

JEWISH RELATIONAL THINKING AND A DIFFICULT TEXT
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זכור את אשר עשה לך עמלק בדרך בצאתכם ממצרים: אשר קרד בדרך
ויזנב בך כל הנחשלים אחריך ואתה עיף ויגע
ולא ירא אלהים¹

Remember what Amalek did to you as you left Egypt...Therefore, 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 the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget!²

An implacable text, drilled into us from childhood, *Zachor Zachor, Zachor*, Remember, Remember, Remember what Amalek did to you. Reinforced by the Jewish Experience from Haman to Hitler, all reputed to be descendants of Amalek. The promise from Exodus that God “will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven”³ and the reassurance that “The Lord will be at war with Amalek throughout the generations” resonates in us. It is a text that has always been translated and read a specific way, I put it above in the Hebrew original because an Italian proverb has it correctly “*Traduttore Traditore*,” or “The translator is a traitor,” to which I

¹ Hebrew text of Deut. 25: 17-18.

² Deut. 25: 19 (Jewish Publication Society: Philadelphia, PA, 1962).

³ Exodus 17:14-16.

add, the only question is degree. To look at this angry traditional text relationally we need to minimize the distortion and look at the original.

My own translation follows the literal sequence of the Hebrew, adding or subtracting nothing:

Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey, after you left Egypt – how he surprised you on the way, cut down all the stragglers in your rear, and you, famished and weary, do not fear God.

The traditional Jewish Understanding and the translating that followed and supported that understanding is that it was Amalek who did not fear God. The translations, examples of which follow, do this a number of ways.

The New Jewish Publication Society translation of 1985⁴ while claiming fidelity to the Traditional Hebrew text nevertheless **rearranges** the sentence order, inserts the words **undeterred by fear of God**, then adds a **he** so as to unmistakably point the finger at Amalek. It makes a fine English sentence, but distorts the meaning (in the following quotes all emphases are mine):

Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey, after you left Egypt; how, *undeterred by fear of God*, he surprised you on the march, when you, famished and weary, and cut down all the stragglers in your rear.

⁴ *TANAKH: A New Translation of The Holy Scriptures According to the Traditional Hebrew Text* (Philadelphia & Jerusalem: Jewish Publication Society, 1985).

Traduttore Traditore.

Others do it more simply with the judicious addition of **he** or **they** neither of which is in the Hebrew text:

Remember what Amalek did unto thee by the way as ye came forth out of Egypt; how he met thee by the way, and smote the hindmost of thee, all that enfeebled in thy rear, when thou wast faint and weary; and **he** feared not God.⁵

Bear-in-mind what Amalek did to you on the way, at your going-out from Egypt, how he encountered you on the way and attacked-your-tail-all the beaten-down-ones at your rear-while you weary and faint, and (thus) **he** did not stand-in-awe of God.⁶

The Christian translations join the parade:

Remember what Amalek did to you on the way as you came out of Egypt ,how he attacked you on the way, when you faint and weary, and cut off at your rear all who lagged behind you; and **he** did not fear God.⁷

⁵ *The Holy Scripture* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1917).

⁶ Everett Fox, trans. *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: Schocken Books, 1996).

⁷ *The Holy Bible, Revised Standard Version* (New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1952).

Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey out of Egypt, how he attacked you on the way, when you were faint and weary, and struck down all who lagged behind you; **he** did not fear God.⁸ (New Revised Standard Version-1989)

Remember what the Amalekites did to you on your way out of Egypt, how they met you on the road when you faint and weary and cut off your rear, which was lagging behind exhausted; **they** showed no fear of God.⁹

Our tradition and its foundational texts, even their calls for total monotheism, are full of direct or implied [either/or] statements. Do whatever it is a specific way or bad things will happen to you. When understood by humans desiring to be loyal to divinity these texts easily lead to, and provide support for, a fundamentalist point of view which says: “either my way or the highway.” As I have written elsewhere:

A monotheistic worldview complicates our accepting multiple “truths” by implicitly postulating that there is only *one* ultimate truth. So we hold to our own (often inculcated) perceptions and reject others’ “realities,” assuming that they are wrong or, at best, woefully inaccurate.¹⁰

⁸ *The Holy Bible*, New Revised Standard Version (New York: American Bible Society, 1989).

⁹ *The New English Bible* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1971).

