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**The War Against Amalek**

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The story of the war against Amalek, with which our parasha concludes (17:8-16), raises two main difficulties; we shall address these as part of our discussion of the story's structure. More than one structure may be suggested for our story, each emphasizing a different idea and thereby raising a different type of question.

**A. THREE-PART STRUCTURE**

The nine verses that comprise our story may be divided by subject into three sections of three verses each. Thus, the story may be summarized as follows:

- a. (8-10) Amalek's attack, and the preparations for the battle against them;
- b. (11-13) Description of the battle itself, up until victory;
- c. (14-16) Ramifications of this battle for the present and for the future.

This division into three sections is based on the development of events, both chronologically and thematically: preparation; the event itself; results.

Biblical stories that are clearly divisible into three more-or-less equal sections – as in our case – gradually build up to a climax at the conclusion. This structure would therefore emphasize God's words to Moshe after the battle: (14) "For I shall surely wipe out the memory of Amalek from under the heavens," as well as Moshe's words after building the altar: (15) "For God has sworn by His throne: God is at war with Amalek from generation to generation."

The war against Amalek is broadened here in two dimensions: in the dimension of space (Amalek will be wiped out "from under the heavens"), and in the dimension of time (the war will continue "from generation to generation").

This proposed structure of the story, emphasizing its conclusion, raises the question: in what way was Amalek so much worse than any of Israel's other enemies?

**B. STRUCTURE #2: TWO HALVES SURROUNDING A CENTRAL AXIS**

In previous shiurim, we have often noted that biblical stories are generally divided into two more-or-less equal halves that correspond with each other in some way. Sometimes there is a part of the story that stands as a "central axis" in between the two halves. This central axis is not part of the first half, but the events of the first half lead towards it. The central axis is likewise not part of the second half, but the events described in the second half arise from it. Clearly, then, the central axis is of vital importance in understanding the story as a whole.

According to this proposed structure, the story appears as follows:

A. (8-10) Amalek's attack and preparations for the battle against them

B. (11) The battle – part I, concluding: "and Amalek prevailed"

C. Central axis: (12) The heaviness of Moshe's hands, and the overcoming of this problem

B. (12-13) The battle – part II, concluding: "and Yehoshua weakened Amalek..."

A. (14-16) Results of the battle: broadening of God's war with Amalek beyond the time and place of this story.

Parallel between parts A: Only in these two sections do we find the root "l-ch-m" (fight, wage war). In the first section it is Amalek who initiates the battle, while in the second section it is God Who initiates the continuation of the war against Amalek and redefines its boundaries.

Parallel between parts B: This is a contrasting parallel in two senses. Firstly, while in the first section Moshe's hands are at some times raised and at other times lowered, in the second half his hands remain uplifted until the setting of the sun. This creates a further contrast: while in the first half we find that at times Israel prevailed and at other times Amalek, the battle concludes in the second half with Yehoshua weakening Amalek.

Let us now turn our attention to the equality of length between the two sections: each contains exactly 51 words, while the central axis contains 17 words – a third of the number contained in each half.

This structure portrays a reversal of events between the first half and the second because of what takes place in the central axis. All of our attention, then, is focused on the central axis, which is the key to the whole story.

But this key, rather than opening the door to understanding, leads instead to a most perplexing question, which is formulated already in the Mishna (Rosh Ha-shana 3:8): "Do Moshe's hands, then, wage war or fail in war?" The Mishna proceeds to answer:

"Rather, it is to teach you that so long as Israel gazed upwards and subjugated their hearts to their Father in heaven - they prevailed; if not – they were defeated."

The Mishna thus regards Moshe's uplifted hands as a means of religious-moral influence on the nation of Israel, whose gaze upon them, and it is THIS INFLUENCE that helps them defeat Amalek.

### C. STRUCTURE #3: SYNCHRONIC

Let us try to propose a third possible structure for our story, a structure that will provide another dimension to the story as a whole.

Our story takes place SIMULTANEOUSLY in two places: on the battlefield, where Yehoshua is leading the war against Amalek, and at the top of the mountain, where Moshe is leading a different battle – a seemingly private one – to keep his hands upraised. The story testifies to the connection between these two events: the events atop the mountain decide what happens on the battlefield.

