

Beshallah 5783

בשלח תשפ"ג

How Do We Keep Our Hands Up?

Rabbi E. Noach Shapiro, LCSW, Adjunct Professor, Center for Pastoral Education at JTS



There is a remarkable moment in Parashat Beshallah when the survival of the Jewish people appears to fully depend on whether Moses can keep his hands in the air. Though the entire incident is exactly eight verses long, there is plenty to unpack.

But first, a little context: The Hebrews are having a VERY tough go of it. Led by Moses, they have fled Egypt with Pharaoh following close behind (until he wasn't), and received a crash course on Matzah (Exod. 13:6), on Tefillin (Exod. 13:9), on being used as human bait (Exod 14:2-4), on sarcasm in service of effective complaining (Exod. 14:11), and on the satisfactions of a well-placed "I told you so" (Exod. 14:12). And then just as they are learning how it is that free people go about acquiring water and food, they are attacked by the famously murderous, scorched-earth inclined forces of Amalek.

And it is then we arrive at our moment.

"Joshua did as Moses told him and fought with Amalek, while Moses, Aaron, and Hur went 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's 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 (*vayehi yadav emunah*) until the sun set. And Joshua overwhelmed the people of Amalek with the sword." (Exod. 10-13).

Sounds like a pretty simple win-story for team Hebrews, doesn't it? Yet, in a certain way, the Rabbis appear reluctant to let the choreography of this narrative speak for itself.

Coming so soon after Moses raising his arm over the Sea of Reeds triggering its parting and then again raising his arm when the sea closes over the Egyptian army, the whole "when [Moses] raise(s) his hand and the Israelites prevail" thing in the conflict with Amalek appears to the Rabbis to be a bridge too far; Moses's arm-raising proximity to three of God's miracles in a row makes the Rabbis nervous.

What are they nervous about? Reading *vayehi yadav emunah* as "his hand was faith" instead of "his hands remained steady," the Midrash speaks directly to their concerns: "Did Moses's hands themselves strengthen Israel or break Amalek? No! Only, as long as he raised his hands toward Heaven, the Israelites would look at him and have faith" (*Mekhilta* on Exod. 17:11). The Rabbis wanted everyone to be very clear about the true source of the Israelites' success.

In my role as the mental health coordinator of a Marcus Foundation grant to JTS's Center for Pastoral Education, the parashah's more covert conversation about identifying the source of any leader's success in serving the extraordinary needs of their community resonates deeply. I have been privileged to converse with a broad swath of JTS alumni—educators, chaplains, rabbis, hazzanim, and Jewish professionals, people I call "spiritual and emotional first responders," about the extraordinary spike in emotional and spiritual needs of their constituents of the last few years and the incredible—and too often uncelebrated—lengths they have gone to ease their burden. I have left nearly every encounter wiser, humbled, and inspired.

Sadly, I was also struck in these exchanges by the nearly unanimously expressed feelings of intense isolation in the face of the huge mental health needs of their constituents, as well as their own existential fatigue. These Jewish

professionals are actual heroes, providing comfort when it feels there is none to be had, rising to every challenge all while engaged in the very same struggles in their own lives!

The question arises: How, as a community, can we support the caregivers as they support the careseekers? What would it look like to, like Aaron and Hur, help hold their arms high? As a partial answer to that question, the Center for Pastoral Education will soon be launching two mental health/spiritual healing initiatives. The first will be a weekly series of “Healing Torah” sessions that will offer exposure to some of the deep sources of sacred healing from within our tradition. The participants will create a sacred (online) space to speak, share, listen, and be heard. The second initiative will be an in-person multi-day gathering this summer of caregivers/emotional and spiritual first responders to talk with each other, sharpen and expand their caregiving skills, listen to each other’s wisdom and experience, and lay the building blocks of a professional-personal support network that will play out long past the conference.

An adjacent caregiving challenge this parashah raises is reflected in the phrase “Who heals the healer?” Or better, perhaps, “when does the healer ever focus on their own healing?” Before fighting with Amalek, the Israelites are trying to figure out where their next meal is coming from, offering another opportunity for sarcasm (Exod. 16:3). In response, as perhaps a Divine precursor to DoorDash, God famously rains down manna for the Israelites to eat, calling the nutritious precipitation a “test [for] them” (Exod. 16:4). The Rabbis wonder how God delivering food right to the Israelites’ (tent)step could be understood as a “test.” The commentator Nahmanides suggests that more than testing their obedience to God’s gathering instructions, perhaps the real test is of the Israelites’ capacity to rely on God’s care for them, to allow themselves to freely choose to accept God’s love and support (Ramban on Exod. 16:4). I think Nahmanides captures something very important and paradoxical about human nature. While we may excel in caring for, and even healing, others, in our own moments of crisis and need, we struggle to let others care for us.

Moses, Aaron, and Hur collectively remind us of the liberating and humbling truth that whatever part we may be privileged to play in someone else’s journey toward healing, our ability to serve others depends on our place in a larger sustaining system of renewal and replenishment. Moses knew he could not save the Israelites from Amalek alone and that to get that job done he needed God’s power. Despite whatever human ego-disappointment that knowledge may have triggered in Moses, he had the *emunah*, the steadiness and deep strength, to lean on—literally and figuratively—the love and support of Aaron and Hur.

There is in Moses’s actions a model and inspiration for all the caregivers among us: true healing cannot sustainably flow in only one direction. For caregivers to live a sustainable life of caregiving, whether in a professional or personal setting, we must be living an ever-renewing, emotionally and spiritually nourishing life. Put simply, what goes out must come in. Rinse and repeat. Why? I guess because, at the end of the day, everyone’s arms get tired.