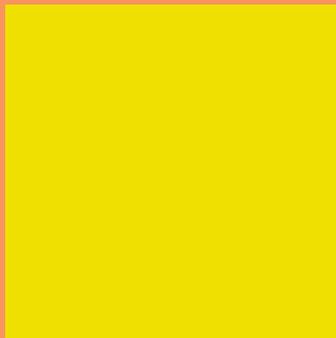


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ENCOUNTER WITH SACRED TEXTS:  
TEXTS OF VIOLENCE

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## MODULE TWO

# ENCOUNTER WITH SACRED TEXTS: TEXTS OF VIOLENCE

## 2.1 INTRODUCTION

### 2.1 GENERAL INTRODUCTION

This handbook is intended as didactic support for teachers to further elaborate on the following theme: “Encounter with Sacred Texts: Texts of Violence”. It gives the teacher or facilitator the opportunity to develop this theme appropriate to the students’ understanding.

This module holds a poly-perspective view: it shows how the same passage can be approached from multiple directions. This makes the approach decidedly non-hermeneutical. No one all-explaining text is given the upper hand, but rather many different perspectives. The aim, therefore, is to encourage discussion, forming of one’s own opinion, daring to disagree, and daring to make counter-arguments as much as possible. That is why the teacher’s guide gradually works up to different interpretations, where different Jewish traditions are given the floor. This teacher’s guide therefore offers various points of attention to guide the discussions in new directions. The teacher is free to work with these suggestions at will and according to the needs and understanding of the class or learning group.

The student handbook, together with the viewing of and discussion on the video, takes an hour. In the second hour more depth can be achieved on the basis of the material in this package. The intention is to give the pupils as many different perspectives and interpretations as possible.

## **2.1.2 CONTENTS OF THE HANDBOOK**

The theme “Encounter with Sacred Texts: Texts of Violence” is approached through the infamous Amalek commandment, the context of which we find in the books Exodus and Deuteronomy. The Amalek passages provide much food for thought. This weighty character should, however, not deter, but instead give rise to a deeper understanding of the Tanakh. The fundamental question is: does Amalek still exist today? And if so, how exactly should we understand Amalek?

The starting point is a story: a real conflict situation concerning two arguing pupils leads to a search for the meaning of the Amalek figure. It concerns a possible real situation sketch from the everyday life of the students. In the first place, the story is a general introduction, but does not need to be reduced to this. On the contrary, it is possible to return to the story throughout the lesson. Which elements of the lesson do they identify in the story?

After the story, the basic subject material is discussed. This handbook makes a distinction between ‘basic subject material’ and ‘in-depth subject material’. The basic material runs parallel to the material in the student handbook. The ‘in-depth subject material’ follows afterwards. The aim is to offer a more comprehensive curriculum, which can be used at the teacher’s discretion. The in-depth subject material discusses the various Amalek interpretations. The list is not exhaustive, but gives a good framework to reflect together with the children. At the end of this handbook, there is a glossary and bibliography.

## 2.2 VIOLENCE AGAINST AMALEK



Figure 2.1  
The Video Clip

### 2.2.1 THE STORY

The story shows a conflict between two students: Levi and Lindsay. Levi is a Jewish boy who moved with his family to a new city. He goes to a new school, but feels like people are looking at him strangely, and he only hangs out with other Jewish children. Lindsay, a classmate of Levi's, sees him standing at the bus stop, and speaks to him. They get into a discussion. Levi calls Lindsay 'Amalek' out of anger. In his defence he refers to a passage from the Tanakh. Suddenly, an old rabbi named Ezra appears. With the magical bus Bunim, he takes the children on their way to Ancient Israel, in search of the possible meaning of this Amalek story.

### 2.2.2 DISCUSSION

Possible questions about preliminary knowledge can be asked:

- Who or what could Amalek be in the story?
- Do they recognize Levi's emotions?
- Have they ever called someone Amalek?
- Have they ever heard somebody else make a comparison between a certain person or group and Amalek?
- Levi compares the move of his family with the move of the Jewish people in the Book of Exodus. Is that comparison correct?
- Levi compares the treatment of his Gentile schoolmates with how Amalek treated the Jewish people. Is that comparison correct?
- Do they know any passages, other than the Book of Deuteronomy, in which Amalek appears?

## 2.3 'THEN CAME AMALEK'

This part is **basic subject material**.

