

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Insights into the Bible
[14]

King Saul's Pity for Amalek
I Samuel 15:1-34



Gustave Doré, The Death of Agag.

Background to Our Story

Amalek in the Bible

Genesis 36

¹² Now Timna was the concubine of Eliphaz, Esau's son, and she bore Amalek to Eliphaz. These were the sons of Adah, Esau's wife.

Exodus 17

⁸ Now Amalek came and fought with Israel in Rephidim. ⁹ And Moses said to Joshua, "Choose us some men and go out, fight with Amalek. Tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the rod of God in my hand." ¹⁰ So Joshua did as Moses said to him and fought with Amalek. And Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. ¹¹ And so it was, when Moses held up his hand, that Israel prevailed; and when he let down his hand, Amalek prevailed. ¹² But Moses' hands became heavy; so, they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it. And Aaron and Hur supported his hands, one on one side, and the other on the other side; and his hands were steady until the going down of the sun. ¹³ So Joshua defeated Amalek and his people with the edge of the sword. ¹⁴ Then the Lord said to Moses, "Write this for a memorial in the book and recount it in the hearing of Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven." ¹⁵ And Moses built an altar and called its name, The-Lord-Is-My-Banner; ¹⁶ for he said, "Because the Lord has sworn: the Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation."

Numbers 13

²⁸ Nevertheless the people who dwell in the land are strong; the cities are fortified and very large; moreover, we saw the descendants of Anak there. ²⁹ The Amalekites dwell in the land of the South; the Hittites, the Jebusites, and the Amorites dwell in the mountains; and the Canaanites dwell by the sea and along the banks of the Jordan."

Numbers 24

²⁰ Then he looked on Amalek, and he took up his oracle and said: "Amalek is the first among nations, but its end will be eternal destruction."

Deuteronomy 25

¹⁷ "Remember what Amalek did to you on the way as you were coming out of Egypt, ¹⁸ how he met you on the way and attacked your rear ranks, all the stragglers at your rear, when you *were* tired and weary; and he did not fear God. ¹⁹ Therefore it shall be, when the Lord your God has given you rest from your enemies all around, in the land which the Lord your God is giving you to possess as an inheritance, *that* you will blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven. You shall not forget.

King Saul's Military campaign against the Amalekites

◆ AI Overview

King Saul's Military campaign against the Amalekites took place primarily in the rugged Negev desert and the Sinai Peninsula, spanning a geographical expanse from Telaim down toward the border of Egypt. This historic clash is detailed in the biblical account of 1 Samuel 15.



THE STORY

וַיֹּאמֶר שְׂמוּאֵל אֶל-שָׂאוּל אֲתִי שְׁלַח יְהוָה לְמַשְׁחֶךָ לְמִלְחָה עַל-עַמּוֹ עַל-יִשְׂרָאֵל וְעַתָּה שָׁמַע לְקוֹל דְּבָרֵי יְהוָה:
כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת פְּלָדָתִי אֶת אֲשֶׁר-עָשָׂה עִמָּלֶךְ לְיִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר-שָׂם לוֹ בְּדַרְךָ בְּעֵלְתוֹ מִמִּצְרָיִם: עַתָּה לָךְ

והכיתה את-עמלק והתרמתם את-כל-אשר-לו ולא תחמל עליו והמתה מאיש עד-אשה מעלל ועד-יונק משור ועד-שה מגמל ועד-תמור: וישמע שאול את-העם ויפקדם בטלאים מאתים אלף רגלי ועשרת אלפים את-איש יהודה: ויבא שאול עד-עיר עמלק וירב בנחל: ויאמר שאול אלי-הקניי לכו סרו רדו מתוך עמלקי פן-אספה עמו ואתה עשיתה חסד עם-פלגני ישראל בעלותם ממצרים ויסר קניי מתוך עמלק: ויך שאול את-עמלק מחוילה בואף שור אשר על-פני מצרים: ויתפש את-אנג מלך-עמלק חי ואת-כל-העם התרים לפי-חרב: ויחמל שאול והעם על-אנג ועל-מיטב הצאן והבקר והמשונים ועל-הכרים ועל-פלי-הטוב ולא אבו התרימם וכל-המלאכה נמבנה ונמס אתה התרימו: ויהי דבר-יהוה אל-שמואל לאמר: נחמתי כיי-המלכתי את-שאול למלך פיי-שב מאחרי ואת-דברי לא הקים ויחר לשמואל ויזעק אלי-יהוה כל-הלילה: וישכם שמואל לקראת שאול בבקר ויגד לשמואל לאמר בא-שאול הפרמלה והנה מציב לו יד ויסב ויעבר וירד הגלגל:

