

Article

Rethinking Amalek in This 21st Century

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Abstract: Twice in the Hebrew Bible—Exodus 17:14–16 and Deuteronomy 25: 17–19—the ancient Israelites were commanded to “blot out” the memory of Amalek, their enemy for all time (as God intended to do as well). Yet, because these texts are a part of Jewish (and Christian) religious traditions, annually these passages are read in the synagogue on the appropriate Sabbath occasions in the annual reading cycle, and linked to the Festival of Purim that is based on the Book of Esther. Over the course of Jewish history, Amalek has served as the symbolic enemy of the Jewish people (e.g., Armenians, Nazis, Palestinians); indeed, all of the enemies of the Jews were and are understood to be descendants of the original Amalekites, and thus worthy not only of enmity but of destruction as well (e.g., Haman, Antiochus, Titus, Hadrian, Torquemada, Khmelnitsky, Hitler). Today, many of those in Israel allied with the so-called “settler movement” associated with right-of-center Orthodox Judaism and located among populations primarily of Palestinian Muslims, and Arabs view them as the descendants of Amalek as well, and thus sanction and legitimate their own at times violent actions and behaviors. At its most transparent level, responding to Amalek is a response to antisemitism, both historical and contemporary. This paper examines the history of *Amalekut* (“Amalek-ness”) within the Jewish (and Christian) religious tradition, the role of memory and forgetting of those survivors and their descendants traumatized by their enemies, the current manner of branding one’s enemies as descendants of Amalek, and whether, in truth, reconciliation is even possible among enemies of long standing. The implications and consequences for all of the divided groups thus becomes an enormous challenge. Practical suggestions are offered at the end as potential models for both present and future work as well.

Keywords: Hebrew Bible/Old Testament; Amalek; Jews; Palestinians

“Remember both of you what Amalek did to us. The Nazis callously slaughtered us, undisturbed by feelings of guilt. I observed them as I stood among them when many thousands of men, women, children, and infants were sent to their deaths. How guilty [the Germans] ate their morning’s bread and butter, how they mocked our martyrs. I saw them on their return from the killing rounds, drenched in the blood of our loved ones. Remember this and do not forget it all the days of your lives. Pass it on as a holy testament to the generations to come.” Elhanan Elkes¹

We remember Amalek by recommitting ourselves to the biblical prohibition against forgetting Amalek, or more specifically, by recommitting ourselves to the somewhat paradoxical command to not forget to eliminate the memory. (Yehuda Kirtzer 2012)

The ancient Amalek has appeared and reappeared in Jewish history in many forms and guises: he wore the signet ring of the king as Haman; the royal crown as Antiochus; the

¹ Letter of Dr. Elhanan Elkes (1879–1944), Chair of the Jewish Council in the Kaunas (Kovno) Ghetto, Lithuania, to his children [Joel, 1913–2015, & Sara, 1924–2015], 19 October 1943. (Littman 1998).

general's uniform as Titus; the emperor's toga as Hadrian; the priestly robe as Torquemada; the cossack's boots as Chmielnitzki; or the brown shirt as Hitler. All of them had in common their hatred of Jews and Judaism, and they all failed in their objective to crush the faith and people of God. (Plaut 1981)

Rabbi Abba, who was the son of Rabbi Kahana and who lived in the Roman administrative capital of Caesarea, declared that so long as the seed of Amalek exists, it is as if God's face is concealed, but that when the seed of Amalek will be uprooted from the world, the face of God will be revealed. (Feldman 2004, vol. 80)

1. Introduction

In the opening paragraph to her insightful essay "How Not to Remember & How Not to Forget" in *Commentary Magazine*, addressing the complicated question of Holocaust/Shoah remembrance, Ruth R. Wisse wrote the following:

"Do you know how my father would try out a new pen?" the Jewish Communist in Warsaw asked her American visitor in the early 1970s. "My father was a pious man, so he would dip the nib in ink, write 'Amalek' in Hebrew on a sheet of paper, then cross it out with a single black stroke."

This is how traditional Jews settled historical scores with their enemies—biblical Amalek being the tribe that attacked the weak rear guard of the Israelites on their flight from Egypt. *But the daughter's point was that "history" teaches only what we are already inclined to learn from it, and that Jews had not yet drawn the right conclusions from theirs.* Her father's symbolic strike at injustice had not prepared his generation for a century of real Amaleks.²

Two years earlier than Wisse's article, in the Introduction to his book *Reckless Rites: Purim and the Legacy of Jewish Violence*, Elliott Horowitz at Bar-Ilan University in Israel, referenced an article by Jeffrey Goldberg in the *New Yorker* entitled "Among the Settlers: A Reporter at Large." He would write about a series of disturbing interviews that Goldberg had with Jewish settlers. Then quoting Goldberg directly:

Some settler leaders see in the Palestinians the modern-day incarnation of the Amalekites, a mysterious Canaanite tribe that the Bible calls Israel's eternal enemy. In the Book of Exodus, the Amalekites attacked the Children of Israel on their journey to the land of Israel. For this sin, God damned the Amalekites, commanding the Jews to wage a holy war to exterminate them. This is perhaps the most widely ignored command in the Bible. The rabbis who shaped Judaism could barely bring themselves to endorse the death penalty for murder, much less endorse genocide, and they ruled that the Amalekites no longer existed. But Moshe Feiglin, the Likud activist, told me, "The Arabs engage in typical Amalek behavior. I can't prove this genetically, but this is the behavior of Amalek."³ When I asked Benzi Lieberman, the chairman of the council of settlements—the umbrella group

² (Wisse 2008) [Emphases added].

