Shabbat Zakhor: Whose Enemy: Israel or God?

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Shemot 17:16	
…יָ֚הּ מִלְחָמָה לַיהוָ֔ה בַּעֲמָלֵ֖ק מִדֹּ֥ר דֹּֽר׃	"[Moshe said]: …GOD will be at war with Amalek throughout the ages."

1. **Amalek as Israel's Enemy**

Shemot 17:8	
וַיָּבֹ֥א עֲמָלֵ֖ק וַיִּלָּ֥חֶם עִם־יִשְׂרָאֵ֖ל בִּרְפִידִֽם׃	Amalek came and fought with Israel at Rephidim.

Mekhiltah DeRabbi Yishmael, Parashat Amalek 1:2	
רַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר הַמּוֹדָעִי אוֹמֵר: **"וַיָּבֹא עֲמָלֵק"**. לְפִי שֶׁהָיָה עֲמָלֵק נִכְנָס תַּחַת כַּנְפֵי הֶעָנָן, וְגוֹנֵב נְפָשׁוֹת מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל וְהוֹרְגָן, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: (דברים כה,יח) "אֲשֶׁר קָרְךָ בַּדֶּרֶךְ, וַיְזַנֵּב בְּךָ כָּל הַנֶּחֱשָׁלִים אַחֲרֶיךָ, וְאַתָּה עָיֵף וְיָגֵעַ, וְלֹא יָרֵא אֱלֹהִים!" אֲחֵרִים אוֹמְרִים: "וְלֹא יָרֵא אֱלֹהִים", אֵלּוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל שֶׁלֹּא הָיוּ בְיָדָן מִצְוֹות.	R. Elazar Hamodai says: "And Amalek came": Amalek "sneaked" under the edges of the cloud and snatched souls of Israel and killed them, viz. (Devarim 25:18) (Amalek) "who met you on the way … when you were faint and weary and (Amalek) did not fear G–d." Others say: This refers to Israel, who (at that time) did not have mitzvoth in their hands.

Rashi on Shemot 17:8	
וַיָּבֹא עֲמָלֵק וְגוֹ'. סָמַךְ פָּרָשָׁה זוֹ לְמִקְרָא זֶה, לוֹמַר, תָּמִיד אֲנִי בֵּינֵיכֶם וּמְזֻמָּן לְכָל צָרְכֵיכֶם וְאַתֶּם אוֹמְרִים הֲיֵשׁ ה' בְּקִרְבֵּנוּ אִם אָיִן, חַיֵּיכֶם שֶׁהַכֶּלֶב בָּא וְנוֹשֵׁךְ אֶתְכֶם וְאַתֶּם צוֹעֲקִים לִי וְתֵדְעוּ הֵיכָן אֲנִי? מָשָׁל לְאָדָם שֶׁהִרְכִּיב בְּנוֹ עַל כְּתֵפוֹ וְיָצָא לַדֶּרֶךְ, הָיָה אוֹתוֹ הַבֵּן רוֹאֶה חֵפֶץ וְאוֹמֵר, אַבָּא טֹל חֵפֶץ זֶה וְתֵן לִי וְהוּא נוֹתֵן לוֹ, וְכֵן שְׁנִיָּה, וְכֵן שְׁלִישִׁית, פָּגְעוּ בְּאָדָם אֶחָד אָמַר לוֹ אוֹתוֹ הַבֵּן, רָאִיתָ אֶת אַבָּא? אָמַר לוֹ אָבִיו, אֵינְךָ יוֹדֵעַ הֵיכָן אֲנִי? הִשְׁלִיכוֹ מֵעָלָיו וּבָא הַכֶּלֶב וּנְשָׁכוֹ (תַּנְחוּמָא יִתְרוֹ):	**וַיָּבֹא עֲמָלֵק וְגוֹ**— Scripture places this section immediately after this preceding verse (they said, "Is the Lord among us or not?") to imply, "I am ever among you and ready at hand for every thing you may need, and yet you say, "Is the Lord among us or not?" By your lives, I swear that the hound (Amalek) shall come and bite you, and you will cry for Me and then you will know where I am!" A parable: it may be compared to a man who carried his son upon his shoulder, and went out on a journey. The son saw an article and said, "Father, pick up that thing and give it to me". He gave it to him, and so a second time and so also a third time. They met a certain man to whom the son said, "Have you seen my father anywhere?" Whereupon his father said to him, "Don't you know where I am?" — He, therefore, cast him off from himself and a hound came and bit him (Midrash Tanchuma, Yitro 3).

