

Who is Really Amalek?
Anshe Emeth Memorial Temple
Rabbi Philip N. Bazeley
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With grief and sorrow in his voice he pleaded with us, “I need a hug. That’s all I need from Israel, from my home, I need a hug. Somebody needs to embrace me because I can’t hold out for much longer.” That’s what Abdu Matta told us when we asked him how he felt about Israel.

It was the summer of 2010. I was on a seminar in Israel as part of the Mandel Fellowship from our Seminary. The point of the seminar was to help us answer the question, “How do you define ‘Jewish Peoplehood?’” We did this by visiting a variety of organizations that ranged from Jewish settlements in the West Bank to Arab community centers in Israeli cities and we spoke with academics from every spectrum of political thought.

This moment came when we spent a night in Akko and Abdu Matta was our tour guide. He had a jolly demeanor, a great smile, and a heart filled with a desire to teach. After the tour we went back to his house for a candid conversation.

We sat down on cushions on the floor of his living room. We were in a big round circle holding empty mugs. As he went around the room pouring us freshly brewed tea he said, “Ask me anything you want, let’s have an honest and respectful conversation.” And then, without more than a 2 second pause, a colleague of mine asked him, “What is your relationship with the State of Israel?” It was a hard question right off the bat. I remember feeling as though we were collectively holding our breath waiting for a response, not sure what would happen next. Thinking, “Really, that’s the question you wanted to lead with?” We sat there in silence as he finished going around pouring tea. He concluded by filling his own cup and sitting down with us. He took a deep breath and then he opened up. We learned that his family has lived in Akko for 10 generations and that his son was baptized in St. George’s Church, the same place where he, his father, and his father’s father had been baptized. He talked about how he was proud to be an Israeli, and of how hard he tried to be a good citizen, but how in the eyes of non-Arabs, he felt he never would.

“What do I want from Israel?” Abdu repeated back to us while fighting tears, “I want Israel to hug me. I want a hug from [Israeli Jews whom I consider to be] my brothers and sisters. I have needed this embrace my entire life and everyday it is getting harder without one. I work very hard with the Arab children of this town because they need to be embraced as well and Israel won’t look at them, but Hezbollah and Hamas, they look at us and they want us, and it’s getting harder to resist them. Their embraces are alluring and might look like love, but they are deceptive. They are serpents and their kisses are toxic. When these organizations get their hands on Arab children it will not only hurt them, but all Israeli children.”

His words have haunted me ever since. The State of Israel was founded out of the necessity to find a home for a displaced people. A people historically often forced to live as second-class citizens because of who they were. Now within this very refuge state, we find Abdu and I wondered “how can we, a people who know this pain, inflict it on others?”

As Jews we have always seen ourselves as being altruistic. We have looked at ourselves with a 20/20 hindsight that has been pleasing to us, but it hasn’t always been the truth. I have always had difficulty with the character of Jacob from Genesis. We like thinking about our

patriarchs as being perfect, but all of them have done things that have been troubling. And when thinking about our relationship with Arabs, I not only think of Isaac and Ishmael, but more often than not I think of the two siblings, Jacob and Esau. For those of you who aren't familiar with the story, Esau is the older brother. Esau is a hunter; Jacob, a gatherer. One day Esau is starving and begs Jacob for food. Jacob obliges only after negotiating stew for Esau's birthright. Later, when Isaac is close to death, their mother encourages Jacob to disguise himself as Esau so Jacob will get the blessing instead of his brother. Esau is so pained by this that their mother encourages Jacob to run away. For 20 years Jacob has lived in fear of Esau and the night before they meet again, he stands on the boarder of the unknown. Will Esau try to take his vengeance? Will his family be wiped out? Will he live to see another night? And it is on that night, hours before they meet again that Jacob has his famous wrestling match when he is renamed Yisrael, meaning the one who wrestles with God. I jumped over years of narrative where we see plenty of stories where we learn that deception and coercion are no strangers to Jacob. But now, considering a name change, we ask ourselves is Jacob a changed man or is he the same person he has always been? Has that wrestling match changed him? Even scholar Nahum Sarna points out in his commentary on Jacob's name change that "names in the Bible are inextricably intertwined with personality and destiny, the change here," he claims, "signifies a final purging of the unsavory character traits with which Ya'akov has come to be associated."¹ What will happen in the morning?