### 2.3.1 GENERAL

The two texts with which the handbook opens are *Ex. 17:8-16*, and *Deut. 25:17-19*. The former gives us the first mention of Amalek's attack. In the latter, the Jewish people are reminded of this attack by Moses near the end of his sermons to the Jewish people on the plains of Moab.

Exodus 17:8-16 and Deuteronomy 25:17-19 are parallel stories: they mention the same event. However, they also differ in terms of information. They each give a different piece of the puzzle. Through the Exodus passage, we know the time and place of the attack. The attack was after the Jewish people left Egypt; the battle took place at Rephidim. The place name Rephidim has a unique meaning. The place name consists of the verb 'rafah' and the noun 'jadim'. 'Rafah' means 'to become weak'. 'Jadim' means 'hands'. Rephidim thus means: 'the weakness of the hands'. This means that our courage can slip away from us: our strength can flow out of our hands. This term, 'weakness of the hands' occurs nineteen times in the Tanakh. Each time it suggests this same meaning.

Moses and Joshua play an important role in the battle. This is the first time in the Tanakh that the name Joshua appears. During the battle, Moses is on top of a hill and keeps his hands in the air. This act is important because it is only as long as Moses keeps his hands in the air that the Jewish people can win. Nevertheless, the concrete battle still has to be fought: Joshua must pick out men and go to war. The link between the actions of Moses and Joshua is very strong. Their simultaneous character is striking. Whenever Moses' hands fall down, Joshua is losing the battle, but when they remain up in the air, Joshua has the 'upper hand'. Thus, the Bible suggests a strong relationship between "Higher" and "Lower/earthly". The Zohar interpretation in the appendix provides a theological and mystical framework to help further reflect on this.

The struggle is significant. We can deduce this from G-d's intention. Because of the attack, He will fight with Amalek from generation to generation. Yet it is not entirely clear what makes this fight so significant. For the answer, we must turn to the Book of Deuteronomy. Here, Moses speaks of the cowardly nature of the attack. Amalek attacked the rearguard, where the most vulnerable were. The people of Israel were already extremely vulnerable at this point. Deuteronomy also provides a new element: that Israel likewise has the responsibility to erase the memory of Amalek. This responsibility is a mitzvah, a religious commandment, given by G-d.

### 2.3.4 SUMMARY

1. Ex. 17:8-16 teaches us:
  - G-d will erase the memory of Amalek
  - G-d will wage war against Amalek from generation to generation
2. Deut. 25:17-19 teaches us:
  - Emphasis that the Jewish people were 'on the road': the pathway of liberation
  - Amalek attacked Israel at their weakest point
  - Israel also has an obligation to erase the memory of Amalek
  - It is a mitzvah: a commandment

### 2.3.5 HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Amalek commandment seems very violent. The texts seem to encourage genocide: the intentional, deliberate extermination of an ethnic group. To make sense of this commandment, it is important to note that the world of Ancient Israel is a very different world from that of today. Back then, the region was divided into all kinds of tribes, who often fought over a limited amount of resources. Moreover, many trade routes ran through the promised land, Canaan. Such a world induces conflict. Today's Israel, which has built up a strong military power, is a different Israel than the vulnerable people who were searching for a new home while thirsty, hungry, and living in insecurity.

## ASSIGNMENT.

### 2.3.6 DIDACTIC SUGGESTIONS

The questions from this section can also be found in the handbook for the students. For the questions which can be answered correctly, a sample answer has been formulated. The remaining questions are open questions.

About which event do these two passages relate?

They are about Amalek's attack on the Jewish people. Time: they occur just after they left Egypt. Place: they occur at Rephidim.

Is this event told in the same way, or is there a difference in information between the two passages? If so, what's the difference?

There is a difference in information. With Ex. we think of an ordinary battle. With Deut. we know it was a deliberate attack on the weak. With Ex, the emphasis is on how G-d takes responsibility for fighting Amalek. In Deut. the emphasis is on Israel taking that responsibility.

What is the essence of these passages:

- Remember (Amalek's deed)
- Fighting (against Amalek)
- This is a conceptual question intended as a thought exercise. It is about the essence of the Amalek Commandment. The answer depends on how you interpret the commandment.

Who will eradicate the memory of Amalek?

- G-d
- The people of Israel

Where do the passages in their book take place?

- Always in the middle section
- At the beginning
- At the very end

Who didn't fear G-d?

Open question.

Explain in your own words the meaning of the place name 'Rephidim'.

