



Yeshiva University
S. DANIEL ABRAHAM ISRAEL PROGRAM



Divrei Torah for the Shabbos Table

פירות הארץ

FROM THE TALMIDIM, FOR THE TALMIDIM

Beshalach / בשלח

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Orayta

Of all the parshiot which tell the story of Yitziat Mitzraim, Parshat Beshalach has some of the most open and wondrous outpourings of miracles- from the sweetening of the waters of Marah, to the daily falling of manna, the defeat of Amalek, and of course the splitting of the sea. Yet in the same parsha that Am Yisroel experiences these miracles, they maintain a strong doubt; first towards Moshe and Aharon and eventually towards Hashem, culminating with the question "*Is God in our midst or not?*" (Shmot 17:7). How does one comprehend this idea of doubting something that is so obviously placed before you?

Another question that jumps out is regarding the war with Amalek and the role that Moshe (and more specifically his hands) plays in the winning of the war. Why does Moshe keeping his hands up make Am Yisroel prevail?! Do these seemingly completely separate parts of the parsha have anything to do with each other? If so, what?

In a certain way, when you step back and think about this idea of open miracles vs. doubt, it makes perfect sense. Hashem can only be brought into your life as much as you want to see Him, so what does it matter if there is a seemingly 'open' miracle in front of you? If one isn't ready to let Hashem into his/her life, then it doesn't matter how clear the miracles are because it is always possible to find some way to doubt. Every day when we put on tefillin we say "I will betroth thee to Me (referring to God) forever..." (Hoshea 2:21). In a way we are in essence married to Hashem. The Gemara (Sanhedrin 7a) says "when love [between man and wife] [is] strong, [they can lie] together on the width of a sword. But [if their] love is not strong, a bed the width of 60 amos does not suffice for [them]." This sums up the whole idea. If you are able to attain a true and healthy relationship with Hashem then you see everything in your life as the biggest of miracles. Yet when your relationship with the Almighty is broken, you can literally witness the splitting of the sea and still be able to doubt Hashem .

But this leads to another question - Wasn't Am Yisroel's relationship with Hashem healthy at this point? We were just freed from slavery! After 210 years of oppression, God "...redeemed Am Yisroel with an outstretched arm..." (Shmot 6:7) What could be a better foundation than that for a healthy relationship?! Rav Hirsch explains that this doubt (which is the root of the unhealthy relationship) is "Not so much doubt concerning God's almighty power, as uncertainty whether He is indeed *bikeerbainu*." Am Yisroel felt that if God is omnipotent and omniscient, then why would He possibly be concerned with the matters of man? But Rav Hirsch says that this "lack of faith and trust

should not surprise us.” The world back then was completely dominated by pagan, polytheistic views. Because this new monotheistic view was so radically different from the norm, it seems only natural that the process towards belief would be gradual, taking pit stops at different levels of doubt along the way.

Rav Matis Weinberg agrees that that faith vs. doubt is a prevalent motif in this parsha. It makes sense “to find merit in doubt, as if it confers a pedigree to the believer’s truth...” It is unhealthy to fully believe or not believe in anything, especially God. This is because a healthy amount of doubt shows that you are actively working on your relationship with Hashem and do not just blindly accept everything you hear. But Rav Matis does not feel that this holds true in this scenario. Rather the sentiment of doubt sends Am Yisroel into a downward spiral “into the hell of Amalek.” It is because Amalek is the embodiment of uncertainty. But what about Amalek can cause so much doubt and give them this title? How can this nation have more of a sway on Am Yisroel than the miracles did?

To understand this, we first must define our terms. In this case, what does ‘doubt’ mean? Rav Matis defines this doubt as a doubt not of God, but of Jews. He says “Amalek doubts not God, but man’s suitability for God. That was precisely what Yisrael themselves doubted – not ‘*Does God exist or not?*’ but ‘*Does God exist amongst us or not?*’...” It would obviously be impossible to actually take on God, so instead Amalek attacks the relationship between man and God. The focal point of the whole attack is on “...perception, not reason.” Rosh Yeshivat Orayta, Rabbi David Aaron, teaches that “what you perceive is what you believe, and what you believe is what you receive.” Amalek was able to understand that if they broke this chain at the start, then both the belief in God and the proper reception of His Oneness would be gone.

When you combine Rav Matis’ and Rav Hirsch’s opinions on the question of faith vs. doubt, then the question of Moshe’s hands becomes clear. Moshe represents Am Yisroel, and his hands represent their belief. But this belief can only come through when the perception is clear. When the perception is being blocked, “... Am Yisroel is ready to stone Moshe” (Shmot 17:4); they are clearly not ready to help lift up his hands. When his hands *are* up, Am Yisroel is able to win the war on doubt, on Amalek. Moshe tries to hold his hands up by himself but “... his hands were heavy...” (Shmot 17:12). He was able to beat Amalek’s attacks personally, but that was not enough to beat the evil nation as a whole. Only when the rest of Am Yisroel is ready to fight their doubt as well and “... support his hands...” (Shmot 17:12) by literally holding them up does it become possible to “...weaken Amalek and its people...” (Shmot 17:13). Only when Am Yisroel is ready to work together and fight through the challenges posed by Amalek are we ever able to prevail.

This is why the Parsha ends with the commandment to wage war on Amalek from generation to generation. Today, as then, doubt still plagues moderns Jews. Everyone has struggles within Judaism, no matter where you are in life. For some it may be why we have Shabbat. Others may struggle with the idea of free will, objective morality, why bad things happen to good people; or literally any aspect of Jewish life/philosophy. We all have questions, but the difference between people is how badly they want the answers. The way that we can fulfill the mitzvah of waging war on Amalek today is by struggling with these issues and working on ourselves to understand not just how, but why to be the best Jews we can be.