

This weekend, many of us are reliving moments from ten years ago. Especially here in Hoboken, where our city lost so many people, and our congregation lost one of our members, Jeffrey Gardner z”l, and numerous relatives and friends of members. Everything seemed to change for us that day, from the rhythms of our lives, to our assumptions and fears.

As often happens on anniversaries, I find myself reliving the memories. Memories of where I was when I heard the news, as a much younger and greener rabbi of this congregation. Memories of calling everyone in the community to find out who was accounted for among the many people in our community who worked at the World Trade Center, and who was not yet accounted for. Memories of people from our synagogue opening their homes that Tuesday night to people who had been displaced from Battery Park City, so they wouldn’t have to stay in public shelters. And memories of that first Shabbat after 9/11 in our synagogue, when every single person who came up for an aliyah - a torah honor -- recited the *birkat ha-gomel*, the blessing one recites after a brush with danger, because every single person had been either in the towers or in their vicinity that day.

Conveniently, amid all this remembering, yesterday’s Torah portion, Parashat Ki Tetzai, includes a section about remembering, and specifically about remembering what an enemy did to you.

We read, *Zachor et asher asah lecha amalek baderekh be-tzeitchem mi-mitzrayim*. “Remember what the nation of Amalek did to you when you were on your way out of Egypt.”

What did the nation of Amalek do? *Vayezanev bekha kol ha-neheshalim aharekha*. “They attacked you from the rear, attacking the stragglers and the weakest among you.”

The Torah describes all kinds of conflicts that the Israelites had with various other peoples in the course of journeying from Egypt to the promised land. Only the Amalekites are singled out for special opprobrium. And the Torah tells us the reason: they attacked from the rear; specifically attacking those who were most vulnerable. We have a word for this, of course: “terrorism.” Targeted attacks on civilians, rather than on the military targets which would be a fairer fight. It made us furious then, and it makes us furious now. It was categorically unjustified then, and it is categorically unjustified now, no matter what the grievance, no matter who the perpetrators. And it’s the reason why the Torah continues with the injunction to “blot out the memory of Amalek from under the heavens; do not forget.” One of the lessons of 9/11 must be that truly, there is dangerous hatred in our world. And the deliberate targeting of civilians is never acceptable, whether it’s happening in the United States, in England, in Israel, in Iraq, or anywhere else.

But the Torah’s message is more complex and multivalent than that. The Torah tells us: “Blot out the memory of Amalek from under the heavens.” That’s a scary commandment. In the biblical era, that commandment was interpreted as a

responsibility to utterly obliterate the people of Amalek, to wipe them out, as a response to what they did to our people.

But for the last two thousand years, this is emphatically NOT how this commandment has usually been understood. Already by the Talmudic era, 2000 years ago, it was considered terribly ethically problematic to destroy a people for something that its ancestors had done. And the commandment to blot out the memory of Amalek began to be understood not literally, but symbolically. Gradually, it stopped being a commandment about a particular tribe, and it started to be an injunction about how to confront aggressive violence in general. Eventually, in the last few centuries, mystical and Hasidic sources reinterpreted the commandment again, classifying the struggle against Amalek as primarily an internal struggle - against the Amalek-like tendencies that we all have within ourselves.

So a second lesson from the Torah about remembering what our enemy did to us – is to make sure you have figured out exactly who that enemy is, and who that enemy is not.

Some of us may have seen the Pew Research Center's recent study of the opinions of American Muslims, just released last week. (See <http://people-press.org/files/2011/08/muslim-american-report.pdf>) And it shows that American Muslims reject extremism by very wide margins, and by and large they have dreams and values that are not significantly different from any other American group. That's not to say that the survey did not identify some challenges of that community. In fact, nearly 50% of those American Muslims who were surveyed said that in their opinion, American Muslim leaders have not done as much as they should have in speaking out against Muslim extremists. As this has been an issue of concern for me, it is useful to know that so many American Muslims are similarly concerned. But, of course, that is a statistic that highlights something that I wish all Americans knew by now: that the problem here is not the American Muslim community as a whole, but a small number of radicals. And we'll be most effective in countering terrorism if we keep the focus on the people who are actually dangerous.

And finally: the passage in our torah portion includes an unusual contradiction. On the one hand, we read, "Remember what Amalek did to you." On the other hand, we read "Blot out the memory of Amalek from under the heavens." One passage tells us to remember, and one passage tells us to erase a memory. Perhaps the Torah is telling us through these two verses that we must be judicious about what we choose to remember most vividly.

Immediately after 9/11, my colleague Rabbi Regina Sandler-Phillips started to work with the Red Cross at the NYC Family Assistance Center in lower Manhattan, assisting the thousands of families who had lost loved ones. These are some words she wrote last week:

When I think of September 11th, 2001, the primary image that comes to mind is not the relentless images of airplanes crashing or buildings collapsing in flame.

The primary image that comes to my mind is the "Walk of Bears."

At the Family Assistance Center set up by the city, an entire wall at one end of the huge complex was designated as the "Walk of Bears." Posted signs explained that the many stuffed bears of all shapes, sizes and colors arranged on the floor against this wall were a gift from the people of Oklahoma City, and were not to be removed.

The shipment had arrived on September 19th, 2001. One of the signs explained that, after the horrific explosion at the Oklahoma City Federal Building, in 1995, survivors and disaster relief workers began to find teddy bears left on the chain-link fence. No one knew who was leaving these bears, but they kept showing up. The people of Oklahoma City decided that it was time for the people of New York City to take comfort in these bears.

Every day, the Walk of Bears would be visited by family members and friends, law enforcement officials, support agency staff and disaster relief volunteers. People came to write and read messages on the wall, to meditate, to cry, to reflect, to honor the memories... to tell and hear stories... [It became] a place of reverence."

The people of Oklahoma City responded to their experience of pain by reaching out to others - and of course that's another way that we all can 'blot out the memory of Amalek from under the heavens."

May we respond to this anniversary by acting with a balance of vigilance and love -- because it is both love and vigilance together that will protect us from Amalek in our world and in our own selves.

Rabbi Robert Scheinberg
United Synagogue of Hoboken
September 11, 2011