



Where Does Amalek Come From?

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The Torah describes: “Amalek came and fought with Israel at Refidim” (Exodus 17:8). Where does Amalek come from? What is the context out of which this war begins?

I. He simply “came”

“Amalek came and fought.” Sometimes the threatening, the combative, the evil—simply arrives. Ostensibly, there is no reason. Perhaps this is part of the very nature of evil: it arrives without context, without warning, and without any visible cause. It is simply there: “And they came!”

II. “He came... to Refidim”

The verse provides a clue to the context of Amalek’s arrival. That clue lies in the location where the war takes place: Refidim. The preceding verses recount the events that transpired at Refidim:



שמות יז:א-ג,ה-ז

¹וַיֵּסְעוּ כָּל עַדְת בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל ... וַיַּחֲנוּ בְּרִפְדִּים וְאִין מַיִם לְשִׁתָּת הָעָם: ²וַיִּרְבּוּ הָעָם עִם מֹשֶׁה ... וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם מֹשֶׁה ... מַה תִּנְסֹן אֶת ה': ³וַיִּצְמָא שָׁם הָעָם לַמַּיִם וַיֵּלֶן הָעָם עַל מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר לָמָּה זֶה הָעֲלִיתָנוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם לְהָמִית אֹתִי וְאֶת בְּנֵי וְאֶת מִקְנֵי בְּצָמָא: ... ⁵וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה עֲבֹר לִפְנֵי הָעָם וְקַח אֶתֶּךָ מִזִּקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וּמִטֶּקֶן אֲשֶׁר הִכִּיתָ בּוֹ אֶת הַיָּאֵר קַח בְּיָדְךָ וְהִלַּכְתָּ: ⁶ ... וְהִכִּיתָ בַּצּוּר וַיֵּצְאוּ מִמֶּנּוּ מַיִם: ... ⁷וַיִּקְרָא שֵׁם הַמָּקוֹם מִסֵּה וּמִרִיבָה עַל רִיב בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְעַל נִסְתָּם אֶת ה' לֵאמֹר הֲיֵשׁ ה' בְּקִרְבָּנוּ אִם אֵין.

Exodus 17:1-3,5-7

¹The whole Israelite community set out... and camped at Refidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. ²The people quarreled with Moshe... and Moshe said to them... "Why do you test God?" ³The people thirsted there for water, and the people complained against Moshe and said, "Why did you bring us up from Egypt to kill me and my children and my livestock with thirst?" ... ⁵God said to Moshe, "Pass before the people... and strike the rock and water shall come out of it." ... ⁶He called the name of the place Massah and Meribah, because of the quarrel of the Israelites and because they tested God, saying: "Is God in our midst or not?"

The site of the war is the very place where Israel tests God. The background for Amalek's arrival is the people's quarrel with God and their doubt.

Various *midrashim* explain the significance of Refidim. For example, Midrash Sekhel Tov¹ teaches:

מדרש שכל טוב שמות יז:א

למה נקרא שמה רפידים? שרפו ידיהם מן המצות שנצטוו במרה ופירשו מן התורה, ולפיכך בא השונא עליהם, שאין השונא בא אלא על חטא ועל העבירה.

¹ A collection by R. Menahem ben Shlomo from 12th century Italy.

Midrash Sekhel Tov to Exodus 17:1

Why was it called Refidim? Because they weakened their hands (*rafu yadeihem*) from the commandments they were given at Marah and they turned away from the Torah.

Therefore, the enemy came upon them, for the enemy only comes because of sin and transgression.

According to this *midrash*, Amalek's arrival is the result of a moral and spiritual failure on the part of the Israelites. It presents a principled stance: the “approaching enemy”—war and struggle—emerges against a backdrop of sin.

A *midrash* in Pesikta de-Rav Kahana² describes a different type of weakness:

פסיקתא דרב כהנא ג

אמר לוי למה היו ישראל דומין? לאחד שהיה לו בן והרכיבו על כתיפו והיה מוליכו בשוק והיה הבן רואה דבר של חפץ ואומר לאביו, קח לי זה. והוא לוקח לו, פעם ראשונה ופעם שנייה, ופעם שלישי ראה הבן אדם, אמר לו: ראית את אבי? אמר לו: שוטה! אתה רוכב על כתיפיי וכל מה שאתה מבקש אני לוקח לך ואתה אומר לזה 'ראית את אבי'?! מה עשה אביו, השליכו מעל כתיפו, בא כלב ונשכו. כך כשיצאו ישראל ממצרים, הקיפו הקדוש ברוך הוא בז' ענני כבוד... בקשו מן נתן להם, שליו נתן להם. כיון שנתן להם כל צרכיהם התחילו מהרהרין ואומרים, 'היש ה' בקרבנו אם אין' (שמות יז: ז). אמר להם הקדוש ברוך הוא הרהרתם עלי, חייכם שאני מודיע לכם, הרי הכלב ונשך אתכם. ואי זה? זה עמלק, שנאמר: 'ויבא עמלק' (שם, ח).

Pesikta de-Rav Kahana 3

Levi said: To what were Israel comparable? To a father who had a son and carried him on his shoulders through the marketplace. Whenever the son saw something he desired, he said to his father, “Buy it for me,” and he bought it for him—a first and a second time. But the third time, the son then saw a man and said to him, “Have you seen my father?” The father said to him, “You fool! You are riding on my shoulders, and everything you request I

² A collection from 6th century Eretz Yisrael.



buy for you, and yet you say to this one, ‘Have you seen my father?’” What did the father do? He cast him off his shoulders, and a dog came and bit him.

