

Dvar Torah for Shabbat Zachor
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Today is Shabbat Zachor: "Sabbath of Remembering." What are we supposed to remember today?

Throughout Torah, we're asked to remember many things; here are some examples:

In the *Aseret haDibrot*, the 10 Commandments, we hear:

Exodus 20:

ח זְכוֹר אֶת-יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת לְקַדְּשׁוֹ:

8. Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.

In the book of Numbers, we are told how to remember all the commandments:

ל ט וְהָיָה לָכֶם לְצִיצִית וּרְאִיתֶם אֹתוֹ וּזְכַרְתֶּם אֶת-כָּל-מִצְוֹת יְהוָה וַעֲשִׂיתֶם אֹתָם וְלֹא תִתּוּרוּ אַחֲרַי לְבַבְכֶם וְאַחֲרַי עֵינֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר-אַתֶּם זָנִים אַחֲרֵיהֶם: מ לְמַעַן תִּזְכְּרוּ וַעֲשִׂיתֶם אֶת-כָּל-מִצְוֹתַי וְהֵייתֶם קְדָשִׁים לֵאלֹהֵיכֶם:

Numbers 15

39. And it shall be to you for a fringe, that you may look upon it, and remember all the commandments of Adonai, and do them; and that you seek not after your own heart and your own eyes, which incline you to go astray;

40. That you may remember, and do all my commandments, and be holy to your God.

We are told to remember our past -- our time as slaves in Egypt, first, in the context of remembering what God did for us --

Deuteronomy 5

טו וּזְכַרְתָּ כִּי עֶבֶד הָיִיתָ בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וַיֹּצֵאֲךָ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ מִשָּׁם בְּיַד חֲזָקָה וּבְזֶרַע נְטוּיָה עַל-בֶּן צֶוֶף יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת-יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת:

15. And remember that you were a servant in the land of Egypt, and that the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and with a stretched out arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.

And later, as a reminder to treat the poor with kindness, remembering our own time of hardship ---

Deuteronomy 15

טו וזכרת כי עבד היית בארץ מצרים ויפדה יהוה אלהיך על-כן אנכי מצוה את-הדבר הזה היום:

15. And you shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you; therefore I command you this thing today.

But today, we're supposed to remember something completely different. We are asked to remember a specific incident from our wanderings in the desert. Here's the traditional maftir portion for today, which we're actually not going to read later, so I'll read it now.

It's interesting, by the way, that in the Torah scroll these three lines are set off by open spaces in the text both in front and at the end:

פ

יז זכור את אשר-עשה לך עמלק בדרך בצאתכם ממצרים: יח אשר קרף בדרך ויזנב בך כל-הנחשלים אחריך ואתה עיף ויגע ולא ירא אלהים: יט והיה בהנחת יהוה אלהיך | לך מכל-איביך מסביב בארץ אשר יהוה אלהיך נתן לך נחלה לרשתה תמחה את-זכר עמלק מתחת השמים לא תשכח: פ פ פ

Deuteronomy 25

17. Remember what Amalek did to you on the road, when you came forth out of Egypt;
18. How he met you on the road, and struck at your rear, all who were feeble behind you, when you were faint and weary; and he did not fear God.
19. Therefore it shall be, when Adonai your God has given you rest from all your enemies around, in the land which Adonai your God gives you for an inheritance to possess, that you shall blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven; you shall not forget.

So, to clarify -- we're supposed to remember an attack by an enemy, a vicious enemy who attacked from behind, who went after the weakest. We want to "blot him out." Some people have the tradition to write the name "Amalek" on the bottom of their shoes, to literally erase it. Hitler is considered to be a descendent of Amalek, at least spiritually; Amalek is allowed to represent all that is evil in the world, and we are reminded to wipe it out. Removing evil from the world seems OK, but...

The traditional Haftarah read on Shabbat Zachor is part of this tradition. Saul, the first King of Israel, is told to destroy the Amalekites. All of them, man, woman, child, animals, everything. He comes pretty close, but spares their king, Agag, and some of the animals, which are reserved for sacrificing later. The prophet Samuel castigates him for not following the commandment of God, has Agag brought forth, and kills him on the

spot.

How is this connected with the upcoming Purim holiday? Our archenemy, Haman, is identified in the Book of Esther as an "Agagite," a descendent of that same Agag that Saul failed to kill; in other words: Amalek. And what do we see in the Purim story -- Haman tries to kill us. But we get him first: in a continuance of blotting out Amalek, Haman and all his sons are killed; the Jews also kill 75,000 Persians as they "defend themselves" from the decree against them that Haman instigated.

I'm not fond of this whole approach to the holiday, and so, I'm trying to Reconstruct it! I've been told -- "The book of Esther is just satire -- you're not intended to take it seriously! After all, everything in the story is so extreme, a drunken oaf of a king, an evil schemer, a crazy plot. Read it, laugh, get drunk, and don't worry about it."

Not bad, and for years I did just that. Although -- it was never so easy; after all, Saul was clearly intended to take blotting out Amalek pretty seriously -- he and his descendants lose the throne of Israel to David and his descendants as a result of his failure to be sufficiently murderous.

