

“Was Netanyahu justified in applying the term
Amalek to the Hamas terrorists?”

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In a speech to the IDF three weeks after the October 7th massacre, Benjamin Netanyahu referred to Hamas as Amalek, the biblical archenemy of Israel. This reference was picked up by South Africa who used it as evidence for a charge of genocide against Israel that it brought before the International Court of Justice at The Hague.

The source it relied on was the account of the prophet Samuel instructing King Saul, in the name of the Lord, to attack Amalek and spare neither them nor their possessions. This is stated as having been in retribution for its cowardly slaughter of the weak and elderly stragglers at the rear of the Israelite travellers through the desert, instead of engaging the Israelite army in a frontal attack.

The Torah chronicles the particular cruelty of the Amalekites in this regard, and utilises it as a paradigm for the sort of action for which a people forfeits its place among the family of nations:

*Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey, after you left Egypt –
how, undeterred by fear of God, he surprised you on the march, when you
were famished and weary, and cut down the stragglers in your rear.
Therefore, when the Lord your God grants you safety from all your enemies
around you, in the land that the Lord is giving you as a hereditary portion,
you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget.*

(Deut. 25:17)¹

Amalek had no reason to seek the destruction of Israel, for the latter constituted no threat to it given that Amalek inhabited no ancestral land that Israel might have coveted and threatened. But the Amalekites were a fierce and merciless desert tribe of nomadic marauders who lived by the sword and required little cause for violence.

The Torah refers only to their attack on the weak and harmless stragglers, but rabbinic tradition has preserved several other of their atrocities to account for the eternal damnation meted out to them. A chilling reference to one of these renders Netanyahu's description of Hamas as Amalek unquestionably accurate:

Not only did Amalek kill them, but he also mutilated their corpses by cutting off a certain part of their body, and throwing it toward heaven with the mocking words, "Here is what Thou desirest." A 'certain part' was the male sexual organ, and in this way he mocked the covenant of Abraham.²

We should add that when measured against the horrific accounts of the crimes against humanity perpetrated by Hamas – such as rape, sexual violence, indiscriminate killing of unarmed civilians and the mutilation and beheading of babies, including the protracted, still ongoing, duration of the war and the sophisticated military preparedness of the enemy and its material, financial, political, and psychological support from other countries, in addition to its lasting effect on the wounded, the families and friends of the bereaved, and, indeed, upon the psyche of the entirety of world Jewry – the biblical attack by Amalek appears even less severe. We say this because of our view that the mitzvah of remembering what Amalek did is not a quantitative assessment of the military severity of its act, but a *binyan Av*, a classic example of the worst kind of violence: that perpetrated upon the weak and the vulnerable, the old or the young, by those far stronger than them.

It is not surprising that, in subsequent Jewish tradition, ‘Amalek’ became the catchphrase for any act of genocide directed at our people. This was underscored by the fact that, centuries later, Haman, a descendant of Agag, king of the Amalekites, sought to accomplish against the Jews of Persia what his predecessor had sought to do against the Israelites in the desert, and what became justifiably associated with the Amalekite mindset.

So, to condemn Mr Netanyahu’s employment of that term to describe those who are committed to a repetition of the Holocaust, and to turn it on its head as an incitement to genocide of the Palestinians, is the height of disingenuousness.

If anyone were to entertain doubts about Hamas’s genocidal intentions, they only had to refer to one of its references – a direct quote from the Quranic hadith writings no less! – that is incorporated into its founding charter:

*The hour of judgment shall not come until the Muslims fight the Jews and kill them, so that the Jews hide behind trees and stones, and each tree and stone will say: 'Oh Muslim, oh servant of Allah, there is a Jew behind me, come and kill him.'*³

When Hamas employs its holy text to express such genocidal sentiments, it is incongruous that South Africa, on its behalf, should take exception to an Israeli Premier utilising the biblical precedent of Amalek as an example of a people who sought to destroy our people.

As regards the prospect of peace being achieved through the establishment of a two-state solution, perhaps the following quote from Hamas’s Charter might indicate such a notion’s chance of success:

*There is no solution for the Palestinian question except through Jihad.*⁴

South Africa's application of a biblical term and situation – such as that of 'Amalek' – to the contemporary political situation in Israel, is widely justified in some academic circles, and finds its place in what is referred to as 'political theology.' This is described as follows:

Political theology is a burgeoning field of academic scholarship. Yet, as a concept, it is notoriously difficult to define. In broad terms, it refers to the relationship between theology and politics, particularly the way in which ideas, categories, symbols, rituals, and practices that derive from theological sources – in a number of different religious traditions – have informed, and continue to inform, ways of thinking about and practising politics, even, and especially, in our modern secular age.⁵

Jews would generally view such a misappropriation of our biblical sources as a direct continuum of what is referred to as *Christological exegesis*. This was a form of interpretation that began as long ago as the early church and according to which all of what is construed as the 'Old' Testament points to and foreshadows the being, life, and teachings of Jesus. This exegetical borrowing was followed by the Quran (7th cent. CE) which utilises some fifty references to individuals and events mentioned in the Hebrew Bible.

Against the background of the widespread employment of such an exegetical tool, it is absurd that it should be regarded as a call to genocide/jihad when an Israeli Prime Minister describes the Hamas atrocity of October 7th as that of an 'Amalek.' Or is it only the other religions that are permitted to cite our *TaNaCh* to promote their own theological and political objectives?

So how inappropriate was Mr Netanyahu's use of the term? The answer is that it was *the* most appropriate one in the circumstances, as quoted in the *Mail on Line's* banner headline: "Israeli morgue worker says horrors inflicted on Hamas's victims are 'worse than the Holocaust,' including a decapitated pregnant woman and her beheaded unborn child and evidence of mass rape so brutal that they broke their victims' pelvis."⁶

'Worse than the Holocaust!' Yet, South Africa had the gall to denounce Mr Netanyahu for referring to the perpetrators as 'Amalek,' and to claim that the use of that term constituted evidence of a call to genocide of the Palestinians before The International Court of Justice!

We should have no hesitation in proclaiming, "Shame on the ICJ for accepting that there was even a case to answer. For, if they wanted to deliberate on a quote from our Torah, they should have chosen rather the implication of *Tzedek tzedek tirdov* – 'Justice, only justice, shall you pursue' (Deut. 16:20). Had they done so, they would have taken account of South Africa's blatant anti-Israel bias and its close ties to the PLO and other revolutionary causes since the days of Nelson Mandela. Indeed, Mandela was one of the most vocal supporters of Yasser Arafat whom he viewed as a kindred spirit fighting for the right of self-determination against Israel, the colonial and apartheid occupiers. But justice is hardly a value that contemporary international institutions employ when assessing our Jewish state!

NOTES

1. See also I Sam.15:1-3.
2. Louis Ginsberg, *Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: JPSA, 1909- 1938), vol. 3, p. 57. 2. 3.
3. Hamas Charter, Article 7. See also ADL Blog: www.Hamas in its own words, Publ. 10.1.2024).
4. Hamas Charter, Article 13.
5. Saul Newman, “Political Theology.” In: Gerard Delanty and Stephen P. Turner, eds. *Routledge International Handbook of Contemporary Social and Political Theory* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021), p.1.
6. Rachael Bunyan, *Mail on Line* (News section), 24th October 2023.