

2/13/23

March 17, 1989 Shabbat Zakhor – Do Not Forget Rabbi Aryeh Azriel

“Zakhor, -- remember what Amalek did to you,” the passage begins. It describes how the Amalekites attacked the children of Israel. As Israel came forth from Egypt, Amalek dealt cruelly with the stragglers, the women, and children, the weak and the weary. The passage concludes: “blot out the memory of Amalek from under the heavens, do not forget!”

What unusually strong words! The language applied to Amalek is no less explicit when Samuel bids Saul to go to war against the ancient foe: “I remember that which Amalek did to Israel...on the way up from Egypt. Now go and smite Amalek, utterly destroy all that belongs to him. Spare no one. Kill alike men and women, infants and suckling, oxen and sheep, camels and asses!” – It was a call for genocide.

In the Book of Exodus, Amalek attacked Israel in the infancy of its nationhood, thus remaining forever the Jewish people’s first enemy. Had he prevailed, there would be no people Israel. The root Zakhor “remember” is by no means limited to negative memories. Far from it indeed: “Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy” or “I will remember My covenant with Jacob, and also My covenant with Isaac, and also My covenant with Abraham will I remember and I will remember the land.”

But against such sacred and edifying remembrances, there stands the inexorable remembering of Amalek, and the “do not forget” lends its urgency. The Midrash explains that blotting out the memory of Amalek means that his very name shall be forgotten. Losing one’s name is considered utter extinction; Jewish folk language has preserved this feeling in the devastating curse: “yimach shemo, may his name be blotted out!” Yet, lo and behold, after the decree that condemns it to extinction, Amalek’s name continues to be mentioned in the Bible dozens of times.

The name of the evil doer who first attempted the total destruction of the Jewish people must be condemned to eternal oblivion. This, however, requires a conscience, a continuous and ever renewed and never-ending process – eternal vigilance. Only thus can we understand that the cures against Amalek is immediately followed by the pronouncement: “The Lord will be at war with Amalek throughout the ages,” which, after all, states the given fact that there will always be an Amalek.

Shabbat Zakhor is the Sabbath before Purim. The connection is clear. The Amalekites king is Agag, and Haman of the Esther scroll is called Agagite. Haman is considered both the biological and the ideological successor of Amalek. What exactly was Haman’s plan? The Book of Esther speaks plainly:

“...to destroy, massacre, and exterminate all the Jews, young and old, children and women, ... and to plunder their possessions.” Once again, genocide, pure and simple. Haman was determined to it out to the dot. His designs were frustrated, the persecutor became the victim. Haman died by Amalek lived on. Countless are the attempts of later Amalekites to execute Haman’s plan. But though Jewish blood flowed like water – they were all amateurs. Until there arose Hitler, yimach shemo!

The Germans have an expression: “to overcome the past.” They have made much use of this phrase during the last forty years, often interpreting the concept of “overcoming” in self-serving ways. The simplest is denial of complicity, even of knowledge: “I never hurt a Jew; I did not know what went on in those camps.” Another way is relying on the passage of time. Even the surviving victim forgets and transforms, and the perpetrator has protested his innocence so often that certain memories have been successfully blocked. There is also the self-righteous apology: “So I did not act heroically; would you in my place?” A question exceedingly difficult to answer, indeed. Middle-aged and young Germans have on their side the irrefutable argument that they were youngsters in the years of slaughter – children not even born. Some react with genuine indignation if one even mentions the word like collective guilt.

But there are other Germans to whom “overcoming the past” means none of these attitudes. They try to overcome the past by standing up to it. They will admit that their very parents or grandparents may have been monsters. Free of personal involvement, they, too, reject the idea of collective guilt as an authoritarian concept alien to the new Germany. They acknowledge a national guilt, a national shame, a national responsibility, and they are willing to bring personal sacrifices to make up for crimes in which they, personally, had no hand. For them, the nation is a community of fate that transcends the guilt or the innocence of the individual member. This may be unjust, it may be irrational – nevertheless, it is a fact. We Jews know this only too well.

Clearly, Jews feel more comfortable with Germans of the second type. But even from them, we are separated by a principally different understanding of history. It is not the Jewish way to “overcome the past.” Rather, as the imperative “remember” always caused us to incorporate our past into our present!!

We know that we shall remember the holocaust. But do we know exactly why? Some of the commonly quoted reasons do not stand up well to scrutiny. There is, first of all, the application to the holocaust of that well-worn saying that those who forget history are condemned to repeat it. And thus, we keep the memory of the holocaust alive in order to prevent a reoccurrence. I am sorry,

but I cannot share this optimism. The holocaust came over us in spite of those who foresaw and foretold it, it arrives despite our collective memories of the many catastrophes in Jewish history. And hardly had the Nazi Empire collapsed, when Amalek raised his head again, testing his old weapons: lies, (demagoguery), unfolded hatred, greed, arrogance, terror, ruthlessness and cruelty – preparing for the next holocaust must not be confined to Europe and not to the Jews. For Amalek, as we heard, is “undeterred by fear of God.” And that may be his mightiest weapon.

Do we remember the holocaust in order to learn from what we did wrong, and avoid the mistakes we made? Shall we not go like sheep to the slaughter? Shall we start the next Warsaw ghetto-type uprising at the first indication of the enemy's intent? Will those not immediately endangered, Jews and non-Jews alike, mobilize all their forces and with utter determination destroyed Amalek's design? Not as long as nations and persons take refuge in the deceptive hope, formulated by Amos, “the evil shall not overtake us or come near us.”

Is the wish for revenge the motive for our remembering? But there can be no revenge, not for the crime of the holocaust: “cursed he who says: take revenge! Revenge for a little child's blood, for a child's life terminated – such a revenge Satan has not yet created.”

Do we continue to remember because guilt will not loosen its grip on us? For – aside for the obvious guilt of the enemies – there is guilt with all who are adults; Jews and Gentiles, those not personally involved and the surviving victims. We all could have done more, if only to ease suffering. Even in the concentration camp, we could have done more. We know it, but our reaction to suffering all over the earth continues to be determined by lethargy and non-involvement, by inertia, and fear, by exhausting our strength in matters of the day, while standing idle by the blood of our neighbors. Our guilt, it seems, is part and parcel of our being human. There is no merit in remembering that guilt. We cannot expiate for it: forgiveness is only with God.

Do we, finally, remember because our quest for meaning has not yet produced a result? Are we waiting for the explanation we feel God owes us? Do we continue tormenting our minds and souls in the face of God's silence? Were we punished for our sins? Have we broken the covenant with God once too often? Can there be truth to the notion that a huge sacrificial feast had to proceed the birth of the state of Israel? Had God turned away His face, as some put it, had He temporarily suspended the covenant? Confounded, we feel that there must be a meaning to it all, only to realize in exasperation that there is no meaning that we could possibly grasp.

We remember the holocaust. This, too, is natural, but we wonder about the rational of this remembrance. Remembering the holocaust is of the same order as the holocaust itself, as the death of millions, as the giant step backward civilization has taken. It is a facet of God's inscrutability. It is a mystery along with creation, with revelation, with covenant. It goes with our fate as God's treasured possession, our fate that keeps shaping us toward a destination unknown, perhaps toward another sixth day of creation.

Remember – do not forget! We do and obey. But we have the audacity to toss back the imperative: Zakhor Adonai, remember, O' God, what has befallen us! And because of what has befallen us, we dare to remind God of His own remembering: "I will remember the covenant I made with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish it with you as an everlasting covenant." Amen.