

This week's parashah is Beshallah, literally, "when Hashem Sent" – as in, sent the people from Egypt. And, as you might expect, it chronicles the first things that happened when Hashem sent the people from Egypt, and it's basically a microcosm of Torah: we have miracles; we have complaining, we have commandments, we have war. . .

Though undoubtedly the most famous aspect of this parasha is the splitting of the sea, I am consistently drawn to the narrative that comes at the very end of the parashah. Once the Israelites' basic needs are met – out of Egypt, receiving manna, have gotten water to drink, Amalek attacks, starting with verse 8 of chapter 17. One minute, we're hearing about the Israelite's complaining about water, the next minute the verse starkly says, "Amalek came and fought with the Israelites at Rephidim." At this point, we do not know anything about Amalek.

Later, in Deuteronomy, Amalek will be described as attacking from behind, the weak stragglers. We will receive the somewhat befuddling commandment to remember to blot out the memory of Amalek. Amalek will come to epitomize all evil. The Chassidim will teach us that Amalek has the same gematriya, the same numerical value of its letters as *safek*, meaning "doubt," that Amalek symbolizes some internal weakness that attacks us from inside, and that we must always be vigilant to overcome. Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch taught that Amalek is something that any of us could be at risk of becoming, should we wind up having power and being ruthless to protect it.

But whether Amalek is an internal or external evil, how does one overcome it?

Here's how the Israelites prevailed:

Verses 9-12 say:

“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.” Joshua did as Moses told him and fought with Amalek, while Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. Then, whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed; but whenever he let down his hand, Amalek prevailed. 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.”

At a first reading, we might get discouraged, because the plain reading suggests that Moshe’s miraculous hands defeated Amalek. In the absence of a miracle, what are to take from this.

But our commentators do not let the story end there. Masechet Rosh Hashana 29a: **Did the hands of Moses make war** when he raised them **or break war** when he lowered them? **Rather**, the verse comes **to tell you** that **as long as the Jewish people turned their eyes upward and subjected their hearts to their Father in Heaven, they prevailed, but if not, they fell.**

Chizkuni: “All of this was necessary in order that the people would not become demoralised.”

That is to say that optics matter. When the people fighting could see their beloved leader with his hands raised, it helped them in two ways- first, it made them feel encouraged. But second, it reminded them that they were not fighting only for themselves, but as part of something larger. And that, what the Talmud cause, “subjecting their hearts” to God, gave them the strength for the battle.

For this reason, the Talmud, in Masechet Taanit, page 11a, also teaches: **A person should be distressed together with the community. As we found with Moses our teacher that he was distressed together with the community, as it is stated during the war with Amalek: “But Moses’ hands were heavy; and they took a stone, and put it under him, and he sat upon it.**

It mattered not only that Moshe held his hands up, but that he felt the burden of it, that he also had to deal with vulnerability and physical discomfort as his soldiers were putting their bodies on the line. There can be no moral victory if leaders keep themselves comfortable and send others into danger.

Just as the leader needs to inspire the people, the leader, too needs help. The fight against Amalek cannot be won with the fighters who have their bodies on the line, the leader whose presence gives the people inspiration and strength and those who hold up the leader’s arms.

I was reminded of this story a week and a half ago, when I was in Montgomery, AL, for a conference with T’ruah, a rabbinic human rights organization. The first night there, we learned from a panel of local speakers, including Jeannie Graetz, the wife of Pastor Bob Graetz, a white minister of a black church in Montgomery during the civil rights movement. Pastor Graetz had been one of the most stalwart local white supporters of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Their home had been bombed during the early years of the movement. When Jeannie Graetz spoke to us, one of my colleagues asked her what her role had been in the movement. She referenced the story of Amalek and said, “I was Aaron and Hor. When Bob’s arm’s got tired, I was there to hold them up.”

To the extent that battle is an appropriate metaphor for the justice work that is required of us today, I find Jeannie's words an important reminder that we do not just need Moseses. We do not even just need soldiers. We need Aaron and Hur – the people who support the vision, who encourage others who are tired. We need the others who are not even mentioned but surely exist in the story: the healers who bind the wounds, the cooks who feed exhausted fighters, the artists who weave stories and visions to carry into a better future.

So if you are feeling demoralized in this moment, I encourage you to identify your role in the story. We are not all needed to be Moses. We are not all needed to be soldiers. We are not all needed to be Aaron and Hur. But I can guarantee that we are all needed to be what we can be.

Shabbat shalom.