Amalek and Eden: Some thoughts on the Relationship between the Sacred and the Good

(Please note: This essay was originally delivered orally last year, when the Torah reading that corresponded to Shabbat Zakhor was the opening of Vayikra. I have revised it somewhat but not had the opportunity to transform it structurally.)

Leviticus deals largely with what academic observers might call "the sacrificial cult of Judaism", the rules and regulations governing the offering of slaughtered animals and other products to God. This topic as a whole is not in tune with modern Western sensibilities, which resonate rather to the occasional statements found in the Prophets denouncing those who offer sacrifices while oppressing their fellows. I have argued elsewhere, following Yoma 69a, that the capacity to experientially relate to the sacrificial order is the positive side of the "evil inclination for avodah zarah". The Talmud there records that this "evil inclination" was subdued sometime during the period of the Men of the Great Assembly, and that as a result it left the Holy of Holies in the form of a lion (the shape of the fire on the altar). I have, accordingly, no expectation of making these rites directly meaningful in our day, at least to those in whom that "evil inclination" has not been successfully revived.

However, I can offer an "intellectualization" of what that experiential understanding might be. The sacrificial rites are a process intended to restore humanity to Eden. Thus "cherubs" appear twice in Torah, once guarding the path back to Eden and once atop the Ark of the Covenant, with the voice of God being heard from a dimensionless space between them. It seems reasonable to conclude that the path to Eden leads through the Holy of Holies. One can similarly understand that Cain and Abel focused their relationship with God on sacrifices as an attempt to regain what their parents had lost, and that Noah sacrificed immediately after surviving the flood in the hope that, as the new Adam, he would be restored to the original Garden.

However, the Torah does not explicitly frame the sacrificial order this way. Rather, the Torah's continual frame of reference is "kedushah", sanctity. It seems reasonable to conclude that kedushah and Eden are analogous terms, that the quest for kedushah is synonymous with the quest for Eden. Thus, again, the path to Eden leads

through the “kodesh kodashim”. [This may also help us understand the association between “tum’ah” and death, as death and the original Expulsion are intimately linked. However, I have not as yet thought through the connection between taharah and kedushah].

A central motif of the Eden narrative is the category tov/ra, which for better or worse we can translate as good/evil. More specifically, knowledge of tov/ra is antithetical to the Eden experience. My argument, accordingly, is that kedushah and tov are at best parallel lines that never meet, and at worst in conflict. (A word of caution: what I am offering here is a broadbrush understanding of the sacrificial rite, not an account of each of its myriad details. It may well be that some details of particular sacrifices, especially those that allow those with lesser economic means to accomplish the same ends via cheaper sacrifices, are grounded in tov considerations, but I don’t think this affects my argument.)

We like to believe that, as regards individuals, kedushah and goodness are intimately and inextricably linked. However, I suspect that most of us can cite examples of individuals who seemed very holy, but who nonetheless, or perhaps as a result, had less than positive relationships with their fellow humans. Similarly, I think most of us know people whose interpersonal behavior is superb but who nonetheless seem to have nothing of the holy about them (although this is not as obvious). My argument is that our observations are correct, that kedushah and tov do not necessarily go together.

This argument also responds well to those who would reduce the sanctity of sexual relationships to the interpersonal behavior of the parties involved. Just as there can be perfectly valid kiddushin between people who are cruel to each other – the kedushah is not dependent on their having a “tov” relationship – so too, being kind and considerate in a relationship does not make it kadosh.

All this brings us to today’s maftir, the commandment to expunge the memory of Amalek (and yet simultaneously to remember their deeds!). I have at other times offered comments on various efforts at providing an ethical rationalization for what is at core a commandment to commit genocide; what I wish to suggest today is that such efforts are in principle the result of a category error. Ethics are on the tov/ra axis; Amalek should be understood as a mitzvah of kedushah.

Maimonides understands the disjunction between Eden and tov/ra along something resembling the following lines; Tov/Ra are not abstractions, but relate to particular situations. In other words, one cannot say of any particular action that it is tov or ra absent a concrete context. Killing another human being, for example, can be either murder (if the victim is wholly innocent), permitted (if the victim accidentally killed a close relative, or if the victim is fighting for the other side in an optional war), or obligatory (if the victim is illegitimately seeking to kill someone else, or has been sentenced to death by a legitimate court). My extension of this is that Tov/Ra always relate to the real, not the ideal world. Those who focus their efforts along the tov/ra axis seek to improve the world rather than to perfect it.

Kedushah, by contrast, can be understood as a purely abstract quality that inheres in objects or persons regardless of their context. The kedushah of kohanim, for example, is independent of their actions generally, and never dependent on their ethics. Kedushah-centered commandments, i.e. commandments whose telos is the maximization of kedushah in this world, must seek to replace the non-kadosh elements of this world with new kadosh elements rather than raising the kedushah level of the existing elements.

