The Ethics of Amalek, War, and Genocide

**Shmuel I:15**

2“Thus said the Lord of Hosts: I am exacting the penalty for what Amalek did to Israel, for the assault he made upon them on the road, on their way up from Egypt. 3Now 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 donkeys!”

**Shemot 17**

14Then the Lord said to Moses, “Inscribe this in a document as a reminder, and read it aloud to Joshua: I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven!” 15And Moses built an altar and named it Adonai-nissi. 16He said, “It means, ‘Hand upon the throne of the Lord!’ The Lord will be at war with Amalek throughout the ages.”

**Devarim 25**

17Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey, after you left Egypt— 18how, undeterred by fear of God, he surprised you on the march, when you were famished and weary, and cut down all the stragglers in your rear. 19Therefore, when the Lord your God grants you safety from all your enemies around you, in the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a hereditary portion, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget!

**ספר החינוך פרשת כי תצא מצוה תרד**

שנצטוינו למחות זרעו של עמלק ולאבד זכרו מן העולם זכר ונקבה גדול וקטן, ועל זה נאמר [דברים כ"ה, י"ט], תמחה את זכר עמלק, שבכלל זכר הוא הכל. וכבר טעה בנקוד תיבה זו גדול הדור, והוא יואב בן צרויה, והשאיר מהם הנקבות, לפי שרבו לא השגיח יפה עליו כשלמדו מקרא זה ונשתבש יואב וקרא זכר, כמו שבא בבבא בתרא פרק לא יחפור [כ"א ע"ב]...וזאת מן המצוות המוטלות על הצבור כולן, וכענין שאמרו זכרונם לברכה [סנהדרין כ' ע"ב] שלש מצוות נצטוו ישראל בשעת כניסתן לארץ למנות להם מלך ולבנות להם בית הבחירה ולהכרית זרע עמלק. **ובאמת כי גם על כל יחיד מישראל הזכרים מוטל החיוב להרגם ולאבדם מן העולם אם יש כח בידם בכל מקום ובכל זמן אם אולי ימצא אחד מכל זרעם**.

**Berachot 28a**

 On that day Judah, an Ammonite proselyte, came before them in the Beth ha-Midrash. He said to them: Am I permitted to enter the assembly? R. Joshua said to him: You are permitted to enter the congregation. Said Rabban Gamaliel to him: Is it not already laid down, At Ammonite or a Moabite shall not enter into the assembly of the Lord? R. Joshua replied to him: Do Ammon and Moab still reside in their original homes? Sennacherib king of Assyria long ago went up and mixed up all the nations, as it says, I have removed the bounds of the peoples and have robbed their treasures and have brought down as one mighty their inhabitants; and whatever strays [from a group] is assumed to belong to the larger section of the group. Said Rabban Gamaliel to him: But has it not been said: But afterward I will bring back the captivity of the children of Ammon, saith the Lord, so that they have already returned? To which R. Joshua replied: And has it not been said, And I will turn the captivity of My people Israel, and they have not yet returned? Forthwith they permitted him to enter the congregation.

*Chazal didn’t like it either*

**Eugene Korn, http://www.edah.org/backend/JournalArticle/KORN\_5\_2.pdf**

 Hence, due to lack of certain genealogical identification it became impossible in principle for any Jew to fulfill the mitsvah to exterminate these peoples. This is consistent with other instances of the rabbinic strategy to render some Biblical laws inoperative or barely implementable, such as the execution of the rebellious son (Deut. 21:18-21; Sanhedrin 71a), capital punishment (Mishnah Makkot 1:10), and the destruction of an idolatrous city (Deut 13:13-16; Sanhedrin 71a). There is another rabbinic tradition that all fulfillment of the command to kill the Amalekites is deferred until the messianic era.

The effect of these interpretations is to render the *mitsvot* inoperative, and thus avoid any immoral behavior that would result from acting in accordance with their literal meaning. There is no reason to believe that R. Joshua invented a historical fiction, since it was the actual practice of ancient conquerors to intermingle their conquered peoples to lessen the possibility of organized rebellion. What is remarkable is the legal power that the talmudic tradition gave to this brute historical fact. To understand the unusual nature of the talmudic ruling, consider the following scenario: The Israeli Army is marching through the Sinai desert led by General Yigal Yadin, who is also an accomplished archeologist. During encampment, Yadin discovers documents buried in the sand that indicate that a clan living in the area is unmistakably descendent from the biblical Canaanites. Yadin takes the document to the world’s leading historians and anthropologists, who unanimously conclude that the documents are authentic and accurate. In other words, all scientific opinion corroborates the claim that these specific persons are Canaanite descendants. Are religious Jews obligated to act on the basis of the overwhelming empirical data and kill these Canaanites? Probably not, for R. Joshua’s talmudic principle would trump the scientific evidence and the genocidal commandment would remain inapplicable.

