

## Winning Israel's Election

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When Bibi Netanyahu called for an early election this past year, I have to confess that there was a piece of me that was secretly excited. Putting aside what was best for Israel, how great it would be – I thought – for our kids to experience an election while we were in Israel.

There were about 2000 eligible voters in our yishuv. The day after the election they published the estimated statistics. Voter turnout was 104%. Usually you only get those kinds of numbers in Chicago or Moscow. Eventually, they sent out the corrected number and it was 83%.

Just imagine a community where you could get 83% of people to do anything. So it was quite impressive and a testament to just how much people care about the state of Israel.

But what happened in April is yesterday's news. This morning, I want to talk about the upcoming election on Tuesday.

To get there, I want to wonder aloud with you about a very old question. In our parsha, we meet a whole host of enemies of the Jewish people: Amon, Moav, Edom, Mitzrayim and so on. Each is attached to its own set of laws: Who's allowed to join the Jewish people and who is not.

And the question is: Why is Amalek so categorically different from every other nation? What did Amalek do to warrant a special mitzvah that calls for the erasure of its very memory?

Yes – they attacked us without provocation. But is one ambush worse than hundreds of years of slave labor? By ordering the death of Jewish boys, Pharaoh had functionally attempted to perpetrate genocide. But there's no mitzvah to wipe out the memory of Egypt. In fact the Torah tells us

לא תתעב מצרי כי גר היית בארצו

Why single out Amalek? Clearly, something else is happening here.

There are many mitzvot in Devarim, but I think there's an argument to be made that three themes rise to the fore of the book.

First is Monotheism. Not surprisingly, commandments to serve Hashem are everywhere. Don't follow other gods; follow one God.

הַשְׁמֵר לְךָ פֶּן תִּנְקֹשׁ אֲחֵרִימָם

Don't fall into the trap of paganism; follow Hashem.

Second is the promise of the land. After all, that's the whole trajectory of the journey and the book.

וְעַתָּה יִשְׂרָאֵל שְׁמַע אֶל הַחֻקִּים וְאֶל הַמִּשְׁפָּטִים אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי מְלַמֵּד אֶתְכֶם לַעֲשׂוֹת לְמַעַן תַּחֲיֶיךָ וּבִאתֶם וּרְשַׁתֶּם אֶת הָאָרֶץ  
אֲשֶׁר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם נָתַן לָכֶם.

If you listen, the land will be yours.

And finally, care for the vulnerable. It's the most oft-repeated theme in the Torah. We always have to be on the lookout for those who may not be able to look out for themselves: The literal or figurative widow, orphan and stranger. Like the Torah tells us in our parsha:

לֹא תִטֶּה מִשְׁפַּט גֵּר יְתוֹם וְלֹא תִחַבֵּל כְּגֹד אֶלְמָנָה.

With these three themes in mind, I think it's actually very easy to understand Amalek. We know very little about them. But the few pesukim we do have actually say it all.

Who do they worship? All other peoples in the ancient near east have a god – or many gods. Amon, Re, Baal, Ishtar – there were hundreds of them.

Who's the god of Amalek?

The Torah tells us

וְלֹא יִרָא אֱלֹהִים

וְלֹא יִרָא ה'

It's not that they didn't believe in our God. No one else believed in our God. The point was that they didn't have any god at all!

And what about the land? Where are they from? Every other nation we encounter has a territory. The Philistines live on the coast. And the Amorites live in Canaan. And the Egyptians in Egypt. But where does Amalek live? Everywhere and nowhere. They were nomads. They had no land. So sometimes we find them in the south and sometimes we find them in north. Sometimes they're by the sea and sometimes in the hills. Whenever there's a war in Tanakh it involves territory. That may not be the only thing, but it's always part of the equation.

Except in the case of Amalek. Which explains the significance of the Torah's formulation. אשר קרך בדרך. They didn't attack us to preempt an incursion. Where they attacked us was entirely beside the point. It didn't matter to them. The point is not that it was an ambush. The point is that Amalek was apathetic to the very notion of a landed nation-state.

And finally, whom do they attack?

