

In Ki Tetzei, we find 74 of the 613 mitzvot—more than in any other parashah. We learn about sacred laws like the obligation to bury the dead as soon as possible; we also learn about seemingly mundane mitzvot such as returning lost objects. The direct connection between the parashah and the upcoming High Holidays can be seen in the laws about making and keeping promises (Deut. 23:22-24).

The lyrics above remind us that making promises can destroy or enhance life. Getting people to trust you, but then not following through, can seriously damage a relationship. While we always need to consider how we use language and take care *before* we speak, this holy season prompts us even more to consider our words, vows and promises. In the end, making promises to God and those around us—and *not* following through—hurts us most of all.

Naked Eyes (a 1980s British band) also has a song called “Promises, Promises”:

Never had a doubt
 In the beginning
 Never a doubt
 Trusted too true
 In the beginning
 I loved you right through
 Arm in arm we laughed like kids
 At all the silly things we did

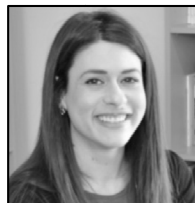
 You made me promises promises
 Knowing I'd believe

The song's lyrics, like those of Hal David, warn against the danger of building trust in others only to then let them down. Let's make a vow to be extra careful this year with all our words, especially our promises.



Ki Tetzei 5776

כי תצא תשע"ו



Why Do We Need a Reminder to Remember?

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When was the last time you memorized a phone number? In the age of Gmail, iPhones, and Facebook, remembering has become a passive activity. But at the end of this week's parashah, the Torah commands us to actively “remember what Amalek did to you... do not forget.” But what did Moses command Israel to remember and why?

The two accounts of Amalek's attack—the first in Exodus 17 and the second in Deuteronomy 25—have quite different focuses. Along with the commandment to bear a grudge, the account in Deuteronomy suggests an answer to the question of what Amalek did to the Israelites such that they—out of all the hostile parties Israel encountered on their 40-year journey—are singled out for special *active* remembrance: they attacked the tired, weak, and wary Israelite stragglers, and they did not fear the Lord. This, though, is not an adequate answer for Rashi, because it does not account for the odd phrase “that [Amalek] happened upon you on the way,” (“*asher karekha baderekh*”).

Rashi's first interpretation of what “happened upon” might mean reminds the reader of the suddenness of Amalek's attack. Indeed, in the Exodus narrative, Amalek appears out of nowhere, seemingly unprovoked. This interpretation suggests that Amalek is singled out for special remembrance because of the apparent randomness of their attack—a manifestation of their essential wickedness. This accords with later Jewish explanations of Israel's eternal enmity with Amalek, whoever they may be.

There is a second interpretive possibility, though, beyond the command to bear an eternal grudge. Deuteronomy is often preoccupied with what might happen after Israel is settled in the land. Israel might intermarry with the daughters of the seven nations and be drawn to worship their gods (chapter 7).

Israel might think that the food that they grow is only the result of their own hard work and eventually forget that it is God who brings forth bread from the ground (chapter 8). And Israel also might forget that it was God who protected them in their long sojourn against their attackers, the first of whom was Amalek.

These commandments to “remember,” “erase the memory of,” and “not forget” Amalek come into force, according to these verses, “[w]hen the Lord your God grants you rest from all your surrounding enemies in the Land the Lord your God is giving you.” That is, after Israel is peacefully settled in the land. The key to understanding this commandment as more than just a divinely prescribed grudge is in this timing. As Moses delivered his final speeches to the remaining Israelites on the plains of Moab at the end of their 40-year journey, he was worried that they might forget God’s protection. After all, the entire generation of Israelites who survived the battle with Amalek had passed on. And so Moses bid their children remember what Amalek did to their parents’ generation *after they are settled in the Land* so that they might also remember God’s protection in the desert.

We find support for this second interpretive possibility in a comment of Rashi’s from the beginning of the earlier account of Amalek’s attack. In the Exodus narrative, the reader is struck by Amalek’s appearance seemingly out of nowhere. At this point in the biblical narrative, the Israelites had just set out on what should have been a short journey, first to Sinai to receive the Torah and then on to Canaan. Just before Amalek’s attack, they complained of hunger, and so God gave them manna. Then they complained of thirst, so God had Moses bring water forth from a rock. Then suddenly, Amalek is battling with Israel at Rephidim. Echoing earlier midrashic traditions, Rashi here suggests that Amalek’s attack was the result of Israel’s lack of awareness of God’s provision—and perhaps ingratitude—in the first weeks after the Exodus:

It is as if God said, “I am always with you [Israel] and prepared to provide for your needs.” And you say, *Is the Lord in our midst or not?* I [God] swear it, a dog is coming, and it will bite you, and you’ll cry out to me, and then you’ll know where I am! An allegory: It is like a man who put his son up on his shoulders and goes out on his way. The son sees something he wants, and he says “Abba, grab that

object and give it to me,” and the father gives it to him. And a second time, and a third time. And they come upon another man, and the son says to him, “Have you seen my father?” At which point, the father says, “You don’t know where I am?!”, takes his son off of his shoulders, and a dog comes and bites him [the son].

This second interpretation suggests that Amalek’s “dog bite” was an effort to teach Israel an important lesson about trust, gratitude, and God’s protection. This, though, is quite an Israel-centric interpretation of Amalek’s attack and, in a way, suggests that Israel was at fault for Amalek’s attack. It ignores Amalek’s own wicked intentions and cowardly military strategy. And whereas the Deuteronomic account stresses Amalek’s cowardice, the Exodus account focuses on the miraculous nature of Israel’s victory over the Amalekites, which, according to this interpretation, should have led Israel to realize that God was there with them. Perhaps, then, this commandment to actively “remember” means to learn the lessons of the event: gratitude and trust.

It follows from this explanation that Deuteronomy’s commandments to “remember,” “erase the memory of,” and “not forget” Amalek contain also at least a partial element of national introspection. Alongside a commandment to destroy the remnant of evil—however we might understand that commandment—we also find a commandment to actively remember the lessons of an earlier time when our Israelite ancestors learned the hard way about trust, gratitude, and God’s protection. Perhaps this week’s parashah can help us to remember these vital lessons—even without setting a reminder on our phones.

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דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



Promises, Promises

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Oh, promises, their kind of promises, can just destroy a life
Oh, promises, those kind of promises, take all the joy from life
Oh, promises, promises, my kind of promises
Can lead to joy and hope and love
Yes, love!

—“Promises, Promises” (from the 1968 musical of the same name), lyrics by Hal David