This means that the principle functions neither as a historical observation nor an empirical claim, but as a non-falsifiable legal rule. A permanent principle with legal force to override the fulfillment of a divine commandment is rare in Jewish legal tradition. It is plausible to assume that rabbinic authorities elevated this opinion to a categorical definitional principle precisely because they sensed the overwhelming moral problems with a literal implement of the commandment. Hazal were not philosophers, but teachers whose ultimate concern was promoting correct action in accordance with how they understood sacred Torah texts. They succeeded in foreclosing the possibility of Jews committing genocide or killing innocents because of the divine commandment, but they left untouched the theological/conceptual problem: How could God command something immoral—even theoretically? Since “The Judge of the earth must act justly,” how could God have ever have issued an immoral command to intentionally kill infants, minors and women or destroy an entire nation?

*Pious Shrug of the Shoulders*

**Leaves of Faith, R. Aharon Lichtenstein**

The source of my support was not confined to my immediate Rabbis. At one point, during my late teens, I was troubled by certain ethical questions concerning [the destruction of ] Amalek etc. I then recalled having recently read that Rabbi Chaim Brisker would awaken nightly to see if someone hadn't place a foundling at his doorstep. I knew that I slept quite soundly, and I concluded that if such a paragon of kindness coped with these laws, evidently the source of my anxiety did not lie in my greater sensitivity but in my weaker faith. And I set myself to enhancing it.

*It was another world*

**Eliyahu Henkin, Study of Bible in Sanctity and Bible as History**

To prevent the stories in the Bible from influencing our nature and spirit, the study of Bible comes with a sacred melody, and matters are stated as if in a different world. The nations we were commanded to make war against, according to Chazal, have become mingled with others and no longer exist. One cannot make inferences to others, for there is no commandment and no prophet.

*What do you want from them? Everyone was doing it!*

**R. Kook, Iggerot Reiyah I:99**

Regarding war: It would have been impossible, at a time when all the neighbors were literal wolves of the night, that only Israel refrain from war. For then they would have gathered and eradicated them, God forbid. Moreover, it was necessary for them to cast their fear on the barbarians through harsh conduct, albeit with the hope of bringing humanity to the state that it ought to reach, but without prematurely anticipating it.

*There’s no crying in war*

**R. Shalom Carmy, Tradition 39:4**

R. Bin-Nun, in effect taking up R. Kook’s remarks, believes that the Jewish mentality is deeply averse to war. For that reason, it was necessary for God to command the prosecution of the conquest with ferocity. Allowing any room for mercy would risk a collective loss of nerve.

**R. Yaakov Medan, Amalek, https://www.etzion.org.il/en/amalek**

The Ramban's first explanation portrays Amalek as the clear enemy of faith in God. Amalek bears the flag of heresy. At a time when all the nations recognized God's kingship because of what happened at the Red Sea, Amalek found it necessary to demonstrate his ability to wage war against God's nation. In light of this, the fact that the war took place close to Mount Chorev, where God's kingship was supposed to be entirely revealed to all people in the world, becomes especially significant. The Revelation had already begun at Chorev, where water poured forth from the rock, and then Amalek arrived to do battle with Israel. Only after the victory over Amalek did the rest of the Revelation at Sinai take place. The juxtaposition of the war to the Revelation at Sinai, when God was revealed to His nation - and was meant to be revealed to the entire world - is explained well by the Ramban.

Many respected commentaries adopted this approach of the Ramban, in different ways. We shall make mention here of the Ba'alei ha-Tosfot, who explain that Amalek waged war against Israel by means of enchantment and astrology - i.e., by unnatural and supernatural means. This insight hints to us that the reasons for the war were likewise not natural - and this would seem to echo Ramban's view of a battle over the roots of faith in God.