In Genesis 33:4 we read "Esau ran to greet him. [Esau] embraced him and, falling on his neck, [Esau] kissed him and they wept." Following that embrace Jacob gives his brother a "gift" of numerous livestock to placate Esau and buy some protection. Esau doesn't want this gift but accepts it when pressed. What Esau really wants is to join Jacob on his journey, to build a relationship with his brother. And what does he get from Jacob? He gets excuses. He gets a "Let's do lunch, I'll call you" statement. He is brushed off left to return home alone while Jacob journeys away from him.

Despite Jacob's name change he remains someone who is unable to see beyond his own self-interest. As Professor Burton Vistosky points out, "despite his wrestling, despite his sleepless night, despite his very name change, he remains the same craven lad who fled from Esau decades earlier..." meanwhile Esau has changed, he is no longer the "...crude and ruddy [individual] concerned only for his stomach and the moment at hand," that he "appears to have forgiven and forgotten the slights and injuries Jacob inflicted upon him when they were children."²

The belief that Jacob remains the same and that Esau has grown in character runs counter to how the rabbis have read this chapter. They look at Genesis 33:4 and notice that the word "VaYishakehu" and "he [Esau] kissed him," when written out in the Torah scroll, has five nequdot, dots, on top of it. Here are two ways they use these nequdot to influence how we see Esau. They teach that the nequdot signify that the word should not be read that he kissed Jacob, rather that he bit him; the difference between nashko and noshko.³ Essentially, they say the Torah scroll is wrong. Another interpretation is Esau really did exhibit a genuine human emotion here. The rabbis assert that the nequdot emphasize it because it is the only time that he has ever

¹ Sarna, N. M. (1989). *The JPS Torah Commentary; Genesis*. Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society. Pg. 227

² Visotzky, B. (1996). *The Genesis of Ethics*. NY: Three Rivers Press. Pgs 180-181

³ Bereshit Rabbah 78:12 and Tanchuma Vayishlach chapter 4

had these human emotions.⁴ Both are untrue to the Biblical text. And both are used to whitewash the text and make Esau seem subhuman.

Some of the Rabbis are troubled by Jacob's actions so they transform Esau into a villain. Why do the rabbis feel the need to rewrite history? Because Jacob's name is Yisrael and we bear that name, the People of Yisrael. We need to be the heroes in our own story, but the truth is that we should look back at Jacob and Esau and try not to assign either sainthood or damnation, but rather enable their characters to show through so that we may grow from their examples. We aren't always the heroes and Arabs aren't always the villains. Jacob, our forefather, was a narcissist. Now, how did we, a people who have prided ourselves on a heritage of righteousness and mercy, grow beyond the self-consumed narrow spirit of Jacob?

Our ethical development may start in Genesis, but it does not end there. Yes, in the beginning our people were chiefly concerned with tribal wellbeing, but as our moral vision evolved, our sense of what was beneficial for our tribe evolved as well. The examples of Jacob's behavior have been succeeded by the multitude of examples of the command to embrace the "other" and think outside of our own selves. We see it in the Torah with the concern for the vulnerable and compassion for the needs of the stranger. We see it in Prophetic writings such as Zachariah when he says, "Execute true justice; deal loyally and compassionately with one another. Do not defraud the widow, the orphan, the stranger, and the poor."⁵ In the words of Isaiah, to "unlock the fetters of wickedness and to let the oppressed go free."⁶

Our pursuit of justice is not just for our own people. The Book of Jonah teaches this, that God cares, as we should care, for all peoples, not just Jews. These teachings force us to go beyond the narrowness of Jacob and embrace what became the universal mission of Israel. Yet despite this long tradition, qualities of Jacob are still very much alive within us for there are times when we act like the People of Jacob rather than the People of Israel.

When we scheme financially to fill our own pockets despite what the repercussions are for others, we are Jacobites. But when we teach our children of the importance of honesty in business and to honor those we make deals with, we are Israelites.

When we march through Jerusalem celebrating our victory over those who lost instead of finding ways to come together, we act like Jacobites. But when work in the pursuit of racial and economic justice that is when we act like Israelites.

Keeping Abdu and other Israeli-Arabs as second-class citizens goes against the commandments of how you should treat the stranger who lives amongst you. Not all Arabs living in Israel are Amalek. Many if not most of them are our siblings waiting for our embrace.

Far too often we see Amalek in the "other." Amalek, a nation that attacked the Israelites as they came out of Egypt; historic symbol of the enemies of the Jewish people. And because we justifiably see Amalek in Hamas and Hezbollah, we are tempted to see Amalek in all Arabs, even those who seek a real peace – just like Esau wanted a real relationship with Jacob. We behave towards them with suspicion and mistrust; we proclaim the motto "never again" when we find it more comfortable to think of ourselves as victims rather than a people with a mission.

