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Zakhor in a Fractured Age

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

"Could you have chosen a more loaded week?" said my husband with a face that can only be described as both bemused and pitying when I told him that I had agreed to write my first JTS Torah Commentary on Shabbat Zakhor. As the heaviness of the reading sank in, with its commandment to recall Amalek's unprovoked attack on the Israelites and to "blot out" Amalek's memory, I became apprehensive.

Like many Torah portions, Zakhor is often used by Jews not only to make sense of history, but to make sense of their contemporary moment. The story has represented a call to fight against evil and complacency; and also as a metaphor for the many persecutions faced by Jews across history, and a convenient label for any and all enemies of the Jewish people. And since October 7th, it has been politicized in ways that have been both surprising and painful when Hamas, and sometimes the entire Palestinian people, have been referred to as Amalek by Israeli politicians and religious leaders, including by Netanyahu in a speech describing the unity of Israelis in the fight against Hamas. Walking through Tel Aviv last month, I found graffiti quoting Zakhor, a sign that it remains a rallying cry to some everyday Israelis. Loaded, indeed.

When I want to understand something in a new way—or when the contemporary resonance starts to overwhelm me—I consult history, looking for answers in the thoughts, feelings, and ideas of Jews past. How did Jews who lived before this intensely conflicted contemporary moment understand Zakhor? A search of the Jewish Historical Press reveals that 1,116 English-language articles in North America cited the word Amalek (and that's just using this spelling). Reading through several, it was clear that, for Jews in the early twentieth century, Amalek as metaphor served them well for describing enemies of the Jews in Europe.

"One can readily understand… that Amalek is not used to designate a particular people, but rather as a synonym for every and any art of cruelty, oppression, hatred and bigotry, whenever and wherever encountered," wrote Ben Aronin in the American Jewish newspaper *The Sentinel* in 1932. Jews have learned "that in every generation there arise many of the 'hosts of Amalek'… We have only to mention men of the stamp of Herod, Hadrian, Haman and Hitler to emphasize the peculiar fanatical suspicion and hatred of the Jew which have characterized those proponents of cruelty." But Aronin argued that Zakhor should not just remind Jews to remember the cruelty of the enemies of Jews past, but to commit themselves "to unremitting efforts against the forces of ignorance and

evil" more broadly. In other words, they should use Zakhor as a call to fight for a better world. In the midst of a news cycle filled with an overwhelming degree of persecution and violence both at home and abroad, Aronin's call to commit to the fight against ignorance feels particularly resonant and powerful.

Despite the fact that Yiddish has its own words for remembrance and memory, secular Yiddish speakers also evoked Amalek and Zakhor quite frequently. "Amalek" was mentioned in the American Yiddish press a whopping 1,488 times, an astonishing number considering that most Yiddish newspapers in the early twentieth century represented the growing ethos of secular Jewishness. What were they thinking about the week's Torah portion? To me, this reveals that, much like secular Israelis no doubt understand Netanyahu's references to Amalek based on their education and cultural touchstones, so too did even the most ardently secular Yiddish speakers.

Not only did Yiddish speakers understand what Amalek referred to, but they still found use for this framing as a tool for understanding their people's contemporary struggles around the globe. For a wide variety of Jews in the early twentieth century, it seems, the metaphor of Amalek was clear and uncontroversial: several obvious enemies of the Jewish people and so little reason to interpret them otherwise. For Jews at that historical juncture, the commandment to remember yielded possibilities of hope in a context of rising antisemitism and eventually the Holocaust.

It is not as easy today to make contemporary connections to Zakhor that work for everyone in a given synagogue, let alone every reader of a Jewish newspaper. I do not envy the rabbis across the country writing their *divrei Torah* as I write mine, figuring out how to deal with communities that no longer agree on who the enemies of the Jewish people are or how to remember. And yet, as I scrolled through the thousands of articles, interpretations, and words of Torah published in the Jewish press, I found myself comforted by the generations of Jews with different worldviews, languages, and religious practices that forged relationships to the words of Zakhor in their own unique ways. May we find a way to remember, even as contemporary events continuously shift and challenge our understanding of the text.

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