

# COVENANT & Conversation

A STUDY OF ETHICS IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS



[www.rabbisacks.org](http://www.rabbisacks.org)

[@rabbisacks](https://twitter.com/rabbisacks)

[facebook.com/lordsacks](https://facebook.com/lordsacks)

I am deeply touched that Covenant & Conversation 5775 on Ethics has been generously sponsored by **The Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation** in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl ז"ל. Maurice was a visionary philanthropist on a vast scale, driven throughout his life by a sense of Jewish responsibility. Vivienne was a woman of the deepest humanity and compassion, who had a kind word for everyone. Together, they were a unique partnership of dedication and grace, for whom living was giving. Through their Charitable Foundation, they continue to bring blessings into Jewish communities around the world.  
— RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS



THE MAURICE WOHL  
CHARITABLE FOUNDATION

## The Face of Evil

**Beshalach - 31 January 2015 / 11 Shevat 5775**

After 9/11, when the horror and trauma had subsided, Americans found themselves asking what had happened and why. Was it a disaster? A tragedy? A crime? An act of war? It did not seem to fit the pre-existing paradigms. And why had it happened? The question most often asked about Al Qaeda was, “Why do they hate us?”

In the wake of those events an American thinker Lee Harris wrote two books, *Civilization and its Enemies* and *The Suicide of Reason*<sup>1</sup> that were among the most thought-provoking responses of the decade. The reason for the questions and the failure to find answers, said Harris, was that we in the West had *forgotten the concept of an enemy*. Liberal democratic politics and market economics create a certain kind of society, a specific way of thinking and a characteristic type of personality. At their heart is the concept of *the rational actor*, the person who judges acts by their consequences and chooses the maximal option. He or she believes that for every problem there is a solution, for every conflict a resolution. The way to achieve it is to sit down, negotiate, and do on balance what is best for all.

In such a world there are no enemies, merely conflicts of interest. An enemy, says Harris, is simply “a friend we haven’t done enough for yet.” In the real world, however, not everyone is a liberal democrat. An enemy is “someone who is willing to die in order to kill you. And while it is true that the enemy always hates us for a reason, it is his reason, not ours.” He sees a different world from ours, and in that world we are the enemy. Why do they hate us? Answers Harris: “They hate us *because* we are their enemy.”

Whatever the rights and wrongs of Harris’s specifics, the general point is true and profound. We can become mind-blind, thinking that the way we – our society, our culture, our

<sup>1</sup> Lee Harris, *Civilization and Its Enemies: The Next Stage of History*. New York: Free Press, 2004. *The Suicide of Reason*, New York: Basic Books, 2008.

civilization – see things is the only way, or at least that it is the way everyone would choose if given the chance. Only a complete failure to understand the history of ideas can explain this error, and it is a dangerous one. When Montezuma, ruler of the Aztecs, met Cortes, leader of the Spanish expedition in 1520, he assumed that he was meeting a civilized man from a civilized nation. That mistake cost him his life and within a year there was no Aztec civilization any more. Not everyone sees the world the way we do, and, as Richard Weaver once said: “The trouble with humanity is that it forgets to read the minutes of the last meeting.”

This explains the significance of the unusual command at the end of this week’s parsha. The Israelites had escaped the seemingly inexorable danger of the chariots of the Egyptian army, the military high-tech of its day. Miraculously the sea divided, the Israelites crossed, the Egyptians, their chariot wheels caught in the mud, were unable either to advance or retreat and were caught by the returning tide.

