

Dear Chavraya,

The Torah portion this week is *Parashat Ki Tetze/When you go forth*. These are the opening words of the *parasha* and are addressed to those going forth to battle. As the ultimate failure in human relationships, war is set as the backdrop for a Torah portion that then goes on to teach *mitzvot* designed to insure justice and wellbeing for all members of society, with particular concern for the most vulnerable. The *parasha* concludes with the passage concerning *Amalek*, a passage that is read again on the Shabbos before Purim. Attacking Israel at our weakest, in the desert just after leaving Egypt, massacring stragglers, both old and young, *Amalek* becomes a symbol in Jewish tradition of brutality and violence. We are told at the beginning of this passage, *Zachor-Remember what Amalek did to you*. At the end of the passage we are told, *Lo tishkach-Do not forget*.

The very last sentence before the *Amalek* passage in *Ki Tetze* ends with the word *avel/injustice*. This sentence is a warning to us, to the people of Israel, not to countenance in ourselves, individually and collectively, any degree of dishonesty or injustice in our relationships with others. In a word play on *avel*, with a slight change in vowels, the same Hebrew letters form the word, *ol/yoke*. Jewish tradition speaks of the *Ol Malchut Shamayim/the Yoke of Heaven's Sovereignty*. A yoke of conscience and commitment joins us to God's ultimate values, harnessing our moral energy in the service of the highest good, human wellbeing. When the *Yoke of Heaven* is broken the *ol* becomes *avel* and we become as *Amalek*.

Drawing on the first and last words of the *Amalek* passage, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, the nineteenth century founder of *Neo-Orthodoxy* in Germany, speaks with a voice of moral clarity that is so needed today. I share with you for Shabbat reflection Rabbi Hirsch's inspiring commentary, an offering of moral wisdom to guide us forth not to war, but to a world of peace and justice.

Zachor/Remember. The avoidance of any avel, any misuse of one's position of power..., requires the refusal to violate the trust that one human being must be able to place in another for human coexistence; the firm conviction that we may call God "our God" only as long as we scrupulously avoid doing even the slightest wrong to our fellow human beings on earth.... That nation whose character should reflect sympathy, consideration, charity and kindness toward all living things – a nation which must be ready at all times to do good, must be prevented by the Law, first and foremost, from doing harm to anyone.

Lo tishkach/do not forget. Do not forget this if you should ever falter and, like Amalek, forget God and your duty.... Do not forget this... if ever you should envy the laurel wreaths woven by a besotted world... and if ever you should forget the tear-drenched soil from which such laurels grow. Do not forget this.... Remain firm! Persevere.... Justice and humanity will forever triumph over brutality and violence, and you yourself have been sent to proclaim that future by your fate and to help bring about that future by your personal example.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor