

Wiping Out the Enemy

Shabbat Zachor 5784

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Jews have always had enemies.

In case we needed to be reminded, the calendar tells us that, on Sunday, we should celebrate joyously that Esther and Mordecai saved our people from annihilation in ancient Persia.

In case we needed to be reminded, the Shabbat that immediately precedes Purim is called, *Shabbat Zachor*, the Shabbat of Remembrance, intended to remind us. And what are we to remember? Just as we've begun Leviticus, we turn to Deuteronomy and read that, when the Israelites were wandering in the desert, "famished and weary," the Amalekites attacked "and cut down all the stragglers in your rear." We are commanded not to forget!ⁱ

In case we needed to be reminded, this week's Haftarah introduces the dire consequences of letting even one of our enemies survive. King Saul is commanded to wipe out all the aforementioned Amalekites—men, women, and children, explicitly including infants. He nearly does that, but he takes the king, Agag, captive alive. As punishment for that negligence, God rejects Saul as Israel's king,ⁱⁱ ultimately replacing him with David.

The Haftarah foreshadows the Book of Esther, where Haman is introduced as an "Agagite,"ⁱⁱⁱ a descendant of Amalekite King Agag, whom King Saul failed to kill. A sixteenth century rabbinic commentator teaches that the only reason we are told of Haman's lineage is to remind us of the consequence of failing to wipe out the Amalekites.^{iv}

Esther tries to finish the task. She successfully asks the king to have Haman's sons impaled, without evidence that they conspired with their father against the Jews. Perhaps she is trying to wipe out the last of the Amalekites. And she's not alone. The Jews kill some eight hundred of their enemies in the capital, Shushan, and another seventy-five thousand throughout the king's provinces.^v

The Hebrew Bible is clear about how to prevent Jew-hatred: Kill them all!

With all due respect to sacred scripture, though, the perspective of another twenty-five hundred years teaches us that it doesn't work. If killing nearly seventy-six thousand, including Haman's sons, had ended antisemitism once and for all, we would rejoice, knowing our losses to Jew-hatred in the two-plus millennia that followed. Instead, attempting to wipe out our enemies by killing them is an endless game of whack-a-mole. In every age, a new enemy arises, and antisemitism reemerges in ways that are new, even as they fit patterns that have been around since before Haman burst onto the scene. Perhaps the real lesson of *Shabbat Zachor* is that killing Jew-haters is infinitely easier than killing Jew-hatred.

This weekend, we celebrate Purim, but we also mark the thirtieth anniversary of a horrific massacre at the Cave of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs, a site holy to both Jews and Muslims in Hebron, in the Israel-occupied West Bank. Baruch Goldstein, an American-born Israeli and right-wing zealot, entered that sacred place and opened fire on unarmed Muslims at prayer, murdering twenty-nine and wounding one hundred twenty-five before being beaten to death^{vi}

After the massacre, the *Washington Post* reported that a rabbi, standing over Goldstein's grave, insisted, "Everything he did was" to serve God. "'He saved us,' a scarred woman" told the reporter. Miriam Goldstein, Baruch's mother, "repeated a story: The Arabs of Hebron had been planning an attack. Baruch heard about it and staged a preemptive strike." Never mind that the Israel Defense Force knew of no such threat.^{vii} Goldstein was no more successful than the Jews of ancient Persia before him at putting an end to antisemitism or attempts to destroy the State of Israel and its people.

Instead, antisemitism continues to flourish on the extremes, right and left, worldwide, while Israelis and those who live among them are hit hardest, with more than twelve hundred brutally murdered on October 7th and some one hundred thirty still held hostage under unspeakable conditions, if they are still alive, in the tunnels of Gaza. Over fourteen hundred Israeli soldiers have fallen in action since Israel's assault on the terrorist enemy, Hamas. Israel is also experiencing a painful reality that America learned in its wars in Afghanistan and Iraq after 9/11: Thanks to modern medicine and surgery, fewer soldiers are killed in action, but the numbers wounded are far greater, and their injuries are considerably more devastating. For months, we have been praying for the healing of Yaakov Tyberg, nephew of our Director of Lifelong Learning Emerita, Ellyn Polsky. Yaakov took fire to his hip and femoral artery—which, once he was no longer in mortal danger, have impaired his mobility. He has undergone countless surgeries, with no end in sight.

