

Message from the Haftara

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The Exception that Defines the Rule of Jewish Morality

ZACHOR

On October 15th, 1982, in the shadow of the First Lebanon War, Rav Aharon Lichtenstein published an open letter to Prime Minister Menachem Begin in the Religious Zionist newspaper Hatzofeh. In it, he emphasized the importance of the State of Israel taking responsibility for its part in the massacres in Sabra and Shatila, two Beirut neighborhoods where IDF-backed Lebanese Christian militias had killed thousands of Palestinian civilians. Begin was initially unwilling to conduct any investigation into the affair, and Rav Lichtenstein strongly criticized him for what he saw as an un-Jewish refusal to confront difficult truths.

Rav Lichtenstein's argument was not an accusation against the IDF, rather a moral call for those entrusted with power to uphold the highest standards of ethical accountability.

In the letter, he invoked the story of Shaul and Amalek, which we read this week as the haftara for Shabbat

Zachor. Why, Rav Lichtenstein asked, was King Shaul punished for sparing the life of Agag, king of Amalek? Was it simply that he had left an Amalekite - any Amalekite - alive? Rather, Rav Lichtenstein suggested, the identity of the one victim spared was significant. Shaul had left Agag alive because he identified with him, as one king to another. He had used his own human logic and values to decide whom to kill and whom to spare.

By doing this, Shaul did not merely become guilty of disobeying a difficult divine command to kill all of the Amalekites; he assumed personal responsibility for all the Amalekites he had killed in the course of the battle. Shaul had been commanded to destroy an entire people. Such an act cannot be justified on ordinary moral grounds; it can only be understood as obedience to an explicit and unambiguous divine command. Precisely because such a command lies outside of ordinary moral reasoning, it cannot serve as a model for human judgment in any other context. Thus, the minute that Shaul decided to make an exception, all the other killings ceased to be part of the divine command, becoming his own moral responsibility instead.

This is the great tradeoff in the story of Amalek and its destruction, and it contains an important lesson for today. Once we step outside the

established moral framework of a situation, and let emotions guide our decisions, like Shaul does, we put ourselves and our society at risk of heading down an immoral or unjustified path, of losing our moral legitimacy, of causing more harm than good.

In any historical context, including ours today, it is necessary and justifiable to decisively defeat enemies sworn to our destruction. But the moment we allow our righteous indignation or the power of our own judgment to seep even the smallest bit past defensive strategy - the moment military action spills over into vigilantism, when civilian life and property are endangered one iota more than absolutely necessary - we run the risk of our just and necessary war being transformed into an abandonment of our values.

While military strength and valor are critical to our national survival, they cannot lead to victory or peace if we abandon our values.

This is an obligation that goes beyond the brave soldiers who are on the front lines. Community and political leaders, educators and rabbis need to call out the behavior of those in our own camp who jeopardizes the justice of our cause. In recent months, there have been repeated criminal incidents in which a small minority of misguided Israeli youth have attacked

Palestinians and vandalized their properties in Judea and Samaria, as well as attacking fellow Jews for the “crime” of simply working with or employing Palestinians. Tragically, these young Israelis have embraced a hate-filled, racist worldview. They take out their anger violently on innocent people, solely because of the victims’ religious and cultural identities.

In the face of these crimes, we cannot remain silent. Despite all the challenges that we face, and notwithstanding the unfathomable hate and vitriol directed at the Jewish people and the State of Israel, we dare not allow fear and victimhood to eat away at our own mores and principles. This is the central message of the story of Amalek, the flip side of the commandment to destroy.

In sharp contrast to the lawless extremist youth, in the most recent conflict we have seen the heroic soldiers of the Israel Defense Forces uphold the values of Judaism with justice and mercy. We’ve seen our soldiers enter damaged residential buildings in Gaza to rescue Palestinian families. We’ve seen units helping and protecting Palestinian children caught in the crosshairs of fire from an enemy that deliberately hides amongst civilians.

Our sons and daughters on the front lines have made brave decisions that

have put themselves and their comrades at risk because they follow the values of the Torah. Because they understand that the command to wipe out Amalek was the exception - and that Amalek no longer exists. For the enduring rule of Jewish life is to act, even at times of war, with compassion and moral restraint toward all human beings. 🌍