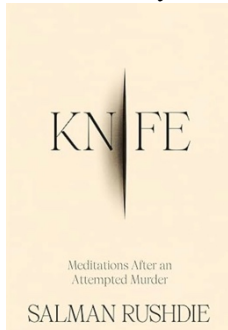


In Salman Rushdie's recently published memoir, he takes pains not to name the man who tried to kill him. Wryly he writes: *I do not want to use his name in this account. My Assailant, my would-be Assassin, the Asinine man who*



made Assumptions about me, and with whom I had a near-lethal Assignment... I have found myself thinking of him, perhaps forgivably, as an Ass. However, for the purposes of this text, I will refer to him more decorously as "the A." What I call him in the privacy of my home is my business. There is something profoundly moral about this decision.

erasing his name, Rushdie consigns him to oblivion, a bloodless punishment which enables the readers to channel all of their empathy to him, the victim, not to the A, the perpetrator. We may be curious about the A, but in the end, we care more about Rushdie than the A. Rushdie brings to mind the often quoted and puzzling commandment at the end of our parasha, to **erase the mention of Amalek**. Familiar to us from Shabbat Zachor before Purim it reads:

זָכוֹר אֶת אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה לְךָ עֲמָלֵק בְּדֶרֶךְ בְּצֵאתְךָ מִמִּצְרָיִם. אֲשֶׁר קָרָךְ בְּדֶרֶךְ וַיִּזְנֹב בְּךָ כָּל הַנְּחָשִׁים אֲחֵרֶיךָ וְאַתָּה עֵיפָה וְיָגַע וְלֹא נָרָא אֱלֹהִים. וְהָיָה בְּהֵיטֵל ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְךָ מִכָּל אֹיְבֶיךָ מִסָּבִיב בְּאַרְצֵךְ אֲשֶׁר ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן לְךָ נַחְלָה לְרִשְׁתָּהּ תִּמְחֶה אֶת זִכְרֵ עֲמָלֵק מִתַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם לֹא תִשְׁכַּח. (דב. כה:יז-יט)

*Bear-in-mind what Amalek did to you on the way, at your going out from Egypt, how he encountered you on the way and attacked-your-tail—all the beaten-down-ones at your rear— while you [were] weary and faint, and [thus] he did not stand-in-awe of God. So it shall be: when the Lord your God gives-you-rest from all your enemies round about in the land that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, to possess it, you are to **timheh**-תִּמְחֶה the name of Amalek from under the heavens; you are not to forget!* (Deut. 25:17-19)

What does **timheh**-תִּמְחֶה mean? To answer this question, we have to examine other occurrences of the root, **מחה**.

Exhibit A: In the story of Noah, God says:

אֶמְחֶה אֶת הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר בָּרָאתִי מֵעַל פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה. (בר. ו:1)

Emheh-I will **annihilate** the human that I have created from the face of the earth. (Gen. 6:7)

As the story unfolds, God indeed **annihilates** all living creatures:

וַיִּמָּח אֶת כָּל הַיָּקוּם אֲשֶׁר עַל פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה. (בר. ז:כד)

God annihilated all existing-things that were on the face of the ground. (Gen. 7:23)

sparing only Noah, his family, and all the animals on the Ark. In these instances, **מחה** means **annihilation**.

Exhibit B: When Amalek attacks Israel just after the Splitting of the Sea, Israel wages a defensive war and defeats them. Afterwards, God says to Moses:

כִּי מָחָה אֶמְחֶה אֶת זִכְרֵ עֲמָלֵק מִתַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם. (שמ. יז:יד)

Mahoh emheh-מָחָה אֶמְחֶה I will **erase** the mention of Amalek from under heaven. (Exod. 17:14).

Here the object of **מחה אֶמְחֶה** is not human beings or creatures, as in the Flood. Rather it is **זִכְרֵ עֲמָלֵק**, *the very mention of Amalek*. This is not **annihilation** but **erasure**, à la Salman Rushdie. God will **erase** Amalek from the human record. They will never capture the attention or imagination of anyone else. After their ruthless attack on Israel, which victimized the most vulnerable and defenseless elements of the population, and after having been defeated, God is promising to **erase** them from history. They will never inspire imitation or arouse empathy. They will experience the worst fate: they will be forgotten.

Exhibit C: Not long after the war with Amalek, the people arrive at Mount Sinai. While Moses is up on the mountain with God, the people become restless and fashion the Golden Calf. God sees the people worshipping it and wants to destroy them. But Moses staves off God's anger and issues God an ultimatum. *Forgive the people or else...*

מִתְנִי נָא מִסִּפְרֶךָ אֲשֶׁר כָּתַבְתָּ. (שמ. לב:כב)

You can erase me from the record that you have written! (Exod. 32:22)

If you don't forgive them, I'm out. Erase any mention of me and go find another character for your book. God had no choice but to forgive the people.

Exhibit D: A few hundred years later, the prophet Samuel instructs King Saul to wage war against Amalek to punish them for their attack on Israel after the Exodus. It is to be a brutal attack, a complete annihilation:

כֹּה אָמַר ה' צְבָאוֹת פְּקֻדְתִּי אֶת אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה עֲמָלֵק לְיִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר שָׂם לוֹ בְּדֶרֶךְ בְּעֵלְתוֹ מִמִּצְרָיִם. עַתָּה לֵךְ וְהִכִּיתָ אֶת עֲמָלֵק וְהִתְרַמְתָּם אֶת כָּל אֲשֶׁר לוֹ וְלֹא תַחֲמַל עָלָיו וְהִמַּתָּ מֵאִישׁ עַד אִשָּׁה מֵעַלְל וְעַד יוֹנֵק מִשּׁוֹר וְעַד שֶׂה מִגִּמְלָל וְעַד חֲמֹר. (שמואל א טו:ב-ג)

Thus said the LORD of Hosts: I am exacting the penalty for what Amalek did to Israel, for the assault he made upon them on the road, on their way up from Egypt. Now go, attack Amalek, and proscribe (put to death) all that belongs to him. Spare no one, but kill alike men and women, infants and sucklings, oxen and sheep, camels and asses!" (1 Sam. 15:2-3)

As brutal as it is, the instruction is conveyed to Saul not in the language of **erasure** - there is no use of the root **מ.ח.ה** - but in the language of all-out **warfare**: **הִכִּיתָ**-**attack**, **וְהִתְרַמְתָּם**-**proscribe**, **וְלֹא תַחֲמַל**-**have no compassion**, **וְהִמַּתָּ**-**kill**. After all of these examples, does the commandment **תִּמְחֶה** in Deuteronomy mean that Israel is to **physically annihilate** Amalek, or to **morally erase** Amalek? The rabbinic tradition almost universally understands the commandment in Deuteronomy as physical **annihilation**. The Sefer Hinukh (Anonymous, 13th Century Spain), clearly and concisely summarizes the tradition as follows:

על כל יחיד מישראל הזכרים מוטל החיוב להרגם ולאבדם מן העולם אם יש פה בינדם בכל מקום ובכל זמן אם ימצא אחד מפל זרעם. (ספר החינוך תרד)

It is incumbent upon every individual Jewish male to kill them and to obliterate them (the Amalekites) from the world, if they have the power to do so, in all places and at all times, if any single Amalekite descendant can be found. (Sefer Hahinukh 604)

Really? How would we identify an Amalekite today? Would we just go up to someone we suspect and ask them for their **Ancestry.com** report? And then what? Just throw them in front of a train? And then, when we go on trial for murder, what would we say? That this is a mitzvah?! That this is morally defensible because their ancestors were evil?! God forbid! It's absurd. We should offer a different interpretation. Prof. Asa Kashner is the author of the IDF Code of Ethics and a recipient of the Israel Prize for Philosophy (2000). He writes:

הפרוש הרווח למצוה "תמחה את זכר עמלק" הוא טעות. בגללו אנחנו משמרים את זכר עמלק בלי הפסק דור אחר דור במקום להשכיח אותו. במקום שלא תהיה לו נוכחות בתינו ונהיה כלא היה אנחנו מעניקים לו נוכחות בולטת מאוד בתינו סמוך לנוכחות של המכבים בחגגה סמוך לנוכחות של יציאת מצרים בפסח. וטעות חמורה מוסיפים כל מי שמשמרים בשטוי "עמלק" בגנות האויבים שבדורותינו. קפה עשו חכמים כשהעלו את רעיון "עלה סנחריב ובלבל את האמות" כך שאין לנו משג מיהו עמלקי וגם בשלו בכך את הפרשנות המטעית של המצוה המקורית.

