

Parashat Beshalach 5771, 2011:

*How Did We Defeat Amalek?*

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Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Sarah bat Rachel, Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, and Sheva bat Sarah Rivka.

Our *parasha* is preeminently the *parasha* of explicit miracles. Herein *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* (the Holy One Blessed be He):

- Takes us out of Egypt “*b’yad ramah*” (in a high-handed, i.e., totally public fashion, 14:8)
- Splits the Sea of Reeds (colloquially known as the “Red Sea,”) and allows us to pass through on dry land (14:21-22 and 14:29-31)
- Drowns the pursuing Egyptian horde (14:23-28)
- Provides us with fresh water from brackish undrinkable water at Marah (15:25)
- Provides us with the *mann* (English, “manna” 16:4-36)
- Provides water for us literally “from a rock” (17:6)
- Enables our forebears, fresh from physical slavery and still shackled by a slave mentality, to defeat Amalek - even though they were totally lacking any manner or degree of military prowess (17: 8-16)

All of these wonders and miracles were overwhelming and amazing. They were almost beyond description in their manifestation of the Divine presence (*HaShechinah*) among us. Each one was an act of undeserved love (*ahavat chinam*), perhaps for no other reason than *zechut avot* (the merit of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Jacob). Collectively, they eventually enabled us to stand shoulder to shoulder in our finest hour at *Har Sinai*, and to achieve the purpose for which the world was created: *Kabbalat HaTorah* (the receiving of the Torah).

The final nine *pasukim* (verses) of our *parasha* discuss the war with Amalek and our consequent miraculous victory. In some ways, it foreshadows other astonishing victories

in the history of our people such as David's defeat of Goliath (*Sefer Shmuel* I: 17), and the Maccabees' success over Antiochus' Syrian-Greek legions. Beyond a doubt, the destruction of Amalek's marauding hordes represented a time when Hashem in His "overwhelming mercies, stood by them [the Jewish people] in the time of their distress. You waged their battles, protected their rights, and avenged the wrong done to them. You handed over the powerful into the hands of the weak, and the many into the hands of the few..." (*Al Hanissim* prayer for Chanukah)

The Amalek narrative, however, presents us with a very difficult exegetical challenge: "It came to pass that when Moses would raise his hand, Israel would prevail, and when he would lay down his hand, Amalek would prevail." (*Sefer Shemot* 17:11, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) *Mishnah Rosh Hashanah* 3:8 formulates the essential problem in this manner:

And is it the case that Moshe's hands performed the war itself or limited (lit. destroyed) the efficacy of the fighting? Rather, this verse is coming to teach you that at all times when the Jewish people would look up toward Heaven (*klapei maalah*) and would bend their will (*u'meshaabdin et libam*) to their Father-in-Heaven, they would conquer [Amalek]; and if they failed to do this, they would fall. (Translation my own)

The celebrated Mishnah commentator, Rabbi Yom-Tov Lipmann ben Nathan ha-Levi Heller (known as the Tosafot Yom Tov, 1578-1654), was dissatisfied with the surface meaning of the Mishnah's explanation regarding what Moshe accomplished by raising his hands. He opined that: "In my estimation, it is possible to suggest that Moshe Rabbeinu's raising of his hands was **actually a command to the Jewish people** (*horaah l'bnai Yisrael*) to look toward Heaven and bend their will to that of the Almighty's." (Translation and bolding my own) In other words, it was not mere coincidence that the Jewish people looked heavenward; rather, Moshe explicitly commanded them to do so.

The Mishnaic period halachic Midrash to *Sefer Shemot* entitled, “*Mechilta d’Rabbi Yishmael*,” basically raises the same question as our Mishnah, yet provides us with a different answer and clearer explanation of our verse:

“It came to pass that when Moses would raise his hand, Israel would prevail...” And did Moshe’s hands cause the Jewish people to be victorious or did his hands destroy Amalek? Rather, whenever Moshe would raise his hands toward Heaven, the Jewish people would look there and believe in the One Who Commanded Moshe to do all that he was doing. At that point, the Holy One blessed be He performed miracles and acts of unmitigated power (*gevurot*) for them. (Translation my own)

According to the *Mechilta*, Moshe’s raising of his hands allowed the Jewish people to refocus their minds on G-d, rather than become totally swept up in the winds of war. By doing so, they were able to rededicate their innermost beings to their belief in Hashem. This ultimate gesture of faith was the catalyst for G-d’s performance of “miracles and acts of unmitigated power” on their behalf. As a result, Amalek was defeated and the Jewish people continued on their 40-year long desert journey.

In sum, we now have two different answers to the Mishnah’s question: “And is it the case that Moshe’s hands performed the war itself or limited the efficacy of the fighting?”:

1. Mishnah: “At all times when the Jewish people would look up toward Heaven and would bend their will to their Father-in-Heaven, they would conquer [Amalek].”
2. Mechilta: “Whenever Moshe would raise his hands toward Heaven, the Jewish people would look there and believe in the One Who Commanded Moshe to do all that he was doing.”

Regardless as to which answer one chooses, we are reminded of *Dovid Hamelech*’s (King David’s) evocative and powerful words: “A song for ascents. I shall raise my eyes to the

mountains, from where will my help come? My help is from the L-rd, the Maker of heaven and earth.” (*Sefer Tehillim* 121:1-2) May we, too, be ever mindful that all of our help and success stem solely from Hashem’s unlimited kindness and beneficence. Then, with His help, may we be able to internalize and actualize the words of the Mishnah and Mechilta and believe in our Creator with all of our being, and bend our will to His. *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

Past drashot may be found at my new website:

<http://reparashathashavuah.weebly.com/>

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added please do not hesitate to contact me via email at [rdbe718@gmail.com](mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com).