ויבא שמואל אל-שאול ויאמר לו שאול ברוך אתה ליהוה הקימתי את-דבר יהוה: ויאמר שמואל ומה קול-הצאן הזה באזני וקול הבקר אשר אנכי שמע: ויאמר שאול מעמלקי הביאום אשר חמל העם על-מיטב הצאן והבקר למען זבח ליהוה אלהיך ואת-היותר התרמנו: ויאמר שמואל אל-שאול הרה ואגידה לך את אשר דבר יהוה אלי הלילה (ויאמרו) [ויאמר] לו דבר: ויאמר שמואל הלא אמר-קטן אתה בעיניך ראש שבטי ישראל אתה וימשחך יהוה למלך על-ישראל: וישלחך יהוה בדרך ויאמר לך והתרמתה את-התטאים את-עמלק ונלחמת בו עד פלותם אתם: ולמה לא-שמעת בקול יהוה ותעט אל-השגלל ותעש הרע בעיני יהוה: ויאמר שאול אל-שמואל אשר שמעת בקול יהוה ואלך בדרך אשר-שלחני יהוה ואביא את-אנג מלך עמלק ואת-עמלק התרמתי: ויקח העם מהשגלל צאן ובקר ראשית החרם לזבח ליהוה אלהיך בגלגל: ויאמר שמואל החפץ ליהוה בעלות וזבחים כשמע בקול יהוה הגה שמע מזבח טוב להקשיב מתלב אילים: כי תטאת-קסם מרי ואנו ותרפים הפצר יען מאסת את-דבר יהוה וימאסת מלך: ויאמר שאול אל-שמואל חטאתי כיי-עברתי את-פיי-יהוה ואת-דבריך כי גראת את-העם ואשמע בקולם: ועתה שא נא את-תטאתי ושוב עמי ואשתתוה ליהוה: ויאמר שמואל אל-שאול לא אשוב עמך כי מאסתה את-דבר יהוה וימאסתך יהוה מהנות מלך על-ישראל: ויסב שמואל ללכת ויחזק בכנה-מעילו ויקרע: ויאמר אליו שמואל קרע יהוה את-ממלכות ישראל מעליך היום ונתנה לרעה הטוב ממך: וגם יצח ישראל לא ישקר ולא ינחם כי לא אדם הוא להנחם:

ויאמר חטאתי עתה ככדני נא גגד זקני-עמי ונגד ישראל ושוב עמי והשתתותי ליהוה אלהיך: וישב שמואל אתרי שאול וישתחו שאול ליהוה: ויאמר שמואל הגישו אלי את-אנג מלך עמלק וילך אליו אנג מעדנת ויאמר אנג אכן סר מר-המנות: ויאמר שמואל כאשר שכלה נשים תרבה פן-תשפל מנשים אמך וישסף שמואל את-אנג לפני יהוה בגלגל: וילך שמואל הרמתה ושאול עלה אל-ביתו גבעת שאול:

ולא-ינסף שמואל לראות את-שאול עד-יום מותו כיי-התאבל שמואל אל-שאול ויהוה נחם כיי-המליך את-שאול על-ישראל:

1 Samuel also said to Saul, "The Lord sent me to anoint you king over His people, over Israel. Now therefore, heed the voice of the words of the Lord. ² Thus says the Lord of hosts: 'I will punish Amalek for what he did to Israel, how he ambushed him on the way when he came up from Egypt.'³ Now go and strike Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and do not spare them. But kill both man and woman, infant and nursing child, ox and sheep, camel and donkey."