וַיִּזְנוּב כָּךְ כָּל הַנְּחָשָׁלִים אַחֲרָיָה וְאַתָּה עֲיִף וְיָגַע

They go after the stragglers – they don't just pick on civilians; they pick on civilians who are tired and weak.

Who does that? It's a violation of the Geneva Convention. Amalek has no regard for a value system that identifies those who are particularly vulnerable and insists that a society pays special attention to them.

Amalek, then, isn't just an enemy of the Jewish people. They personify the very antithesis of our core values.

- We're champions of ethical monotheism and they hold nothing sacred.

- We're the people of the promised land; they're the people without a land.
- We spend our time caring for the poor and the weak; they attack the defenseless.

What does all of this have to do with Tuesday's election in Israel?

Well what are the issues that up for debate? Of course the economy is always at the top of national agenda – so that's a given. [In fact, the very first decision made by a Jew in the Torah was an economic decision. Avraham gets to Canaan and there's a famine. There's an economic crisis. And he has to decide whether to ride it out or relocate. If there's no food to eat, well nothing else really matters.] But beyond the economy, what does matter?

Every country grapples with the issues of the moment. In the US, for instance, immigration, gun control and health care tend to dominate our contemporary discourse.

So what's Israel grappling with? And it struck me that the three most important issues are the very ones that form our core identity in Sefer Devarim and the very ones that make Amalek our eternal enemy.

First is God. If Israel is a Jewish country, what's the place of religion in the public square? In a country like the US, the matter is settled. There's a constitutionally ordained separation between church and state. Occasionally someone wants to put up a rendering of the Ten Commandments in a federal courthouse and we have to open up the conversation. But as a policy matter – black letter law governs the overwhelming majority of the discourse. But in Israel there is no separation of church and state. Religious voters constitute a hugely influential percentage of the electorate. And so the questions of God and religion and Judaism and their role in a democratic Israel are entirely unsettled.

Second is the land. And again, for many countries, the land is a settled matter. Canadians aren't sitting around worrying where to draw the border around Vancouver. But in Israel, where to draw the cartographic lines and where to put up fences in Judea and Samaria are the most contested questions of the day. Everyone can agree that we want an Israel that's safe and secure. It's a matter of land that separates the politics of the right and the left.

And finally is the matter of the vulnerable. In data I saw from 2016 – and there's nothing to gainsay it – 21% of Israelis are living below the poverty line. So how do we help them? Where do we lay down the safety net? How much does the government distribute in federal aid? What demands do we need to make to encourage more people to join the workforce? The right has one set of answers; the left has another.

Some people get very cynical about Israeli government and governance. And perhaps not without justification.

But it's also worth zooming out and marveling at the fact that we're in a position to be having these debates – both in Israel and in the diaspora.

Wherever Jews have been, we've set up social institutions to provide dowries for orphans and support for the poor. We've established *חברות קדישא* and *חברות בקור חולים*. Whatever our state, we've always found a way to keep the vulnerable at the forefront of our consciousness.

But how often over the course of the past 2000 years have we been in a position to publically talk about God and religion? How often could we debate the precise contours and borders of a Jewish state?

So I would argue – that whatever the outcome of Tuesday's election – there's a great deal to celebrate. Israel is such a young country. These issues don't get solved in the course of a year or a decade or even a generation. Israelis aren't known for their patience. But given a little time, I have every confidence that we will in fact move these issues forward.

You may call it naiveté. I call it faith.

Let me conclude with one final thought: This past year it was humbling to come to terms with just how little we American Jews understand about the nuances of what it means to govern Israel. When you have a kid serving in the army – and I can assure you they are kids – every other issue is a sideshow. And the only thing on your mind – all the time – is the safety of your child.

It's certainly true that all politics are local. But Jewish politics are global.

If we want to claim that we're entitled to our opinions about what life in Israel should look like, then we should make Aliyah and vote.

But not having a vote is not the same as not having a voice. What a privilege to live in an era when we can engage freely in conversations about Hashem, our promised land, and our promise to the most vulnerable among us. The likes of Amon and Moav; Edom and Amalek; may be long gone. If we're still here, let's not forget why.