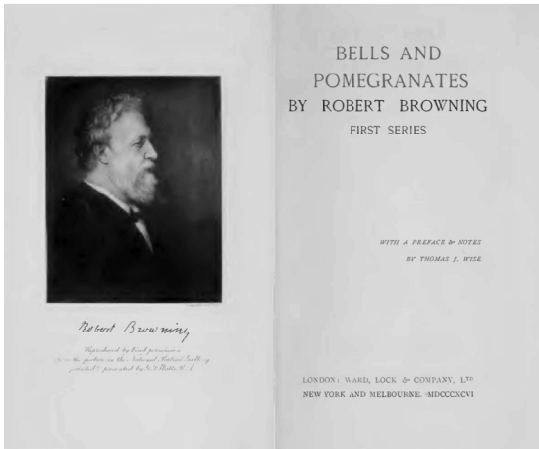


דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



The Poet as High Priest

Dr. Alisa Braun, Academic Director, Community Engagement, JTS



Robert Browning, the Victorian poet, puzzled many of his readers when he called one of his collections *Bells and Pomegranates*. The issue wasn't that he invoked a biblical type; many poets preceding him had seen themselves in prophetic terms. They were heroic figures whose imaginative powers could transform the world; they spoke truths to inspire others and change society. But what did the design

on the hem of the priestly garment (Exod. 28:33-35) have to do with poetry? The poet as High Priest, a figure associated with rules and ritual rather than creativity and imagination, seemed counterintuitive.

The key to Browning's meaning can be found in the bells' function. One interpretation is that the bells were worn to ward off evil spirits that might impede the process of atonement. Another is that the sound of the bells could attract God's attention as the High Priest approached the Holy of Holies, drawing the divine closer. A third is that those around him would hear the bells and be reminded, albeit in a sweet and gentle way, of God's presence and what God asks of them (see Sir James Frazer's *Folklore in the Old Testament: Studies in Comparative Religion, Legend, and Law*). Taken together, all three explanations highlight the priest's role serving Israel from within the community. The biblical prophet typically stands in an antagonistic relationship to the people, haranguing Israel to accept God's truth; but the High Priest is Israel's representative before God. Browning's priestly poet serves society in terms that they can hear. Truth is not his alone; it is something that everyone already knows but needs to be reminded how to access. It is the poet's unique calling to generate that awareness and recognition.

Shabbat Zachor
Tetzavveh 5777

שבת זכור
תצוה תשע"ז



The Performance of Memory

Dr. Avinoam Patt, Philip D. Feltman Professor of Modern Jewish History, University of Hartford, and JTS Fellow

On the Shabbat before Purim the *maftir* Torah reading includes the following verses:

Remember what Amalek did to you by the way, when you came forth out of Egypt; how he met you by the way, and struck at your rear, all who were feeble behind you, when you were faint and weary; and he did not fear God. Therefore it shall be, when the Lord your God has given you rest from all your enemies around, in the land which the Lord your God gives you for an inheritance to possess, that you shall blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven; you shall not forget it. (Deut. 25:17-19)

Because of this reading it is called Shabbat Zachor (Remember). The verses recited in Deuteronomy are in effect already a remembering of what Amalek did shortly after the flight from Egypt, and the commandment to remember Amalek in Deuteronomy is in fact the second time this tale is recounted, the first being in its place in the narrative:

Then the Lord said to Moses, **“Write this as a memorial in a book and recite it in the ears of Joshua**, that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.” And Moses built an altar and called the name of it, The Lord is my banner, saying, “A hand upon the throne of the Lord Jacob! The Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation. (Exod. 17:14-16)

In Exodus, we thus have the first reference in the Torah to the act of memorial writing. The explicit implication here is that the act of writing and reciting, recording the history and recounting it verbally, will blot out the memory of

Amalek, even though every generation will be forced to confront Amalek again and again. This is a battle that is continued throughout the ages: Saul and Samuel battle the Amalekites and King Agag (described in the haftarah reading for Shabbat Zakhor from I Sam. 15-24); later in Jewish history, we learn in the Book of Esther that Haman, a descendant of Agag, also set out to destroy the Jewish people; and again, during and after WWII, comparisons between Hitler and Haman were commonplace.