⁴ So Saul gathered the people together and numbered them in Telaim, two-hundred-thousand-foot soldiers and ten thousand men of Judah. ⁵ And Saul came to the city of Amalek and lay in wait in the valley.

⁶ Then Saul said to the Kenites, "Go, depart, get down from among the Amalekites, lest I destroy you with them. For you showed kindness to all the children of Israel

when they came up out of Egypt." So, the Kenites departed from among the Amalekites. ⁷ And Saul attacked the Amalekites, from Havilah all the way to Shur, which is east of Egypt. ⁸ He also took Agag king of the Amalekites alive and utterly destroyed all the people with the edge of the sword. ⁹ But Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep, the oxen, the fatlings, the lambs, and all that was good, and were unwilling to utterly destroy them. But everything despised and worthless, that they utterly destroyed.

¹⁰ Now the word of the Lord came to Samuel, saying, ¹¹ "I greatly regret that I have set up Saul as king, for he has turned back from following Me, and has not performed My commandments." And it grieved Samuel, and he cried out to the Lord all night. ¹² So when Samuel rose early in the morning to meet Saul, it was told Samuel, saying, "Saul went to Carmel, and indeed, he set up a monument for himself; and he has gone on around, passed by, and gone down to Gilgal." ¹³ Then Samuel went to Saul, and Saul said to him, "Blessed are you of the Lord! I have performed the commandment of the Lord."

¹⁴ But Samuel said, "What then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears, and the lowing of the oxen which I hear?"

¹⁵ And Saul said, "They have brought them from the Amalekites; for the people spared the best of the sheep and the oxen, to sacrifice to the Lord your God; and the rest we have utterly destroyed."

¹⁶ Then Samuel said to Saul, "Be quiet! And I will tell you what the Lord said to me last night."

And he said to him, "Speak on."

¹⁷ So Samuel said, "When you were little in your own eyes, were you not head of the tribes of Israel? And did not the Lord anoint you king over Israel? ¹⁸ Now the Lord sent you on a mission, and said, 'Go, and utterly destroy the sinners, the Amalekites, and fight against them until they are exterminated.' ¹⁹ Why then did you not obey the voice of the Lord? Why did you swoop down on the spoil, and do evil in the sight of the Lord?"

²⁰ And Saul said to Samuel, "But I have obeyed the voice of the Lord, and gone on the mission on which the Lord sent me, and brought back Agag king of Amalek; I have utterly destroyed the Amalekites. ²¹ But the people took of the plunder, sheep and oxen, the best of the things which should have been utterly destroyed, to sacrifice to the Lord your God in Gilgal."

²² So Samuel said:

"Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices,
As in obeying the voice of the Lord?
Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice,
And to heed than the fat of rams.

²³ For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft,
And stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry.

Because you have rejected the word of the Lord,
He also has rejected you from being king.”

²⁴ Then Saul said to Samuel, “I have sinned, for I have transgressed the commandment of the Lord and your words, because I feared the people and obeyed their voice. ²⁵ Now therefore, please pardon my sin, and return with me, that I may worship the Lord.”

²⁶ But Samuel said to Saul, “I will not return with you, for you have rejected the word of the Lord, and the Lord has rejected you from being king over Israel.”

²⁷ And as Samuel turned around to go away, Saul seized the edge of his robe, and it tore.²⁸ So Samuel said to him, “The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today, and has given it to a neighbor of yours, who is better than you. ²⁹ And also the Strength of Israel will not lie nor relent. For He is not a man, that He should relent.”

³⁰ Then he said, “I have sinned; yet honor me now, please, before the elders of my people and before Israel, and return with me, that I may worship the Lord your God.” ³¹ So Samuel turned back after Saul, and Saul worshiped the Lord.