But the final blow, for me, was in 1994, when Baruch Goldstein, a religious Israeli Jew, took the occasion of Purim to "blot out Amalek" -- by murdering Muslims peacefully at prayer at the Tomb of Abraham. This is bad enough, but it's made worse by the fact that he became a hero to some people -- they pray at his tomb now. OK -- enough is enough. Somehow, the whole thing just isn't very funny any more; I've never looked at Purim in quite the same way.

At Keddem, we've wrestled with Purim, and this year are trying a different approach. Today we'll work on reconstructing Shabbat Zachor. Is there anything in the tradition to help?

Rabbi Amy Eilberg, in the Jewish Bulletin, of March 21, 1997, comments on the fact that "the commandment [about Amalek] is given in the singular form -- "Zachor" or "Remember," while the Torah could have used the plural, *zichru*. One might say that this simply means the commandment is addressed to the Jewish community as a single collective. But for at least one interpreter, the use of the singular form serves to teach a lesson about the safety of the collective: Amalek had no power over those who stayed *close* to the community. Amalek only had the power to attack those who lagged behind, who found themselves walking singly, separated from the protection of the group.

To extend this idea even further, a Chassidic anthology called "*Itturei Torah*," "Torah Gems," offers us the following:

Had the children of Israel not forgotten about the slower ones in back but instead, brought them *closer* under the protecting wings of God's Presence, binding the slower to all of Israel, the Amalekites would not have succeeded in their attack. But because you allowed the slower ones to be *aharekha* (meaning both "behind you" and "other"), that you separated them off from you and made them "other", and you forgot about your brothers and sisters, Amalek could viciously attack them. Therefore, the Torah tells us to remember Amalek, so that we never forget to bring our brothers and sisters who need special attention into our midst.

Now we're getting somewhere! Here is the *maftir* section again, but this time also including the 4 verses that precede it in the Torah, and that are not, traditionally, included in the *maftir* for *Shabbat Zachor*.

13. You shall not have in your bag different weights, a large and a small.
14. You shall not have in your house different measures, a large and a small.
15. But you shall have a perfect and just weight, a perfect and just measure shall you have; that your days may be lengthened in the land which Adonai your God gives you.
16. For all who do such things, and all who do unrighteously, are an abomination to the Lord your God.
17. Remember what Amalek did to you by the way, when you came forth out of Egypt.
18. How he met you by the way, and struck at your rear, all who were feeble behind you, when you were faint and weary; and he did not fear God.
19. Therefore it shall be, when the Lord your God has given you rest from all your enemies around, in the land which the Lord your God gives you for an inheritance to possess, that you shall blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven; you shall not forget.

The text about Amalek is immediately preceded by texts about just behavior! We're being told not only that we should have protected the weakest among us, but that we, ourselves, should not be unrighteous, should not be Amalek! Do not forget their behavior, blot it out, *so that you never emulate it*.

Instead of a reminder for us to be sure to keep hating an enemy, we are asked to *remember* to take care of each other, we are asked to be righteous. The singular "zachor," addressed to each of us, gives each of us the responsibility for all of us. We've chosen an alternative *haftarah* for today that may help us with this kind of remembering.

Finally, we come to today's Torah portion. We're starting the book of Leviticus today. In Hebrew, this book is called Vayikra, as it begins, "Vayikra el Mosheh, vay'daber Adonai elav," "And then there called to Moses, and then there spoke Adonay to him." Why does the text need to say that God "called, and then spoke?" Commentators tell us that God "called out" to Moses to bring him close, because now that the glory of God covered the Tabernacle even Moses was afraid to enter. So, God called to him, just as God had done at the burning bush, when God called, "Moshe, Moshe."

And what is Moses being called to explain? The *korbanot*, which are the subject of much of the book of Leviticus. The word *korban* is generally translated as "sacrifice;" this is the word used in English for the ritual killing of animals as offerings to a Deity. It's a word from a Latin root, *sacrificium*, related to the word "sacred," which means "dedicated, set apart, exclusively appropriated to some person or some special purpose, to a deity." This idea would be better expressed by the Hebrew "*kadosh*;" if these were

called "*kadshanoṯ*" or some such in Hebrew the translation would really work. There's also some content in the word "sacrifice" of harm to oneself; we say, "I sacrificed everything to put my spouse through school," for instance.

But the Hebrew *korban* has at its root *quf-resh-bet*, which means *approach, draw close*. In our Reconstructionist version of the Torah blessings, we say "asher *kervanu* la'avodato," "who has drawn us close to your service." In the *shacharit* service, we sing "v'kol *kerovai* et Shem kodsho," "and all my insides praise your holy Name." *Korbanot* are "closenesses," or "approach-makers;" they are a way provided to the children of Israel to draw themselves close to God, if they believed they had lost their connection. We may reject the idea of killing animals to achieve this nearness, but I'm sure we like the idea of nearness to God, or connection with the "power that makes for salvation," or however we see it. Maybe we can find this nearness, this "drawing close," in the connections we make with each other as well. Remember -- if the people had been "drawn close together," then Amalek would have been unable to harm them.

In today's portion, God calls to Moses as a friend. What, or who, calls to us? The poor, the homeless, the needy, our friends who need a hand, people on the other side of the world who are in desperation? Do we hear calls to justice and right behavior as calls to be closer to God or godliness?

Today we are called to remember. Do not forget.

Shabbat Shalom.