A variant of this ritual is also found in the comment by Diana Lipton:

A *sofer* (Torah scribe) begins each working day by fulfilling the commandment to blot out the name of Amalek. He writes the Hebrew letters *ayin mem lamed kuf* (Amalek) on a scrap of parchment and quickly excises them with several strong lines. Only the inclination of the scribe's heart as he performs this ritual will determine whether it signifies for him a violent rejection of 'the other' or an ethical rejection of social injustice. (Diana 2003)

³ Feiglin, a member of Israel's Knesset (Parliament) from the Likud Partry, a right-wing consolidation, continues to be something of an *agent provocateur*. According to the Jewish Telegraphic Agency (JTA) for March 4, 2013, he and some of his followers continued, and continue to, attempt entry into the Dome of the Rock on the Temple Mount (site of the ancient

of all settlements in the West Bank and Gaza—if he thought the Amalekites existed today, he said, “The Palestinians are Amalek!” Lieberman went on, “We will destroy them. We won’t kill them all. But we will destroy their ability to think as a nation. We will destroy Palestinian nationalism.” (www.newyorker.com)⁴

I cite these instances because one of the central functions of religious communities—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam included—is bringing the insights of their historical sacred texts into the contemporary moment. In the case of Amalek and the Amalekites in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, we appear to have a case unlike any other—what Joshua Cohen calls “the most renowned ban in all of Jewish tradition” (Joshua 1994)—and thus, labeling one’s present enemies as the *literal descendants* of one’s past enemies with exterminatory and annihilatory injunctions would appear to carry with it the ever-present potential for ongoing violence, and a reading of history that is neither necessarily, nor fully in accord, with that past. Thus, the initial question becomes: *How did an ancient enemy become a contemporary one?*—a process that Alistair Hunter calls *de-nomination*.⁵

2. Amalek in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament

Twice in the Hebrew Bible—Exodus 17:14–16 and Deuteronomy 25:17–19—the ancient Israelites were commanded to “blot out” the memory of Amalek.

The Lord said to Moses: “Write this in a book to be remembered, and tell it to Joshua: I [God] will completely *blot out any memory of Amalek from under heaven.*” Moses built an altar, called it *Adonai nissi*, [The Lord is my banner.] and said, “Because their hand was against the throne of God, the Lord will fight Amalek generation after generation.” [Ex. 17:14–16; emphasis added]⁶

“Remember what Amalek did to you on the road as you were coming out of Egypt, how he met you by the road, attacked those in the rear, those who were exhausted and straggling behind when you were tired and weary. He did not fear God. Therefore, when the Lord your God has given you rest from all your surrounding enemies in the land the Lord your

Judaism’s Holy Temple), the holy site where Muslims believe Mohammed (570–632) ascended into Heaven. In October, December, 2012, and January, 2013, he attempted to lead a *minyán* (prayer quorum) before being arrested by Israeli police and continues such provocations today.

⁴ Horowitz, however, does disagree with Goldberg in two important respects: Firstly, that, for him, the ancient Amalekites “are neither Canaanites nor mysterious”, and, secondly and more significantly, the claim that the rabbis did not “endorse genocide” is . . . patently false. Not only did the “rabbis who shaped Judaism,” that is, the Talmudic sages, never made such an assertion, but even Maimonides [1135–1204], in his great twelfth-century code, clearly suggested—as many commentators noted—that unlike the “seven nations” of ancient Canaan, who were also doomed to extermination by biblical command, the Amalekites were still alive and kicking (Elliot 2006). Martin Jaffee agrees with Horowitz and writes:

. . . how generations of sages, working over the span of nearly two millennia throughout the lands of Jewish dispersion, ploughed and replanted the field of Jewish scriptural interpretation so as to ensure that a benign ritual of “remembrance” would substitute for genocidal violence as the method of enacting the biblical commandment regarding Amalek . . . the crucial turn in rabbinic tradition regarding Amalek is *the absolute denial of the possibility of identifying with certainty any existing nation as the “seed of Amalek.”* (Martin 2011, p. 49, Emphases in original)

⁵ Hunter writes:

By this neologism I mean that specific proper names are de-historicized, emptied of their original content, and re-appropriated in ways which on the one hand effectively disenfranchise their original owners and on the other implicates contemporary groups in a negative discourse which they have no means of countering. (Hunter 2003)

⁶ Norman Lamm suggests that, according to Moses Maimonides (1135–1204), in *Hilchot Melakhim* [Laws of Kings] 5:5, “The traditional interpretation of this injunction is ‘Remember—by word of mouth; do not forget—out of mind, that it is forbidden to forget his hatred and enmity’ See (Norman 2007).

God is giving you as your inheritance to possess, *you* [Israelites] *are to blot out all memory of Amalek from under heaven*. Don't forget!" [Deut. 24:17–19; emphasis added]

Who then were they, these Amalekites? Gerald L. Mattingly well summarizes the current state of our knowledge about them under the heading "Amalek" in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*. It would thus appear that the first obligation of the ancient Israelites was to "blot out the memory" of this enemy after having written down the injunction itself. Remember to forget the memory of your enemy by writing down this obligation—but certainly not the rationale for it—a Divine command—or the historical event or events which led to this obligation. Yet, quite obviously a conundrum arises right at the outset: as long as the people continue to share the text itself, the hated enemy of Amalek, at least his name, lives on in the consciousness of the people who either hear or read of him. But, equally significantly, the Deuteronomic expansion provides the Divine rationale for the command, and, as the sacred texts are themselves shared generation after generation and later in synagogal settings annually, the Jewish people cannot forget either the name of the hated enemy who did this to the Jewish people in the past or what was done to the Jewish people by the "Amalekites" in succeeding generations.⁷ Equally so, Psalm 83:1–8 provides a further textual rationale, linking the Amalekites with the genocidal intent of other nations confronting Israel:

1 O God, do not remain silent; do not turn a deaf ear, do not stand aloof, O God. 2 See how Your foes rear their heads. 3 With cunning they conspire against Your people; they plot against those You cherish. 4 "Come," they say, "let us destroy them as a nation, so that Israel's name is remembered no more." 5 With one mind they plot together; they form an alliance against You—6 the tents of Edom and the Ishmaelites, of Moab, and the Hagites, 7 Byblos, Ammon and Amalek, Philistia, with the people of Tyre. 8 Even Assyria has joined them to reinforce Lot's descendants. [Emphases added]

More problematic, however, after the writing and the non-forgetting, is the substantive question and understanding of *how* Israel is to engage in the blotting out process against a nation who seemingly had a genocidal agenda against Israel.⁸ Here, a Hebrew linguistic exercise, I believe, may shed light on this process, and serve as a possible transitional reading to legitimate and justify violence.⁹

There are no curse words in the Hebrew Bible, though there are curses to be sure! The ultimate curse is that of *karet*, being "cut off" from one's kin. Biblical scholarship informs us that this devastating imprecation admits of three possibilities: (1) May you die before marrying, and thus your biological line comes to its end. (2) Should you already be married, may your wife (and you) die before (or, possibly, in) childbirth, and thus your biological line comes to its end. Or, (3) Should you already have children, may your children, in turn, repeat steps (1) or (2), and thus your biological line comes to its end.