Can we divide the story between the two foci of action? Such a division would force us to cut up sentences and to divide their constituent parts according to which focus of action they belong to. Events taking place in both places simultaneously could be presented with an "equal" sign (=) representing their equality. Events following each other in each place could be listed depending on the order of their taking place:

(BF – battlefield; MT – mountaintop)

A. BF:(8) And AMALEK came and waged war against Israel in Refidim.

(9) And Moshe said to Yehoshua: Choose men for us and go out to fight AGAINST AMALEK.

MT: = Tomorrow I shall stand atop the mountain, with the staff of God IN MY HAND.

BF: (10) And Yehoshua did as Moshe had told him, to wage war AGAINST AMALEK.

MT: = And Moshe and Aharon and Chur ascended to the top of the mountain.

B. MT: (11) And it was, when Moshe raised HIS HAND

BF: that Israel prevailed,

MT: and when he dropped HIS HAND

BF: AMALEK prevailed.

C. Central Axis: MT: (12) And Moshe's HANDS were heavy, and they took a rock and placed it under him and he sat upon it, and Aharon and Chur supported HIS HANDS, one on one side of him and the other on the other side.

B1. MT: And HIS HANDS were strong until the setting of the sun.

BF: (13) And Yehoshua weakened AMALEK and his nation by the sword.

A1. BF: (14) And God said to Moshe: Write this as a memorial in a book, and let Yehoshua hear it, for I shall surely wipe out the memory of AMALEK from under the heavens.

MT: (15) And Moshe built an altar, and called it "God is my Banner."

(16) And he said: For God's HAND has sworn by His throne,

BF: that God will wage war against AMALEK from generation to generation."

Let us now examine these two halves of the story and point out some comments pertaining to both. Thereafter we shall turn our attention to each half independently.

1) There is a fundamental difference between the two halves: the excerpts occurring on the battlefield can be read smoothly, as a story that stands on its own. But the events on the mountaintop have no independent standing, and they can be understood only if they are read in conjunction with what is going on the battlefield. This means that the real event, as it takes place in the physical realm, can be understood alone – even if this understanding is not the full picture. The metaphysical situation, in contrast, cannot be understood alone; it exists only by virtue of its connection with the real situation on the battlefield.

2) Does this synchronic structure preserve the equality between the halves of this biblical story? Indeed, it does: the "battlefield"

side of the situation contains 60 words in the Torah text, while the "mountaintop" side contains 59 words.

3) The "equal" signabove are meant to remind us of the division of the story into sections according to the previous structure. But now we discover that each section actually contains a double event: what happens in one place in each section is related to what happens in a different place in that section. Only the central axis (the main part of verse 12) takes place entirely atop the mountain, with no parallel event on the battlefield. This indicates both the importance of the central axis and the priority of what is going on atop the mountain. In other words, the key to solving the question of this story is to be found atop the mountain.

Battlefield:

The essential difference between the events described in the two arenas finds expression in the linguistic style of each. The "battlefield" section is the story of the war against Amalek. The name "Amalek" appears here seven times, as a leading word, and does not appear anywhere in the "mountaintop" section.

The battlefield aspect also contains several roots of a "warlike" nature, all in relation to Amalek: "l-ch-m" (to fight), "g-b-r" (to prevail), "ch-l-sh" (to weaken), "m-ch-h" (to erase). None of these roots is found in the "mountaintop" section.

Mountaintop:

The main leading word here, also appearing seven times, is the word "yad" (hand, arm), which is nowhere to be found in the "battlefield" description. The list of appearances of the leading word "yad" is of vital importance in clarifying the meaning of the raising of Moshe's hands. The parallel between this leading word and the leading word "Amalek" in the other half shows that the "yad" atop the mountain is actually what is causing Israel to prevail and Amalek to be defeated. We shall return to this later on.

What is the reason for the duality of this story? Why is it specifically here that the military campaign is dependent, from the very beginning of the story, on a battle of a different kind, taking place at some distance but at exactly the same time?

D. WHERE DOES AMALEK COME FROM, AND WHAT ARE HIS MOTIVES?

The first nation mentioned by the spies as being indigenous to Canaan is Amalek:

([Bemidbar 13:28-29](#)) "However, the nation that dwells in the land is strong... AMALEK DWELLS IN THE SOUTH, and the Hittite and the Jebusite and the Emorite live in the mountains..."

Hence, at the time the Israelites were in the desert, Amalek dwelt along the southern border of Canaan, in the Negev, serving as the first and most difficult barrier obstructing Bnei Yisrael's entry into the land.

