

Torah Thoughts Tetzaveh

5778:

This Shabbat is distinctive, as it is the Shabbat that precedes Purim, Shabbat Zakhor. A special maftir reading in the Torah service, as well as a special haftarah. The reason that these readings are so important is that they recall what Jewish culture has always defined as evil incarnate: the attack of Amalek on the weak and infirm stragglers at the rear of the Israelite procession through the wilderness. The reading is done prior to Purim because Haman, the villain of the megillah, is thought to be a descendant, literally and figuratively, of Amalek.

While there have been many explanations of the nature of Amalek's evil, the theme that runs through most of them is that of godless cruelty. The Torah specifically mentions a surprise attack, 'undeterred by fear of God,' against the stragglers among the Israelites, and the midrash on the story supplies others. Killing the weak and defenseless among an enemy people is thus a definition of not being God-fearing, of behaving as if there is no God. Without the constraint on our actions that belief in God provides, human beings are capable of any evil imaginable.

The depravity of Amalek has recurred frequently in Jewish history, and each time it does, we call it by its name. The Nazis, modern terrorists and many others have targeted the defenseless among our people as an easy means to reach their ultimate goal of destroying the whole.

This week in particular, when the country is reeling from yet another in a long string of shootings in public schools, we are all especially in need of a reminder that attacks on those least able to defend themselves are neither new, nor any less evil than in the days of Amalek.

What we are to remember this Shabbat, and on Purim as well, is that Judaism is supposed to be the antidote to evil, to the spiritual descendants of Amalek. We are to behave and cause others to behave in the light of our faith in God. Jews are supposed to seek out peace, and to pursue peace. Inaction, passivity, or acquiescence to evil makes us complicit in it. As we prepare for this Shabbat, and for Purim, we all need to remember Amalek, and to act in ways that battle evil with actions that will make such evil impossible.

Shabbat shalom