The Israelites sang a song and finally seemed to be free, when something untoward and unexpected happened. They were attacked by a new enemy, the Amalekites, a nomadic group living in the desert. Moses instructed Joshua to lead the people in battle. They fought and won. But the Torah makes it clear that this was no ordinary battle:

Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Write this on a scroll as something to be remembered and make sure that Joshua hears it, because I will completely blot out the name of Amalek from under heaven.’ Moses built an altar and called it The Lord is my Banner. He said, ‘The hand is on the Lord’s throne. The Lord will be at war with Amalek for all generations.’ (Ex. 17: 14-16)

This is a very strange statement, and it stands in marked contrast to the way the Torah speaks about the Egyptians. The Amalekites attacked Israel during the lifetime of Moses just once. The Egyptians oppressed the Israelites over an extended period, oppressing and enslaving them and starting a slow genocide by killing every male Israelite child. The whole thrust of the narrative would suggest that if any nation would become the symbol of evil, it would be Egypt.

But the opposite turns out to be true. In Deuteronomy the Torah states, “*Do not abhor an Egyptian, because you were a stranger in his land*” (Deut. 23: 8). Shortly thereafter, Moses repeats the command about the Amalekites, adding a significant detail:

Remember what the Amalekites did to you along the way when you came out of Egypt. When you were *weary and worn out*, they met you on your journey and attacked all who were *lagging behind*; they had no fear of God ... You shall blot out the name of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget! (Deut. 25: 17-19)

**“When hate depends on a specific cause, it ends once the cause disappears. Causeless, baseless hate lasts forever.”**

We are commanded not to hate Egypt, but never to forget Amalek. Why the difference? The simplest answer is to recall the rabbis’ statement in The Ethics of the Fathers: “If love depends on a specific cause, when the cause ends, so does the love. If love does not depend on a specific cause, then it never ends.”<sup>2</sup> The same applies to hate. When hate depends on a specific cause, it ends once the cause disappears. Causeless, baseless hate lasts forever.

The Egyptians oppressed the Israelites because, in Pharaoh’s words, “The Israelites are becoming too numerous and strong for us” (Ex. 1: 9). Their hate, in other words, came from fear.

---

<sup>2</sup> Mishnah Avot 5: 16.

It was not irrational. The Egyptians had been attacked and conquered before by a foreign group known as the Hyksos, and the memory of that period was still acute and painful. The Amalekites, however, were not being threatened by the Israelites. They attacked a people who were “weary and worn out,” specifically those who were “lagging behind.” In short: *the Egyptians feared the Israelites because they were strong. The Amalekites attacked the Israelites because they were weak.*

In today’s terminology, the Egyptians were rational actors, the Amalekites were not. With rational actors there can be negotiated peace. People engaged in conflict eventually realise that they are not only destroying their enemies: they are destroying themselves. That is what Pharaoh’s advisers said to him after seven plagues: “Do you not yet realise that Egypt is ruined?” (Ex. 10: 7). There comes a point at which rational actors understand that the pursuit of self-interest has become self-destructive, and they learn to co-operate.

It is not so, however, with non-rational actors. Emil Fackenheim, one of the great post-Holocaust theologians, noted that towards the end of the Second World War the Germans diverted trains carrying supplies to their own army, in order to transport Jews to the extermination camps. So driven were they by hate that they were prepared to put their own victory at risk in order to carry out the systematic murder of the Jews of Europe. This was, he said, evil for evil’s sake.<sup>3</sup>

The Amalekites function in Jewish memory as “the enemy” in Lee Harris’s sense. Jewish law, however, specifies two completely different forms of action in relation to the Amalekites. First is the physical command to wage war against them. That is what Samuel told Saul to do, a command he failed fully to fulfil. Does this command still apply today?

The unequivocal answer given by Rabbi Nachum Rabinovitch is No.<sup>4</sup> Maimonides ruled that the command to destroy the Amalekites only applied if they refused to make peace and accept the seven Noahide laws. He further stated that the command was no longer applicable since Sennacherib, the Assyrian, had transported and resettled the nations he conquered so that it was no longer possible to identify the ethnicity of any of the original nations against whom the Israelites were commanded to fight. He also said, in *The Guide for the Perplexed*, that the command only applied to people of specific biological descent. It is not to be applied in general to enemies or haters of the Jewish people. So the command to wage war against the Amalekites no longer applies.