In order to attack the Israelites in Refidim (which is adjacent to Har Sinai), the Amalekites had to cross wide expanses of the Sinai Peninsula. Indeed, this is hinted at in the first verse of our story: "And Amalek CAME..." Why did Amalek do this?

The war waged by Amalek was a pre-emptive battle that was aimed at halting Israel's progress in the desert in the direction of Canaan. They chose to attack at a moment of relative weakness: at the beginning of their journey, at a place where they had been thirsty for water and where the incident of Masa U-Meriva had taken place - a moment of weakness, crisis and lack of faith on the part of Israel: "Saying, Is God in our midst, or not?"

The purpose of the Amalekite attack was therefore to disrupt the great Divine process starting with the exodus from Egypt and leading up to the entry into Canaan, by severing it at its weakest point - the beginning:

([Devarim 25:17](#)) "Remember what Amalek did to you ON THE WAY as you came out of Egypt.

(18) That they met you ON THE WAY... when you were tired and weary, and did not fear God."

Thus Amalek made himself the eternal enemy of God and of Israel, His nation. For his war was not one of self-defense, waged by a nation attacked and trying to protect itself, nor even a coincidental attack by some nomadic desert tribes seeking spoils. Amalek's war was, instead, the calculated plan of a nation coming to disrupt and thwart God's plan concerning the nation of Israel. Amalek came at a most important point in the biblical history of the nation of Israel: the point of contact between the exodus from Egypt and the entry into Canaan. This point - the journey - is sensitive and vulnerable to attack. Nothing could be more dangerous or malevolent than an attack at this point, representing an attempt to sever the process at its most critical stage.

Thus, the war against Amalek is actually an introductory battle in the war for the conquest of the land!

E. THE BATTLE AGAINST EGYPT AT THE RED SEA VS. THE BATTLE AGAINST AMALEK IN REFIDIM

Parashat Beshalach begins with the battle against Pharaoh and his army and ends with the battle against Amalek. Although only a few weeks separate these two events, they are very different in nature, and some of the differences between them illustrate the progress that has taken place in Israel's situation since leaving Egypt and being freed of their fear of their oppressors at the Red Sea. The following are some of the differences.

## THE BATTLE AGAINST EGYPT:

1. With the enemy's approach, the Jews shout and panic.
2. "God will fight for you, and you shall remain silent."
3. Moshe leads the events.
4. The victory is the result of a double miracle.
5. The battle takes place at night.

## THE BATTLE AGAINST AMALEK:

1. No one panics at Amalek's approach.
2. The nation fights its own war.
3. Yehoshua leads the army.
4. The victory is achieved through natural means (i.e. military battle).
5. The entire battle takes place during the day.

What is common to all of these differences? The answer is hinted at in the final part of the previous section of this shiur. The battle against Egypt represents the completion of the process of the exodus. Just as the whole story of the exodus is bound up with overt miracles performed by Moshe, with the nation in a passive role, so the same scene repeats itself at the Red Sea. The war against Amalek, on the other hand, is the first stage of the war to conquer Canaan. Therefore it is Yehoshua who leads here – the future leader of the nation in the generation of the conquest. The task of conquering the land rests on the nation, and God does not fight for them as He did at the Red Sea. The most important difference, related to the previous ones, is that the battle at the Red Sea is conducted under miraculous and overt Divine leadership, while the war for conquest of the land and its introductory battle, against Amalek, is conducted naturally.

The time when each of these battles takes place is a symbolic illustration of their historic roles: the splitting of the Red Sea took place at night, and the event as a whole lasts the entire night until the morning, thus serving as a fitting conclusion to the long night of Israel's exile in Egypt. The battle against Amalek is conducted by day, "until the setting of the sun" – like the battles for the conquest of the land, which were likewise conducted by day. (It is perhaps for this reason that Moshe postpones the battle until "tomorrow.")

Despite these profound differences, the two battles also have a common element: in both instances Moshe's hand, grasping the staff of God, has a direct effect on the battle.

Let us now ask, as the Mishna does: Is it Moshe's hands, then, that split the sea and then return it to its previous state? This is indeed the case, as God commands Moshe: "Lift up your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea AND SPLIT IT." But no one watching Moshe lift his staff attributes the splitting of the sea to Moshe himself; everyone understands that Moshe is acting as God's agent. This is not mere assumption, but rather is expressed clearly at the conclusion of that story:

(14:31) "And Israel saw THE GREAT MARVELS THAT GOD HAD PERFORMED in

Egypt, and the nation feared God and believed in God and in Moshe, His servant."

