

B'shalach: Moshe — General or Rabbi? Thoughts in a Time of War **Leah Fine, Class of 2024**

V'haya k'asher yarim Moshe yado v'gavar Yisrael v'kasher yaniakh yado v'gavar Amalek: v'yado Moshe k'veidim vayikhu-ev'en vayisimu takhtav vayeshev aleiha v'aharon v'chur tamkhu b'yadav mizeh echad u'mizeh echad vayihi yadav emunah ad bo hashemesh.

...and it would be, whenever Moshe raised his hand, Israel prevailed, and whenever he set down his hand, Amalek prevailed. Now Moshe's hands were heavy, so they took a stone and placed it under him, and he sat down on it while Aharon and Hur supported his hands, one on this-side and one on this-side. So his hands remained steadfast, until the sun came in (Exodus 17:11-12).

At the time that I read these verses with my then-teenage son Koby, I excitedly jumped to explain them in theological, even spiritual, terms. I followed Mishnah Rosh HaShana 3:8, which demystifies the battle between Israel and Amalek and derives moral meaning from this episode: *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.*

Koby would have none of it. Reading the same verses, he saw the tactics of a military tactician, a master general. Where I saw Moshe as a spiritual leader, as the rabbi of rabbis, Koby saw a political and military leader.

Turning to the medieval commentators on the Torah, Koby confidently found support for this military reading in the commentary of **Rabbi Shmuel ben Meir** (c.1005-c.1158). The RaSHBaM understands “*v'gavar yisrael*, and Israel prevailed,” as tactical orders, directing his forces on the battlefield. When the Israelite army saw Moshe raise up “the staff of God” (verse 9), they attacked Amalek. When the staff was lowered, Israel retreated.

The RaSHBaM's student, Rabbi Joseph ben Isaac Bechor Shor, went further. For him, the lowering of the staff was a signal to the soldiers in reserve to move forward in battle. It turns out that Josephus, and numerous *midrashim*, support Koby's militaristic interpretation as well.

Rabbi Avraham ben Meir Ibn Ezra completely rejects the military explanations of RaSHBaM though, asserting that the Mishnah had it right. Bnai Yisrael were victorious when they “turned their eyes upward and subjected their hearts to their Father in Heaven, they prevailed, but if not, they fell.” In other words, whatever military language RaSHBaM and Bechor Shor see is only secondary to the theological response.

Since October 7th, I have thought about this dispute between RaSHBaM and Ibn Ezra, between Koby and me quite a bit. My spiritual interpretation has been shaken—or at least broadened. I have come to understand the military implications of “And Israel prevailed.” Almost every night, I watch the IDF spokesperson, Brigadier General Daniel Hagary address a nervous Israeli public. Hagary has a deep, steady, and commanding voice, even when answering tough questions about the war. Hagary’s extensive combat and command experiences help viewers trust his updates. He speaks for the army, and people need to know that the army has competent leaders.

General Amir Eshel, former commander of the Air Force, reads our *parsha* as a modern military tactician. In his 2016 Hebrew article on 929.org, “The First War of Liberation,” General Eshel sees four military principles at play in our story:

1. **Civic Leadership.** Moshe stands on top of a hill, with his “steady” hands— (literally “faith”)—“*Vayehi yadav emunah*”—supported by Aaron and Hur. This steadiness instills a fighting spirit into the forces.
2. **Military command.** Moshe demonstrated competence as a commander: “Joshua did as Moses told him and fought with Amalek” (Ex. 17:10).
3. **Warriors.** Moshe instructed Joshua to carefully choose soldiers based on their skills and suitability for battle. “Moses said to Joshua, ‘Pick some troops for us, and go out and do battle with Amalek’” (Ex. 17:9).
4. **Investigation.** After the military victory, Hashem commands Moshe to “Inscribe this in a document as a reminder, and read it aloud to Joshua.” (17:12). There will be opportunities in the future to apply the lessons learned from this war, and that may be one of the reasons to document it immediately after the war.

General Eshel views Moshe’s military capabilities through the lens of an experienced general. This battle was a turning point for B'nai Israel and Moshe’s implementation of civic leadership, military command, warriors, and investigation were the keys to victory.

Is it possible to understand both explanations as complementary and not contradictory? Perhaps the Israelite warriors followed Moshe’s battle signals *and* gained confidence in Hashem when they witnessed Moshe’s outstretched arms? Chazal certainly thought so.

In these difficult days, we need a lot of reassurance and solidarity. We need, as our ancestors did, the skills of Moshe, the military leader, and the *emunah*, the steadfastness, of Moshe Rabbenu, our rabbi, our spiritual teacher.



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*Leah Fine is a Jewish educator, having taught, administered, and innovated curriculum within a wide range of formal and informal settings. She holds an MA in Modern Jewish History from Yeshiva University and credentials in elementary and special education from California State University. Leah has studied at Pardes, Drisha, the Melton Senior Educators Fellowship at the Hebrew University and most recently the i-Center Fellowship. Leah is co-author of *Where God Dwells: A Child's History of the Synagogue* with her husband, Steven Fine, with whom she loves to hike the world of Chazal.*