The Israel Defense Force is waging a just war, responding to terror. The twin goals are worthy—destroying Hamas's capability to continue terrorizing Israelis and freeing the hostages. Much more than that, though, is less clear. Are those two goals aligned; that is, does the full-fledged assault on Gaza decrease the likelihood of hostage release? Still more problematic: Even if the offensive capability of Hamas can be uprooted, and Hamas can be dislodged from ruling Gaza, what will "the day after" look like? Who will govern Gaza, and how? Will an exhausted Jewish State and its military face an assault from an equally heinous and well-armed enemy in the north, Iran-sponsored Hezbollah? Will Israel, having killed tens of thousands of people—Hamas fighters, sympathizers, and civilians, including children—have made the next generation of its enemies even more determined to kill Jews and destroy the Jewish state? *Shabbat Zachor* teaches: Killing Jew-haters does not kill Jew-hatred.

And what of all the Palestinians whose lives have been ended by the Israeli assault? Yes, that blood is on Hamas's hands. As my teacher Micah Goodman taught us in the days after October 7, Hamas is as immoral on defense as it is on offense, placing its weapons and terrorist leaders among, below, and on top of the civilian population. By Hamas's design, Israel's perfectly legitimate, targeted strikes on Hamas assets kill more civilians than terrorists.

However, if we stop thinking about the deaths of Palestinian civilians after insisting that Hamas is to blame, we have failed. I, too, have been indifferent to the slaughter and starvation, and I am ashamed of that. For Israeli soldiers, that blindness may be required to do what they must. However, the extreme right-wing leadership of a nation where the Minister of Homeland Security had a portrait of Baruch Goldstein on his wall,^{viii} a nation where, a year ago, six months before October 7th, ten percent of poll respondents said that Baruch Goldstein was a "national hero" while "about a third of respondents didn't know whether to regard him as a terrorist or a national hero,"^{ix} cannot be trusted to kill as many Palestinians as they like, imagining that killing more enemies will end deadly and violent hatred of Israel and the Jewish people.

I am not a military expert or analyst. Benny Gantz and Gadi Eisenkot, by contrast, are former IDF Chiefs of Staff and leaders of the centrist National Union Party that joined the government after October 7. Eisenkot, whose son and nephew have been killed in the current war, has said, “We need to stop lying to ourselves, to show courage and work towards an extensive deal that will bring the hostages home. Their time is running out, and every day that goes by is putting their lives in danger.”^x And that was in mid-January.

Like King Saul and Queen Esther before them, Israel’s current leaders have not wiped out the enemies of the Children of Israel. The goal is as worthy as it is unattainable. Still, Esther and Mordecai achieved much, and we have reason to celebrate on Purim. The imminent threat was removed. The danger was postponed. Even partial or temporary victories are victories. As the *megillah* tells us: ויקר ושמחה וששן ויקר, “The Jews enjoyed light and gladness, happiness and honor.”^{xi} May that be Israel’s blessing, and the blessing of all the Jewish people, again, speedily and soon, in our own day.

Amen.

ⁱ Deuteronomy 25:17-19.

ⁱⁱ I Samuel 15:1-26.

ⁱⁱⁱ Esther 3:1.

^{iv} *Yesha Elohim* to Esther 3:1.

^v Esther 9:1-16.

^{vi} Tzvi Joffre, “10% of Israeli Jews think terrorist Baruch Goldstein is a ‘national hero’ – poll,” *The Jerusalem Post*, March 6, 2023, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/article-733523>.

^{vii} Laura Blumenfeld, “A Time to Kill: Baruch Goldstein Practiced Medicine—and Murder—by the Book,” *The Washington Post*, March 20, 1994, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1994/03/20/a-time-to-kill/8ff1f7d1-ad8a-4c30-8720-ad8062501fd4/>.

^{viii} “Ben Gvir responds to Bennett: Fine, I’ll take down Baruch Goldstein’s picture,” *The Times of Israel*, January 15, 2020, https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/ben-gvir-responds-to-bennett-fine-ill-take-down-baruch-goldsteins-picture/.

^{ix} Joffre.

^x “Eisenkot, Gantz said to urge hostage deal for long halt to war; PM, Gallant opposed,” *The Times of Israel*, January 15, 2024, https://www.timesofisrael.com/eisenkot-gantz-said-to-urge-hostage-deal-for-long-halt-to-war-pm-gallant-opposed/?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=twitter.

^{xi} Esther 8:16.