Is God's hand active also in a natural war, where there is no change in the natural order and where the battle follows the usual custom? Certainly, but in such a war God's hand works in hidden ways and is not clearly visible to all. What, then, decides the measure of God's involvement in a natural battle? It depends on the extent to which the nation at war is worthy of Divine assistance, or on the measure of closeness to God that the nation has attained. When God is among them, they will be victorious; when God is not among them, then coincidence and the natural balance of forces will decide the outcome of the battle.

Let us compare this to another natural battle against Amalek – the battle waged at the time of the unsuccessful attempt to enter the land, conducted in opposition to God's command. Moshe tells the rebels who attempt to force their way:

(Bamidbar 14:42) "Do not go up FOR GOD IS NOT AMONG YOU; that you may not be smitten before your enemies.

(43) For the Amalekites and the Canaanites are there ahead of you and you will fall by the sword, for it is because of this that you turned from following God, AND GOD WILL NOT BE WITH YOU."

Had this event taken place immediately after the exodus, we would have been told that Moshe refrained from participating in the battle and did not lift up his hand with the Divine staff towards the fighters, thereby expressing the fact that God's hand was not active amongst Israel. But in the circumstances following the establishment of the Mishkan, we read something a little different:

(44) "But the Ark of God's covenant, and Moshe, did not budge from the camp."

Therefore the final result of that battle was that Amalek prevailed: "And the Amalekites descended... and they struck them and beat them..."

Let us now return to our story. From the point of view of its timing, our story is an interesting encounter between two time periods and two periods of leadership. We are still close to the time of the exodus, at the beginning of the journey led by Moshe in the desert, and the Torah has not yet been given. This is the epoch of miracles in Jewish history: miracles associated with the exodus, and miracles that were part of the daily routine of the desert. Here, in Refidim, Moshe uses his staff by God's command in order to perform a miracle:

(5-6) "And God said to Moshe: Pass before the nation... and your staff WITH WHICH YOU STRUCK THE NILE – take in it your hand, and go... and strike the rock that water may issue

from it and that the nation may drink. And Moshe did so."

Into the midst of this epoch of miracles erupts a war that belongs to a later epoch – the epoch of conquering the land by means of regular warfare. Moshe is admittedly the current leader of the nation, and he holds the Divine staff with which he struck the Nile and with which he brought forth water from the rock. But Moshe – even without being commanded – understands that this must be a regular war, whose leadership he must entrust to his disciple Yehoshua, the representative and future leader of the next generation.

But Moshe's withdrawal from leadership of the battle in light of this sudden premature arrival of regular warfare does not cancel his own existence, nor does it change the actual historical period in which the nation finds itself: a period in which Moshe and the staff in his hand symbolize God's great outstretched arm, guiding Israel with miracles and saving them from all their troubles.

Here we find the solution to the encounter between the two periods and the two leaders: Moshe, with God's staff in his hand, does not back away entirely from this war; he places himself at Yehoshua's side, turning his own hand with the staff into the symbol of God's arm active within the natural reality through hidden miracles. Indeed, it is not only on the battlefield that a change takes place (in that the nation now fights its own battles instead of relying exclusively upon God), but also atop the mountain. Moshe and his staff change from being tools to accomplish God's great and overt miracles, and instead become means of expressing the hidden Divine providence that acts within the natural reality. Thus it is specifically this natural war that turns into an exceptional educational opportunity to mold the religious consciousness of this generation, already used to miracles. God's hand works not only in great miracles that are visible to all, but also guides the world in its everyday activities and provides for each individual and nation in accordance with its needs and its actions.

The duality of our story – its composition of two simultaneous levels of activity, one dependent on the other – arises from the encounter between two periods and two leaders that takes place within this event. Moshe and the staff in his hand, which until now have symbolized overt, revealed Divine providence, now come to express His hidden guidance – but with continuity and in such a way that all can perceive it. The representatives of revealed miracles have become the representatives of concealed miracles, but they do this openly.

#### F. "FOR GOD'S HAND IS NOT INADEQUATE TO SAVE..."

To the Mishna's question - "Is it then Moshe's hands that wage war or that fail in war?" - we may answer: Yes, indeed! But as at the Red Sea, likewise here: Moshe's hands represent the hand of God, which is what brings victory or defeat.

