The Israelites had escaped the seemingly inexorable danger of the chariots of the Egyptian army, the military high-tech of its day. Miraculously the sea divided, the Israelites crossed, the Egyptians, their chariot wheels caught in the mud, were unable either to advance or retreat and were caught by the returning tide. The Israelites sang a song and finally seemed to be free, when something untoward and unexpected happened. They were attacked by a new enemy, the Amalekites, a nomadic group living in the desert. Moses instructed Joshua to lead the people in battle. They fought and won. But the Torah makes it clear that this was no ordinary battle:

“Then the L-rd said to Moses, ‘Write this on a scroll as something to be remembered and make sure that Joshua hears it, because I will completely blot out the name of Amalek from under the Heaven.’ Moses built an altar and called it The L-rd is my Banner. He said, ‘The hand is on the L-rd’s throne. The L-rd will be at war with Amalek for all generations’ (Shemot 17:14–16).

This is a very strange statement, and it stands in marked contrast to the way the Torah speaks about the Egyptians. The Amalekites attacked Israel during the lifetime of Moshe just once. The Egyptians oppressed the Israelites over an extended period, oppressing and enslaving them and starting a slow genocide by killing every male Israelite child. The whole thrust of the narrative would suggest that if any nation would become the symbol of evil, it would be Egypt. But the opposite turns out to be true. In Devarim the Torah states, “Do not abhor an Egyptian, because you were a stranger in his land” (Devarim 23:8).

Shortly after, Moshe repeats the command about the Amalekites, adding a significant detail:

“Remember what the Amalekites did to you along the way when you came out of Egypt. When you were weary and worn out, they met you on your journey and attacked all who were lagging behind; they had no fear of G-d … You shall blot out the name of Amalek from under the Heaven. Do not forget” (Devarim 25:17–19).

We are commanded not to hate Egypt, but never to forget Amalek. Why the difference? The simplest answer is to recall the Rabbis’ statement in Pirkei Avot: “If love depends on a specific cause, when the cause ends, so does the love. If love does not depend on a specific cause, it never ends.” The same applies to hate. When hate depends on a specific cause, it ends once the cause disappears. Causeless, baseless hatred lasts forever. The Egyptians oppressed the Israelites because, in Pharaoh’s words, “The Israelites are becoming too numerous and strong for us” (Shemot 1:9). In other words, their hate came from fear. It was not irrational. The Egyptians had been attacked and conquered before by a foreign group known as the Hyksos, and the memory of that period was still acute and painful. The Amalekites, however, were not being threatened by the Israelites. They attacked a people who were “weary and worn out,” specifically those who were “lagging behind.” In short: the Egyptians feared the Israelites because they were strong. The Amalekites attacked the Israelites because they were weak.

In today’s terminology, the Egyptians were rational actors, the Amalekites were not. With rational actors there can...
be negotiated peace. People engaged in conflict eventually realise they are not only destroying their enemies: they are destroying themselves. That is what Pharaoh’s advisers said to him after seven plagues: “Do you not yet realise that Egypt is ruined?” (Shemot 10:7). There comes a point at which rational actors understand that the pursuit of self-interest has become self-destructive, and they learn to cooperate.

It is not so with non-rational actors. Emil Fackenheim, one of the great post-Holocaust theologians, noted that towards the end of the Second World War, the Germans diverted trains carrying supplies to their own army to transport Jews to the extermination camps. So driven were they by hate that they were prepared to put their own victory at risk in order to carry out the systematic murder of the Jews of Europe. This was, he said, evil for evil’s sake.

In Jewish memory, the Amalekites function as “the enemy” in Lee Harris’s sense. Jewish law, however, specifies two completely different forms of action in relation to the Amalekites. First is the physical command to wage war against them. That is what Samuel told Saul to do, a command he failed fully to fulfil. Does this command still apply today?

The unequivocal answer given by Rabbi Nachum Rabinovitch is: No. Maimonides ruled that the command to destroy the Amalekites only applied if they refused to make peace and accept the seven Noahide laws. He further stated that the command was no longer applicable since Sancheriv, the Assyrian, had transported and resettled the nations he conquered so it was no longer possible to identify the ethnicity of any of the original nations against whom the Israelites were commanded to fight. He also said, in The Guide for the Perplexed, that the command only applied to people of specific biological descent. It is not to be applied in general to enemies or haters of the Jewish people. So the command to wage war against the Amalekites no longer applies.

However, there is a quite different command, to “remember” and “not forget” Amalek, which we fulfil annually by reading the passage about the Amalekites command as it appears in Devarim on the Shabbat before Purim, Shabbat Zachor. Here Amalek has become a symbol rather than a reality.

By dividing the response in this way, Judaism marks a clear distinction between an ancient enemy who no longer exists, and the evil that enemy embodied, which can break out again at any time in any place.

At times of peace, it is easy to forget the evil that lies just beneath the surface of the human heart. Never was this truer than in the past three centuries. The birth of Enlightenment, toleration, emancipation, liberalism and human rights persuaded many, Jews among them, that collective evil was as extinct as the Amalekites. Evil was then, not now. That age eventually begat nationalism, fascism, communism, two World Wars, some of the most brutal tyrannies ever known, and the worst crime of man against man.

Evil never dies, and like liberty it demands constant vigilance. We are commanded to remember, not for the sake of the past but for the sake of the future, and not for revenge but the opposite: a world free of revenge and other forms of violence.

Lee Harris began Civilization and its Enemies with the words, “The subject of this book is forgetfulness,” and ends with a question: “Can the West overcome the forgetfulness that is the nemesis of every successful civilization?” That is why we are commanded to remember and never forget Amalek, not because the historic people still exists, but because a society of rational actors can sometimes believe that the world is full of rational actors with whom one can negotiate peace. It is not always so.

Rarely was a Biblical message so relevant to the future of the West and of freedom itself. Peace is possible, implies Moses, even with an Egypt that enslaved and tried to destroy us. But peace is not possible with those who attack people they see as weak and who deny their own people the freedom for which they claim to be fighting. Freedom depends on our ability to remember and whenever necessary to confront “the eternal gang of ruthless men,” the face of Amalek throughout history.

3 Rabbi N. L. Rabinovitch, Responsa Melomdei Milchannah, Ma’ale Adumim, Ma’aliyot, 1993, 22–25.

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