Thus, one strong possibility that suggests itself is that, *literarily*, blotting out the memory of one's enemies is the prayerful hope that the biological line of that enemy will cease to exist at some point in

⁷ Joshua Cohen notes:

By reading these texts aloud in the synagogue, are Jews then showing their approval of the slaughter of their traditional enemies in accordance with the holy ban? Does reading the *cherem* [extermination] imply consent...Perhaps Jews are required to read the *cherem* [extermination] every year in the synagogue so that they will be forced to confront the enduring presence of bigotry in their sacred teachings. (Joshua 1994, vol. 294, p. 299)

⁸ Rabbi David Brofsky of Midreshet Lindenbaum, Jerusalem, notes importantly in his Torah commentary on "The Laws of Remembering Amalek" that "the mitzvah (commanded act) to remember Amalek is not necessarily linked to the mitzvah to wage war against Amalek." (www.vbm-torah.org).

⁹ As Moshe Anisfeld notes "Both Rashi [Rabbi Shlomo Itzhaki, 140–1105] and Rashbam [Rabbi Samuel ben Meir, 1085–1158] interpret this verse [Exodus 17:14] interpret this verse as an instruction for Joshua to blot out the name of Amalek". Going further into Rashi's comments and his use of various midrashic texts, he also notes that, in addition to the Amalekites attacking the rear of Israel's defenseless rear of old people, women, and children, were (1) "defiling the Israelites with homosexual rape", and (2) "mutilating the sexual organs of Israelite males" (Moshe 2014, pp. 147–48, 150–51).

the future—ere too long—and all that will remain will be a verbal and/or historical memory without real persons in the present upon whom to bestow contempt—or worse. The rabbis of the later Jewish tradition, Talmudic and beyond, could thus argue that the descendants of the original Amalekites are no more, and, therefore, the literal physical obligation to exterminate them is no more as well.¹⁰ Such words of condemnation, however, would also prove psychically invaluable as comfort to a powerless people.¹¹ Indeed, there is even within Jewish religious tradition an epithet to be uttered immediately after speaking the name of one's hated enemy, "*Yimakh sh'mo v'zikro*/May his name and his memory be blotted out!" As Joel S. Kaminsky in his book *Yet I Loved Jacob: Reclaiming the Biblical Concept of Election* notes:

Fundamentally, the idea of Amalek is an attempt to make some theological sense of recurring historical evils. While such theologies are *potentially dangerous*, they also serve a purpose by helping communities survive and explain troubling historical events. *In Judaism, the theological idea that massive historical evils perpetrated by individuals and groups who harbor an irrational hatred of Jews and Judaism are part of a larger cosmic pattern has helped the community make sense of tragedies and thus continue to survive.* (Kaminsky 2017) [Emphasis added].

Yet, as Ruth Wisse writes, and Rabbi Plaut affirms, Jewish interpretative memory is filled with far too many Amaleks upon whom verbal cursing has no, little, or futile impact, beginning early on, when the hated Romans were understood and disguised as "Edom", and equally hated as Israel's enemies. The one place in the Hebrew Bible where we read of the above actually taking place, however, would be in *Megillat Esther*/Book of Esther where the Prime Minister and arch-villain Haman, said to be an Agagite (that is, a descendant of Amalekite King Agag), is hung on the gallows along with his ten sons, thus effectively and forever bringing his own biological line to its end; this, despite the myriad problems associated with this text regarding its own historical authenticity.¹² (Interestingly enough, historically, two enemies of the Jews—the priest Tomás de Torquemada (1420–1498) in medieval Spain; and Hitler (1889–1945) in 20th century Germany were bachelors and produced no heirs that are known to us. The same cannot be said of others, either historically or contemporarily.)

Even more problematic was the injunction of the prophet Samuel to Israel's first king, Saul, in I Samuel 15:3, a command in which Saul does not fulfil, and which will, ultimately, contribute to his own demise and loss of kingship:

¹⁰ Professor Emeritus Zev Garber of Los Angeles Valley College notes, however:

In rabbinical literature, Amalek is shown as a paradigm of absolute wickedness and evil, destroyer and rejector of all that God and humans have wrought. Thus, the halakhic Jew [one who follows the Jewish legal tradition], if confronted with a bona fide descendant of Amalek, would be duty bound to kill him or her immediately without needing to obtain a mandate from any rabbinical court. (Zev 2012)

¹¹ As Cromer (2001), puts it: "Unable to defeat their enemies, they had to make do with demonizing them." "Amalek as Other; Other as Amalek: Interpreting a Violent Biblical Narrative," *Qualitative Sociology* 24(2): 192.

¹² Lewis Feldman, however, draws our attention to a little cited passage in the Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 96 b, which reads:

Our Rabbis taught: Naaman was a resident alien [one who renounces idolatry for the sake of certain rights of citizenship in Palestine]. Nebuzaradan was a righteous proselyte [who one accepts the laws of Judaism with no ulterior motive], the descendants of Sisera studied Torah in Jerusalem; the descendants of Sennacherib taught Torah to the multitude. Who were they?—Shemaiah and Abtalion [the teachers of Hillel]. *The descendants of Haman studied Torah in B'nai B'rak.* The Holy One, blessed be He, purported to lead the descendants of that wicked man [Nebuchadnezzar] too under the wings of the Shechinah [to make them proselytes], but the ministering angels protested before Him, "Sovereign of the universe, Shalt Thou bring him under the wings of the Shechinah who laid Thy House [Temple] in ruins, and burnt Thy Temple?" That is meant by the verse, "We would have healed Babylon, but she is not healed" [Jeremiah 21:9]. Ulla said, "This refers to Nebuchadnezzar [that God desired that his descendants to become proselytes]". (Feldman 2004, vol. 49)

And thus indicating that Haman's descendants, unnamed, did become converts to Judaism. Other places in the Babylonian Talmud where Amalek is referenced are Sanhedrin 20b, Baba Batra 21a–21b, Megillah 7a, Yoma 22b, and Sandhedrin 105b–106b.

