

The Mitzva of Amalek in the Book of Shmuel Aleph

1. I Shmuel 15:2–3

כֹּה אָמַר ה' צְבָאוֹת פְּקֻדָּתִי אֶת אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה עִמָּלֶק לְיִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר שָׁם לוֹ בְּדֶרֶךְ בְּעֵלְתּוֹ מִמִּצְרַיִם: עֲתָה לָךְ וְהִכִּיתָ אֶת עִמָּלֶק וְהִחַרְמְתָם אֶת כָּל אֲשֶׁר לוֹ וְלֹא תִחַמַּל עָלָיו וְהִמַּתָּה מֵאִישׁ עַד אִשָּׁה מֵעַלְל וְעַד יוֹנֵק מִשׁוֹר וְעַד שָׂה מִגָּמֶל וְעַד חֲמוֹר.

"Thus says the LORD of Hosts: I have taken note of what Amalek did to Israel, how he laid a plot for him on the way, when he came up from Egypt. Now go and strike Amalek and put under the ban all that he has; do not spare him, but kill man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and donkey."

2. Rashi, Devarim 25:19, s.v. "Timcheh et zeher Amalek"

מֵאִישׁ וְעַד אִשָּׁה מֵעַלְל וְעַד יוֹנֵק מִשׁוֹר וְעַד שָׂה (ש"מ"א טו, ג). שְׁלֹא יִהְיֶה שֵׁם עִמָּלֶק נִזְכָּר אֶפְלוּ עַל הַבְּהֵמָה, לוֹמַר בְּהֵמָה זוֹ מְשֻׁלַּ עִמָּלֶק הִיָּתָה.

"From man to woman, from infant to suckling, from ox to sheep (I Samuel 15:3) — so that the name of Amalek should not be mentioned even in reference to an animal, [to prevent people] from saying, 'This animal belonged to Amalek.'"

3. Devarim 25:17–19

זָכוֹר אֶת אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה לָךְ עִמָּלֶק בְּדֶרֶךְ בְּצֵאתְכֶם מִמִּצְרַיִם: אֲשֶׁר קָרָךְ בְּדֶרֶךְ וַיִּזְנֵב בָּךְ כָּל הַנֶּחֱשָׁלִים אַחֲרֶיךָ וְאַתָּה עֵיף וְיָגַע וְלֹא יָרָא אֱלֹהִים: וְהָיָה בְּהִנִּיחֲךָ לָךְ מִכָּל אִיבֶיךָ מִסָּבִיב בְּאַרְצְךָ אֲשֶׁר ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן לָךְ נַחֲלָה לְרִשְׁתָּהּ תִּמְחָה אֶת זָכְרָ עִמָּלֶק מִתַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם לֹא תִשְׁכַּח.

"Remember what Amalek did to you on the way, as you were leaving Egypt — how he met you on the way and cut down all the stragglers at your rear, when you were faint and weary, and he did not fear God. Therefore, when the LORD your God grants you rest from all your enemies around you, in the land which the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget."

4. Sifrei Devarim, Piska 296 (gloss 6, Vilna Gaon version)

נִשְׁבַּע הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא בְּכֶסֶד הַכְּבוֹד שְׁלוֹ, שְׁלֹא יִנִּיחַ נִין וְנֶכֶד שֶׁל עִמָּלֶק וְלֹא גָמֶל וְלֹא חֲמוֹר תַּחַת כָּל הַשָּׁמַיִם, שְׁלֹא יֵאמְרוּ גָמֶל זֶה שֶׁל עִמָּלֶק.

"The Holy One, blessed be He, swore by His Throne of Glory that He would not leave a descendant or grandchild of Amalek — nor even a camel or a donkey — under all the heavens, so that people should not say, 'This camel belonged to Amalek.'"

5. Rambam, Laws of Kings and Their Wars, Chapter 5, Halachot 4–5

הלכה ד: מִצְוַת עֲשֵׂה לַהֲחָרִים שְׂבָעָה עֲמֻמִּין, שְׁנֵאמַר "הַחֲרֹם תַּחְרִימֵם", וְכָל שֶׁבָא לִידּוֹ אֶחָד מֵהֶן וְלֹא הִרְגּוֹ – עוֹבֵר בְּלֹא תַעֲשֶׂה, שְׁנֵאמַר "לֹא תַחֲיֶה כָל נֶשְׁמָה", וַיִּכָּר אֲבֹד זָכָר.