However, there is a quite different command, to “remember” and “not forget” Amalek, which we fulfil annually by the reading the passage about the Amalekites command as it appears in Deuteronomy on the Shabbat before Purim, Shabbat Zakhor (the connection with Purim is that Haman the “Agagite” is assumed to be a descendant of Agag, king of the Amalekites). Here Amalek has become a symbol rather than a reality.

By dividing the response in this way, Judaism marks a clear distinction between an ancient enemy who no longer exists, and the evil that enemy embodied, which can break out again at any time in any place. It is easy at times of peace to forget the evil that lies just beneath the surface of the human heart. Never was this truer than in the past three centuries. The birth of Enlightenment, toleration, emancipation, liberalism and human rights persuaded many, Jews among them, that collective evil was as extinct as the Amalekites. Evil was then, not now. That

**“There comes a point at which rational actors understand that the pursuit of self-interest has become self-destructive, and they learn to co-operate.”**

---

<sup>3</sup> Fackenheim, Emil L., and Michael L. Morgan. *The Jewish Thought of Emil Fackenheim: A Reader*. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1987, 126.

<sup>4</sup> Rabbi N L Rabinovitch, *Responsa Melomdei Milchamah*, Maaleh Adumim, Maaliyot, 1993, 22-25.

age eventually begat nationalism, fascism, communism, two World Wars, some of the brutal tyrannies ever known, and the worst crime of man against man.

Today, the great danger is terror. Here the words of Princeton political philosopher Michael Walzer are particularly apt:

Wherever we see terrorism, we should look for tyranny and oppression ... The terrorists aim to rule, and murder is their method. They have their own internal police, death squads, disappearances. They begin by killing or intimidating those comrades who stand in their way, and they proceed to do the same, if they can, among the people they claim to represent. If terrorists are successful, they rule tyrannically, and their people bear, without consent, the costs of the terrorists' rule.<sup>5</sup>

Evil never dies, and like liberty it demands constant vigilance. We are commanded to remember, not for the sake of the past but for the sake of the future, and not for revenge but the opposite: a world free of revenge and other forms of violence.

Lee Harris began *Civilization and its Enemies* with the words, "The subject of this book is forgetfulness," and ends with a question: "Can the West overcome the forgetfulness that is the nemesis of every successful civilization?" That is why are commanded to remember and never forget Amalek, not because the historic people still exists, but because a society of rational actors can sometimes believe that the world is full of rational actors with whom one can negotiate peace. It is not always so.

Rarely was a biblical message so relevant to the future of the West and of freedom itself. Peace is possible, implies Moses, even with an Egypt that enslaved and tried to destroy us. But peace is not possible with those who attack people they see as weak and who deny their own people the freedom for which they claim to be fighting. Freedom depends on our ability to remember and whenever necessary confront "the eternal gang of ruthless men," the face of Amalek throughout history.

**“We are commanded to remember, not for the sake of the past but for the sake of the future, and not for revenge but the opposite: a world free of revenge and other forms of violence.”**



Rabbi Sacks is honoured to be the International President of *70 Days for 70 Years*, an inspiring Holocaust remembrance and education initiative that began on 25th January and runs until Pesach. For more details on how to participate and receive a book of 70 inspirational essays, visit [www.70for70.com](http://www.70for70.com).



**70 Days  
for 70 Years**

Remember the past to build the future

**RABBI  
SACKS**

For more material from Rabbi Sacks, or to join his mailing list, please visit [www.rabbisacks.org](http://www.rabbisacks.org)

The Office of Rabbi Sacks, PO Box 72007, London, NW6 6RW  
+44 (0)20 7286 6391 • [info@rabbisacks.org](mailto:info@rabbisacks.org) • [www.rabbisacks.org](http://www.rabbisacks.org)

© Rabbi Sacks • All rights reserved

The Office of Rabbi Sacks is supported by The Covenant & Conversation Trust

<sup>5</sup> Michael Walzer, *Arguing about War*, Yale University Press, 2004, 64-65.