3 Now go, attack the Amalekites and *totally destroy all that belongs to them*. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys. [Emphasis added.]

The violent totality of this biblical obligation cannot be swept away through interpretative strategies, be they Jewish or Christian. Indeed, Professor Louis Feldman of Yeshiva University, NY, in his text “Remember Amalek!” *Vengeance, Zealotry, and Group Destruction in the Bible According to Philo, Pseudo-Philo, and Josephus* presents his readers at the outset with twelve “Problems” when addressing these texts:

- (1) What precedents and parallels are there among other peoples of antiquity for the command of genocide, including women, children, and animals; and what unique elements are there in the genocide of the Amalekites?
- (2) What significance is there in the birth and origin of Amalek?
- (3) Whose responsibility is it to eliminate the Amalekites?
- (4) What are the grounds that are said to justify such a command?
- (5) Which of the Amalekites are included in the command to have them destroyed?
- (6) To what extent do Philo, Pseudo-Philo, and Josephus, the earliest systematic commentators on the Bible, raise the question of divine morality and to what degree do they regard Amalek as merely a symbolic concept?
- (7) How do these writers treat Saul’s and David’s campaigns against the Amalekites?
- (8) To what degree should the *alleged* Jews’ hatred of Gentiles be seen as the background for God’s everlasting war with Amalek? [Emphasis added]
- (9) What significance is there in the equation of Esau, Edom, Amalek, and Rome?
- (10) To what degree can parallels to the genocide of the Amalekites be seen in God’s destruction of life in the great Flood, the divine decision to obliterate Sodom and Gomorrah, the divine annihilation of the first-born Egyptians in the tenth plague?
- (11) To what degree are there parallels in the seeming brutality of the Israelites toward non-Jews in avenging the rape of Dinah, in the annihilation of the nations of Sihon and Og, in the annihilation of the inhabitants of Jericho, and in the annihilation of the priests and other inhabitants of Nob?
- (12) To what degree is there a parallel in the divinely approved zealotry of Phineas in putting to death Zimri and his consort?¹³

That Feldman is not afraid to use our modern word “genocide” to describe this obligation is itself significant, and, therefore, even by implication, suggests a “moral lapse,” unrationalizable, on the part of God. His questions, however, are predicated upon a certain literalist reading of the stories of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament—accurately reflecting what happened—and thus squares, though unintentionally, with Jeffrey Goldberg’s assessment of the mindset of some of today’s right-wing Israeli Jewish settlers, though the questions Feldman raises are uncomfortable nonetheless. Thus, the potential for violence against those they understand to be present-day Amalekites.

3. The Weaker and Stronger Sides of History

Prior to the 20th century, Jews were a decided minority and powerless population throughout Europe and the Middle East, and whose only refuge against a steady onslaught of enemies lay within

¹³ (Feldman 2004, pp. 1–2). Rabbi Gil Student in his blog posting “Hihurim—Musings” entitled “Amalek and Morality” (March 11, 2012) notes that “while we can no longer identify Amalekites, the obligation [to kill any Amalekite who crosses one’s path, citing earlier Jewish textual formulations and interpretations] still presents theoretical moral difficulties.” To this list perhaps, the words of Numbers 33:52–53 must also be added: “Drive out all the inhabitants of the land before you. Destroy all their carved images and their vast idols, and demolish all their high places. Take possession of the land and settle in it, for I have given you the land to possess, as too easy an example of those who would, contemporarily, justify and legitimate violence against *all* non-Jews in the Land of Israel.”

the verbal (private and public conversations within the ghettos), the religious (prayers for Divine retribution, e.g., at Passover), and the psychic (humanly conceiving of a better future)—and dreams, perhaps, of a powerful past and a powerful future.

Throughout history, from a particularistic Judaic *Weltanschauung*/world perspective, Jews have labelled their enemies as either Amalek directly or his descendants, and thus equally worthy of death at the hands of Jews, even if unable to realize the goal. The vagaries of history being what they were and are, until the present moment, Jews continued to find themselves vulnerable, with little to no opportunity to put into practice this most unusual and demanding of obligations in response to what was done to them by their hated enemies. Thus, as already noted, Rome could be labelled by some as Amalek in the guise of Edom, but the power of Rome in ancient Palestine was such that Jews could only mourn their dead, engage in suicidal acts of rebellion in the years 66–70 CE and beyond (the unsuccessful Bar Kokhba Revolt of 132–136 CE), and watch their Second Temple being razed to the ground in that fateful year of 70 CE. Banished from Jerusalem, they would begin a 2000-year trek, primarily westward; always a minority at risk, subject to the whims and caprices of religious and governmental overlords, and all-too-often at the mercy of physically violent populations who would “take the bait” of their own leaders, accuse the Jews of every ill imaginable (e.g., blood libels of innocent children, consecrated host desecrations, well poisonings, and economic usurpation and havoc, etc.), and suffer the consequences.¹⁴ It is, therefore, not surprising that, after the Roman period, we find Christianity equated with Amalek up to and including the Middle Ages, and, later and more obviously, Hitler and the Nazis, and, by extension, those who allied themselves with them and their desire to make the world *Judenrein*/Jew-free.¹⁵ Indeed, as Robert Eisen notes in his book *The Peace and Violence of Judaism: From the Bible to Modern Zionism*:

... it is well known among scholars of rabbinic Judaism that the image of Amalek was highly malleable in the imagination of the rabbis and that they commonly identified their adversaries with the ancient enemy, whoever they might be. In the first centuries, Amalek was the Roman Empire, while in the medieval period was Christian Europe. This tendency has continued in the modern period. Many Jews identified the Nazis as Amalek, and *in modern day Israel, some right-wing religious Israelis have done the same with the Palestinians*.¹⁶ Certainly, up until recent times, the consequences of this phenomenon have been limited because the rabbis had no power to act on their hatred of Amalek. However, as [Elliott]

