

Part 33a: Ethical issues in Tanach 10 – Amalek II

The previous article analysed the ethical issues relating to God's command to wipe out the nation of Amalek (Devarim 25:19). While in biblical times this related to ensuring the destruction of the most evil nation in the world despite the inevitable loss of civilian life, God indicates that the command to annihilate Amalek is an ongoing struggle 'from generation to generation' (Shemot 17:16) and must therefore apply even today.

This is hard to understand, especially since the military campaigns of the Assyrian king Sancheirev during the 7th century BCE, assimilated and mixed up the identity of many of the nations mentioned in Tanach. It is therefore impossible to know who the true descendants of the Canaanites or the Amalekites are today (Yeshaya 10:13, Brachot 28a and Sefer HaChinuch 425).

Rabbi Moses Isserles (d. 1572) notes that children had the custom of drawing images or writing Haman on wood and stones and then banging them together to symbolically erase the name of Haman on Purim (Orach Chaim 690:17). This appears to be the origin of making noise when Haman is mentioned during the Megillah reading.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (d. 1993) broadens the commandment to destroy Amalek to include any nation in any generation that seeks to destroy the Jewish people (Theological and Halakhic Reflections on the Holocaust pp. 51-117). Indeed, post-biblical empires such as Rome have often been related to Amalek.

The Gemara identifies a nation called *Germamia* whose people are descendants of Edom, another name for Eisav (Bereishit 36:1) the grandfather of Amalek (*ibid.* 12), who would 'destroy the entire world if given the chance' (Megillah 6b). Both Rabbi Yaakov Emden (d. 1776) and the Vilna Gaon (d. 1797) associate *Germamia* with Germany. Based on this tradition, when Kaiser Wilhelm II visited Jerusalem in 1898, Rabbi Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld (d. 1932) the leader of Ashkenazic Jewry in Palestine at that time, refused to greet him.

However, Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm notes that it is both immoral and impractical to apply the biblical command to destroy Amalek to every member of every nation or people who have ever threatened our existence (Faith and Doubt, p. 334-343). Think of the many righteous gentiles who saved countless Jews from our enemies who were also part of those evil nations.

There is also the possibility of *Teshuvah*. Rabbi Yosef Karo (d. 1575) states that if either the Canaanites or Amalekites had agreed to make peace and adopt the seven Noachide Laws, they would no longer be considered miscreants (Kesef Mishnah Laws of Kings 6:4). The Gemara in fact states that the descendants of Haman the Amalekite taught Torah in Bnei Brak (Gittin 57b).

To many contemporary Jewish thinkers Amalek represents more than just a race or nation. Rabbi Tzvi Elimelech Shapira of Dinov (d. 1841) associates the essence of Amalek with that of the spiritual impurity, temptation to sin and self-doubt (Bnei Yissaschar 3:6). In this sense, the post-biblical command to annihilate Amalek is a struggle against the moral and spiritual threats, both on a personal and national level.

The next section of our series will examine contemporary Jewish ethics in the areas of business, medicine and emerging technologies.

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