Rabbi Tzadok ha-Kohen of Lublin, in his book "Resisei Laila," adopts a different approach. Amalek, to his view, represents principally the power of false imagination that reigns in the world, and the apparent perfection of its strength and logic. Therefore, the essence of the war against him lies in the spiritual realm. This approach, like that of Ramban, understands the crux of the war waged by Amalek as being directed against faith in God and His service - and therefore the war against him is a commandment. Many chassidic works follow this view of R. Tzadok, especially Rav Yehuda Aryeh Leib of Gur - the "Sefat Emet."

The Ramban's second explanation does not address a direct confrontation that takes place between Amalek and God; rather, it refers to the hatred of Israel inculcated in him by his ancestor - Eisav - which causes him to come from afar, all the way to Refidim, to fight against Israel. There is considerable support among the commentators for this explanation, too, and is has become widely accepted, especially following the Holocaust. Among contemporary thinkers, Rav Soloveitchik was its staunchest supporter, claiming that those who sow hatred of Israel in the world are the disciples and ideological descendants of Amalek.

**רמב"ם הלכות מלכים פרק ה**

**ד** מצות עשה להחרים שבעה עממין שנאמר החרם תחרימם, וכל שבא לידו אחד מהן ולא הרגו עובר בלא תעשה שנאמר לא תחיה כל נשמה, וכבר אבד זכרם.

**ה** וכן מצות עשה לאבד זכר עמלק, שנאמר תמחה את זכר עמלק, ומצות עשה לזכור תמיד מעשיו הרעים ואריבתו, כדי לעורר איבתו, שנאמר זכור את אשר עשה לך עמלק, מפי השמועה למדו זכור בפה לא תשכח בלב, שאסור לשכוח איבתו ושנאתו.

**R. Soloveitchik**

I heard the answer from my father of blessed memory. Every nation that conspires to destroy the Jewish people is considered by the halakhah to be Amalek. My father added that as concerns Amalek itself we were commanded to perform two mitzvot: (a) [for the individual] to blot out the memory of Amalek, which is incumbent on everyone [to slay] any individual member of Amalek [that he encounters], as expounded in the Torah portion of Ki Tetzeh, “You shall blot out the memory of Amalek” (Deuteronomy 25:19), and (b) [for the community] to engage in communal military preparednes for war against Amalek, as it is explained in the Torah portion of B’shalach, “The Lord will wage war with Amalek from generation to generation” (Exodus 17:16). With relation to any other nation that stands ready to destroy us, we are [now after the time of Sennacherib] commanded to wage war against it [even] while it prepares for war against us, and our war against it is a “War of Mitzvah”, in accordance with the command of the Torah that “The Lord will wage war with Amalek from generation to generation.” However, the destruction of individuals, which is derived from the Torah portion of Ki Tetzeh, refers only to the biological descendants of Amalek. The words of Maimonides include the obligation to wipe out individuals, which does not apply to any other antion that plots destruction against the People of Israel. However, since the obligation of warring with Amalek pertains to such a nation (as well), he did not employ the phrase “And its memory has already been lost.”

*A more careful read - And a new understanding of Rambam*

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| **Devarim 7**When the Lord your God brings you to the land that you are about to enter and possess, and He dislodges many nations before you—the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites, seven nations much larger than you— 2and the Lord your God delivers them to you and you defeat them, you must doom them to destruction: grant them no terms and give them no quarter.  | **Devarim 20**10When you approach a town to attack it, you shall offer it terms of peace. 11If it responds peaceably and lets you in, all the people present there shall serve you at forced labor. 12If it does not surrender to you, but would join battle with you, you shall lay siege to it; 13and when the Lord your God delivers it into your hand, you shall put all its males to the sword. 14You may, however, take as your booty the women, the children, the livestock, and everything in the town—all its spoil—and enjoy the use of the spoil of your enemy, which the Lord your God gives you. |