¹⁰ Jack H Bloom, Ph.D. *The Rabbi as Symbolic Exemplar: By the Power Vested in Me* (Binghamton, NY: Haworth Press, 2002), p. 98.

Or in another place:

The move from polytheism to monotheism has not been without its costs and dangers. The belief that there is only One True God has sometimes led to the blessed affirmation that all humankind is equal. It has with less benign consequences also led to rejecting that there is more than one way to know the one God, especially if that way is different from what we are told that God has commanded. Monotheism can be taken to imply an essential oneness in us and the world [...] It is a dangerous yet understandable inference drawn from monotheism that as there is only one God, there is only one way to the divine [...] *You either* acknowledge that "truth' *or you* are in some way benighted, and must be set right. Monotheism, and the quest for *ultimate* meaning, for all its truth and benefits, unfortunately has produced a dangerous by-product: [Either/Or] thinking. [Either/Or] thinking is found throughout our own and other traditions. Things, ideas, etc. are either one way or another [...] [Either/Or] thinking is at its core a fundamentalist position. There is *one* way. Both intrapersonally and with others, an attribute, idea, person or whatever that is not that *one* way needs either to be converted to the "true" thinking or gotten rid of. We are obliged to bring both ourselves and others into line both for the wayward's benefit. [Either/Or] thinking allows no other way.¹¹

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 179-180.

To think about this text in a relational **[Both/And]** setting is no easy thing. It is as far from you shall love your neighbor as yourself as you can get. It is a text well described by Judith Plaskow¹² as “hard and perplexing in many ways, an embarrassment to many. No mitigating circumstances are possible, no way to end the enmity short of blotting out the memory of Amalek.”

But, why get **so** worked up? Why a call for eternal battle, for a war of extermination? War with Amalek was, after all, only one of a whole series of battles as the Israelites made their way to Canaan. In Numbers (14:45) yet another battle – a defeat – yet no cry of eternal revenge. What is all the fuss and fury about? There are endless battles with seemingly countless enemies. Only one becomes a paradigm. Only one evokes the motto: “God is at war with Amalek in every generation.” Only one carries the terrifying injunction to “blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.” A hard text for a people subjected to wars of extermination, and for those of us who would not want to do unto others.....

We return to the Hebrew text. (Deut. 25:18) We take note of a sequence that raises a question. The sequence in which “**do not fear God**” appears, seems different than indicated by The Jewish Publication Society of America translation of 1962/1985 which, in keeping with Jewish tradition and most translations, understands “**do not fear God**” as referring to the Amalekites, who because they “**do not fear God**” could perpetrate their unforgivable act. The Hebrew sequence has “**do not fear God**” follow immediately upon **and you famished and weary “do not fear God.”**

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¹² Judith Plaskow, “Dealing With the Hard Stuff,” *Tikkun*, September/October 1994.

ולא ירא אלהים

ולא ירא אלהים = “do not fear God”

It is located at the very end of the verse. To whom then does “do not fear God” apply? By its Hebrew location “do not fear God” seems to apply to the Israelites. They are “famished” and “weary” and they (the Israelites) “do not fear God.” Read one way it is the Amalekites who “do not fear God”; read by its place in the sentence, it is the Israelites.

What does **fearing God** mean? This expression appears at the beginning of Exodus.¹³ The midwives, Shifrah and Puah, ordered by Pharaoh to kill all newborn Israelite boys, do *not* do so because they are, they **fear God**. The midwives understand that the babies, though weak and helpless, are human, modeled after and molded by divinity, and therefore are not to be killed. Their **fear of God** governs their actions. They disobey Pharaoh and risk life and position by lying to Pharaoh in their account of how it was that the baby boys survived. So the text is clear: **fear of God** motivates compassion towards the helpless.

Back to Amalek. Amalek infuriatingly attacks and kills those who cannot keep up. Killing the weak and stragglers is of no military or strategic importance. It is a waste of energy and resources. To defeat the Israelite enemy by killing in battle is one thing, but the women and children, the “famished and weary,” those who cannot hurt you and are no threat, what is the point of killing them? You kill them because they happen to be Israelites, the enemy, because they’re different, because they’re not you. To kill them, you have to depersonalize them. Amalek attacks and kills the “other” simply because they are the “other.” A depersonalized other.

