

Shabbat Zahor

(Exodus 27:20 – 21:9 and Deuteronomy 25:17-19)

Robert Stone – KNM: 11 March 2017

זְכוֹר אֶת אֲשֶׁר-עָשָׂה לְךָ עַמְלֵק בַּדֶּרֶךְ כְּצֵאתְכֶם מִמִּצְרָיִם:

“Remember what Amalek did to you on the way when you came out of Egypt.”
(Deut. 25:17)

Today, the Shabbat before Purim, is Shabbat Zachor, when our Maftir is the passage from Devarim in which we are commanded to remember Amalek – and of course tonight and tomorrow we will remember Amalek’s descendant, Haman, who was also an enemy of the Jewish people.

But at the end of the passage we read this morning the commandment is to

תְּמַהֵה אֶת-זִכְרֵ עַמְלֵק מִתַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם לֹא תִשְׁכַּח:

‘... you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under the heavens; you shall not forget.’

(Deut. 25:19)

So how can we (a) remember Amalek, (b) blot out his memory and (c) not forget? Well, it’s complicated – which is another way of saying it’s Jewish. There are lots of explanations, but I want to focus on the word זְכוֹר, remember and זִכְרֵ, memory. זִכְרֵ does not only mean to remember. In the Torah it is sometimes used to mean to name, or to mention, which is its original meaning in Akkadian and in Ancient Hebrew. The Arabic word *zkr* similarly means remembrance but it is also used for the Sufi practice of reciting the 99 names of God. So Everett Fox translates זְכוֹר אֶת אֲשֶׁר-עָשָׂה לְךָ עַמְלֵק as “*Bear-in-mind* what Amalek did to you”, while he and many others translate תְּמַהֵה אֶת-זִכְרֵ עַמְלֵק as “You shall blot out the *name* of Amalek”

So, you might say to me, why does this matter to anyone except a pedant? Well it does matter to me because I am a pedant. But it also matters for another reason. I, personally, am not at all sure that a King called Amalek actually, historically massacred the stragglers among the Israelites. Nor, am I at all sure that the story in the book of Esther is literally, historically true. Nor do I believe that the world was created literally as described in Bereshit, even though I say at kiddush every Friday night, and believe, that God gave us the Shabbat זְכוֹר לְמַעַשְׂה בְּרֵאשִׁית, as a remembrance of the work of creation. How can I

“remember” something that I do not believe actually happened? The answer is that the act of זָכַר does not have to be a remembering – it can also, or alternatively mean a bringing to mind, a naming, a mentioning of something. We can bring to mind things that are not literally true, like stories and myths, like Harry Potter or the Iliad or the Mabinogion. Or, for me, many stories in the Torah, which I do not need to believe actually happened in order to bring them to mind. The important point is that even if they are not all historically accurate, they have truth in them. And the truth that is in them is much more important than the historical accuracy of the account.

Which brings us to the issue of truth, אֱמֶת, a very topical subject right now, when people are talking about truth and post-truth. אֱמֶת, truth, is supremely important to Jews. Jeremiah says, *Hashem Elokim Emet* - the Eternal God is truth (Jer. 10:10), while the Talmud, in Tractate Shabbat, says that “Truth is the seal of Hakodesh Baruch Hu.” An explanation of this by Rashi should be read in the light of the tradition embodied in the Sefer Yetsirah that the world was created from the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Rashi points out that אֱמֶת, truth, is formed from *alef*, the first letter of the alphabet, *mem*, the middle letter; and *tav*, the last letter.

So what is truth?, as Pontius Pilate may or may not have said. Well, again, it’s complicated. The Koehler-Baumgartner Lexicon translates the Hebrew word אֱמֶת as 1. firmness or trustworthiness; 2. constancy or duration; 3. faithfulness and 4. truth. The editors, charmingly, say that it is “hard to distinguish” 3 from 2 or 4, hard to distinguish faithfulness from constancy or truth. An interesting way of approaching this, for me, is to consider truth in the light of its opposite, falsehood.

When people utter a falsehood. we normally think that one of two things is happening: either they are making a mistake, they are saying something false because they mistakenly believe it to be true; or they are liars, in other words they saying something false because although they know what the the truth is, they want you to believe something that they know is not the truth. So when Donald Trump utters a falsehood, is he making a mistake or is he lying. The answer, clearly, is often neither. Because there is third category of falsehood that is neither innocent errors, nor is it lies. Here I must ask you to forgive my language, because the best word for this category of falsehood is “bullshit”. Professor Harry Frankfurt is an eminent philosopher, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at Princeton and former Visiting Fellow of

All Souls, Oxford. In 2005 he published a little book called *On Bullshit*. He argues that the essential difference between a liar and a bullshitter is that the liar knows what the truth is, but wants you to think something that they know not to be the truth. The bullshitter, on the other hand, simply doesn't care what the truth is, they don't care whether what they are saying is true or not; they only care about what impression they are making when they speak they only care about the effect of what they are saying. Frankfurt cites an incident when Wittgenstein got annoyed with a colleague for saying something he regarded in this way. Frankfurt interprets Wittgenstein as believing that "Her fault is not that she fails to grasp the truth, but that she is not even trying. ... Her statement is grounded neither in a belief that it is true nor, as a lie must be, in a belief that it is not true. It is just this lack of connection to a concern with truth – this indifference to how things really are – that I regard as the essence of bullshit."

Frankfurt argues that bullshit is worse lies for exactly this reason, that the bullshitter simply has no interest in what the truth is. Frankfurt says that because the liar knows and cares what the truth is, whatever they do with the truth, "telling lies does not tend to unfit a person for telling the truth in the same way that bullshitting tends to. Through excessive indulgence in the latter activity, which involves making assertions without paying attention to anything except what it suits one to say, a person's normal habit of attending to the way things are may become and attenuated or lost."

Donald Trump may tell the truth some of the time and he may lie some of the time, but it seems clear to me that *most* of the time he is bullshitting, that he has no real interest in the truth of what he is saying. If the President of the United States is in the habit of doing something that attenuates or eliminates the normal habit of attending to the way things are, then we are all in deep trouble. And Mr Trump is by no means the only bullshitter in the world today.

For the rest of us, we need to struggle against both lies and bullshit and stand up for the truth, for אמת. That does not only mean upholding facts against falsehoods, but also upholding true values against false values; it does not mean defending the literal truth of "all that you're li'ble to read in the bible, [which] ain't necessarily so", but it does mean upholding what is true and good in the biblical narrative and its lessons, whether you think that they are literally true or you think that at least some of it is myth or fiction.

It has been said that truth is stranger than fiction because it has a better Author.