**רמב"ן דברים פרק כ פסוק י**

(י) כי תקרב אל עיר להלחם עליה וגו' - במלחמת הרשות הכתוב מדבר, כמו שמפורש בענין (פסוק טו), כן תעשה לכל הערים הרחוקות ממך מאד, לשון רש"י. כתב הרב זה מספרי (שופטים קצט) ששנו שם כלשון הזה, במלחמת הרשות הכתוב מדבר. והכונה לרבותינו בכתוב הזה, אינה אלא לומר שהפרשה בסופה תחלק בין שתי המלחמות, אבל קריאת השלום אפילו במלחמת מצוה היא, שחייבים לקרא לשלום אפילו לשבעה עממים, שהרי משה קרא לשלום לסיחון מלך האמורי, ולא היה עובר על עשה ועל לא תעשה שבפרשה, כי החרם תחרימם (פסוק יז) ולא תחיה כל נשמה (פסוק טז). אבל הפרש שביניהם כאשר לא תשלים ועשתה מלחמה, שצוה הכתוב ברחוקות להכות את כל זכורה ולהחיות להם הנשים והטף בזכרים, ובערי העמים האלה צוה להחרים גם הנשים והטף:

**Mechilta Beshalach, Parasha 2**

R. Eliezer says that if anyone from the nations of the world comes to convert to Judaism, he should be accepted. If he is Amalek, he should **not** be accepted.

**Shmuel II:1**

After the death of Saul—David had already returned from defeating the Amalekites—David stayed two days in Ziklag. 2On the third day, a man came from Saul’s camp, with his clothes rent and earth on his head; and as he approached David, he flung himself to the ground and bowed low. 3David said to him, “Where are you coming from?” He answered, “I have just escaped from the camp of Israel.” 4“What happened?” asked David. “Tell me!” And he told him how the troops had fled the battlefield, and that, moreover, many of the troops had fallen and died; also that Saul and his son Jonathan were dead. 5“How do you know,” David asked the young man who brought him the news, “that Saul and his son Jonathan are dead?” 6The young man who brought him the news answered, “I happened to be at Mount Gilboa, and I saw Saul leaning on his spear, and the chariots and horsemen closing in on him. 7He looked around and saw me, and he called to me. When I responded, ‘At your service,’ 8he asked me, ‘Who are you?’ And I told him that I was an Amalekite. 9Then he said to me, ’stand over me, and finish me off, for I am in agony and am barely alive.’ 10So I stood over him and finished him off, for I knew that he would never rise from where he was lying. Then I took the crown from his head and the armlet from his arm, and I have brought them here to my lord.”...13David said to the young man who had brought him the news, “Where are you from?” He replied, “I am the son of a resident alien, an Amalekite.” 14“How did you dare,” David said to him, “to lift your hand and kill the Lord’s anointed?” 15Thereupon David called one of the attendants and said to him, “Come over and strike him!” He struck him down and he died. 16And David said to him, “Your blood be on your own head! Your own mouth testified against you when you said, ‘I put the Lord’s anointed to death.’﻿”

**Mechilta**

At the same moment that the lad identified himself as an Amalekite, David remembered what was said to Moshes, our teacher: “If one comes from the nations…” Immediately, David said to him, “Your blood be upon your head, for your mouth testified against you.”

**Devarim 25**

19Therefore, when the Lord your God grants you safety from all your enemies around you, in the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a hereditary portion, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget!

**Shmuel I:30**

By the time David and his men arrived in Ziklag, on the third day, the Amalekites had made a raid into the Negeb and against Ziklag; they had stormed Ziklag and burned it down. 2They had taken the women in it captive, low-born and high-born alike; they did not kill any, but carried them off and went their way…

17David attacked them from before dawn until the evening of the next day; none of them escaped, except four hundred young men who mounted camels and got away. 18David rescued everything the Amalekites had taken; David also rescued his two wives. 19Nothing of theirs was missing—young or old, sons or daughters, spoil or anything else that had been carried off—David recovered everything. 20David took all the flocks and herds, which [the troops] drove ahead of the other livestock; and they declared, “This is David’s spoil.”

**רמב"ם הלכות מלכים פרק ו הלכה ד**

ואם לא השלימו או שהשלימו ולא קבלו שבע מצות, עושין עמהם מלחמה והורגין כל הזכרים הגדולים, ובוזזין כל ממונם וטפם, ואין הורגין אשה ולא קטן שנאמר והנשים והטף זה טף של זכרים, במה דברים אמורים במלחמת הרשות שהוא עם שאר האומות, אבל שבעה עממין ועמלק שלא השלימו אין מניחין מהם נשמה שנאמר כן תעשה לכל וגו' רק מערי העמים לא תחיה כל נשמה, וכן הוא אומר בעמלק תמחה את זכר עמלק, ומנין שאינו מדבר אלא באלו שלא השלימו שנאמר לא היתה עיר אשר השלימה אל בני ישראל בלתי החוי יושבי גבעון את הכל לקחו במלחמה כי מאת ה' היתה לחזק את לבם לקראת המלחמה את ישראל למען החרימם, מכלל ששלחו להם לשלום ולא קבלו.