The place name consists of the verb 'rafah' and the noun 'jadim'. Rafah' means 'to become weak. Jadim' means 'hands'. 'Rephidim' thus means: 'the becoming weak of our hands'. This means that our courage can fall away from us: the strength can flow out of our hands.

In the Deuteronomy passage it says: 'and he did not fear God'. This sentence could also grammatically refer to Israel. Why should Israel not fear G-d? What could this mean?

One possible answer can be found in the story. Rabbi Ezra mentions at a certain point that Amalek can stand for 'failing to protect the weak': leaving the vulnerable of the group to their fate. During the attack, Amalek was able to hit the vulnerable of the Jewish people. The people of Israel therefore failed to protect their vulnerable, while they themselves experienced vulnerability under the regime of Egypt. The people of Israel 'do not fear God' when they do not protect the vulnerable, because they show 'Amalekian behavior'. What other things can be called 'Amalekian behavior'?

- Amalek's attack was an act of war. Is the Amalek mitzvah a matter of self-defense, or of revenge?



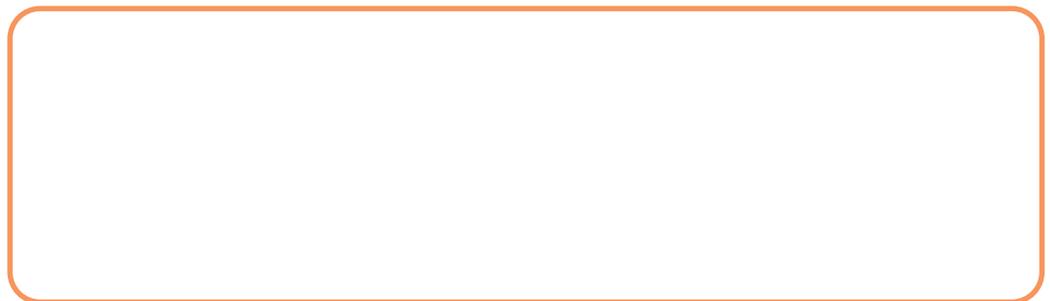
- Read this sentence again: "Adonai will fight Amalek generation after generation." (Ex. 17:16) Do you think 'from generation to generation' means that the war is forever, or do you think it only applies to particular generations?



- Do you think the commandment to erase the memory of Amalek still applies?



- Who or what do you think is Amalek?



## 2.4 INTERPRETATIONS OF THE AMALEK

This part is **in-depth subject material**.

### 2.4.1. GENERAL

Rabbis have offered interesting solutions to help us understand what the Amalek commandment, and the figure Amalek, could mean. We make a distinction between classical Jewish interpretations, and the orthodox, Halachic tradition. The list of interpretations is certainly not exhaustive. It is not important that students memorize those interpretations. This section is aimed at understanding the interpretations and encouraging the students to form their own opinion in relation to these interpretations. Following the theory section, there are some questions that the students can answer.

### Yitschak ben Yehuda Abarbanel [1437-1508]

### 2.4.2 CLASSICAL JEWISH BIBLE READINGS

Yitschak ben Yehuda Abarbanel was a Spanish-Portuguese rabbi. Rabbi Abarbanel, strangely enough, first takes a look at the sentences just before the Amalek commandment in Deuteronomy.

[13] “You are not to have in your pack two sets of weights, one heavy, the other light.

[14] You are not to have in your house two sets of measures, one big, the other small.

[15] You are to have a correct and fair weight, and you are to have a correct and fair measure, so that you will prolong your days in the land Adonai your God is giving you.

[16] For all who do such things, all who deal dishonestly, are detestable to Adonai your God.

The Torah forbids the use of unequal weights or measures. With this, the Torah means: we can't treat each other unequal or unjust. We can't hold each other to different standards since this treats people unequally. Right after this sentence, the Torah immediately goes over to Amalek. That is a very strange transition.

For rabbi Abarbanel, this transition is not strange at all. On the contrary, for him, it has a lot of meaning? Amalek, rabbi Abarbanel says, is a typical example of injustice. They had no reason to attack Israel, but they did it anyway. And to make matters worse: they attacked the people of Israel at their weakest point. Because of that unjust, unfair waging of war, they deserve their punishment. The same situation applies to anyone who wages war in such an unjust way. Rabbi Abarbanel understands the commandment against Amalek as a very real situation of war! Amalek in this case refers to a concrete 'evildoer'.

