekhirah* thus indicates sustained one-pointed concentration on a single object of focus. ... [T]he object of our mindful remembrance is the Oneness of Being, divinity itself. When we forget the omnipresent Oneness that undergirds and is bound up with all that is, when we fall into mindlessness, we tend to engage in all manner of unskillful, self-serving behavior. Thus the first practice point is *zekhirah*, mindful remembrance, fixing our attention one-pointedly on divine omnipresence. Doing so supports the kind of inner clarity and balance that deepens our capacity to turn away from an unwholesome path by *adopting a more expansive view than the narrow and self-cherishing view of the grasping ego* (emphasis added).<sup>9</sup>

So how can we remember Amalek in order to obliterate the memory of Amalek? How can we “remember in order to forget?” By bringing kind attention to our *yetzer hara*, our inclination to cling or to dominate, both of which arise from excessive desire or fear. These thoughts and feelings “tangle us up” and lead us to stumble repeatedly. The *Pri Ha'aretz* advises us to untangle ourselves by remembering to bring our Amalek/*yetzer hara*, arising from engagement in the world of differentiation in his terms, *yesh* (“that which exists”) to *ayin* (that is,

---

<sup>6</sup> C.W. Jung, "Psychology and Religion" (1938), in *Collected Works of C.W. Jung, Psychology and Religion: West and East* (Princeton: 2014), p. 140.

<sup>7</sup> Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk, *Pri Ha'aretz* on *Tetzaveh/Zakhor*, trans. Rabbi James Maiserls-Jacobson.

<sup>8</sup> Nahum Sarna, *Jewish Publication Society Commentary on Exodus*, on Exodus 2:24.

<sup>9</sup> Rabbi Sam Feinsmith, commentary on *Degel Machaneh Ephraim* on *parshat Devarim*.

“nothingness:” consciousness of non-differentiation and non-judgment). The *Pri Ha'aretz* teaches that our inner Amalek is like wax which “melts before fire, so the wicked shall perish before God,” (Psalm 68:3), which is the *ain sof* (infinite) which gives life to it.”

In this week leading to Shabbat *Zakhor*, we bring attention to those moments throughout the day when our inner Amalek is active in our mind, emotions, and body: when we are unintentionally cruel to those we love and care about (including ourselves), when we seek out and take advantage of our or others' vulnerabilities. These moments of awareness can make us cringe and desire to flee. Rather than berate ourselves for the presence of such painful instincts, we recognize even these as containing holy sparks waiting to be redeemed—if we are willing to face and even embrace our shadow.

In a time of widespread demonization of the “other,” may we use this sacred season to explore with compassion our own inner demons. May we remember and not flinch from the Amalek within us. May we befriend our shadow and drain its toxicity. In doing so, may we free the energy within our shadows and, rooted in compassion for all beings, confront and defeat the real presence of Amalek in this world. May we protect the sanctity of every human life and work towards a world of *tzedek v'shalom*, justice and peace, wiping out the memory of Amalek from under the heavens, without succumbing to the Amalek within us.

***Tikkun middot* practices for the week of *Vayikra/Zakhor*, practicing *zekhirah*, cultivating our memory/mindfulness of our shadow:**

***Chevruta* questions:** What is your instinctive reaction to the thought that you have your own “inner Amalek?” Do you think it is true that you tend to project that shadow onto others? What would it mean for you to “remember” that shadow and “dissolve it” in compassion?

**Focus phrase:** Choose a focus phrase to bring *zekhirah* (kind, mindful attention) to your own shadow. Some examples: “bring shadow to light,” “kind attention untangles my knots,” “remember to forget.”

***Kabbalah:*** As a *kabbalah* (simple daily practice), bring kind attention to moments throughout the week when your “inner Amalek” manifests in your thoughts, words, or actions - when you notice a cruelty arising without you, whether towards loved ones or others. Or maybe your Amalek preys upon your own vulnerabilities, picking on your own areas of vulnerability, “ganging up” on yourself. Can you notice the pattern of thoughts, feelings and sensations in such moments? Can you accept them with compassion and watch them pass?

**Prayer Practice:** Psalm 23 includes the verse *gam ki eilech b'gei tzalmavet, lo ira ra ki atah imadi*, “though I walk through the valley of death I will fear no evil, for You are with me.” The word *tzalmavet* (“shadow of death”) is a compound word comprised of *tsel* (shadow) and *mavet* (death). The verse can be a reflection or prayer that we can enter our shadow without fear, for we will find the Holy One even there, in the aspects of ourselves we usually think of as least godly. Paradoxically, if we can “go there,” we can transform those aspects of ourselves and deprive

them if the power they possess in secrecy and darkness. Here's a [wonderful setting of Psalm 23:4v](#) to utilize in chanting that verse this week as a prayer practice, recorded by Ethan Goldberg who learned it from Avram Mlotek at Brandeis University.

**Poetry:** For cultivating *zekhirah*, the sacred capacity for mindfulness, Joy Harjo's "Remember" (from *She Had Some Horses*, W. W. Norton & Company, 1983)"

Remember the sky that you were born under,  
know each of the star's stories.  
Remember the moon, know who she is.  
Remember the sun's birth at dawn, that is the  
strongest point of time. Remember sundown  
and the giving away to night.  
Remember your birth, how your mother struggled  
to give you form and breath. You are evidence of  
her life, and her mother's, and hers.  
Remember your father. He is your life, also.  
Remember the earth whose skin you are:  
red earth, black earth, yellow earth, white earth  
brown earth, we are earth.  
Remember the plants, trees, animal life who all have their  
tribes, their families, their histories, too. Talk to them,  
listen to them. They are alive poems.  
Remember the wind. Remember her voice. She knows the  
origin of this universe.  
Remember you are all people and all people  
are you.  
Remember you are this universe and this  
universe is you.  
Remember all is in motion, is growing, is you.  
Remember language comes from this.  
Remember the dance language is, that life is.  
Remember.

**Music:** A song for this week to capture the paradoxical injunction of Shabbat *Zakhor* of remembering in order to forget: "I Forgot to Remember to Forget" (by Stan Kesler and Charlie Feathers), originally performed by [Elvis](#), as well as by [Johnny Cash](#), and by [Wanda Jackson](#). Or try Andrew Lloyd Webber's "[Memory](#)," here sung by Barbara Streisand ("Daylight/I must wait for the sunrise/I must think of a new life/And I mustn't give in/When the dawn comes/Tonight will be a memory too/And a new day will begin/Burnt out ends of smoky days/The still cold smell of morning/A street lamp dies, another night is over/Another day is dawning/Touch me/It is so easy to leave me/All alone with the memory/Of my days in the sun If you touch me/You'll understand what happiness is/Look, a new day has begun").