So what is the special significance of Shabbat Zakhor beyond remembering to remember Amalek? We know that Judaism is a religion that is built on a foundation of memory, on the commandment *zakhor*. In his masterwork on the subject (*Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*), Yosef Haim Yerushalmi notes that *zakhor* is repeated nearly 200 times in the Hebrew Bible, with both Israel and God commanded to remember: to remember the Sabbath, to remember the covenant, to remember the Exodus from Egypt. Judaism is a religion of remembering and, implicitly, of not forgetting. As Yerushalmi suggests, one might argue that the commandment to remember has been central to the survival of the Jews in dispersion over thousands of years. How else can we explain the continuity of the Jewish people through millennia of migration, relocation, persecution, destruction, and renewal?

The commandment *zakhor* has taken on new implications in the aftermath of the Holocaust as the commandments to remember and to bear witness have been integrated into modern Jewish observance. But how can we simultaneously perform the act of remembrance while blotting out the memory of Amalek, as both passages in the Torah require? *Zakhor* in the context of Amalek reinforces the importance of the victim's voice and the role of the persecuted and the oppressed in recording their history both during *and* after collective trauma. This act of remembrance has not only historical and ethical value, but is of great psychological importance, too. Perhaps, in keeping with Purim's combination of memory and levity, this can best be illustrated through a joke.

During and after the war, allusions to Hitler as Haman and the belief that he would meet the same end as Haman were common. One joke included in Steve Lipman's *Laughter in Hell* went as follows:

Hitler, not being a religious man, was inclined to consult his astrologers about the future. As the tide of the war worsened, he asked, "Am I going to lose the war?" Answered affirmatively, he then asked, "Well, am I going to

die?" Consulting their charts, the astrologers again said yes. "When am I going to die?" was Hitler's next question. This time the answer was, "You're going to die on a Jewish holiday." But when ... on what Jewish holiday?" he asked with agitation. The reply: "Any day you die will be a Jewish holiday." (201-202)

Understandably, the first Purim celebration after liberation in Germany was a long-awaited holiday in the DP camps. In Landsberg, survivors organized a week-long Purim carnival that included a symbolic burning of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* (which had been written in the local prison in 1924); a parade of workers, schools, kibbutzim, and various organizations; and, of course, the wearing of costumes. The *Landsberger Lager Cajtung* reported that, at the entrance to Landsberg, "Hitler hangs in many variations and in many poses; a big Hitler, a fat Hitler, a small Hitler, with medals and without medals. Jews hung him by his head, by his feet, or by his belly." Leo Srole, the UN-appointed welfare director for Landsberg and one of the organizers of the 1946 Purim carnival, later recalled: "It was (a day) of such elation, I had never seen anything like it ... Hitler and Haman now had their due." As a poster from Landsberg announced: "In the city where Hitler wrote his *Kampf*, the Jews will celebrate the greatest Purim *to-w-szin-wow-hey* [the transliteration of the Jewish year 5706], the Purim of Hitler's downfall!" These reenactments of Purim in the aftermath of the Holocaust not only fulfilled the obligation to remember Amalek and to record the history of the latest destruction, they served as a poignant reminder of *am yisrael hai*, that the People Israel endures.

The performance of memory—through deeds, actions, and speech—assists in the process of not forgetting. But the act of writing and recording the events after they have transpired, and not forgetting them, also ensures that, by taking on the mandate of remembering and retelling, that the truth will win out and that history will record the perspective of the victims, not just the perpetrators. Those who seek to erase history, to deny the existence of evil, and to ignore the face of injustice and persecution only benefit when we do not remember. However, if we engage in the process of remembering Amalek, then those who endure and triumph over evil in confronting the persistence of Amalek—be it in the form of prejudice, discrimination, anti-Semitism, racism, or xenophobia—will ultimately enjoy the last laugh.