[1] All translations are from Sefaria, unless otherwise noted,.

Devora Steinmetz, *Why Rain Comes from Above,* "God's Eternal Enemy," 101
Amalek, according to this teaching, is that which tells you that you can never be different from how you are right now. Amalek is that which tells the sea that the people that it sees is what the people will forever be like. Amalek tells the people that, though the sea has parted for them, they will never become the people in the picture that God showed the sea at the beginning of time. Amalek is a manifestation of one's own vulnerability, of not knowing who you are or who you need to be, of not being able to change. Amalek is whatever is inside us that tries to keep us from crossing over into the promised land.

2. Amalak as God's Enemy

Midrash Tanhuma (Buber), Ki Teitze Siman 11	
רַבִּי בֶּרֶכְיָה בְּשֵׁם רַבִּי אַבָּא בַּר כַּהֲנָא אָמַר, כָּל זְמַן שֶׁזַּרְעוֹ שֶׁל עֲמָלֵק קַיָּם, כְּאִלּוּ כָּנָף מְכַסֶּה אֶת הַפָּנִים. אָבַד זַרְעוֹ מִן הָעוֹלָם, לֹא יִכָּנֵף עוֹד מוֹרֶיךָ (ישעיה ל, כ). רַבִּי לֵוִי בְּשֵׁם רַבִּי אַחָא בְּרַבִּי חֲנִינָא אוֹמֵר, כָּל זְמַן שֶׁזַּרְעוֹ שֶׁל עֲמָלֵק בָּעוֹלָם, לֹא הַשֵּׁם שָׁלֵם, וְלֹא הַכִּסֵּא שָׁלֵם. אָבַד זַרְעוֹ שֶׁל עֲמָלֵק, הַשֵּׁם שָׁלֵם וְהַכִּסֵּא שָׁלֵם.	R. Berekhyah said in the name of R. Abba bar Kahana, "As long as the seed of Amalek remains alive in the world, it is as though a wing (*kanaf*) is hiding the [divine] face. When the seed of Amalek has passed from the world, (in Is. 30:20), "your Teacher (i.e., the Holy One, blessed be He,) will no longer be hidden (*yikaneif*)." R. Levi says in the name of R. Hama bar Hanina, "As long as the seed of Amalek is in the world, the [divine] name will not be at peace (literally, whole) and the [divine] throne will not be at peace. When the seed of Amalek passes from the world, the throne will be at peace, and the name will be at peace."

Rashi on Shemot 17:16	
כִּי יָד עַל כֵּס יָהּ. יָדוֹ שֶׁל הַקָּבָ"ה הוּרְמָה לְשָׁבַע בְּכִסְאוֹ לִהְיוֹת לוֹ מִלְחָמָה וְאֵיבָה בַּעֲמָלֵק עוֹלָמִית…	כִּי יָד עַל כֵּס יָהּ— the hand of the Holy One, blessed be He, is raised to swear by His throne that He will have war and enmity against Amalek to all eternity.

Devora Steinmetz, *Why Rain Comes from Above,* "God's Eternal Enemy," 99
…Amalek can be seen, as in the midrash that Rashi cites, as an enemy not only of Israel, but of God. Amalek's existence makes impossible a world in which God has complete dominion, in which God's name and God's throne, in Rashi's words, can be complete.

3. Whose Enemy? And Does It Matter?

Devora Steinmetz, *Why Rain Comes from Above,* "God's Eternal Enemy," 121-122
The internal view of Amalek asks me to look inside myself. What is it within me that is blocking me from crossing over to the promised land? What in me is not matching up to that picture that God showed the sea when God created the world? What is it in me or in us that does not fear God, that hesitates to acknowledge God's presence in our midst, that keeps us from building God's sanctuary? God created a good world; what about us and our choices is keeping God's plan from working out?
The alternative view starts from a different place. I look at the world, and it's not a good place. And I can't believe that the evil in the world is because of choices I've made or my community has made. The external view of Amalek allows me to say that maybe it's not yet a good world. Maybe God doesn't yet have full dominion; maybe creation is still in process. One day God's name will be complete, but not yet. One day God will reign supreme, but not yet. I am not responsible for the evil that is in the world. But I am responsible to ask myself what I can do to make more room for good, to push back the dominion of evil, to expand God's dominion.