³² Then Samuel said, “Bring Agag king of the Amalekites here to me.” So Agag came to him cautiously.

And Agag said, “Surely the bitterness of death is past.”

³³ But Samuel said, “As your sword has made women childless, so shall your mother be childless among women.” And Samuel hacked Agag in pieces before the Lord in Gilgal.

³⁴ Then Samuel went to Ramah, and Saul went up to his house at Gibeah of Saul. ³⁵ And Samuel went no more to see Saul until the day of his death. Nevertheless, Samuel mourned for Saul, and the Lord regretted that He had made Saul king over Israel.

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? Why did God target the Amalekites for complete destruction?

Extra Bonus ? How could you explain God’s commandment to utterly destroy Amalek (man and woman, infant and nursing child, ox and sheep, camel, and donkey)?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Answer 4 _____

Answer 5 _____

Bonus ? How do we know King Saul didn't have any moral conflicts about killing men and women, infants, and nursing children?

Bonus ? Why did King Saul take Agag king of the Amalekites alive?

Extra Bonus ? How do we know that King Saul is aware that he disobeyed God's command?

Bonus ? Why does King Saul use the expression "the Lord, your God" when he speaks to Samuel?

? What could King Saul do to improve his situation after he disobeyed God's commandment? What does he do instead?

Extra Bonus ? Why is Samuel especially aggrieved and dissatisfied with King Saul?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Bonus ? Why does King Saul ask Samuel to honor him before the elders and before Israel and return with him to worship God together?

? Why does Samuel finally agree to King Saul's request?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

? How is this story related to the book of Esther and the story of Purim? (find all the possible connections)

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Answer 4 _____

Answer 5 _____

Extra Bonus ? What is the real reason King Saul disobeyed God's command? (hint: it is in the story).



Our story marks the tragic turning point of King Saul's reign, where his partial obedience results in God rejecting him as king over Israel. The story can be analyzed from different angles, including God's challenging commandment to

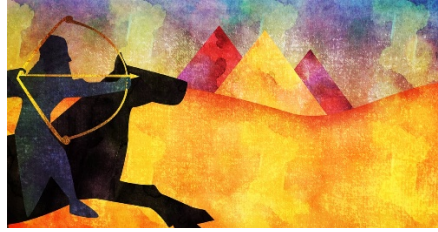
exterminate an entire people—including men, women, and children—Samuel’s initial personal investment and later disappointment with King Saul, and the people’s motivation for going to war.

My particular focus in the analysis of this story is on King Saul and his failure as a leader due to his flawed moral character.

While at first glance, King Saul’s sin appears to be one of disobedience, further exploration reveals a weak leader deprived of a moral compass. King Saul passes up many opportunities to accept responsibility for his actions. He finally admits that his disobedience was motivated by fear of his own people and weakness of character, justifying God’s and Samuel’s decision that he was no longer fit to rule.

Are Jews Still Commanded to Blot Out the Memory of Amalek?

By Rabbi David Golinkin



*This article is based on a Hebrew lecture given at the Van Leer Institute in Jerusalem on March 20, 2005. Most of the sources are taken from Avi Sagi, *Yahadut Bein Dat L'mussar*, Tel Aviv, 1998, Chapter 10 and Elliot Horowitz, *Zion* 64/4 (1999), pp. 425-454, though I have organized the material in an entirely different fashion. I refer to them in parentheses as “Sagi” and “Horowitz”. An earlier version of Sagi’s article appeared in *English in the Harvard Theological Review* 87/3 (1994), pp. 323-346.*

I) Introduction

Now that the chaos and frivolity of Purim are behind us, I would like to address a serious question: Are Jews still commanded to blot out the memory of Amalek?

On Purim, we are rightly appalled by the fact that Haman wanted to destroy the Jewish people “young and old, children and women, on a single day” (Esther 3:13). But we seldom notice that we were commanded to do the same thing to Haman’s people, to Amalek! We read from the Torah on Purim morning that God says “I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven” (Exodus 17:14), while on Shabbat Zakhor, the Shabbat before Purim, we read that God commands the Israelites: “you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven” (Deut. 25:19).

