

Remembering, Forgetting, and the Message of Purim

Blotting Out the Name of Amalek

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The Shabbat before Purim has traditionally been called *Shabbat Zachor*, or the “Sabbath of Remembering.” The additional Torah portion read on this Shabbat is Deuteronomy 25:17–19.

Remember what Amalek did to you along the way when you came out from Egypt, how he met you along the way and attacked among you all the stragglers at your rear when you were faint and weary; and he did not fear God. Therefore it shall come about when Adonai your God has given you rest from all your surrounding enemies, in the land which Adonai your God gives you as an inheritance to possess, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven; you must not forget. (Deut 25:17–19)

The command to “blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven” is playfully fulfilled each Purim in the reading of the *megillah*—when the scroll that contains the story of Hadassah (Esther) is read to the community. In the Book of Esther, the first time Haman is mentioned he is described as “Haman, the son of Hamedata, the Agagite” (3:1). Since the King of the Amalekites was Agag (1Sam 15:8), it would appear that Haman had ancestral linkage to the Amalekites. Thus, it became a tradition to “blot out the name of Haman” as the story is read by making a racket so that his name cannot be heard during the reading.

But how is it possible that any Amalekites survived the war waged against them by Saul, Israel’s first king? In 1Samuel 15 we read:

So Saul defeated the Amalekites, from Havilah as you go to Shur, which is east of Egypt. He captured Agag the king of the Amalekites alive, and utterly destroyed all the people with the edge of the sword. (1Sam 15:7–8)

Moreover, we read in this same passage that Samuel put Agag to death after Saul had taken him captive. So it appears at first reading that all of the Amalekites were put to death, leaving no survivor to perpetuate the Amalekite people. However, in the continuing story of 1Samuel, we read that David and his men engaged the Amalekites (1Sam 27:8; 30:1, 13, 18). Moreover, the man who came to David with the claim that he took Saul’s life at his request (2Sam 1:2ff) identified himself as “the son of an alien, an Amalekite” (1:13). We can only conclude, then, that when Saul destroyed the Amalekites in battle, it must have been that he wiped out the population of a particular Amalekite city and not the entire Amalekite population in all areas. So it is possible that Haman was, in fact, a distant relative of the Amalekite royal family.

But what does God intend for us to understand by the seemingly contradictory commands to, on the one hand, “blot out the memory of Amalek” while at the same time retaining the memory, that is, “you must not forget?” We might be helped by considering the fact that both the act of “remembering” and “forgetting” have a covenant connection in the Tanach. For instance, in the prologue to the Exodus story, we read:

So God heard their groaning; and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. (Ex 2:24)

Likewise, in Leviticus 26, when exiled Israel returns to the Lord and obeys His Torah, the promise is given:

then I will remember My covenant with Jacob, and I will remember also My covenant with Isaac, and My covenant with Abraham as well, and I will remember the land. (Lev 26:42)

Obviously God has not “forgotten” the covenant and then suddenly “remembers” it! These texts (and many more like them) use the word “remember” in a covenant sense of “be loyal to the covenant” or “act in faithfulness to the covenant.”

In like manner, but in the reverse, to “forget” is used in covenant terminology to indicate “be disloyal to the covenant” or “to disregard the covenant.” Thus we read in Deut 4:23,

So watch yourselves, that you do not forget the covenant of Adonai your God which He made with you, and make for yourselves a graven image in the form of anything against which Adonai your God has commanded you. (Deut 4:23)

Likewise, the unfaithful wife is characterized this way in Proverbs:

To deliver you from the strange woman, from the adulteress who flatters with her words; that leaves the companion of her youth and forgets the covenant of her God.... (Prov 2:16–17)

So the concepts of “remembering” and “forgetting” took on a wider meaning in the Ancient Near East, and particularly among the Israelites. Remembering has a direct effect upon one’s decisions and actions, for in “remembering the covenant,” one has made a conscious decision to act in faithfulness to the covenant. On the other hand, “forgetting the covenant” is the result of having already decided to walk away from the covenant and to count it as having no bearing upon one’s decisions and therefore upon one’s life.

Now if we take these two concepts of “remembering” and “forgetting” into the broader perspective of general life, we might have a better understanding of why God commanded Israel to “blot out the memory of Amalek.” We might say it this way: “forget that Amalek ever existed.” In other words, don’t let the terrible inhumanity that Amalek committed (attacking those who were faint and weary as we traversed the wilderness on our way to the Promised Land) affect you now by bringing fear and unrest to your soul. Just forget Amalek! Blot his name out from your memory! And, of course, here the idea of “name” means “all that characterized him.”

But the commandment is also “do not forget” to blot out his name! How can we blot out the memory of that which so adversely affected us if we must constantly remember to do so? It seems that the command “do not forget” undermines the command to “blot out the name!” But the point is this: each and every time that we begin to succumb to the fear that such a memory brings, we are actively to remember that God has rendered Amalek ineffective—that God has committed Himself to our safety. We are to remember the covenant promises God has made to us and rest assured in these promises. In other words, we are to “forget Amalek” (thus rendering him and his deeds as having no effect upon us) and “remember what God has said” (thus resting in His faithfulness).

How often the enemy of our souls would have us “remember Amalek” and “forget” what God has promised. So He reminds us, yea, commands us, to “forget Amalek” and to remember to do so constantly. We have not been called to a life of fear, but to a life of faith in the One Who forever keeps His promises.

For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, “Abba! Father!” (Rom 8:15)

And is this not the very heart of the story that we will read once again on Purim? Haman, who represents Amalek, is intent upon destroying Israel. But God, in His sovereign and miraculous providence, brings about deliverance in ways we could have never imagined. May every “Amalek” that comes into our minds and heart, intent upon bringing fear and defeat, be blotted out by the resounding refrains of faithful praise to the One Who has promised He would never leave us nor forsake us. “I will fear no evil, for You are with me!” (Ps 23:4).