

Weekly Words of Torah

Our Leaders Must Lead for the Sake of the People, Not for the Sake of Their Own Egos: Parshat Vayikra / Shabbat Zachor

Framing

This year, we read Parshat Zachor - the extra section chanted for Maftir on the Shabbat before Purim - alongside Parshat Vayikra. The Zachor text, three verses that come from the tail end of [Deuteronomy chapter 25](#), recounts God's emphatic exhortation to the Jewish People to

"Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey, after you left Egypt—how, undeterred by fear of God, he surprised you on the march, when you were famished and weary, and cut down all the stragglers in your rear. Therefore, when God grants you safety from all your enemies around you, in the land that God is giving you as a hereditary portion, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget!"

The special Haftarah read for Parshat Zachor tells the story of Saul, first king of Israel, and the decision to fire him from that job, when he did not completely destroy the Amalekite nation when he had the chance (and when he was commanded to!).

Access Points

■ **Is humility a high Jewish value?** In any Torah scroll you will look at, the letter aleph in the first word of Parshat Vayikra is written in miniature, like this: וַיִּקְרָא. Some commentators (including the 13th-century German/Spanish sage, the Tur) explain that the small aleph is a nod to Moses, who, as we are told, was [incredibly humble](#). Since, the Tur points out, God only appeared to the prophet Balaam by chance, the way the Torah records that appearance ([Numbers 23:4](#)) is: וַיִּקְרָא (having to do with the word בִּקְרָה, or chance). Moses did not want to make himself seem better than Balaam, so he also wanted to record God's appearance to him in this particular instance as וַיִּקְרָא, rather than וַיִּקְרָא (which comes from the root א.ק.ר, meaning to call, indicating a strongly intentional appearance). God did not accede to Moses's request, as their prophetic meetings were never by chance, but did meet Moses part way by allowing Moses to write this word in the Torah with a smaller aleph than usual.

■ **So is arrogance condemned in Judaism?** The Amalekites, who, in our tradition, were reembodyed in Haman and his family in the Purim story, and can arguably be said to have reappeared today in the form of Hamas, are our people's complete and utter enemy, as they represent complete and utter evil in the world. In the Zachor text, we are told that the Amalekites intentionally chose to attack a totally vulnerable people - the Israelites - as they exited their world of slavery. Even more, we are told that the Amalekites did so because they were "undeterred by fear of God." The Amalekites were so arrogant that knowing Israel's connection to God didn't stop them from brutally attacking an unprepared, ragtag group of people. Their overblown sense of self is anathema to Judaism and the Jewish people.

■ **But is uber-humility a Jewish value?** In the Haftarah, when King Saul decides to sidestep God's command to utterly destroy all of the Amalekite nation by keeping alive the Amalekite king Agag, Samuel the prophet delivers the devastating news that this has caused God to regret making Saul king, and will tear the kingship away from him for someone better suited for the job. In his sharing this with Saul, Samuel boils down the reasons for Saul's failure to one main point: Saul was too humble. "You may look small to yourself, but you are the head of the tribes of Israel," says Samuel. We can imagine the subtext here: Had Saul believed in himself and his ability to rule, instead of manifesting his inferiority complex in his leadership, he would have remained king. But his extremely low self-esteem left no room for him to stay in power.

Call to Action

When we consider who we choose as our leaders - especially when we think about making sure that bringing home our hostages is taken into account in every decision that is made by our leaders - we must look closely at where those leaders stand on the humility-arrogance spectrum. Are they overly arrogant, like our archenemies, the Amalekites (and Hamas)? Then they must not be allowed to be in power. Are they overly humble, like Saul, and not able to govern properly because they are focused on the unhelpful narrative they have going in a loop in their head? Then they must not be allowed to stay in power. We need leaders like Moses, who know their import and yet don't flaunt it. Those who work for the sake of the people only, and not for the sake of their own ego. Consider this in the coming times, when we are called to choose who we think should lead us. And as you continue to write to your elected officials, and as you continue to post on social media to demand the hostages be brought home now, make this point: it is we the people who choose the leadership of our countries, and we will make our choices. We have the power.

Closing Intention

For some, Purim this year will be very different than in years past. Celebrating our people's victory over the evil Haman feels questionable when we are facing a similar evil right now. Explore how you might want to change your Purim practices to reflect our 5784 circumstances.

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