We learn from the Haftarah of Shabbat Zakhor that these verses were understood in a literal sense. The Prophet Samuel orders King Saul in God’s name: “Now go, attack Amalek, and proscribe all that belongs to him. Spare no one, but kill alike men and women, infants and sucklings, oxen and sheep, camels and asses!” (I Samuel 15:3). In other words, we are instructed to commit genocide — to destroy the men, women and cattle of Amalek. This is morally problematic in and of itself; it is doubly problematic after the Holocaust.

II) What was Amalek’s Sin?

During the biblical period, we were attacked by many peoples. What was so awful about Amalek’s attack? Why blot out the memory of Amalek, as opposed to other peoples who have attacked us throughout history? Prof. Avi Sagi has surveyed many of the answers to this question. Here are two explanations, which try to explain the peshat or simple meaning of the Amalek passages.

Rabbi Yitzhak Abravanel (Portugal, Spain, Italy, 15th century) and Rabbi Yitzhak Arama (Spain, 15th century) say that Amalek deviated from the norms of war. They attacked a weak, defenseless bunch of slaves on the road, just for the sake of attacking them. They had nothing to gain from the attack since the Israelites had just left Egypt; it would lead neither to improving their reputation as warriors nor to significant spoils. It was an unjust war motivated by hatred (Sagi, pp. 200-202).

Rabbi Avraham Shmuel Sofer (Hungary 1815-1871) emphasized the words “undeterred by fear of God” (Deut. 25:18). If Amalek attacked the Israelites immediately after God redeemed them from Egypt with signs and wonders, it shows that that they had no fear of God. That is why Exodus says that God will be at war with Amalek from generation to generation (Exodus 17:16). It is, so to speak, a war between God and Amalek.

III) Discomfort with the Command to Destroy all of the Amalekites

Despite the biblical commandment to blot out the memory of Amalek, and the biblical precedent of King Saul trying to kill all the Amalekites, a number of rabbinic sources express clear discomfort with this commandment.

In the tractate of Yoma (22b), Rabbi Mani says that King Saul argued with God: If the Torah said (Deut. 21:1-9) that if you find an anonymous dead body between two cities you must bring an eglah arufah , a sacrifice as a form of atonement for that one death, “how much the moreso all of these souls! And if an [Amalekite] sinned, did his animal sin? If adults sinned, did children sin?” In other words, in this midrash Saul argues with God just as Abraham argued with God about the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18:20-33).

Rabbi Ya’akov Hayyim Sofer (Baghdad and Jerusalem, 1867-1939) also felt discomfort with one of the commandments regarding Amalek. In Kaf Hahayyim to Orach Hayyim 685 (par. 29) he asks why we don’t recite a blessing before we read Parashat Zakhon on the Shabbat before Purim. He replies: “because we do not bless regarding destruction, even the destruction of non-Jews, as we see that God said [to the angels after the Egyptians drowned in the Sea of Reeds]: ‘my handiwork are drowning in the sea and you are singing?!’ (Megillah 10b)”.

IV) Allegorical Interpretations

Indeed, Prof. Sagi believes that this discomfort was one of the motives which led to allegorical interpretations of the commandment to destroy Amalek. For example, the Re’aya Mehemna section of the Zohar says that Amalek is Samael or Satan, while in Barcelona (ca. 1300) there were commentators who said that Amalek means Yetzer Hara or the evil inclination. This latter interpretation was also popular in hassidic literature (Sagi, pp. 206-216; Horowitz pp. 444-445). In other words, we are commanded to blot out Satan or Yetzer Hara , not a physical people called Amalek.

V) Limitation or Elimination of the Mitzvah

The discomfort described above may have led a number of important commentators to limit the commandment of blotting out Amalek to very specific times or circumstances.

