

Message from the Haftara

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A Call to Our Collective Responsibility

SHABBAT ZACHOR

Amalek is no longer. The Mishna (Yadayim 4:4) teaches us that Sancheriv, the Assyrian emperor, through his military campaigns and conquests created such upheaval among the various local nations - interspersing and intermixing them - that Amalek and the seven Canaanite nations no longer exist today. Hence, the command in this week's Maftir regarding destroying Amalek is and shall remain a technically dormant mitzva.

Yet our tradition has preserved the mitzva to remember Amalek, as practiced on Shabbat Zachor, because our memory of the past does not require actual Amalekites to still exist. It is as though the Torah itself has told us DROSH V'KABEIL S'CHAR - seek out the underlying messages embedded in this seemingly inactionable mitzva and be rewarded with insight. What, then, are we meant to learn from this command that can still impact us today?

The story of Sha'ul, as recounted in the Haftara for Shabbat Zachor, opens with the king assembling his army. VAYSHAMA SHAUL ET HAAM - Sha'ul calls upon the people to report for duty, and hundreds of thousands respond. The term VAYSHAMA is unusual, meaning to 'make heard'. As the Radak astutely notes, it is similar to the opening line of Masechet Sh'kalim, which teaches that at the start of the month of Adar MASHMI'IM AL HASH'KALIM, that every Jew is obligated to donate a half-shekel. In the haftara, too, Sha'ul faces a situation that requires the full participation of the entire nation, a MILCHEMET MITZVA, a war that is a religious command. He issues the call to prepare to fight, and the people rally together.

Yet the Talmud (Sotah 42b) teaches that there is an even higher classification: a MILCHEMET CHOVA, an obligatory war, necessary for the survival and security of the Jewish people in their land. In an obligatory war, the Talmud rules that "even brides and bridegrooms must report for duty" - every individual is responsible for ensuring the safety of the Jewish people. Indeed Rambam codifies this ruling as law (Mishneh Torah, Melachim 7:4), applying it to both a MILCHEMET MITZVA and a MILCHEMET CHOVA.

Today, we are in the midst of a

MILCHEMET CHOVA - an obligatory war for the safety and security of Israel and, I believe, for Jews worldwide. The Jewish people's standing army needs the full engagement of its citizenry - not only as a matter of necessity, but as a halachic obligation. One of the silver linings amid the darkness of these past months has been the remarkable display of partnership, cooperation and mutual responsibility among so many sectors of Israeli society, as well as the active engagement of Jewish communities around the world.

Yet this war has also highlighted, more than ever before, the urgent need to ensure that the burden of security does not fall only on some communities while others remain unencumbered. Many soldiers are already on their fourth or fifth round of reserve duty, with some having served for over 400 days. The acute need to share the load across Israeli society has never been clearer.

This responsibility particularly extends to those who devote their lives to Torah study. If the Torah is what binds the Jewish people together, then the Torah itself mandates that we stand together in times of need, and step up to the duty to physically protect the nation.

As Rav Aharon Lichtenstein tz"l wrote in his monumental essay "The

Ideology of Hesder", "When, as in contemporary Israel, the greatest single chesed one can perform is helping to defend his fellows' very lives, the implications for yeshiva education should be obvious."

Forty years after these words were written, the challenge remains: How do we integrate all sectors of Jewish Israeli society into the shared responsibility of defense? This is not just a question; it is a call to action. It is our duty to take concrete steps to make the Torah's vision a reality. We should act upon this as we read about Amalek on Shabbat Zachor. 