### **Samson Raphael Hirsch [1808-1888]**

Samson Hirsch was a German orthodox rabbi. Rabbi Hirsch understands Amalek differently. According to him, Amalek can also be a symbol: Amalek doesn't stand for an identifiable person or thing, but for something else, like an idea. Amalek, rabbi Hirsch says, stands for war, destruction, and the sword. But not Israel: Israel stands for peace, building, and the voice of G-d calling for righteous action. Amalek and Israel stand for different values. This means that waging war is not the solution, because then we are copying Amalek's bad behavior. In that case we exercise the wrong idea! We may fight in self-defense, but we must always listen to the voice of G-d. And when we fight, we must fight for peace, according to rabbi Hirsch.

### **Chassidic Judaism**

The Chassidic tradition, for example rabbi Meir Simcha of Daugavpils, draws attention to a certain sentence in the Deuteronomy passage about Amalek: "Remember what Amalek did to you by the road when you were coming out of Egypt" (Ex. 17:17). In this sentence, one word is very important: 'you'. Amalek did something against you, or in general, against all people who deviate from the right path. Amalek is the **yetzer hara**: the evil instinct inside of us. This is the evil voice inside of our heads that makes us do wrong things. So, erasing the memory of Amalek means not listening to the bad voice inside of us! According to the Chassidic tradition, Amalek cannot be one person or group. On the contrary, every human being is part Amalek.

## **Sefer ha-Chinukh**

This book is a classical work from the 13th century AD, which discusses the 613 commandments in the Torah. In this book we read a surprising comparison: Amalek is like a fool jumping into a bath of boiling water! This comparison is not as farfetched as it may seem.

Someone who jumps into a bath of boiling water burns himself, but cools it down for others. Amalek attacked Israel and burned himself by losing the battle but opened the door for others to attack Israel as well. After the escape from Egypt, with the help of the Ten Plagues, everyone was afraid of Israel and their mighty G-d. Because of Amalek's attack, that fear disappeared. From that moment on, others also dared to attack Israel. That is why the punishment for Amalek is so severe: That is why the punishment for Amalek is so severe: Amalek opened the door to violence against Israel.

## **Zohar**

The Zohar is a work from the 13th century BC. The Zohar is known as a classical text within Jewish mysticism. In the Zohar we read that Israel is never alone in his fight against evil. After all, Israel is G-d's partner. G-d fights with evil in the divine world, and Israel fights with Amalek in the earthly world. That is why Moses on the hill must keep his hands in the air, and Joshua must fight down below at the same time. Moses symbolizes the battle of G-d, and Joshua symbolizes the battle of Israel. And therefore, says the Zohar, both G-d (Ex.) and Israel (Deut.) are responsible for the fight against (the memory of) Amalek.

### 2.4.3 HALACHIC TRADITION

#### Literal reading

Some Halachic Jews read the Amalek commandment literally. According to that reading, Amalek still exists as a population group, threatening Israel, and it is the task of Jews to exterminate them. There are Halachic Jews who disagree with this.

#### Meir ha-Cohen (end 13th century AD)

Rabbi Meir ha-Cohen draws attention to one important sentence, again in the Book of Deuteronomy: "Therefore, when Adonai your God has given you rest from all your surrounding enemies in the land Adonai your God is giving you as your inheritance to possess, you are to blot out all memory of 'Amalek from under heaven." (Deut. 25:19) According to rabbi ha-Cohen, the Tanakh refers to the **future**: only when the Messiah appears on Earth at the end of time, and we will live in an era of universal peace and harmony, does the commandment to eradicate Amalek apply!

#### Yosef Babad [1801-1874]

Rabbi Yosef Babad, however, goes in a different direction. He states that the Tanakh refers to the **past**. We have already discussed how Ancient Israel was different from the world today. Tribes used to be easier to distinguish from each other. Through time, however, they have become more and more mixed, so that we can no longer make that distinction. The Assyrian King Sennacherib [Circa. 705-681 B.C.] plays an important role in this theory. He was responsible for this intermingling of different people. So, for rabbi Babad there is a practical problem hindering the commandment and it became impossible to carry out.

#### 2.4.4. DIDACTIC SUGGESTIONS

This section first addresses questions that can be asked on the basis of the interpretations above. Afterward, there are additional questions about an Amalek text in the Book of 1 Samuel.