¹⁴ As Elliott Horowitz writes in *Reckless Rites*:

The Jews of Christian Europe knew, of course, that they would never hope to vanquish the Amalekites of their day on the battlefield, but some found ways to carry the holy war against them to a more convenient site, where they would enjoy “the home-court advantage”—the synagogue. Beginning with the Jews of Franco-Germany around the time of Rashi [Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac, 1040–1105], the solemn *Kaddish* prayer, one of the central texts of the synagogue service, was conscripted into battle against the ancient archenemy of the Jews. [via an interpretive commentary] (128)

¹⁵ With some trepidation, however, Joel Kaminsky suggests that “unlike the anti-Canaanite polemic directed solely against Israel’s neighbors in the land, the condemnation of Amalek acquires within biblical tradition an aura that may vaguely recall certain features of genetically based Nazi racism, even though Israel’s policy toward Amalek falls short of Nazi policies and has an altogether different character.” *Yet I Loved Jacob*, 115.

¹⁶ Eugene Korn, commenting on two of the major Orthodox thinkers of the 20th century, writes:

R. Moses Soloveitchik (1876–1941) asserted that the Amalekite nation never assimilated beyond recognition . . . Speaking during the Nazi era, R. Soloveitchik insisted that Amalek is a prototype for any person attempting to exterminate the Jewish people and that the commandment to physically destroy such persons is still binding. His son, R. Joseph Soloveitchik (1903–1993), applied it to Arabs trying to destroy Israel in the 1950’s. (Eugene 2006, p. 11)

A similar reference is also found in (Shalom 2007; Saul 2001). Norman (2007), however, devotes several pages to contesting the Soloveitchiks’, both father’s and son’s, reading of contemporary *Amalekut* [“Amalek-ness”] based on the Holocaust experiences of the Second World War. (Norman 2007), and concludes, “Hence, with most respectful apologies to the revered Rabbis Soloveitchik, father and son, I find it difficult to accept their thesis.”

Horowitz has argued, Jews were surprisingly forthright in the medieval period in openly ridiculing and insulting Christians and Christianity. Much more serious and troubling is that in the modern period, Jews have regained political power, and *the propensity of right-wing Israeli settlers to identify the Palestinians with Amalekites has sometimes had deadly consequences. The commandment to exterminate the Amalekites was therefore preserved by the rabbis, and for that reason it remains a potential source of violence* (Eisen 2011, pp. 104–5, Emphasis added)

Contemporary Israeli mystic, though not an academic, Nechama S. G. Nadborny-Burgeman, in her text *The Twelve Dimensions of Israel, and of Israel and the Seventy Dimensions of the World—a Kabbalistic approach to an Enduring World Peace*, writes that “in the past, it [Amalek] has seeped through and manifested itself as Haman, Hitler, Sadam Hussein, Hamas. Now it is Hizbullah.” (www.NechamaSarahGila.com). Given the ongoing Middle East conflicts between Israel and the Palestinians, as well as the surrounding Arab nation-states, and this seemingly intractable sixty-nine-year confrontation, it should not be at all surprising that, among certain traditionally-observant and traditionally-thinking and traditionally-reading Jewish circles, today’s Palestinians are the living descendants of the Hebrew Bible’s original Amalekites, evil personified, and worthy of extermination and annihilation. Nor, given the complexities of the political, social, economic, military, and religious issues involved in Middle Eastern realities, is it at all surprising that this most recent understanding of Amalek has surfaced and remains current.¹⁷

Before proceeding along these lines, however, to complete this skewed picture, it must also be noted that, in some post-World War II Orthodox Jewish circles, non-Orthodox Israelis, and secular Zionists were likened to Amalekites as well, as those Jews struggled to make religio-theological sense of the Holocaust/Shoah. In a lengthy article in the *Journal of Contemporary History* entitled “Amalek’s Accomplices’ Blaming Zionists for the Holocaust: Anti-Zionist Ultra-Orthodoxy in Israel during the 1980s”, Israeli scholar Dina Porat articulates and clarifies a particularistic reading of secular state Zionism—interfering with God’s plan to present to the Jewish people His messiah, one of whose tasks would be the ingathering of Jews world-wide—and thus divine punishment in the form of the Holocaust/Shoah, wreaked upon the Jewish People, and consistent with classical Biblical thinking in which the God of Israel and all humankind uses human agents to punish an errant and wayward Israel.¹⁸ Thus, in the context of this discussion, not only non-Jews/Gentiles have been labeled Amalek, but, contemporarily, Jews as well.¹⁹ Indeed, as Eisen notes, perhaps somewhat ironically, in his book *The Peace and Violence of Judaism: From the Bible to Modern Zionism*:

... throughout the centuries, it was not uncommon for Christians and Jews to view their enemies as Canaanites and Amalekites ... William Gouge, the seventeenth-century English

¹⁷ See (Elliot 2006, pp. 137–46), Specifically “Amalek in the Twentieth Century.

¹⁸ The classic text is that of Isaiah 10:5 where God says that the nation-state of Assyria is the “rod of my anger,” that is, using Assyria to punish Israel. The “law of unintended consequences,” by implication and not fully thought through by these thinkers, would, thus, appear to be that the Nazis, all up and down the chain of command, would, in the process of their destructive acts, become agents of the Divine against the people of Israel. See (Porat 1992).