Rabbi Yosef Kara (France, 11th century) says that Exodus 17:16 which mentions a “hand upon the throne of the Lord” means that we are only instructed to wage war against Amalek “when a King sits on the throne of God – that is the Kingdom of Israel” (Horowitz, p. 445). Rabbi Eliezer of Metz, a pupil of Rabbenu Tam (France, ca. 1200) says in his Sefer Yere’im that the commandment to blot out the memory of Amalek “is incumbent on the king and not on the rest of the Jewish people” (Horowitz, pp. 445-446). Rabbi Moshe of Coucy (France, d. 1236) says in his Sefer Mitzvot Gadol that “this mitzvah is only practiced in the days of the King Messiah after the conquest of the land” (Horowitz, p. 447).

In other words, the commandment to blot out the memory of Amalek only applies to the future king of Israel in the days of the Messiah and cannot and should not be fulfilled by the Jews in their day.

Indeed, the commandment to blot out Amalek is omitted entirely by two of the most important codifiers of Jewish law — Rabbi Ya’akov ben Asher in his Tur (Spain, ca. 1340) and Rabbi Yosef Karo in his Shulhan Arukh (Safed, 1556) (Horowitz, p. 449).

VI) In Our Day, Amalek no Longer Exists

A number of important rabbis eliminated the obligation to destroy Amalek by explaining that, in our day, Amalek no longer exists. Rabbi Abraham, the son of Maimonides (Egypt, ca. 1200) says in his Torah commentary that Amalek was wiped out in the days of King Saul (Horowitz, p. 431). Rabbi Yosef Babad says in his Minhat Hinukh (Lemberg, 1869) that “today we are not commanded to do this.’because Sanheriv already arose and mixed up the world’ “. The latter is a reference to Mishnah Yadayim (4:4), which says that it is now permissible to marry the Amonites and the Moabites because Sanheriv came and mixed up the nations. Rabbi Babad is saying that the same holds true for Amalek; we are not commanded to destroy them because we simply don’t know who they are (Horowitz, p. 449).

Rabbi Avraham Bornstein says in his responsa Avnei Nezer (Sochachov, d. 1910) that “now there are no Amaleks in the world” (Horowitz, p. 450). Finally, Rabbi Hayyim Hirschenson wrote in his responsa Malki Bakodesh (Part I, p. 32) in 1919 that the mitzvah to destroy Amalek no longer exists because they were destroyed by King David and King Hezekiah and then Sanheriv arose and mixed up the nations.

VII) Amalek Exists and We are Still Commanded to Blot them Out

Nonetheless, there were many important rabbis who ruled that Amalek still exists and that we are still commanded to remember their deed and to destroy them. This was the opinion of Maimonides in his Sefer Hamitzvot (Positive Commandments 188-189) and in his Mishneh Torah (Laws of Kings 5:4-5). Though he mentions there the tradition about Sanheriv mixing up the nations, he clearly does not apply it to Amalek i.e. they still exist and they must be remembered and blotted out. This was also the opinion of Rabbi Pinhas Halevi of Barcelona in his Sefer Hahinukh (13 th century). He says that “every Jewish male has the obligation to kill them and to destroy them from the world if they have the power to do so, in every place at every time, if perhaps he finds one of their descendants” (Horowitz, p. 449).

VIII) Attempts to Identify Amalek with a Specific People

It is clear that many rabbis agreed with the Rambam and Sefer Hahinukh that Amalek still exists and they proceeded to identify Amalek with a specific people. Prof. Elliot Horowitz has compiled a veritable catalogue of these identifications, including the following:

1. Amalek = Esau = Edom = Rome = the Christians. Prof. Horowitz finds hints of this opinion in rabbinic literature (pp. 439 ff.) though I am not convinced. In any case, Nahmanides (Spain, 13th century) and other medieval rabbis did make this identification (Horowitz, p. 441-443).

2. Many medieval and modern Jews thought the Armenians were Amalek, though the reason for this identification is not at all clear (Horowitz, pp. 431, 450-451).

