

Jewish Contemporary Ethics Part 33: Ethical Issues in Tanach 11: Amalek I

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The previous article discussed eradicating the barbaric practices of the idolatrous Canaanite nations by waging war against them. Eliminating these brutal rituals, such as child sacrifice, was a moral

imperative. The campaign included offering peace, contingent upon the Canaanites adopting the universal morals of the seven Noachide laws. This was in stark contrast to the commandment to annihilate the nation of Amalek by killing every man, woman and child (see the Book of Shmuel I 15:3). How are we to understand this mitzvah?

Amalek was a grandson of Esav (Bereishit 36:12) and the nation which he spawned was infused with the hatred that Esav had harboured towards his brother Yaakov after their father had granted Yaakov the birthright blessing (Bereishit 27). Despite an apparent rapprochement between the two brothers (Bereishit 33), this hatred continued throughout the generations, culminating in the Amalekites launching brutal attacks against the fledgling Israelite nation (Shemot 17:8-16, Bemidbar 14:45 and Devarim 25:17-19). God therefore commanded that we “erase the memory of Amalek and wage war against them from generation to generation”. Rashi (1040-1105) notes that while Amalek lost the initial battle, their actions paved the way for other nations to attack, and so they must be annihilated.

It is therefore clear that the nation of Amalek is the archetypal enemy of the Jewish people, tantamount to the embodiment of anti-Semitism. But how does that justify killing even Amalekite children?

There are numerous approaches to this question; the most cogent argument expresses a utilitarian

motive. Given that the Israelite nation was as yet stateless, there was no gain or practical reason for Amalek to attack them. Unlike other barbaric nations, the Amalekite motive was purely an evil act of hatred. Rabbi Yitzchak Abarbanel (1437-1508) explains that their annihilation would serve as a deterrent to other nations.

Similarly, the Ramban (Nachmanides d. 1194-1270) writes that Amalek is intrinsically evil, as proven in the story of Shaul’s misplaced clemency on Agag, the Amalekite king (Shmuel I 15:9). Before Shmuel eventually executed him, Agag fathered a child who perpetuated the Amalekite nation (Talmud Megillah 13a) yielding the wicked Haman (Megillat Esther 3:1).

Does ‘the end justify the means’? Rabbi Yaakov Medan (of Yeshivat Har Etzion) argues that the command to kill every “man and woman, infant and suckling” (Shmuel I 15:3) does not inevitably demand genocide. Instead, Shmuel’s command meant that when waging war, a Jewish army may have to be uncompromising in their efforts to remove this destructive evil from the world. In modern terms, despite causing as many as 135,000 violent civilian deaths, the controversial bombing of Dresden during World War II was justified by the 1953 United States Air Force report because it eliminated the Nazis’ ability to reinforce a counter-attack against the advancing Russian army. Even the most precise modern firepower cannot entirely mitigate against innocent casualties, even when clearly and correctly attempting to do so.

The next article will discuss whether the commandment to destroy Amalek applies in modern times and if so, what it means today.