¹⁹ Almost as disturbing to be sure was the column by Professor of Journalism at Columbia University Samuel Freedman entitled “In The Diaspora: The Amalek Syndrome” in *The Jerusalem Post* (February 8, 2007), wherein he challenged Professor Alvin Rosenfeld’s publication “*Progressive Jewish Thought and the New Anti-Semitism* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 2006, 30 pgs.) as “an effort not to eradicate our external enemies but to invalidate, delegitimize and disenfranchise the supposed traitors within.” The seriousness of the internal Jewish debates regarding the State of Israel and its policies is thus reflected in these two pieces as well as Bernard Harrison’s subsequent publication *Israel, Anti-Semitism, and Free Speech* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 2007, 47 pgs.), as well as his prior text *The Resurgence of Anti-Semitism: Jews, Israel, and Liberal Opinion* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006). Somewhat similar yet different is the fact that, for some right-wing Orthodox Jews, secular Israeli culture as well has been labeled as Amalek, according to Gerald Cromer:

Haredim [extremely pious one], for instance, who are engaged in a constant battle against Israeli secular society, invariably attribute the lack of religious observance to purposive action on the part of the secular political and cultural establishment to uproot Jewish tradition. Two of the major culprits, Israeli television and the Labor Party, are regularly referred to as Amalek. (Cromer 2001, p. 197)

Calvinist used texts about Amalek to justify war against Catholics. Cotton Mather drew on the image of Amalek in his diatribes against Native American Indians. And Martin Luther and his student Johannes Brenz even identified Amalek with the Jews! (Eisen 2011, pp. 28–29)

4. Today's Palestinians as Amalekites

To return, however, to the current case of the Palestinians as the contemporary descendants of the biblical Amalek, the Amalekites of today: it must be stated at the outset that the overwhelming majority of the world's Jews, both inside and outside of Israel, do not draw such conclusions, much less the bold implication that they must be genocidally destroyed in keeping with past Jewish understandings and present readings and Biblical/Torahitic commands.²⁰ Those who advocate such thinking and action are in the decided minority—*despite* the fact that they garner far too much press and far too much publicity. But they do exist and present an ongoing challenge to how one reads ancient and historical sacred texts in light of present events, and all the more so as regards the volatile Middle East²¹ (Interestingly enough, Christian readers of biblical texts, from the most fundamentalist to the most liberal, do not seem to side with their Jewish compatriots and counterparts on this issue, no matter how publicly supportive of the State of Israel and its governmental and military actions they appear).

In the Weekend Edition, March 7–9, 2003, of the leftist and radical online magazine *Counterpunch*, Shulamit Aloni (b. 1928), then member of the Israeli Knesset (Parliament) and Minister of Communications and the Arts, Science and Technology, under the provocative title “Murder Under the Cover of Righteousness” wrote:

Many of our children are being indoctrinated, in religious schools, that the Arabs are Amalek, and the bible [sic] teaches us that Amalek must be destroyed. There was already a rabbi in Israel [Israel Hess]²² who wrote in the [student] newspaper of Bar Ilan University

²⁰ Cromer (2001) writes: “many on the left of the political spectrum reject the comparison between Israel’s Arab enemies and Amalek. They contend that the analogy exaggerates the dangerousness and/or depravity of current foes. In doing so, it leads to a deepening of Jewish-Arab hatred, and, in turn, to an exacerbation of the conflict between them.” (Cromer 2001, p. 199).

²¹ In a rather telling article entitled “Ploughshares into Swords: Contemporary Religious Zionists and Moral Constraints,” Rabbi Yitzchak Blau writes:

In instances of Jewish violence against Arabs, it is frequently religious voices that are the most vocal for absolving the perpetrators of guilt. In military actions that place non-Jewish civilians in danger, it is often religious voices that feel no reservation about calling for such action.” (Yitzchak 2000, p. 56)

One rather unsettling example would be that engraved on the tombstone of the American-Israeli medical doctor Baruch Goldstein (1956–1994) who killed 29 Palestinian worshippers and wounded 125 others at the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron on February 25, 1974:

Here lies the saint, Dr. Baruch Kappel Goldstein, blessed be the memory of the righteous and holy man, may the Lord avenge his blood, who devoted his soul to the Jews, Jewish religion, and Jewish land. His hands are innocent and his heart is pure. He was killed as a martyr of God on the 14th of Adar, Purim, in the year 5754 (1994). (Martin 2011, pp. 44–45)

²² At the time, February, 1980, Rabbi Hess was a campus rabbi and wrote in the student newspaper an article entitled “The Genocide Commandment in the Torah,” where he stated:

The day is not far when we shall be called to this holy war, to this commandment of the annihilation of Amalek . . . Against this holy war God declares a counter jihad . . . in order to emphasize that this is the background for the annihilation and that it is over his land that the war is being waged and that it is not a conflict between two peoples . . . God is not content that we annihilate Amalek—‘blot out the memory of Amalek’—he also enlists personally in his war . . . because, as has been said, he has a personal interest in this matter, that is the principal aim.

Subsequently Rabbi Hess resigned his post, and the article was pulled from the newspaper and its online access. See (Masalha 2000, pp. 130–32). for his reading of *l’affaire Hess*. Martin Jaffee notes the difficulty of now obtaining a copy of Hess’s article:

that we all must commit genocide, and that is because his research showed that the Palestinians are Amalek. (www.counterpunch.com)²³

Commenting on the case of Rabbi Hess, Nur Marsalha, Reader in Religion and Politics at St. Mary's University College, UK, and a consistent critic of all things Israeli, in his book *The Bible & Zionism: Invented Traditions, Archaeology and Post-Colonialism in Israel-Palestine* writes:

Clearly for Hess, Amalek is synonymous with the Palestinian Arabs, who have a conflict with Israeli Jews, and they must be “annihilated,” including women, children, and infants. His use of the Arabic term *jihad* [See note 27.] leaves no doubt as to whom such a war of ‘annihilation’ should be waged against. (Masalha 2007)

While I strongly disagree with the main thesis of his text—that the Israeli archaeological project is *dominated* by political agendas and concerns to validate and legitimate the modern nation-state of Israel rather than solid scholarship—and have critiqued both his text and that of Nadia Abu El-Haj (Steven 2010), Masalha does cite two additional examples worth referencing, whereby far-right Israeli religious Jews continue to equate today's Palestinians with yesterday's Amalekites.

In 1974, the rabbi of Ramat Gan [near Tel-Aviv], Moshe Ben-Tzion Ishbezari, published a book associating the two . . . In 1980, Haim Tzoriyah published an article in the settler movement bulletin entitled “The Right to Hate”, and stated “In every generation there is an Amalek. The Amalekism [sic] of our generation finds expression in the deep Arab hatred towards our national revival in our forefathers' land”.