So it was when Israel left Egypt. The Holy Blessed One, surrounded them with seven clouds of glory... they asked for manna, and God gave it to them. Once God had provided all their needs, they began to criticize and say, “Is God in our midst or not?” The Holy Blessed One said to them, “You criticize Me? By your lives, I will let you know—here, the dog is coming to bite you.” And who is this? This is Amalek, as it is said, “And Amalek came.”

The *midrash* explains that Israel experienced a moment of total lack of awareness regarding the magnitude and power of the divine gifts. Amalek’s arrival was a response to this cognitive and spiritual weakness.

The verses in Deuteronomy (25:18) that describe the war with Amalek hint at this as well: “How he surprised you on the road and cut down all the stragglers in your rear, when you were faint and weary, and did not fear God.” The Mekhilta clarifies: “‘And he did not fear God’—this refers to Israel, who had no commandments in their hands” (Massekhta de-Amalek 1).

Amalek arrives when Israel is in a state of weakness (*rifyon*), at a low point, failing to uphold their obligations, their values, and their relationship with the God who brought them out of Egypt.

III. It was Israel who “came”

While the verse describes Amalek as coming to the place where Israel was, we must remember who was actually new to this space. The true newcomers to the wilderness were the Israelites, who had only recently arrived from Egypt. The biblical scholar and commentator



Nahum Sarna suggests that the Amalekites likely interpreted the sudden appearance of Israel in the wilderness as a strategic threat—a challenge to their control over vital trade routes and the region’s scarce resources.³ From this perspective, their brutal attack was a reaction to a perceived intrusion.

This reading encourages us to pause and consider the perspective of the “Other”—even when that other is Amalek. It invites us to ask: How are we perceived in their eyes? Furthermore, it raises a profound question: Is it possible that the Torah attributes the start of the conflict to Amalek (“And he came... and he fought”) because of the sheer cruelty of his reaction to a stranger entering his living space? Perhaps the “coming” refers not to who arrived at the geographic coordinate first, but to who initiated the transition from presence to warfare.

IV. Esav’s grandson “came”

A final possibility is that Amalek arrives out of a deep historical context—emerging not merely from the wilderness, but from an ancient, tangled knot of kinship with Israel. This is not Amalek’s first appearance in the Torah:

בראשית לו:יב

תִּמְנָע הָיְתָה פִּילְגֵשׁ לְאֵלִיפָז בֶּן יִעֲשׂוּ וַתֵּלֶד לְאֵלִיפָז אֶת עַמְלֵק אֵלֶּה בְּנֵי עֵדָה אִשְׁתּוֹ יִעֲשׂוּ:

Genesis 36:12

Timna was a concubine of Eliphaz, Esav’s son; she bore Amalek to Eliphaz. These were the descendants of Adah, Esav’s wife.

³ “The Amalekites interpreted the sudden appearance of the Israelites in this region as a menacing encroachment upon their territory and as a threat to their control of the oases and trading routes. The Amalekites thereupon savagely attacked the Israelites.” Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus*, p. 95. Thank you to Daniel Roth for pointing me to the interpretation.



Amalek is a descendant of Esav, the son of his son's concubine. As we remember, the relationship between the twin brothers, Ya'akov and Esav, was profoundly charged. Ya'akov disguised himself as Esav to secure the primary blessing from their father: "Ya'akov said to his father, 'I am Esav, your firstborn; I have done as you told me. Pray sit up and eat of my game, so that you may give me your innermost blessing'" (Genesis 27:19).⁴

Midrash Lekah Tov⁵ directly links this family history to the battle in the wilderness:

מדרש לקח טוב דברים כה:יח

שנזדמן לך לנקום נקמת אבי אביו, דכתיב "וישטם עשו את יעקב" (בראשית כז:מא) – אמר: בא עת לנקום נקמת זקננו.

Midrash Lekah Tov to Deuteronomy 25:18

It happened that you [Amalek] were destined to avenge the vengeance of your father's father. As it is written: "Esav harbored a grudge against Ya'akov" (Genesis 27:41); Amalek said, "The time has come to avenge the vengeance of our grandfather and ancestors."

This *midrash* chooses to assume that Amalek has their own motivation—one that is both personal and national—to attack Israel. It invokes the memory of the stolen blessing, suggesting that when Israel stands before Amalek, they do so not only as the heirs of their ancestors' merits (*zekhut avot*), but also as the inheritors of their ancestors' unresolved conflicts and grievances.⁶

⁴ Indeed, Esav's sale of the birthright is in the background (Genesis 25:29-31).

⁵ A collection by R. Tuviah bar R. Elazar from late 11th century Greece and the Balkans.

⁶ The Abarbanel draws a direct line between Amalek's sudden appearance in the wilderness and the event of the stolen blessings: "It is explained here that Amalek would be a hater and an enemy to Israel. This was because Amalek was the son of Eliphaz, the son of Esav, and he was well aware of the matter of the blessings with which Yitzhak had blessed Ya'akov—specifically, that he had designated Esav to be a servant to Ya'akov whenever Israel held the power of sovereignty. Amalek feared that, given their successful and victorious Exodus from Egypt, that blessing was now on the verge of being fulfilled" (Abarbanel to Exodus 17:8).



V. From where does it begin?

The Torah invites us to understand the war with Amalek through multiple lenses. We do not truly know the ultimate origin of Amalek, where war begins, or from where wickedness first springs.

The multiplicity of lenses suggests reading the conflict with Amalek as an archetypal event that offers us important perspectives on war as part of the human condition. These interpretations of Amalek invite and maybe even demand of us: recognition of the existence of the irrational and evil; to hear the call to responsibility and upholding our own values; recognition that conflict is often grounded in material distress; accounting for historical sediments and legacies. The verses encourage us to reflect on the different ways we encounter evil and conflict in our lives, and teach us to navigate a world in which war erupts.

May the One Who makes peace in the heights make peace upon us.

