

Temple B'nai Israel
March 2014
Remarks For Shabbat Zachor (Special Maftir for Purim: Deuteronomy 25:17-19)

There are some people who you meet in your life and they change you forever. Sometimes it happens for the better and they make a positive impact. Other times they do some serious damage. For me, that person could most accurately be described as my bully. Her name is Autumn. For two years, she intimidated me, made fun of almost everything about me, and found ways to humiliate me over and over again. Today, years later, even after she apologized to me one day out of the blue, I still cannot really let it go. I find it hard to forget the pain she caused me, or how she took advantage of me. She is an integral part of my past, but a difficult one to confront or to forget.

In the Jewish tradition, the sworn enemy of the Jewish people is the nation of Amalek. In the Book of Exodus, just as the Israelites came out of Egypt to the other side of the sea, a vicious attack befell them. The Amalekites, a local tribe, came and attacked the Israelites. Even though Joshua, a great military leader, and Moses, who held up his staff to give God's help in their battle, were at the helm, many Israelites were killed. They were thirsty and hungry after wandering in the wilderness just a few days. The telling of this episode in the Book of Deuteronomy adds to the description. The text emphasizes that when the Israelites were at their most weak and vulnerable, the Amalekites came up from behind and killed the most tired stragglers in the back, the slow

walkers, and anyone else they could get their hands on to slay. God told Moses to record this battle as a memorial for all time from generation to generation.

This week, we commemorate Shabbat Zachor, the Shabbat of remembrance. We read this special portion from the book of Deuteronomy that reminds us again of Amalek, saying: “Blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven; you shall not forget.” For you see, on Purim, our story focuses on Queen Esther, but also on another enemy of the Jewish people, the wicked Haman. We know that he is the bad guy of the story, but in the megillah, he is also identified as an Amalekite. It is no coincidence that he is known as a descendent of the original Amalek. Haman also cracks a plot to destroy the entire Jewish people. Haman hates Mordechai, one Jew who works at the king’s palace, so he decides to kill every single Jew—man, woman, and child. We know of course that they survive, and each year we continue to follow the commandment in the Torah to never forget Amalek. We vow never to forget what Haman, Amalek, and all of the enemies of the Jewish people did to us in Shushan and in countless other places.

I think that many of us can relate on a very basic human level to this sentiment: when someone deeply wrongs or hurts you, it is never that easy to simply forgive and forget. It can still feel too fresh and the commandments lingers. Even if you aren’t one to hold a grudge, I bet you can still remember a time when somebody wronged you and you never quite got over it. Plus, the commandment to remember this incident can seem quite passive and pointless. We remember the past injury, but what can we do about it?

We don't actually blot out their memory at all—we keep it alive by telling the story year after year. In addition, it's interesting to consider if they even existed at all. In fact, the name Amalek is not mentioned in any writings outside the Bible. Any identification with other ancient peoples isn't proven with archaeological evidence anywhere. In the biblical genealogical system Amalek is the son of Esau's son Eliphaz by Eliphaz's concubine Timna (Gen. 36:12). Amalek's genealogy was intended to imply his special status as a nomad as distinct from the sedentary Edomites who were farmers.

So why do we need to keep this memory of Amalek and live and blot out their name? There may actually be another way to understand this idea of Amalek. Many of our teachers of old agree: The Torah declares: "For the hand is on the throne of God: God maintains a war against Amalek..." (Exodus 17:16). The Sages teach that, "God's throne is not complete, as long as Amalek exists in this world. Nor is His name complete." In this verse, the Hebrew root for throne and covered are the same. In Amalek's worldview, God is not important in this world. His power is worth challenging. Perhaps God doesn't even exist. Amalek also shares the same numerical value (240) in Hebrew letters as *safek*, doubt. The very existence of Amalekite philosophy causes uncertainty, fear, and confusion. It reminds us of our base instincts, removes us from a higher purpose.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe teaches that Amalek is not simply a person or a nation. It is a metaphor for all that is still evil in the world, everything we wish we could escape in ourselves and in others. It is the embodiment of selfishness, ego, irrationality, brutality, and negative desires. The Rebbe teaches: *How is one to respond to Amalek? How is one to deal with the apathy, the cynicism, the senseless doubt within? The formula that the Torah proposes is encapsulated in a single word: Zachor—“Remember.”* The Jewish response to this metaphorical Amalek within is not to ignore it or feel restricted by its power. By pledging to remember, we can acknowledge the past and ideally, learn from it.

The key to succeeding in this effort is taking back control. Psychologists agree that bullies and abusers thrive on fear and self-doubt. The things that haunt us, hurt us, and negatively impact our lives are usually there because we are afraid of them. We are afraid that they could hurt us more, or that we cannot get away from their power over us. When that perceived control is gone, the victim becomes enabled to act. The Buddha taught: I do not believe in a fate that falls on men however they act; but I do believe in a fate that falls on them unless they act. I believe this is how we can get rid of our own metaphorical Amalek influences. We have to take back control, make our own decisions, and stand up for our own rights and needs. Sometimes we feel stuck, stuck in a moment where we were hurt and cannot move past it. Sometimes we may feel hopeless, never finding the solution to escape a troubling experience. Taking back control is about

making a decision. We can remember the incident, but we control what it does to us on a daily basis.

The act of remembering something we cannot fully forgive actually gives us a new way to remember. We can move forward and create hope for a better future. As Jews, we remain obligated to this commandment, to name the things that harm us. Maybe we won't be able to destroy them from under God's creation as the Torah teaches us. People like Autumn still pop up, hateful enemies of our nation will continue to be a part of our history. The point is that Amalek should not define us nor be the only moment in our history we remember for all time. It should motivate and ground us to be better, to learn from their negative example. We hold the power to recognize the things that damage our personal and national psyches. By drawing upon our own inner strength and our faith in ourselves, we can remember our own Amalek, and try to blot out its impact today.