**רמב"ם הלכות סנהדרין פרק יח הלכה ו**

גזירת הכתוב היא שאין ממיתין בית דין ולא מלקין את האדם בהודאת פיו אלא על פי שנים עדים, וזה שהרג יהושע עכן ודוד לגר עמלקי בהודאת פיהם הוראת שעה היתה או דין מלכות היה

**רמב"ם הלכות איסורי ביאה פרק יב הלכה יז**

כל העכו"ם כולם כשיתגיירו ויקבלו עליהן כל המצות שבתורה והעבדים כשישתחררו הרי הן כישראל לכל דבר שנאמר הקהל חוקה אחת יהיה לכם ומותרין להכנס בקהל ה' מיד...חוץ מד' עממין בלבד והם עמון ומואב ומצרים ואדום שהאומות האלו כשיתגייר אחד מהן הרי הוא כישראל לכל דבר אלא לענין ביאה בקהל.

**Gittin 57b**

A Tanna taught: Naaman was a resident alien;[6](http://halakhah.com/gittin/gittin_57.html#57b_6) Nebuzaradan was a righteous proselyte;[7](http://halakhah.com/gittin/gittin_57.html#57b_7) descendants of Haman learnt the Torah in Benai Berak; descendants of Sisera taught children in Jerusalem; descendants of Sennacherib gave public expositions of the Torah. Who were these? Shemaya and Abtalion.[8](http://halakhah.com/gittin/gittin_57.html#57b_8) [Nebuzaradan fulfilled] what is written, I have set her blood upon the bare rock that it should not be covered.[9](http://halakhah.com/gittin/gittin_57.html#57b_9)

**שו"ת אבני נזר חלק אורח חיים סימן תקח**

והנראה לי בזה דשניא ז' אומות שחוטאים בעצמם ועושים כל התועבות ונחייבו מיתה. והוא אמינא שלא יועיל תשובה. כמו כל חייבי מיתות בי"ד שאין נפטרים מחיובם על ידי תשובה. אבל זרע עמלק שנענשין בעון אבותם. ולכאורה הא כתיב לא יומתו אבות על בנים ובנים לא יומתו על אבות. אך שגלוי וידוע לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא ששנאתם טמונה בלבם. פוק חזי מעשה המן האגגי. ובאוחזין מעשה אבותיהם בידיהם כתיב פוקד עון אבות על בנים. אבל אם עשו תשובה וקיבלו שבע מצוות. הא אין אוחזין מעשה אבותיהם בידיהם. ושוב אין נענשים בעון אבותם:

**שו"ת ציץ אליעזר חלק יג סימן עא**

(ו) ובכיוון אחר, להעמיד את המכילתא באוקימתא, ראיתי שכותב לפרש הגאון החזו"א ז"ל על הרמב"ם בה' מלכים, והיינו, דכוונת המכילתא דלאחר שנכנסו למלחמה אין מקבלין אותן, דבשאר אומות מקבלין אף אח"כ, ולא יניח ד' נין ונכד לעמלק היינו בעושה מעשה עמלק, וגר העמלקי דדוד, זה היה במלחמה והלך ונתגייר וקבלוהו, ודוד אמר שקיבלוהו שלא כדין כיון שהיה במלחמה עיין שם.

וכך מצאתי להגאון הנצי"ב ז"ל בפירוש ברכת הנצי"ב הנדמ"ח שעל דברי המכילתא כותב בזה"ל: ולעמלק ולביתו לא יקבלוהו. כלומר בשעת מלחמה וגדולת ישראל כמו בימי דוד עכ"ל. הרי כנ"ז.

**R. Nathaniel Helfgot, Mikra and Meaning**

Even the phrase “infant and suckling” does not imply genocide in the sense of killing every single Amalekite one meets on the street. Rather, we should understand this phrase as only being applicable in the context of war. When at war with Amalek, we must be willing to make no compromises - even when it comes to bombing civilian locales. This is the nature of war under certain circumstances; it is, in fact, what the US did during World Ward II...This is not an injunction to be taken on by private individuals...God has not commanded each and every Israelite to become an assassin, waging private war against Amalek.