3. In a battle poem, Rabbi Shmuel Hanagid (Spain, 1038), a medieval Jewish general, calls his enemy Zohir “Agag”, i.e. the Amalekite king put to death by King Saul, and his soldiers “Amalek, Edom, and the sons of Keturah” (Horowitz, pp. 437-439).

4. In 1898, Rabbi Yosef Hayyim Sonnenfeld (1849-1932) refused to go out to greet Kaiser Wilhelm II when he visited Palestine, even though this meant forgoing the opportunity to recite the blessing upon seeing a king. (This was the trip during which Herzl met the Kaiser.) He said that he has a tradition from the Gaon of Vilna that the Germans are the descendants of Amalek (Horowitz, p. 428). This is an amazing story since it took place decades before the Holocaust.

5. Not surprisingly, many rabbis and scholars identified the Nazis with Amalek beginning in the 1930s. Among them were the historian Simon Dubnow who was later killed by the Nazis, the anti-Nazi artist Arthur Szyk, and the Holocaust historian Raul Hilberg (Horowitz, pp. 426, 427, 452-454).

6. Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik (d. 1993), Rabbi Irving Greenberg, and Rabbi Yitzhak Arieli say that anyone who hates the Jewish people is from the seed of Amalek. Thus, Rabbi Soloveitchik identifies the Nazis, the Soviets, Nasser and the Mufti as descendants of Amalek (Horowitz, pp. 429-430; Sagi, p. 208; Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, *The Jewish Way*, New York, 1988, pp. 232-234).

7. Sadly enough, some Jews and rabbis have identified other Jews as Amalek. Rabbi Elhanan Bunem Wasserman (1875-1941), a leading European anti-Zionist rabbi, said that Jews who are mumarim l’hakhiss, those who oppose Jewish law in a spirit of defiance, are of the seed of Amalek (Horowitz, p. 428). Rabbi Yisrael Meir Hachohen, the Hafetz Hayyim (1838-1933), said that the Jewish communists in Russia are from the seed of Amalek (ibid.). And some Jews in Israel today have said that “all the leftists, from Meretz” are Amalek (Horowitz, p. 454).

8. Finally, various Christians have referred to themselves as “Israel” and to their enemies as “Amalek”! In the seventh century, the Byzantine chronicler Theophanes called the Muslims who conquered Eretz Yisrael “Amalek”. In 1095, Pope Urban II told the Crusaders at Clermont that he was Moses, they were the Israelites and the Muslims were Amalek. Furthermore, Martin Luther (d. 1546) and his pupil Johann Brenz claimed that the Jews who fought against Jesus were Amalek. Finally, in 1689, the Puritan preacher Cotton Mather preached a sermon to Christian soldiers who were fighting against the Indians. He urged his flock to fight against “Amalek who afflict Israel [=the Puritans] in the desert” (Horowitz, pp. 429-230).

IX) Symbolic Methods of Blotting out Amalek

In the middle ages, Jews were frequently powerless. Even if they believed that Amalek still existed and even if they identified Amalek with certain specific peoples, they did not have the power to do anything about it. Therefore, it is not surprising that Jews found symbolic methods of blotting out Amalek.

1. Early liturgical works such as Mahzor Vitry and Sefer Hapardess (France, ca. 1100) interpreted the Kaddish to mean that we must blot out Amalek. Thus, the Jews who were aware of these interpretations blotted out Amalek repeatedly every day! (Horowitz, pp. 443-444)

2. We make noise on Purim whenever Haman's name is mentioned. This custom began ca. 1200. Rabbi Avraham of Lunel reports in his Sefer Hamanhig that in France and Provence the children take smooth stones and write Haman on them and when the reader mentions his name they knock one stone against another in order to erase his name, as the midrash says "blot out the memory of Amalek even from the trees and the stones". This custom was quoted by Sefer Abudraham (Spain, ca. 1340) from whence it entered Rabbi Moshe Isserles's glosses to the Shulhan Arukh (Cracow, ca. 1570) (Sefer Hamanhig , ed. Refael, Jerusalem, 1978, pp. 242-243; Sefer Abudraham Hashalem , Jerusalem, 1959, p. 209; Shulhan Arukh Orah Hayyim 690:17 in the Rema. For the history of "beating Haman", see Yom Tov Lewinski, Keitzad Hiku et Haman Bitfutzot Yisrael , Tel Aviv, 1947 and Daniel Sperber, Keitzad Makim et Haman , Ramat Gan, 2002).