In 1969, in the journal of the Israeli Army rabbinate, *Mahanaim*, Shraga Gafni (1926–2012) wrote:

As to the Arabs—the element that now resides in the land is foreign in its essence to the land and its promise—their sentence must be that of all previous foreign elements. Our wars with them have been inevitable, just as in the days of the conquest of our possessions in antiquity, our wars with the people who ruled our land for their own benefit was inevitable . . . In the case of the enemies, who, *in the nature of their being*, have only one single goal, to destroy you, there is no remedy but for them to be destroyed. This is ‘the judgment of Amalek. (Masalha 2007, pp. 150–51, 198–99)

Lastly, in a previous text, *Imperial Israel and the Palestinians: The Politics of Expansion*, Masalha wrote that:

For many settlement leaders, particularly those religious figures and extremist rabbis, the ideological conflict with the Palestinian Arabs, had its roots in biblical injunctions, regarding the Amalekites . . . At least some leading rabbis interpreted this biblical injunction to justify not only expulsion of local Arabs but also the killing of Arab civilians in the event of war.²⁴

My efforts to turn up a copy of this article have failed. The Bar Ilan library does not have a copy of this issue of *Bat Kol*, and my requests for copies from Israeli colleagues yield nothing. I do know that Rabbi Hess chose not to have the essay reprinted in his “collected essays” prior to his death in the late 1980s. (Martin 2011, 67n36)

²³ Subsequently and contemporarily, among the latest “flaps” is the question of how both Israelis and Palestinians portray each other and their stories in their own school textbooks. See, for example, “‘Victims of Our Own Narratives?’ Portrayal of the ‘Other’ in Israeli and Palestinian School Books” (February 4, 2013). Initiated by the Council of Religious Institutions of the Holy Land, which critiques both communities for their portrayals, and which has come under fire by both Israeli governmental agencies and American defense organizations such as the Anti-Defamation League. See, also, (Adwan 2001; Adwan and Bar-On 2004), and expanded in (2006), “Educating toward a Culture of Peace” (Information Age Publishing), Chapter 19: 309–24; (Daniel et al. 2009; Nurit 2012; Podeh 2002). Further, on the complicated question of dual narratives and the differences in Israeli and Palestinian readings of their intertwined past, see (Adwan et al. 2012; Gabbay and Kazak 2012; Rotberg 2006; Rowland and Frank 2002; Sa’di and Lila 2007).

²⁴ (Masalha 2000). However, the accuracy of his earlier assessment, one must seriously question his misreading of these rabbinic leaders as “leading.” In truth, they are leaders only to their relatively small constituencies and in no way speak for

Please note that I am not arguing that there do not exist among some Palestinians—including members of Hezbollah, Hamas, and Fatah—those who most definitely would align themselves with Iran’s former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (b. 1956) in their active desire to “wipe Israel off the map”, and, along with it, not only the nation-state itself but every one of its Jewish residents. But I am arguing that, to equate today’s Palestinians with yesterday’s Amalekites, is both a false equation and a misreading of history, including biblical history, on the part of those religious Jews who take their scriptural texts far more literally and far more seriously than others—Jews and Christians—and, out of their religiously legitimate desire to contemporize the meaning and the relevance of those texts, and, thus, keep open the doors for present and future occasions of violence. I am suggesting that contemporary *Amlekut* (“Amalek-ness”), however wrongly understood and misinterpreted by some in the traditional Jewish communities of Israel, Europe, and the United States, is a response to the reality of ongoing antisemitism and an understanding that the enemies of the Jewish people are the literal and lineal descendants of the past.²⁵ Though not a focus of this paper, this traditionally Jewish religious view is consistent with those who view the negativities of the Jewish historical experience as one long, ongoing, and enduring tragedy, and a consequence—the price paid—of divine selectivity of the Jews (“chosen-ness”) and the acceptance of the gift of the Torah.

5. What Then Is to Be Done?²⁶

Hate speech is hate speech, whether is it offered by religious or secular persons, orally or in print or online, and must be confronted directly and in the immediacy of the moment when it is first presented. Equally knowledgeable advocates of alternatives to violence, in this case the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, must, equally, use the same tools of argument (i.e., textual sources and citations) to rebut and refute those whose narrow parochial readings of the past and present demean the actual texts they cite, the history to which they refer, and the living persons and communities who stand the most to lose in such ongoing violent confrontations. As the late Anglican clergyman and scholar who did much in the arena of Jewish-Christian relations, James Parkes (1896–1981) is said to have remarked, “bad history does not make good theology”.²⁷

other Orthodox Jews, other Orthodox rabbis, and, to be sure, other Jews either in Israel or world-wide. In fact, the opposite is the case: they are, indeed, viewed as extremists, and, thus, by and large, rejected along with their interpretive understandings of the Jewish past and present as well their readings of primary classical Jewish texts—Hebrew Bible and Babylonian Talmud—as well.

²⁵ Consistent with this position is the comment by Malachi H. Hacohen:

Most Ultra-Orthodox Jews believe that the Holocaust came for assimilation’s sins, and vindicated Moses Sofer’s [Moses Schreiber, 1762–1839] warning that mimicry of the gentiles would provoke their (and God’s) wrath and end up disastrously. With the exception of the radically anti-Zionist Satmar Hasidism, they have desisted from calling the Zionists (and assimilated Jews) Amaleq, as they had done before the Holocaust, and Amaleq is now reserved for the Nazis. In his *Megilat Polin* (1966), Gur leader Yehudah Leib Levin, founder of the Ultra-Orthodox Daily Ha-Modia, suggested that remembering the antisemitic Nazi design to obliterate the entire Jewish people, and commemorating the saints who perished in the Holocaust, was fulfillment of the Torah’s command to remember Amaleq. (Hacohen 2017, pp. 171–72)

²⁶ Henry F. Knight, Keene College, NH, problematizes the difficulties theologically in terms of the issue of hospitality:

Amalek is the other who opposes Israel (and any of us who identify with Israel) so viciously, so completely, so utterly that he/she opposes not just Israel (or those who identify with Israel) but God and God’s intentions for life and all creation. Amalek is that other whom my hospitality will never be able to make welcome in the world because Amalek’s identity and place in the world requires that certain others be eliminated. Amalek is that other whom hospitality cannot welcome because Amalek’s identity denies the validity of hospitality even when it welcomes Amalek. (Knight 2012)

