

BESHALACH: MOSES' HANDS

Exodus 17:8-15

8. Amalek came and fought Israel at Rephidim.
9. Moses said to Joshua, "Pick some men for us, and go out and do battle with Amalek. Tomorrow I will station myself on the top of the hill, with the rod of God in my hand."
10. Joshua did as Moses told him and fought with Amalek, while Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill.
11. Then, whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed; but whenever he rested his hand, Amalek prevailed.
12. But Moses' hands grew heavy; so they took a stone and put it under him and he sat on it, while Aaron and Hur, one on each side, supported his hands; thus his hands remained steady until the sun set.
13. And Joshua overwhelmed Amalek and his people with the sword.
14. Then the Eternal said to Moses, "Inscribe this in a document as a reminder, and read it aloud to Joshua: I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven!"
15. And Moses built an altar and named it Adonai-nissi.

וַיָּבֹא עִמְלֵק וַיִּלָּחֶם עִם־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּרֵפְדִים:
וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בְּחַר־לָנוּ אַנְשִׁים וְצֵא
הִלָּחֶם בְּעִמְלֵק מֵחָר אֲנֹכִי נֹצֵב עַל־רֹאשׁ הַגְּבֻעָה
וַיִּמָּטָה הָאֱלֹקִים בְּיָדַי:
וַיַּעַשׂ יְהוֹשֻׁעַ כְּאֲשֶׁר אָמַר־לוֹ מֹשֶׁה לְהִלָּחֶם
בְּעִמְלֵק וּמֹשֶׁה אָהָרֹן וְחֹר וְעָלוּ עָלָיו רֹאשׁ הַגְּבֻעָה:
וְהָיָה כְּאֲשֶׁר יָרִים מֹשֶׁה יָדוֹ וַגְּבַר יִשְׂרָאֵל וְכַאֲשֶׁר
יָנִיחַ יָדוֹ וַגְּבַר עִמְלֵק:
וַיִּדְּי מֹשֶׁה כְּבָדִים וַיִּקְחוּ־אֶבֶן וַיִּשְׁלִמוּ תַחְתָּיו וַיֵּשֶׁב
עָלֶיהָ וְאָהָרֹן וְחֹר וַתִּמְכּוּ בְיָדָיו מֵזֶה אֶחָד וּמֵזֶה
אֶחָד וַיְהִי יָדָיו אֲמוּנָה עַד־בֹּא הַשָּׁמֶשׁ:
וַיַּחַלֵּשׁ יְהוֹשֻׁעַ אֶת־עִמְלֵק וְאֶת־עַמּוֹ לְפִי־חֶרֶב:
וַיֹּאמֶר יְקֹקֵק אֶל־מֹשֶׁה כְּתֹב זֹאת זָכְרוֹן בְּסֹפֶר
וְשִׂים בְּאָזְנֵי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ כִּי־מָחָה אֶמְחָה אֶת־זָכְרֹ
עִמְלֵק מִתַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם:
וַיִּבֶן מֹשֶׁה מִזְבֵּחַ וַיִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ יְקֹקֵק | נֶסִי:

Tur ha-Aroch (Rabbi Jacob ben Asher: 1269 - 1343. Translation and notes by Rabbi Eliyahu Munk)

“But whenever he rested his hand...” According to the plain meaning of the text it was simply physically impossible for Moses to maintain a posture with raised hands all day long. Whenever he was too tired to maintain his posture, the battle tended to favour the Amalekites. This is why he commanded Aaron and Chur to assist him in maintaining the posture with his hands raised in support of his prayer.

According to the Midrash, where the question is asked rhetorically whether Moses' hands determined the outcome of the battle, the answer given is that Moses was not suffering from physical fatigue, but that it is forbidden for any man to keep his hands outstretched in prayer for three hours or more without a break. [It is an aspect of praying “insistently,” something most unbecoming for man in his relation to his Creator. Ed.] Rabbi Joseph Kimchi explains that the words “but whenever he rested his hands” do not describe something that Moses actually did, but these words describe that Moses knew that he could not afford to allow his hands to rest, else Amalek would prove victor, and that in order to forestall such an eventuality, he took Aaron and Chur with him from the start to help him support his hands.

Some commentators understand Moses' raising his hands as referring to the hands with which he was holding his staff as a sign of encouragement to the people. Moses' staff meant for the people what the flag means to gentile troops. Generally, the purpose of the flag is to serve as a point around which the troops position themselves, to prevent being scattered by opposing forces. The description of Moses being placed in an elevated position even while seated, is to signify that Moses performed the function that a flag normally performs in a battle. This explains why Moses called the altar he built after the battle **יְהוָה נִסֵּי** He did not want the people to think that their victory had been due to the visibility of Moses' staff during the battle, but that it was exclusively due to the help of Hashem, without which the staff would not have proven effective at all. Israel's "flag" is its faith in Hashem.

Leading From Humility (by Kayley Romick. She will be ordained as a rabbi at JTS this year.)
<https://929.org.il/lang/en/page/67/post/41872>

In this chapter, we see a remarkable example of leading with humility from our teacher Moses. As the Israelites battle Amalek at Rephidim, Moses, Aaron, and Hur overlook the battle atop a hill. When Moses raises his arms up, the Israelites dominate the Amalekites, but when Moses' arms drop, Amalek prevails...

In this moment, the success of the Israelites depended on their leader's humility. In view of the entire people, Moses could have let his ego rule him, spurning Aaron and Hur lest he look weak. Had Moses refused help from Aaron and Hur, the entire community would have been wiped out. His display of physical weakness was a sign of inner strength.

Exodus 17 reminds us that leaders are more successful with the support of their teams. The power imbued by status and titles can seduce leaders into monopolizing roles within a project, wanting to be the reason for the team's success. Furthermore, society applauds the frontman (and it is overwhelmingly often a man.) Paul McCartney more quickly comes to mind than George Harrison when hearing the Beatles' "Let It Be"; Steve Jobs is consistently lauded as the creator of Apple over co-founders Steve Wozniak and Ronald Wayne. However, rarely can one person alone accomplish what a group of like-minded people can achieve. The image of Moses' weakening victory arms held up by his "support staff" reminds us that all members of the team are necessary for success.



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