3. There is a common custom among soferim (scribes) first attested in 1705. When a scribe wanted to test his quill, he would write Amalek or Haman or Zeresh (Haman's wife) and cross it out in order to fulfill the mitzvah of blotting out the memory of Amalek (Horowitz, p. 451).

4. Finally, when Sefardic Jews read Parashat Zakhor on the Shabbat before Purim and get to the verse "blot out the memory of Amalek. do not forget" (Deut. 25:19), they stamp their feet in order to blot out Amalek (Lewinski, p. 7. I myself have witnessed this custom at a Sefardic synagogue in Jerusalem).

X) Two Positive Lessons we can Learn from the Story of Amalek

Personally, I identify with the discomfort expressed in Yoma and in Kaf Hahayyim regarding the commandment to destroy an entire people, despite the gravity of their original deed. I agree with the many rabbis throughout history who eliminated this mitzvah from their codices or who said that there are no longer any Amalekites in the world. We have seen in paragraph VIII above just how dangerous it is to identify your current enemy with Amalek. The identification changes from country to country and from place to place, it is used by one Jew against another, and it is even used by Christians against us!

Though it would seem from all of the above that the story of Amalek is entirely negative in nature, I would like to conclude with two positive, ethical lessons which we can learn from the Amalek passages in Exodus and Deuteronomy.

In Pesikta d'rav Kahana (3:4, ed. Mandelbaum, pp. 42-43), there is another explanation of the Amalek story. Rabbi Banai explained Proverbs 11:1-2 to mean that if you use unjust weights and measures, a non-Jewish nation will wage war against your generation:

Said Rabbi Levi: Moses hinted at this in the Torah as well. "You shall not have in your pouch alternate weights, larger and smaller" (Deut. 25:13). If you do, a non-Jewish nation will come to wage war against your generation... and what does it say next? "Remember what Amalek did to you" (v. 17).

According to this midrash, Amalek's attack was a punishment for unethical behavior. Thus, the message of the story is not hatred but repentance. In order to prevent another Amalek, we must behave ethically.

Finally, we shall cite the explanation of Prof. Nehama Leibowitz. What was the dreadful sin of Amalek, as opposed to other peoples who fought with Israel? Because only of him is it written: " undeterred by fear of God ". This expression appears only four times in the Bible.

In Genesis 20:11, Abraham explains to Avimelech why he lied about Sarah's identity: "I thought: surely there is no fear of God in this place ". In Genesis 42:18, Joseph says to his brothers after accusing them of spying: "Do this and you shall live, for I am a God-fearing man ". In Exodus 1:17, the midwives refuse to murder the male infants: " And the midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt told them". And in our portion it says: " undeterred by fear of God , he cut down all the stragglers" (Deut. 25:18). In all of these verses, the litmus test for "fear of God" is the attitude to the weak and the stranger. Amalek is the archetype of the Godless, who attack the weak because they are weak, who cut down the stragglers in every generation (Studies in Devarim , Hebrew edition, Jerusalem, 1994, pp. 234-235).

In our day, this is perhaps the most important message of the Amalek story — not hatred of Amalek but aversion to their actions. In the State of Israel, there are many strangers and stragglers — new immigrants, foreign workers, as well as innocent Arabs and Palestinians. Some Jews learn from the story of Amalek that we should hate certain groups. We must emphasize the opposite message. We must protect "the stragglers" so that we may say of the State of Israel: "surely there is fear of God in this place".