Understanding mechiyyat Amalek as a kedushah-centered mitzvah, accordingly, entails the realization that carried out partially it is likely to have grievous consequences, as its purpose is not to improve this world, but to replace it. Carried out partially, it will leave this world in place, and not improved. On the tov/ra axis, it cannot but be considered murder.

And accordingly, it is halakhically appropriate to seek every avenue for limiting the mitzvah to eschatological fulfillment, as, for varying reasons, many halakhists have done. The Torah itself limits the mitzvah to times at which complete peace from all surrounding enemies has been achieved. (Note that Amalek is not a "surrounding enemy", in other words that they are defined as a group having no territorial dispute with the Jews.) Note for example Yishavev Sofer (cited in **Sefer HaMafteiach)**, which, on the basis of Smag via Hagahot Maimuniyot, says that mechiyyat Amalek becomes a mitzvah only after we've conquered the whole world! (As Amalek is nomadic, one can conquer the whole world geographically without subduing them.) Note also the positions that the mitzvah applies only to the community and not to individuals, and to

the community only when it is headed by a monarch. Note also that the Torah always speaks of Amalek in eschatological terms (midor dor, reishit/acharit). (As for the obvious problem with this thesis, that Samuel ordered Saul to seek the destruction of Amalek, many halakhists have already declared that episode either a) a potential but failed eschatological moment or b) a horaat shaah (action taken on the basis of a temporary suspension of ordinary law.) Note also the position that Amalekites can convert to Judaism; I would suggest that the commandment would be fulfilled by mass conversion as well as by mass execution, perhaps more so. Genocide generally does not lead to the erasure of memory, but rather to its perpetuation. Eliminating both the physical existence and the memory of Amalek would be accomplished far better by the complete transformation of their culture to the point that no one any longer identified with their past.

To sum up – mechiyyat Amalek cannot and should not be ethically rationalized, as it is a command that cannot be effective in a real world with real world consequences. It can only work if it accomplishes the complete transformation of a world to the extent that the new world is unrelated to the old. In other words, it can work only if this-world consequences are irrelevant, as its this-worldly consequences are inevitably horrific. It functions in much the same way as various other utopian schemes that have rested on the notion that the barrier to utopia is the existence of particular people, e.g. the bourgeois or the aristocrats or the Jews, and those Jews inclined to look forward to its fulfillment would do well to learn from history lest they repeat it.

Final note:

In essence, this dvar Torah is an expansion of an idea I originally read in (now Rabbi) Nachum Spirn's writeup in **Hamevaser** of a shiur by Rav Aharon Lichtenstein Shlita, and which (now Rabbi) David Mouvsas later found for me in the Likkutei Chafetz Chayyim al HaTorah. (R. Lichtenstein also refers to it in Leaves of Faith volume 2). R. Lichtenstein sought to explain Shaul's loss of the monarchy, working on the assumption that excessive mercy would not be a sufficient explanation for that punishment. Accordingly, he assumed that the sparing of Agag could not be the act that cost Shaul the monarchy. Instead, he argued, Shaul's failure to kill Agag indicated that he believed the

killing of the rest of Amalek to be rationally/ethically justifiable, that he understood the other killings sufficiently to be able to be doresh taama dikra (fathom the reasons behind a Biblical commandment) and pasken accordingly. However, the truth is that there is no ethical justification for genocide, and the only possible legitimization of such an act is its performance solely as the fulfillment of Divine Will. Since Shaul performed it after a process of moral evaluation, his killing of the other Amalekites is considered mass murder, and mass murder is a fit cause for losing the monarchy.

This explanation has long been important to me for its legitimation of ethical discomfort with acknowledged Divine command, and its mere existence, and by implication the existence of its originators, has been a continual religious comfort to me. On an analytic level, however, I have noted critically in the past that this explanation is paradoxical, in that it posits that certain mitzvot are not subject to ethical evaluation, and yet the determination of which mitzvot fall into that category can only be the result of ethical evaluation (ethical evaluation serves to determine the parameters of all but the most ethically problematic mitzvot, which are left unaltered by the process??!!). Furthermore, it may be dangerous, as it provides a ready defense for anyone committing the most heinous acts in the name of Halakhah. My version attempts to solve this problem by limiting all such commandments to the eschatological realm, but, as noted above and emphasized in conversation by my wife, who is quite opposed to the thesis set out in this essay, it still provides such a defense if one simply claims that one had retrospectively false or frustrated Messianic expectations. I am not sure, however, that there is ever a way of removing the profound dangers inherent in the fact that messianism seems, at least in the short term, readily counterfeitable.