

Congregation Netivot Shalom

September 6, 2025

Parashat Ki Teitzei

Torah: Deuteronomy 21:10 - 25:19

Haftarah: Isaiah 54:1 - 54:10

Peretz Wolf-Prusan

The opening words of Parashat Ki Tetzei are: “When you go out to war against your enemies . . .” Rabbinic interpretations understand the use of the plural (enemies) as signifying a distinction between different kinds of enemies. The rules of war that open the parashah are the foreign enemies that a nation may encounter from outside and from the closing instructions, about how to fight Amalek, the enemy within. How deep we look within, and whom we see as Amalek, makes all the difference.

וְלֹא יִרְא, אֱלֹהִים

Deuteronomy 25:17-19

“Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey, after you left Egypt— how, undeterred by an “awe 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 your God יהוה grants you safety from all your enemies around you, in the land that your God יהוה is giving you as a hereditary portion, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget!”

I prefer to understand the Hebrew יִרְא Yod-Resh-Alef as “awe,” as in, the elevator doors open to an empty shaft... wow. Or a great expanse. Not fear, but a shaken reality check.

I had the privilege of learning with Professor Nechama Leibowitz. Her apartment was wall to wall ***gilyonot***, or mimeographed worksheets. Before email she used... the

mail, to students around the world. She taught that the expression, “awe of God,” appears only four times in the Torah.

In Genesis 20:11, Abraham explains to Avimelech why he lied about Sarah’s identity: “I thought: surely there is no awe of God in this place.”

אֵין-יִרְאַת אֱלֹהִים

In Genesis 42:18, Joseph says to his brothers after accusing them of spying: “Do this and you shall live, for I am in awe of God.

אֶת-הָאֱלֹהִים, אֲנִי יֹרֵא

In Exodus 1:17, the midwives refuse to murder the male infants, “And the midwives were in awe of God and did not do as the king of Egypt told them.

וַתִּירָאן הַמִּיֻּלְדֹּת, אֶת-הָאֱלֹהִים

And in Ki Teitzei it says: “He had no awe of God, he surprised you on the march, when you were famished and weary, and cut down all the stragglers in your rear.”

וְלֹא יִרָא, אֱלֹהִים

In all of these verses, the litmus test for “awe of God” is the attitude to the weak and the stranger. Amalek is the archetype of the Godless, who attack the weak because they are weak, who cut down the stragglers in every generation.

(Studies in Devarim, Hebrew edition, Jerusalem, 1994, pp. 234-235).

The Talmud, Berakhot 28a, there is a scene where Yehuda, an Ammonite convert, asks if he can marry a Jewish woman, is debated between Rabban Gamliel and Rabbi Yehoshua. Rabban Gamliel says no. The concluding, and winning, argument from Rabbi Yehoshua is: “Sennacherib, the King of Assyria, (circa 500 BCE), mixed up all the nations. When he conquered a country,

he would take a large segment of the population and send them to other countries.”

Anyone from Moab or Ammon are not the Moabites or Ammonites from earlier days.

Hasidic Master, Rabbi Simcha Bunim, points out that in the Hebrew text of the Torah, the instruction “to blot out the memory of Amalek” is written in the singular, not the plural. Not the Amalekites, Amalek, and not the man Amalek, but for each of us not to become an Amalek. Not to act like an Amalek, and certainly not to support an Amalek.

There is a darker path of Amalek. Extremists on the Israeli far-right referred to Yitzhak Rabin as "Amalek" leading to his assassination in 1995.

“You must remember what Amalek has done to you, says our Holy Bible — we do remember,” said Prime Minister

Benjamin Netanyahu. His reference to Amalek came in a speech delivered in Hebrew on Oct. 28 as Israel was launching the ground invasion.

This is path of **אֵין-יִרְאַת אֱלֹהִים**

“Surely there is no awe of God in this place.” When men act as kings and speak for God as if they know. When men or women of power are only in awe of themselves.

There is another path, especially in these days of Elul.

The path Shifra and Puah, and all the midwives, who were in awe of God, and did not do as the king of Egypt told them.

וַתִּירֶאן הַמִּיִּלְדוֹת, אֶת-הָאֱלֹהִים

And then there is a scribal tradition.

The scribal tradition of writing Amalek and then blotting it out.

A sofer or a soferet, takes a quill, and writes on a small piece of klaf, the letters, Ayin-Mem-Lamed-Koof, pause, say quietly, “Amalek,” seek ones inner Amalek, and, with the same pen, blots it away.

Imagine that. Don’t worry if you cannot write Hebrew letters like a scribe, in you imagination you can do anything. Write the letters, Ayin-Mem-Lamed-Koof. Say “Amalek,” seek out your inner Amalek, and blot it away.

I have no control over the godless women and men in Washington or Jerusalem, but I can seek my own Amalek.

Chodesh Elul Tov, Shana Tova, and Shabbat Shalom.