Did ultra-nationalistic Jews have a right to march through the Arab areas of the Old City of Jerusalem, taunting the Arab residence in celebration of the reunification of Jerusalem? Sure. Was it the Jewish moral thing to do? No. Jews should not be in the business of humiliation.

⁴ Avot D'Rabi Natan

⁵ Zachariah 7:9-10

⁶ Isaiah 58:6-8

Judaism has always taught us, going back to its earliest days that we must never ever do anything but treat people with dignity and respect, even those we overcome in war. Does Israel have a right to the properties in Sheikh Jarrah? Also yes, historically those are Jewish properties. But right and moral are two different things and a moral response to those actions by Hamas was not what happened.

Make no mistake, Hamas is a terrorist organization that wants nothing more than to wipe us out of existence. Israel has the supreme right to defend itself and it does so in a just way which has always been their guiding star.⁷ They may not always hit their target, but they pursue it greater than any other country on earth. Hamas jumped on those actions of Israel and used it as an excuse to try and kill more Jews. Hamas uses their own citizens as cover to launch rockets⁸ and Israel tries as best they can to minimize civilian death. I couldn't be more disgusted with Rep. Ilhan Omar when she likened Israel with Hamas⁹. We weren't at war with Palestinians, we were at war with Hamas, and Hamas was at war with all Jews - there is a difference there.

When Abdu spoke with us, he spoke defensively of Israel – empathizing with how hard it must be to give up generations of PTSD going from the Crusades, to the Holocaust, to the Intifadas. He spoke guardedly about Hamas out of a place of fear and concern. Israel, despite his need for an embrace, was a protector in his eyes. Hamas was Amalek to him as well. He spoke more lovingly and defensively about Israel than many Jews did this past spring.

My guess is right now some of you may be surprised at the language that Abdu is using or maybe you're trying to convince yourself that he's putting on a show for American Jews. He isn't. He is one of many Arabs and Jews that come together to help push back against the forces of pessimism and destruction and try to foster a real peace. The problem with whitewashing with large brush strokes is it paints everyone to look all the same and it enables us to never challenge our assumptions.

Too often we fall back on the phrase, “Is it good for the Jews?” as an excuse to not challenge our assumptions and allow an unjust status quo to continue. This distorts our tradition and runs against common sense. Whenever we look out for someone else, it is good for the Jews. For our people's wellbeing is wrapped up in the wellbeing of other peoples. When an Arab child living in Akko has the true potential for having a secure and prosperous future, then so too does the Jewish child, for an equitable society is the only type of society that is good for the Jews. And we should do it because it is just the right moral thing to do. We can help foster peace and protect ourselves at the same time.

The program that I went on when I met Abdu asked us to answer the question, “what is Jewish Peoplehood?” Well here is my answer:

We are a people, a collective, with one thread that is woven through our DNA: no matter how we understand Judaism; no matter how we live our lives; no matter where we live in this world; no matter how we interpret or don't interpret our sacred texts; there is one thread, one sacred purpose that calls down to us from Mount Sinai itself. It says to us, no it declares to us: don't see the world as it is, see it as it could be; don't give up on the hope of what that world

⁷ <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/ethics-and-international-affairs/article/abs/moral-standards-under-pressure-the-israeli-army-and-the-intifada/040DEEF95A6784A0C1B03F2117391FF1>

⁸ <https://www.channel4.com/news/factcheck/factcheck-hamas-civilians-human-shields>

⁹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-57436573>

could be; don't let your dreams of making the world better be snuffed out by those who think you silly; partner with other workers of peace because there is nothing more important in this world than Shalom; be a light onto the other nations, an *or l'goyim*, be like Nachshon stepping out into the waters of the great unknown and willing to be the first to say, "It's the right thing to do;" be counter-cultural: love the stranger; lift up the poor; care for the dignity for all; and fight injustice whoever it is done by and whoever it is done against. Evolve, grow, mature, you don't need to live the same way Jacob did, you can not only aspire to be Israel, but you can also become Israel. We are Israel. We may pray to God for peace, but we are the ones who partner with God to help foster peace for all peoples: *Oseh shalom bimromav* May the one who makes peace from above *Hu ya'aseh shalom aleynu* help us make peace around us *Ve'al kol yisrael*, for all of Israel *v'al kol yoshvei tevel* and for all who live. *Ve'imru Amen*