

The Amalek Within

Rabbi Daniel Bogard

(please excuse the odd punctuation, etc... this was written to be read out loud! If you'd like to hear a recording of this, [please click here.](#))

Amalek.

It was a word, a name, that inspired terror. We spoke of them in hushed tones; tried to not even say it when little ears were around.

We were refugees from Egypt, living as refugees always have. It was 3000 years ago, but it may as well have been pictures of Syrian camps today. Shacks. Narrow alleys. Rats everywhere--and the disease that comes with them. We spent our days scrounging, roaming, looking for enough food to fill our stomachs and the stomachs of the kids, the orphans, the elderly, the sick.

And just think of the smell. The old stories say there were 600,000 men. A couple million people. Packed together. On top of each other. Traveling---endlessly traveling, tearing down and moving.

The warriors in front, leading the way. The neverending train of refugees following, unwelcome wherever we went. Unwanted in every place we tried to stop.

And at the end of this line of humanity were the slow ones. The weak ones. The old, the sick, the young. The people who couldn't keep. Or couldn't keep up anymore.

There was always an eerie silence that would fall, just before. Just before Amalek.

You could hear the footsteps of their horses first. Mother's putting their bodies in front of their children; Grandpas who just moments before had been having trouble walking, now moving to the outside, clutching their swords with ancient muscle memory.

Amalek. They wouldn't fight us in the front; they wouldn't attack where our warriors were. No. They attacked the sick. The old. The weak. The vulnerable.

That's the nature of Amalek. Always the vulnerable. Taking what little we had, taking the very things that we had carried on our backs out of slavery.

They looked different every time they showed up. Never the same people, never the same appearance, but always the same evil.

It's why we swore before our God a sacred oath that we committed not just ourselves to, but also our children, and their children, and every child of our tribe, for as long as there will be those who call themselves Jews:

We swore that whenever we found them, wherever we saw them, for all time, we would destroy them.

Wipe them off the face of the earth, until even their name would be forgotten into the wind, never to be heard again.

But Amalek is slippery. Early on, we thought they were another tribe, a rival people. But this was naive, because everywhere we went there they were. The ancient rabbis taught us this--Amalek isn't an ethnicity, it's an inclination, an approach to the world. Wherever there are those who target the vulnerable, those who persecute the *ger*, the refugee; wherever the world order is arranged so the rich stay healthy while the sick stay poor, there Amalek is to be found.

Amalek was there in the wilderness when we left Egypt, and Amalek was there in Rome, when they came in, tore our Temple down, and carted off our children in chains. Amalek was there in Spain, this time with crosses and messages of damnation. They were there in the old country, with the Cossacks and their pogroms, and with the horrors that came in the Shoah.

Always the same--always Amalek--those who would demonize and otherize the defenceless and the vulnerable.

And then we came to America. The Goldina Medina. And we began to believe the dream. Perhaps these were the shores to which Amalek wouldn't follow. Perhaps the sufferings of our ancestors had been enough, perhaps we had reached, if not the Promised Land, the Land of Promise.

But of course, this was a blindness. It's the insidious nature of privilege, of power, of acceptance. We came to a land where we weren't the stranger, and we began to think that maybe this was a land without strangers.

But America wasn't a land without Amalek--it was just a land where Amalek mostly focused on someone else. This was the place where whiteness was invented, in order to justify the enslavement of those that we called black; this was the nation where where former slaves fled north, only to be fleeced of their homes, and red-lined into generational ghettos of poverty and self-fulfilling prophecies.

But I didn't grow up seeing that. I grew up believing Amalek was in retreat. Defeated by American soldiers abroad, and by Dr. King and those like him at home. I believed the redemptive stories that my parents and my schools told me, that the world was inevitably getting better, that we were getting better. That we were finally learning the central lesson of our people: that our experiences of having been the victim don't give us special privileges, but instead give us unique obligations to protect the vulnerable around us. For we strangers in the land of Egypt

But our rabbis warned us. In every generation, in every generation Amalek arises anew.

And it's not hard to see Amalek rising. To see Amalek in the white supremacists marching in Charlottesville; to see it in those who would impose their religious law upon us all. To see Amalek in our schools, where it's not the other kids who are the worst bullies to children who are transgender.

It's easy---it's easy to see Amalek outside--to see Amalek in the other. The other political party; the other ethnic group; the other person.

But Rosh HaShanah is not the time when we point our fingers outward; These Yamim Noraim, these days of awe, are days when we are commanded to turn inward, to do the hard work of true introspection.

The Chassidic masters, mining nuggets of wisdom from the depths of Kabbalah, saw that Amalek wasn't a tribe. Amalek is something in us. Within all of us. Within me. Within you. Within our neighbors. In our children, and our parents. Amalek, the Chasidim teach, arises anew in every generation. And in every person.

And when I stop, and look within myself, I can see my inner Amalek. I can come up with the daily things, the insidious things. The ways--even though I try everyday to fight the racism in my heart and in my culture--that I do react differently when it's a man of color walking down the street than when it's a white man. The ways I treat my daughters differently than my son--and the ways I treat my son differently than my daughters. And the ways in which I let the world treat all of them differently.

I can see these things. And I know I need to do better in 5778 than I did in 5777.

But, in the story I tell myself about myself, I am mostly the good-guy.

"Yeah", my inner voice tells me, "*you* can do better, but *they* are the problem." I need to do work. They are Amalek.

And that of course, is the problem.

When I "otherize", when I stop seeing someone as a human being, and instead I see them as an ideology, as a group that it is ok to demean, and ok to mock, and ok to shame. When I turn *them* into the other, into the problem, when I blind myself to seeing them as images of the Divine, and see them only as Amalek, then I have become Amalek myself.

I think back to when we were refugees from Egypt. When there really were roving bandits who would attack the rear of our camps. They were doing evil things. But I bet they didn't think of themselves as evil people. I bet the story they told themselves was one where they were the heroes, and we were the

real enemy. I bet in their Torah, in the story that they wrote down, we are Amalek, and they are the chosen of God.

I mentioned earlier that Rosh HaShanah, that these 10 days of awe, are a time not to focus on the problems outside of us, but instead to focus on the ways we can change within ourselves. The blast of the shofar, if we do the work of hearing it right, is designed to pierce our souls, and crack the calcification of our ethics.

And so this is my blessing for all of us--and my hope for myself. May we take these days of awe, this time of introspection and reflection, and may we spend it focusing less on the problems of others, and more on the problems within ourselves. May we do the work of honestly looking at the ways in which we failed to stand with the vulnerable, because we have told a story where they are the villain. And in doing so may we make our lives, and the lives of our family and friends and neighbors, and the lives of every being on this world, better in 5778.

Shanah Tova umetukah--may it be a year of sweetness, and goodness for us all.