הלכה ה: וְכֵן מִצְוַת עֲשֵׂה לְאַבֵּד זָכָר עִמָּלֶק, שְׁנֵאמַר "תִּמְחָה אֶת זָכָר עִמָּלֶק", וּמִצְוַת עֲשֵׂה לְזָכֹר תִּמְכִּיד מַעֲשֵׂיו הָרָעִים וְאַרְיֵיתוֹ כְּדִי לַעֲוֹרֵר אִיבָתוֹ, שְׁנֵאמַר "זָכוֹר אֶת אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה לָךְ עִמָּלֶק". מִפִּי הַשְּׁמוּעָה לְמַדּוֹ: "זָכוֹר" בִּפְהָ, "לֹא תִשְׁכַּח" בְּלֵב, שְׁאִסּוֹר לְשַׁכַּח אִיבָתוֹ וְשִׁנְאָתוֹ.

Halacha 4: *"It is a positive commandment to place the seven [Canaanite] nations under the ban, as it is said, 'You shall utterly destroy them.' And anyone who has one of them in his power and does not kill him transgresses a*

Halacha 5: "Likewise it is a positive commandment to destroy the memory of Amalek, as it is said, 'You shall blot out the memory of Amalek.' And it is a positive commandment to constantly remember his evil deeds and his ambush, in order to arouse hostility toward him, as it is said, 'Remember what Amalek did to you.' From the oral tradition they learned: 'Remember' — with the mouth; 'do not forget' — in the heart, for it is forbidden to forget his enmity and hatred."

"This matter — that even the animals must be killed — is not stated explicitly in the Rambam, and I do not know from where Rashi derived it... And from the incident with Shaul there is no proof, for the Holy One, blessed be He, commanded him at that time through Shmuel; but that this should be a commandment for [all] generations, we have not heard."

"The third question concerns what He commanded him: 'and put under the ban all that he has,' etc., 'and kill man and woman,' etc., 'infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.' Now, the divine Torah commanded that we destroy the memory of Amalek, but it did not command that we place under the ban all that belongs to him, nor did it forbid his spoil to Israel — indeed it is good that they should eat his spoil and also place it among their own possessions. It is therefore difficult: why, then, did the prophet Shmuel add to his punishment by forbidding the spoil in this instance?"

"And Shaul said to Shmuel: I have sinned, for I have transgressed the command of the LORD and your words, because I feared the people and heeded their voice."

10. Emet L'Yaakov (Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky), I Shmuel 15

מדוע אמר שעבר גם על פי ה' וגם על דברי הנביא והרי לכאורה הנביא לא אמר לו איזה דבר שאינו כבר מצוה מן התורה, למחות את זכר עמלק? ... עצם היציאה למלחמה איננה מצוה מחדשת של הנביא! ... ונראה שהנביא חדש כאן צווי על הבהמות ... וזה דבר שלא כתוב בתורה ... ולפי זה יתפרש הפסוק: "כי עברתי את פי ה'" – שלא הרגתי את אגג, "ואת דבריד" – שלא הרגתי את הבהמות.

"Why did he say that he transgressed both the command of the LORD and the words of the prophet, when seemingly the prophet told him nothing that was not already a commandment from the Torah — to blot out the memory of Amalek? ... The very act of going out to war is not itself a new commandment of the prophet! ... It appears that the prophet innovated here a command concerning the animals ... and this is something not written in the Torah ... Accordingly, the verse is to be understood: 'for I transgressed the command of the LORD' — that I did not kill Agag; 'and your words' — that I did not kill the animals."

11. Rashi, I Shmuel 15:3, s.v. "mishor v'ad seh"

שהיו בעלי כשפים ומשניין עצמן ודומין לבהמה.

"For they [the Amalekites] were sorcerers, who would transform themselves and make themselves resemble an animal."

12. Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, "By the Light of Your Countenance They Shall Walk" (Yediot Achronot Publishing), p. 146

שאול נצטוו להשמיד עם שלם – צווי מחריד מבחינה מוסרית. ההצדקה היחידה לכך היא בהיות ההשמדה מלוי של צווי א-להי חד-משמעי. על כן, אלו הנה שאול פועל מכח מניעים של נראות שמים טהורה וציתנות לצווי ה', הנה עליו לקיים את המצוה במדויק ... הרגה היא שהיא הרג את כלם, אבל רחם על עמיתו, על חברו למלכות ... משום שהיא הרג אותם לא בעקבות הצווי הא-להי כשעצמו (שהוא הדבר היחיד שבכחו להתגבר על השקול המוסרי), אלא מתוך חשבונות צבאיים, דיפלומטיים או מדיניים.

"Shaul was commanded to destroy an entire nation — a morally horrifying command. The only justification for this is that the destruction constitutes the fulfillment of an unambiguous divine command. Therefore, had Shaul acted out of motives of pure fear of Heaven and obedience to God's command, he would have had to carry out the commandment precisely... The proof is that he killed everyone, yet had mercy on his counterpart, his fellow monarch [Agag]... because he killed them not on account of the divine command in itself — which is the only thing capable of overriding the moral consideration — but rather out of military, diplomatic, or political calculations."

13. Rabbi Yaakov Medan, "The Renewing Scriptures," Herzog College, Tevunot, p. 322

השלל ואסופו עוד בשלבים הראשונים של המלחמה, הם מרשם ברור להכשלת יעדי המלחמה כלה. צבאו של שאול מגיע לעיר עמלק, מפה אותה בקרב, ובמקום לנצל את הצלחתו מבחינה צבאית, לרדף אחרי החילים הנמלטים ... העדיף צבא שאול לנצל את הנצחון בעיר עמלק לצרכי אישיים של בזה ושלל, והפסיד בכך את יתרונו במלחמה כלה. עמלק נשאר להציק לישובי דרום יהודה ולישובי הנגב ... מלחמת עמלק דממה בכך לקודמתה, מלחמת מכמש, שהעם עטה בה על השלל, נותר לסעד את לבו בבשר על הדם, ואבד את מרצו הגופני ואת פחו המוסרי להמשיך לרדף אחרי פלשתים.

"The spoil and its collection, already in the early stages of the war, were a clear recipe for the failure of the war's entire objectives. Shaul's army reaches the city of Amalek, strikes it in battle, and instead of exploiting its military success to pursue the fleeing soldiers... Shaul's army preferred to exploit the victory at the city of Amalek for the personal needs of plunder and spoil, and thereby lost its advantage in the war as a whole. Amalek remained to harass the settlements of southern Judah and the settlements of the Negev... The war against Amalek thus resembled its predecessor, the battle of Michmas, in which the people pounced on the spoil, stopped to feast on meat with the blood, and lost their physical energy and their moral strength to continue pursuing the Philistines."

14. Chiddushei HaGriz on the Torah, p. 108

וְנִרְאָה מְכָרָח מְזֵה, שְׂאָף עַל פִּי שְׂמִלְחָמָת עֲמָלֵק הוּא אֶחָד מִגִּ' מִצְוֹת שֶׁנֶּצְטִיב יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּכַנִּיסָתוֹ לָאָרֶץ, אִין מְחִיבִין רַק בְּנִבְיָאָה שְׂמִלְחָמוֹ אֲתָם. דָּאֵם לֹא כֵן לָמָּה נִצְטָרְכוּ כָּאן לְצִוּי מִיַּחַד, וּמִבָּאָר זֶה בִּקְרָא דְכִתְיֵב (בְּשַׁלַּח יז, טז) "מִלְחָמָה לֵה' בְּעֲמָלֵק", דְּמִלְחָמָה עַל פִּי ה' הִיא.

English:

"And it appears necessarily from this, that although the war against Amalek is one of the three commandments Israel was commanded upon their entry into the Land, they are only obligated [to wage it] by way of prophecy instructing them to fight. For if not so, why was a special command needed here [through Shmuel]? And this is made clear in the verse (Beshalach, Exodus 17:16), 'The LORD will be at war with Amalek' — meaning, this is a war conducted by the word of God."
