



Sermon Tidbits

MARCH 14, 2016

Parashat Vayikra – Zachor – Purim

Basic Morality – Parashat Zachor

Remember that which Amalek did to you (Deut. 25:17) זכור את אשר עשה לך עמלק (דברים כה:יז)

On Wednesday, March 8, 2016, the day U.S. Vice President Joe Biden arrived in Israel, the Jewish State suffered three nearly simultaneous terror attacks. In Jerusalem, [two police officers were severely injured](#) in a shooting attack. In Petach Tikva, Yonatan Azarihab [managed to remove the knife he was stabbed with](#) from his neck and kill the terrorist who attacked him. In Jaffa, a knife-wielding terrorist killed 29-year-old US Army veteran Taylor Force, who was visiting Israel on a Vanderbilt University school trip, and injured ten others, including Force's wife. While the world reacted in horror and condemnation, the terrorist leadership of Hamas offered a different reaction on its website: praise. According to the [Times of Israel](#) Hamas released a statement praising the attacks as "heroic operations," noting that, "Hamas celebrates the martyrs that have ascended through these operations, and confirms that their pure blood will, God willing, be the fuel for escalating the intifada." Since its creation, Hamas has demonstrated a complete lack of any moral, ethical compass, presenting a terrible threat not only to Israel, but to civilized society around the world.

Amalek suffered from a similar lack of basic human morality. In Parashat Zachor, we read that we must remember how the nation of Amalek attacked the Israelites after the Exodus from Egypt: "How he met you by the way and smote the hindmost of you, all that were enfeebled in your rear, when you were faint and weary; *velo yarei elohim.*" (25:18) We generally translate the final phrase of this verse, *velo yarei elohim*, to mean "and he feared not God." Yet, Professor Shimon Sharvit suggests that the phrase carries a much more basic, fundamental meaning, based on other examples of the phrase in the Bible. In Genesis, Joseph releases his brothers from prison and offers them the opportunity to prove their trustworthiness, telling them *et ha'elohim ani yarei.* (Genesis 42:18) When Pharaoh instructs the Hebrew midwives to murder the male Jewish children, they refuse to fulfill the decree because, *va'tirena hameyaldot et ha'elohim.* Professor Sharvit suggests that this unusual phrase refers not to a religious doctrine or fear of God, but instead to a general sense of morality and ethics. He writes, "The phrase '*yirat elohim*' refers not specifically to the Children of Israel, but instead represent a universal conscience that we would expect to see even in a non-Jew—a global ethical code of conduct towards strangers, the weak and the leaderless." When we examine the actions of Amalek, we find that they engage in precisely this kind of immoral, unethical behavior: They prey on the weak, the stragglers, those who are "faint and weary," without any semblance of compassion. When the Torah teaches us that Amalek was *lo yarei elohim*, it is telling us that they were an immoral, unethical nation willing and able to commit heinous, terrible acts, unimaginable to civilized society.

We consistently see this same behavior from Hamas. Since its inception, Hamas—a designated terrorist organization by the United States and the European Union—has murdered more than 500 Israeli civilians. During the 2014 war, Israel uncovered and destroyed 32 Hamas tunnels penetrating into Israel from Gaza that were intended to threaten Israeli communities. Fewer than two years later, an estimated 1,000 Hamas workers are rebuilding the attack tunnel network, diverting materials provided by the international community to rebuild Gaza's homes and civilian infrastructure. Gaza-based terrorist groups have fired more than 17,000 rockets into Israel since 2001, often intentionally targeting Israeli population centers, while exploiting Israel's ethical reluctance to fire on civilians by placing noncombatants around military targets. Hamas also terrorizes its own citizenry, according to Amnesty

International, during the 2014 war Hamas [terrorized the population of Gaza](#) when it “committed serious human rights abuses including abductions, torture and extra-judicial killings.”

Through its terrorist tactics, its cynical abuse of human rights, and its immoral exploitation of the civilian population of Gaza, Hamas’ leadership has demonstrated an fundamental lack of basic human morality. They, like Amalek – are people who lack *yirat elokim* on the most fundamental level. When recognize the barbarity of the adversary Israel faces each and every day, we appreciate all the more the pressing need to ensure that Israel has the means and ability to protect its civilians from the grave threat that Hamas poses to its safety and security. ■

Esther: A Model of Female Jewish Leadership

Esther the Queen (Esther 5:2)

אסתר המלכה (אסתר ה:ב)

In his address to the Knesset marking International Women’s Day, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu noted the rare find of a [2,500-year-old seal](#) that belonged to a female businesswoman, inscribed with her name, Elihana bat Gael. The fact that she even had a seal is evidence of the elevated legal and high social status she held, a rarity during the First Temple Period. [The Prime Minister noted](#) that in Israel, “Women lead in every area of Israeli life, from the judiciary to politics to technology to banking...I am sure Israel will continue to set an example in this area, not only in the Middle East, where it’s easy, but in the whole world. We will be a light unto the nations.”

Queen Esther, a major protagonist in the Purim story, would have agreed. According to the Midrash, Esther took the place of King Saul, her ancestor from the tribe of Benjamin, whose reign was suddenly cut short. “Said R. Hanina son of Abahu: It is written, ‘For He shall hurt and bandage; smite but His hands shall heal.’ (Job 5:18) In the [same] language that the kingship was taken away from her ancestor [King Saul], as it is written: ‘And He shall give it to your fellow person who is better than you,’ (I Sam 15:28), was the monarchy restored to her, as it says: ‘And her royal position shall the king give to her fellow person who is better than she.’ (Esther 1:19)” (Midrash Abba Gorion section 1) The language of Esther’s rise directly matches the language predicting King Saul’s fall. From this parallel language, the Midrash derives that Queen Esther represented not only a critical Jewish leader, but that she serves as an example of a Jewish monarch. Noting the comment of the Midrash, Vered Hollander-Goldfarb of the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem explains that, “Esther becomes a female incarnation of the king that lost the kingship. She regains it, becoming a monarch again...Now is the time to return to the days of the first God-chosen king. He now has an heir in a royal position. Interestingly, the heir is a woman.”

From its birth in 1948, the modern state of Israel viewed Esther as a model for emulation, advocating women’s full integration into Israeli society and for female leadership in every public arena. Following passage of the 1951 Women’s Equal Rights Law, Israel enacted a series of laws to create an environment where women thrive, and in 1964, Israel passed the Male and Female Workers (Equal Pay) law to ensure equal pay for women. When, in 1969, Golda Meir was elected prime minister, Israel became just the third country in the world to elect a woman to lead its government. Today, women serve in key roles throughout the Israeli political system, and have held posts including chief justice of the Supreme Court, the speaker of the Knesset and the permanent representative to the United Nations.

Women have also played a critical role in the IDF since the 1948 Israeli War of Independence, including serving in full combat roles. Israel was one of the first militaries with female combat soldiers, and the IDF assigns 1,500 women to combat positions annually. According to the Equality Amendment to the Military Service Law, women and men have equal rights to serve in any role in the IDF. Israel has the largest percentage in the world of women serving in the military, and women continue to rise in the IDF’s ranks, accounting for 57 percent of officers among conscripts and 15 percent of top officer positions.

Prime Minister Netanyahu’s comments are on point: Israel isn’t just a leader in women’s issues in the Middle East. Israel has been a global leader in advancing women’s rights for decades, representing an important area in which the Jewish State shines the lights of equality and democracy to the world. ■