²⁷ It is important to state here that those who justify their potentially violent reactions/responses to the Palestinians and do so by the citing of numerous biblical, Talmudic, and midrashic sources—interpreted through their own narrow lenses—are, overall, smaller than the clear majority of Jewish, especially in Israeli itself, who strongly disagree with them. However, their continuous repetitions, making use of various media possibilities (books, articles, lectures, Internet, and social media), accords and affords them disproportionate legitimacy in the eyes of those inclined to agree with them. While, objectively,

Such refutations that I am proposing are far easier spoken than realized on the part of a people whose very past has been all-too-often framed and traumatized by victimhood by a succession of Amaleks. It may, perhaps, be easier to refute the refutable than initially realized in this age of instant communications.²⁸

Not only the Jewish religious communities in both the United States and Israel must enter this fray and denounce any and all assertions that Palestinians equal Amalekites, but the government of Israel, including its courts,²⁹ and in particular its Education Ministry, must exercise appropriate educational control once and for all over the stricter religious educational programs and institutions as they already do over the secular system, and, equally so, must work with the Muslim/Arab/Palestinian school system as well. In the United States, the two primary Jewish defence organizations—the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) and the American Jewish Committee (AJC)—must continue to monitor and denounce all such ignoble and false equations. I would also suggest that the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), too, has a public role to play in this issue as the most publicly transparent American “face of Israel”, not only about Congress but the American people has well. Thus, one cannot thus but be reminded of President George Washington’s (1732–1799) 1790 letter to Touro Synagogue in Newport, RI, as applicable in this context:

For happily the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance requires only that they who live under its protection, should demean [conduct] themselves as good citizens. [Emphasis added]

Additionally, support must be garnered from the various online sites that see as their mandate the support of Israel and the prevention of its own defamation: CAMERA (Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting, www.camera.org), Honest Reporting (www.honest-reporting.com), and Stand with Us (www.standwithus.com) readily come to mind.

Furthermore, the very break-through model of how those who read those texts differently and who differ in their understandings and interpretations of those same texts may sit down together at the same table may very well be the model of Jewish-Christian dialogue as pioneered in the United States, a dialogue which, while initially fragily built in the aftermath of the Second World War and the revelations of the Holocaust/Shoah, has only gotten stronger over the years—despite occasional setbacks and both missed and realized opportunities.³⁰ Then, too, who would have ever imagined in the darkest days of the Second World War and its aftermath that, today, there exist dialogues both in the United States and in Europe as well of Germans and Jews—the children (and now grandchildren) of the perpetrators and the children (and now grandchildren) of the survivors and victims—coming to together to talk through their burdens and their pains, and emerge stronger for having undergone these difficult conversations.

If Jews and Christians can engage in a dialogical encounter after more than 2000 years of a truly bad history, why not Jews and Jews concerned with the continuing deaths of innocent children, women and men whereby the ages-old dream of shalom/peace remains in the background? If Jews and Germans can sit across the table *panim-el-panim*/face-to-face and share the burdens that they both carry of their turbulent history, why not Jews and Jews—Orthodox and non-Orthodox, settler and non-settler—who regard their residence in the Holy Land as a precious and priceless gift, unmerited, and unwarranted, but a gift nonetheless. If, fragily, some Jews and some Palestinians can engage each other—not all but some—who both wish to reverse an ongoing culture of death and affirm a

their overall impact is difficult to engage, and the examples cited tend to be anecdotal, as well as their reportage, further fuels this ongoing dangerous proclivity and potential.

²⁸ On the misuses of language, see (Abel 1998; Brennan 1995; Crowley 2006; Lewis 2005; Riggins 1997; Tannen 1998; Young 1991).

²⁹ See, for example, (Cohen-Almagor 2012), especially his comment that “we should not ignore repeated calls for murder that have the effect of legitimizing violence” (47).

³⁰ See, for example, (Jacobs 2012).

culture of life for themselves and their children and grandchildren, why not Jews and Jews who wish for themselves and their descendants the same thing?

The dialogue model pioneered by Jews and Christians in the United States is predicated upon mutual respect and civility for which Hebraic equivalent expressions exist (e.g., *Elu v'elu divrei Elohim hayyim*/"These [words] and those [words] are the words of the Living God;" *Makhlokot lshem shamayim*/"Disagreements for the sake of heaven"); its successes have incorporated into the conversations recognition of the past without disregarding it nor minimizing events and persons about which and whom neither side would wish to consider. A truism of human behaviour, which is all-too-often forgotten or ignored in volatile and conflictual encounters, is the following: *The past is neither a guarantor of the present nor mandate for the future.*

The Palestinians of today are *not* the Amalekites of the past, despite those shrill voices who falsely label them as such—any more than 2017 is 1938 or Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (b. 1956) or the late Yasir Arafat (1929–2004) are or were the incarnations of the Nazis of the Second World War and the Holocaust/Shoah. Using these false equivalences, biblically based as they would at first appear, strengthens only the hands of the warriors, not the peacemakers. As Alastair Hunter would have it: "Until those involved can become sensitive to each other's pain, it seems likely—sadly—that this biblical legacy will continue to impose its harsh inheritance as both Jews and Palestinians use the etymology of the past to undermine any hope for the future." (Hunter 2003) The stakes in both the present and the future are far more important for Jews, Palestinians, Arabs, Christians, the State of Israel, the United States, and the Middle East not to conclude *Zeh maspeak bamakom*/"It is enough [of this injurious, hateful, and always potentially violent rhetoric]³¹ in that place!"

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³¹ As Nur Masalha would have it:

There is good reason to suggest that the greater the role of the Jewish halacha [legal tradition] in the political life of Israel becomes, the more vigorously will these messianics demand that the Palestinian Arabs be dealt with according to halachic regulations, including the imposition of the status of 'resident alien' on them; the insistence on diminishing numbers by making life even more difficult; the revival of the command to 'blot out the memory of Amalek' and the insistence that the Arabs are the 'Amalekites of today' to be dealt with by annihilations, and the assertion that the killing of a non-Jew is not a murder. (Masalha 2000)

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