**ASSIGNMENT.** The students can answer the following questions

- Which interpretation appeals to you the most, and why?
- Which interpretation appeals to you the least, and why?
- Is Amalek a specific person or group, or a bad quality within each person?
- What bad qualities can you come up with that Amalek could symbolize?
- Why is the use of equal measures so important according to the Torah?
- According to rabbi Abarbanel, the Jewish people are allowed to wage war against those who act extremely unjust, such as Amalek's attack. Do you agree? Do you think this is the right response?
- What does 'yetzer hara' mean?
- Have you experienced this 'evil instinct/yetzer hara' within yourself?
- Are we allowed to fight in certain situations according to rabbi Hirsch?
- According to rabbi Meir ha-Cohen, the commandment to eradicate the memory of Amalek only exists in the Messianic Age. Do you agree?
- Can you find some of the above interpretations in the video? Does the character Levi understand Amalek as an *external* person, or an *internal* characteristic?
- Who or what do you think Amalek is? Have you changed your mind?

**ASSIGNMENT.** The students can read the text from 1 Samuel and answer the corresponding questions. In this text we read how King Saul receives the commandment to go to war against the Agag, the leader of the Amalekites.

In 1 Samuel 15:2-3, King Saul receives the mitzvah to fight against King Agag, the leader of the Amalekites:

[2] Here is what Adonai Tzvaot says: 'I remember what Amalek did to Israel, how they fought against Israel when they were coming up from Egypt.'

[3] Now go and attack Amalek, and completely destroy everything they have. Don't spare time, but kill men and women, children and babies, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.'

How do you feel about this passage?

Is this the correct way to 'punish' someone today? (cf. Abarbanel)

Is this passage about revenge, or self-defense?

It seems to be about revenge. (But more could be said about it: It seems to be about revenge, but more could be said about it. The students can reflect together on the phenomenon of 'precautionary measures': preventative actions in order to be safe. Are they justifiable?)

What similarities do you find between this passage and the Exodus and Deuteronomy passages?

For example: the emphasis lies again on the road. G-d remembers what the people of Israel suffered. G-d is involved as Israel's partner.

According to Meir ha-Cohen, the Amalek commandment can only take place in the future: the Messianic Age. Does this 1 Samuel text, which appears after the book of Deuteronomy, contradict this interpretation?

Some rabbis think so.

## 2.6 GLOSSARY

In this glossary you will find more information on certain terms used in this module.

### **Amalek**

In Hebrew, the term 'Amalek' can refer to both a person, Amalek, and a people, the Amalekites. This module uses both meanings interchangeably.

### **Genocide**

The term 'genocide' means the deliberate extermination of an ethnic group. International law regards this act as a horrific crime.

### **Canaan**

According to the Old Testament, Canaan is the land promised to the Jewish people. This area lies between the Mediterranean Sea in the West and the Jordan River in the East. This area is now made up of Lebanon, Israel, a part of Syria, and Jordan.



Photo: © Annie Spratt | Unsplash

## 2.7 TRANSCRIPT OF THE VIDEO

### 1 INT KITCHEN DAY

We see a father sitting at the kitchen table. It's morning. His son enters with his school bag and walks straight towards the door.

Father: Good morning! Leaving already?

Levi: Yeah. I don't have time for breakfast, sorry.

Father: I wanted to ask you about your new school. How's it going? It has been a week now... Have you made some friends in class yet?

Levi: Not really. But there are some other Jewish kids in school, though.

Father (confused): Why don't you hang out with your classmates?

Levi: Why would I? They always look at me, like I'm from outer space... Sorry, I really have to go now.

We see Levi quickly leaving the house.

### 2 EXT BUS STOP DAY

Levi arrives at the bus stop early. There is another kid, Lindsay. The other kid sees him.

Lindsay: Hi! I'm Lindsay. We're in the same class, right? Isn't your name Levi?

Levi: Now you care to talk to me?

Lindsay: What do you mean?

Levi: I've been here a week. No one talks to me. If you think I don't belong here, just say so.

Lindsay: Look, you're the one that is not talking to anyone. We see you Jewish kids grouping together all the time, what do you expect from us?

Levi: Ah forget it. You're just like Amalek.

Lindsay (confused): Who?

Levi: 'sighs' Of course you wouldn't know...Have you ever even opened the Bible?

Lindsay: euh... who has? But what are you saying?

Levi: Amalek hurt the people of Israel just when they moved out of Egypt and were vulnerable, like my family... We just moved here, too. But you wouldn't understand and why would you,... you don't even want us here.