The commentaries avoid this explanation because Moshe is not commanded here to stretch out his hand with the staff, as he was at the Red Sea and in the case of bringing forth water from the rock. Also – more importantly – because if Moshe's

hands symbolize the hand of God, then how are we to explain the Torah's assertion that "Moshe's hand became heavy"? How can there be any suggestion of "weakness" or "fatigue" when we are talking about Divine power?

The answer to this question is to be found in what we mentioned previously. The hand of Moshe that represents God's hand in our story is not the same as the Divine hand that splits the sea and that brings water from a rock through revealed miracles that are performed for Bnei Yisrael whether they are worthy or not. In our case, the hand of God is operating in a hidden way within the natural reality, and is providing for the nation in accordance with what they deserve. As such, the intervention of the Divine hand here is dependent on man's actions and his spiritual level. When Bnei Yisrael are distant from God, they bring trouble upon themselves and cause weakness, as it were, to the Divine hand helping them.

([Yishayahu 59:1-2](#)) "For God's hand is not inadequate to save, nor is His ear too heavy to hear. Rather, it is your sins that have separated between you and your God, and your transgressions that have hidden His face from you, such that He will not hear."

Two events took place at Refidim, both connected to the Divine staff in Moshe's hand. The first is the nation's complaint to Moshe and their "testing" of God with regard to the water. The nation's behavior in this instance is considered a grave sin, and is eternalized in the name given to the place ["Masa U-Meriva (Testing and Quarreling), after the quarrel of Bnei Yisrael and their testing of God, saying, Is God in our midst or not?"], as well as in a prohibition given for all generations ([Devarim 6:16](#)): "You shall not test the Lord your God as you tested in Masa." Despite this, the sinful nation merits an open miracle: God commands Moshe to take his staff in his hand, to strike the rock and to bring forth water for the nation. And so it is. This type of phenomenon is characteristic of that generation of the exodus, and of the period of wandering in the wilderness.

But into that place bursts an event that belongs to a different religious calendar and a future epoch: the war against Amalek. Now the nation will learn not only that God's hand operates also within the natural reality – through hidden miracles – but that the nature of this activity depends directly on the nation's behavior. The events on the battlefield in Refidim and atop the adjacent mountain are the result of the nation's actions at that very place, in their sin of Masa U-Meriva. They tested God - asking, "Is God in our midst or not?" - and now they will be shown how reality looks when God is indeed in their midst ("And it was, that when Moshe lifted his hand, Israel prevailed") and how it looks when He is not ("And when he let his hand fall, Amalek prevailed").

Israel's sin at Refidim was a serious one, but not like the sin of the spies in Kadesh Barnea. There, the sin brings about a situation whereby Moshe tells the rebels that "God IS NOT in your midst" – and therefore no amount of human effort is going to help. "The Ark of God's covenant, and Moshe, did not budge from the camp," and the rebels' initiative is repulsed by the more powerful Amalekite and Canaanite forces.

At Refidim, Bnei Yisrael learn how vital it is that God be among them. Here, Moshe and his Divine staff do indeed "move from amongst the camp" in an attempt to educate the nation and to save them from the danger they face. But the weakening of their faith – "Is God in our midst or not?" – causes a weakening of Moshe's hands, which is really a symbol of the weakening of the help that they receive from God.

A strengthening of the action of God's hand amongst Israel is the result of reinforcement FROM BELOW. The more the nation seeks God's presence, and the more they work towards attaining it – the more worthy they will be of it. The "technical solution" that is devised at the center of the story is in fact not technical at all. Atop the mountain are the representatives of Israel's leadership – Moshe (God's appointed leader of Israel for this generation), Aharon (the future Kohen Gadol) and Chur (of the tribe of Yehuda – the tribe of the future kingship). The combined effort of the Israelite leadership of that generation to "bring back" God's hand to act amongst Israel, together with the military effort of Yehoshua and his soldiers on the battlefield, bring about an act of God that facilitates the victory of Yehoshua over Amalek. The phenomenon of God's hand in the story comes with an explicit mention at the end: after six appearances of the word "hand" in our story in relation to Moshe, we find that term referring to God: "For God has sworn by HIS HAND upon His throne that God is at war with Amalek from generation to generation."

(Translated by Kaeren Fish.)

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