

Welcome to the Streaming Wars. This moniker, given to the battle for supremacy among all the different streaming platforms, is an illustration that we are perhaps in the golden era of TV.

It feels like almost every week, there's a new premiere dropping and so much of the water cooler chatter, or whatever the virtual version of that is now, centers around "did you see what happened in last night's episode!?"

As a devourer of many of these shows, I love this part of pop culture, the building and bridging of micro communities. We might have wildly different personalities or interests in other areas of life, but put some dragon or Elvin lore on the table? Bam-simpatico!

What's even more interesting to me about these shows though is the role that evil plays and how often we find ourselves drawn to it.

Sauron from The Lord of the Rings realm and the White Walkers

from Game of Thrones are the ones that pop into my mind per my

most recent viewings. For you, it might be Darth Vader, Lord

Voldemort, Thanos, or heck, even Cruella De Vil. There are amazing

characters throughout so many of these shows. The heroes of each

are the ones many of us aspire toward.

More and more, I find myself drawn to the bad and evil characters.

Even though we usually know the bad side loses and the good side

wins, I find it a little fun, alluring, and maybe even taboo to think

about what would happen if the bad side won. Or even more

personally, what might it be like to be in that role!?

There has been fascinating research into why we are attracted to evil in television and movies. Some psychologists argue that it is because bad is exciting and it instills fear. Fear and attraction are often registered similarly because they are produced by very similar chemical reactions in the body. When endorphins and adrenaline are released when we interact with evil characters, we are drawn toward them.

Another theory, posited by Dr. Margareth Bruun Vaage, a lecturer at the University of Kent is reflected through the realm of friendship.

In our regular lives, we're all willing to forgive our friends' moral flaws because we like them to some degree. The same applies to these characters. Rationally, we do not condone what they do, but intuitively we engage with them because we kind of like them.

Besides,

“we’re all morally flawed in some sense, so it can be reassuring to see someone onscreen who’s even more morally flawed than we are!”

My personal favorite theory comes from Rebecca Krause and Derek Rucker, two Professors at Northwestern. They observed how people explored their “good” and “bad” sides and how they did this without ruining their positive image of themselves. The researchers predicted that story villains would provide an outlet to explore a darker version of themselves that would be immoral to act out in real life.

The study found that site users favored characters with personality traits similar to their own. People with similar traits to non-villains were more likely to become fans of those characters, whereas people found villains more likable if they shared similar personality traits.

When they extended this to ascertain how people connected to real world “villains” it turned out that people were much more comfortable comparing themselves to fictional villains than real world versions.

In other words, there’s something that we see in evil characters in shows and movies that feels similar to us. It feels safe to explore this outside of ourselves with a bad character who is made up because well, if it gets too real, then it hits closer to home. Broadly speaking, there is something about the evil we see on screens that feels personal. That works perfectly for the world of screens, but in the world of humans, it’s more complicated.

The reality in which we live definitely has bad actors. We don’t have to look so far or read too deeply into the newspaper to find them. In

Judaism too, we have many wicked characters. There is perhaps no greater bastion of evil than Amalek who we can remember from back in Exodus. They were the nation that attacked us at our most vulnerable time, preying on the rear of the Israelite travelers: the ill, the weakened, and the young.

They are referenced again in our portion this week where we are told emphatically:

“Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey, after you left Egypt—how, undeterred by fear of God, he surprised you on the march, when you were famished and weary, and cut down all the stragglers in your rear.”(Deuteronomy 25:17-18)

We are familiar with this from Exodus, so the commentators wonder why it's reintroduced here.

They use it as a jumping off point to read even more reasons into why Amalek was so terrible. The *Midrash* breaks the word Amalek up into a portmanteau, *Am Yelek*, a nation that licks up. There it describes them as locusts who fly down, dogs that lap up blood, and flies that seek out the rot of an open wound.

Other commentaries look at the juxtaposition of texts in this section. Immediately following the commandment to be honest in our weights and measures in our business dealings, they say that when you deal falsely with people, it creates a certain moral rot within you that makes it easier to become evil, just like Amalek did.

They weren't always like that but they slid down the slippery slope of unscrupulousness.

My favorite piece takes an internal view of Amalek. In addition to it being a nation-state's ideology, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev (Kedushat Levi) sees Amalek as a mindset:

“it seems that it is not only for this that the seed of Israel is being commanded regarding the erasing of Amalek, which is from the seed of Esav. Rather, every person in Israel needs to erase the evil part that is concealed in one's heart, that is known by the name Amalek.”

In his eyes, the verse is speaking to two different levels. Yes, there was an Amalek. We have to remember what they did. Also, Amalek is within each of us. It is that part that we carry deep within us that

moves us in dark directions. It's that voice within us that convinces us to not act charitably or kind to others. It's the side of ourselves that pushes us to harm others.

He continues:

“this is because whenever the seed of Amalek is found in the world it is found in the human being, since the human is a small world, and therefore there is a reality to "Amalek", to the force of evil inside every human being, which arises every time to make a human being sin, and is regarding this that the remembrance comes in the Torah.

In astonishingly beautiful language, the Kedushat Levi notes that every person is an *olam katan*, a small world. Each of us, in and of ourselves, is a universe. The remembrance here is a reminder to not

only look externally but also internally for Amalek is operative in both frameworks. Ultimately, we are responsible for ourselves and this is part of the work.

How does the work work? He reasons:

“and behold, the strength of the seed of Israel is only found in the mouth, since "the voice, is the voice of Yaakov", [found] in the Torah [study] and in prayer, when a person has this force always burning within towards the Holy One of Blessing, then no evil can control him.”

Playing on the moment where Isaac is duped by Jacob (as an aside, that's a fascinating choice to prove why we need to be honorable), and hears the voice of Jacob but it doesn't feel like him, the Kedushat Levi is arguing that we better ourselves through our

tradition. Namely, we pray and we study which he says, *bo'er libo*, ignites one's heart. In other words, it reminds us of the passion we should have in fulfilling our responsibility to be God's emissaries in this world. When we do that, no evil can control us.

That last line is obviously a challenge as we know that we, and plenty of Jews dedicated to study and prayer, do plenty of not great things.

Yet, I find its aspiration elevating. This whole business, living as a Jew in the world, in our homes, coming to shul, performing acts of *chesed*, these are all purposeful.

They're not meant to fill a resume or application. They're not intended to make us feel better about ourselves. Those may be nice consequences. The essence of all of this stuff is to remind us how much of an impact we can make and to continually show ourselves

that the world is so much bigger than us. We are each small worlds, so every little deed that we do has immense power to construct or destruct. Left to our own devices, when we just think of ourselves, we get into Amalek mentality.

It may not be a prayer or study for you and that's fine but I think there's wisdom in what the Kedushat Levi is saying. Every act has this potential. Reminders come in all shapes and sizes. The next time you find yourself eagerly awaiting Sauron's appearance in the latest Rings of Power or maybe you wonder why your pulse rises when the White Walkers appear on screen, see it as an opportunity to look within. We're not commanded only to remember Amalek for historical memory by looking backward but also to remember by looking within. They're Amalek and so are we.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Adir Yolkut