If “**do not fear God**” applies to the Israelites. It applies not to the stragglers but to those in command. Equal over against equal. Perhaps at an Israelite army staff meeting when an officer noted that there were those who trailed behind the camp, who could not maintain the stringent pace, no junior officer or commanding general stood up to say ” we have stragglers out there; we have women and children, the famished and the weary, young and old who can’t keep up – we have to protect them somehow.”

No troops were deployed, no armed escort dispatched, no protection provided. The stragglers were not protected for the self same reason the Amalekites attacked them. The Israelite high command had depersonalized their own people. They were the refuse, the impoverished, those no longer of any use in the long trek to Canaan. They were no longer of value. They did not matter. They had become **other**. **They were depersonalized**, left to perish in the desert, to be exterminated by Amalek. The Israelite leadership itself did **not fear God**. Because Israelites and Amalekites **both “do not fear God”** they, unlike the midwives of old, did not recognize the divinity in and of each person. Both were guilty of depersonalizing the other. Both were responsible for the awful outcome. So read the verse as applying to both Israel and Amalek. Neither **feared God**. **Fearing God** means recognizing the ultimate personhood, the ultimate value of each human being, taking none for granted, depersonalizing no one.

God’s war with Amalek is an eternal war against depersonalizing people, against the kind of thinking that allowed both Amalek and Israel to collude in what happened in the desert so long ago and so many times in so many places, to our own day.

¹³ Ex.1:17.

In my early courtship of the woman who is now my “*yekeh rebbitzin*,”¹⁴ I had to deal with her German-ness. I was stunned to hear that when she heard the words “six million,” she also thought of the six million German men who died in the war. “No comparison,” I said. She agreed. Yet it started me thinking about those on the other side who had died. One night after viewing a documentary on “The Siege of Leningrad,” I called her, sharing with her that I had seen it. Her first comment was “It’s terrible how many Germans died there.” I exploded! “Who began the war?! Who attacked whom?! Who was shelling whom?!” Who was encircling and starving Leningrad anyway?!” She interjected in the midst of my outburst, “You think those students, those farmers, those clerks, those men like my uncle, you think they *wanted* to die there?” I was caught up short. I realized that I was doing what had been done to my people. I had depersonalized them all. They were Germans, and their death did not count, because my people had suffered so!

We are each of us expert at depersonalizing others. We do it with our spouses, our friends, the other sex, our neighbors, ethnic groups, religions, and races, with whoever is perceived of as “other.” Each of us in any and every relationship is living and dealing with an alien reality. Depersonalizing is a simple way of dealing with “alien-ness.” It is simpler to **not fear God** and to depersonalize the other. No problem!

Fearing God is much tougher. Recognizing the divine uniqueness in every other, not depersonalizing them is difficult for another reason. It runs headlong into what we humans have to do to get by in the world. We *have to generalize*. If every time we met a new person we started *de novo*, wondering, “is this creature human or an orangutan?” not knowing whether or

¹⁴ “*Yekkeh*” is Israeli colloquial for German Jews. Perhaps because they insisted on wearing their Jackets on hot mideastern days. *Rebbitzin* is a Rabbi’s wife.

not to shake hands, how to say hello, do we smile or run for cover, we would be stuck. We learn by *generalizing*. Whether in Chicago, Illinois or Fairfield, Connecticut, a red light means stop. We drive on the right (in the U.S., at least) and generalize that others have learned the same. Otherwise it would be even more insane to drive down the road than it already is. Much of our learning and behavior comes from our ability to generalize from one situation to another, from one person to another. Otherwise we could predict nothing. We would be starting from square one all the time. And *generalizing* is the direct opposite of recognizing each human being as a specific and different person, each modeled after and molded by divinity, each unique and ultimately valuable. A hard thing to do. Depersonalizing is a lot easier. It's in our bones. To **not fear God** is both natural and effortless.

So the text, indeed a "hard" text, remains intense and resolute. Only it's focus changes. God is at war with the Amalek present *in us* and *in others* in all generations. God has sworn us to an oath to wipe out Amalek, to do the patently impossible, yet to undertake the mission. We are covenanted to overcome the tendency to depersonalize others, which has wreaked so much havoc in human history. Our task is to be counted among those who **fear God**. Our mission is to see the personhood in ourselves and in all others. Our battle is to recognize and relate to the Amalek in our selves and others, and with fear of God, neutralize the Amalek that depersonalizes and destroys, both others and ourselves, lest it destroy the world.