Lindsay: Oh come on man...Comparing me to that Amak...

Ezra: You mean 'Amalek'.

Lindsay: Yes, exactly. Huh -

The kids turn around in surprise. They see an old, strange looking man, scratching his head.

Ezra: Shalom Aleichem!

Levi: Aleichem Shalom... I'm sorry... Who are you?

Ezra: My name is... Wait, hold on, I have a bad memory... Uhm... Oh, yes, it's Rabbi Ezra! I've come to help you! But tell me, what is all of this about Amalek?

Lindsay: He is calling everyone who is not Jewish that! It's ridiculous!

Ezra: Aha! Well, let's recall the passage... Wait, I've got a bad memory... Oh! Why don't we go and take the bus? I said I've come to help! Or I think I said that...

The kids look confused.

Lindsay: Uhm... How is a bus ride going to help us?

Ezra (laughing): aahhh! It'll take us of course! Come on!

The kids look confused. Ezra taps with his walking stick on the floor. Suddenly in a purple cloud of dust, a bus arrives at the bus stop.

Ezra: I couldn't think of a good name for this bus, so I called him Bunim! He can take us everywhere, so let's go to ancient Israel!

Levi: Wait... You mean back in time? But that's just a bus?

Ezra: That's exactly what I mean! Let's go!

Ezra taps his stick again, and suddenly they are all sitting in the bus. The bus starts driving.

We see the bus disappear in a purple fog.

### 3 EXT ANCIENT ISRAEL DAY

The bus stops in ancient Israel. Lindsay, Levi, and Rabbi Ezra get out.

Levi: Where are we?

Ezra (proudly): Well, young ones, welcome to Ancient Israel, just like in the Bible! These are the plains of Moab. You wanted to look up what Moses exactly said, right? Bunim took us there! Now, it's kinda like a live concert!

Levi and Lindsay are bewildered.

Levi: So, we travelled through time??

Ezra: You got it! Look!

We see a long line of people, looking tired and wearisome, all moving towards one gathering place.

Ezra: Quickly, quickly. I don't want to miss the speech.

The company walks towards the front. They mix in with the rest of the people. No one seems to notice them. We then see Moses standing in front of a mountain. He is speaking passionately with his arms raised. One of his arms is holding a walking stick. He has long white hair and a long white beard.

Ezra: I wish I had that stick... Oh, listen! Moses is about to mention Amalek!

Moses: 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.

Levi: See!

Lindsay looks disappointed.

Ezra: Hmm. You're a bit hasty. Why are you so sure Amalek is a person or group?

Levi: Because Moses just said so?

Ezra: Did he? Did you know that the Torah always has a deeper meaning? We can understand the writings in different ways.

Lindsay: How so?

Ezra: Well, Amalek first appeared right after the people were complaining about the lack of water, and they were doubting their decision to leave Egypt and follow God.

For this reason, some Rabbi's think Amalek symbolizes our inner doubt. They think 'destroying the memory of Amalek' means destroying the part in us that doubts God and ourselves!

Levi: So, he's like a mirror to the bad parts of us?

Ezra: So, they think! But this 'bad part' can be many different things besides doubt, like 'not protecting the vulnerable', 'indifference', ... Amalek can symbolize all of these things!

Levi: But can't it be a person, too?

Ezra: Perhaps. You're thinking about your self-defence? But some Rabbi's think that if Amalek were a people, they only existed in ancient Israel. Then other Rabbi's think Amalek will only arrive in the future.

Levi: All of this about a couple of sentences...

Ezra: Look around. There are as many ways to understanding the Bible, as there are people standing here listening to Moses.

Ezra: All right, I think it's time for us to leave. [taps stick] You've got school, remember!

Levi: How do we get back?

Ezra: I don't know, but Bunim does!

Ezra, Levi and Lindsay walk towards the bus and get on. The bus drives to the present day bus stop.

### 4 EXT PRESENT DAY BUS STOP DAY

Levi and Lindsay get out.

Levi: Thank you, Rabbi Ezz –

Levi and Lindsay turn around and see that they are alone. The bus and Ezra are gone.

Lindsay: That was strange...

Levi: Yeah, it was... Look, I'm sorry. Calling you Amalek was weird, ... But it doesn't change the fact you are treating us like aliens.

Lindsay: It's okay, I understand. It must be hard to feel so unwelcome... We should have started talking much earlier.

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## Bible translation

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## KU LEUVEN



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