The widespread interpretation of the commandment of "erase the mention of Amalek" (as annihilation) is a mistake. Because of it, we end up preserving the memory of Amalek uninterruptedly generation after generation instead of purging it from our memory. Instead of it not having any presence in our lives as if it never existed we give it a tremendous presence in our lives akin to the Maccabees on Hanukah and the Exodus on Passover. And anyone who uses the term "Amalek" to denigrate our enemies in the present generation is making an even greater mistake. The Sages did a great thing when they suggested that, "When Sennacherib (Assyrian king 8th century BCE) came to power he mixed up all the nations," such that we have no clue today who is an authentic Amalekite. In doing so, they nullified the wrongful interpretation of the original mitzvah.

Already in the Bible, Amalek became a symbol for evil. As we know, Haman, is a descendant of Amalek. During the reading of the Megillah on Purim, we blot out his name, partly to fulfill the mitzvah from Deuteronomy, and partly just to make noise. Ironically though, every time we try to blot out his name, we end up perpetuating it! Perhaps, some names just can't be erased. Or perhaps, there is some consolation in knowing that after the death of Haman and his sons, Amalek is completely erased from history, just as God promised. Let us return to Salman Rushdie.

He imagines meeting his assailant, the A, in court. Here is what he imagines he will say to him: *Our lives touched each other for an instant and then separated. Mine has*

improved since that day while yours has deteriorated. You made a bad gamble and lost. I was the one with the luck. People who believe they knew you well have described you as a person who would never harm anybody, but they didn't know you as well as they thought they did. You are revealed here as a would-be assassin, and an incompetent one at that. You deceived those people about your true nature, but you will never deceive anyone again. Now you stand naked before the world. Perhaps, in the incarcerated decades that stretch out before you, you will learn introspection and come to understand that you did something wrong. But you know what? I don't care. This I think is what I've come to this courtroom to say to you: I don't care about you. Or the ideology that you claim to represent, and which you represent so poorly. I have my life, and my work, and there are people who love me. I care about those things. Your intrusion into my life was violent and damaging, but now my life has resumed, and it is a life filled with love. I don't know what will fill your imprisoned days, but I'm pretty sure it won't be love. And if I think of you at all in the future, it will be with the dismissive shrug. I don't forgive you. I don't not forgive you. You are simply irrelevant to me, and from now on for the rest of your days, you will be irrelevant to everyone else. I'm glad I have my life and not yours. And my life will go on. That is erasure. Erasure is a moral punishment, not a legal one. When the Torah commands us to erase Amalek, it is making a moral demand of us. It wants us to consign them to meaninglessness. In this way, erasure of Amalek becomes the archetype for how to deal with all those who perpetuate evil, *yimah shemam, may their names be erased! May they be punished by the law and expunged from the human record!* Like Rushdie, we are saying to them: *You are irrelevant. Your existence, while having caused irreparable harm, has no worth. If a name is what confers moral value on a person, you shall remain nameless and as a consequence, you have no moral worth, and elicit no empathy from us. We don't care about you. Humanity turns its back to you and consigns you to obscurity.* Having commemorated 9/11 this week, we were attentive to the names of the victims. Their names deserve their rightful place on the memorial at Ground Zero. Let the names of the murderers be purged from the record. Likewise, we will do our utmost to remember and preserve the names of the victims of October 7th, and all the hostages murdered since then. To remember their heroism, their dignity, and their lives. As for the perpetrators? May they be punished by their death or their imprisonment, and may their names be blotted out from human memory. Like their Amalekite archetype, they have revoked their right to be remembered because of their heinous evil. They destroyed countless lives. They are to be expunged from the human record. May their names be erased forever.

TODAY IS DAY 344. WE PRAY FOR THE RELEASE OF THE HOSTAGES. MAY GOD PROTECT THE IDF AND SHIELD ISRAEL FROM TERROR. שבת שלום!