

# Whose Battle? Whose Victory?

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The story of the battle against Amalek (Exodus 17:8-16) is a story about human initiative aided by God. As one modern commentator has observed, this brief biblical passage presents Moshe's "exercise of power as a sign of the direct intervention of God Himself."<sup>5</sup> Rabbinic interpreters sense this trend in the story and carry it further, almost at the expense of the human agents. When the *Tannaim* read the story, they assign God a commanding, central role in the battle and an even more decisive claim to the victory. At the same time, however, by reaffirming Israel's special position as God's people, they retain the balance between Israel and the Divine.

The Torah's description begins with a group of verses that involves only human actors (8-13). In response to Amalek's attack (8), Moshe commands Yehoshua to choose men and fight (9). Moshe, Aharon and Hur oversee the battle from their vantage point on the hilltop, with Moshe's arms holding God's rod (9) and directly influencing Israel's victory (10-11). When Moshe raises his arms, Israel prevails; when Moshe lowers them, Amalek prevails (11). To allow Moshe to keep his arms up throughout the day of battle, Aharon and Hur support them while Moshe sits on a rock (12). With help of Moshe's arms, Yehoshua overwhelms the Amalekites (13).

In contrast with the human-focused verses that begin the story, the concluding verses, in the wake of Israel's victory, highlight God's role (14-16). For the first and only time in the narrative, God speaks, commanding Moshe to record, in writing and through oral proclamation, that God will "completely erase the memory of Amalek" (14). Moshe explicitly acknowledges the divine power behind his own arms by building an altar and naming it *יהוה נסי*, "God is my banner" (15). Moshe declares that it is God's war against Amalek that is to continue "throughout the generations" (16). In sum, it is God who has won this battle at Rephidim, and it is God who will continue to pursue the enemy.

When read together, the story's two parts reflect a "division of labor" between Israel as a fighting force and God as the source of their victory. Israel fights the battle, and God helps them win. Overall, then, the Torah describes the battle against Amalek at Rephidim as an action to which both Israel and God contribute. At the end of the story, God's speech to Moshe confirms that Moshe has acted properly in taking the initiative to defend Israel against Amalek. Yehoshua's victory over Amalek marks a victory for God.

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<sup>5</sup> B.S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus* (Philadelphia, 1974), 315.

The way in which the Torah tells this story, however, somewhat undercuts the depiction of Israel and God working in concert. In the first section (8-13), which describes the actual fighting, God's involvement remains largely implicit, rather than explicit. God is not named as an actor, and so remains in the background. The use of God's rod and the miraculous correlation between the positions of Moshe's arms and the battle's outcome imply, of course, that God does participate here, too. But the very implicitness of God's involvement places humans at the center of the action. As much as Moshe appears in the familiar role of the Man of God—wielding the rod to work a miracle—Moshe also appears as a general who initiates the military response to Amalek by devising a clear plan for battle and issuing orders. And the text clearly states that it is Yehoshua who "overwhelms Amalek" (13). Conversely, God's claim to victory, while implicit in the story's beginning, becomes explicit only once the fighting is over, in the latter part of the story (14-16). By emphasizing that the war and the victory are God's, the story ends with almost no acknowledgement of Israel's role.

The *Tannaim*, in their interpretation of the story of the battle against Amalek, are particularly concerned with God's minimal role in the first part of the narrative. Thus, when they encounter the effects of Moshe's arms, they comment:<sup>6</sup>

*Could Moshe's arms make Israel victorious or weaken Amalek? Rather, as long as Moshe raised his hands toward heaven, the Israelites would look at him and believe in Him who commanded Moses to do so; then God would perform miracles and mighty deeds for them.*

**Mekhilta of Rabbi Yishmael, Amalek, 1**

וכי ידיו של משה מגברות את ישראל או  
ידיו של משה שוברות את עמלק? אלא כל  
זמן שהיה משה מגביה את ידיו כלפי למעלה  
היו ישראל מסתכלין בו ומאמינין במי  
שפיקד את משה לעשות כן והמקום עושה  
להם ניסים וגבורות.  
מכילתא דר"י, מסכתא דעמלק, פרשה א

The *Mekhilta's* question about the power of Moshe's arms expresses concern with God's apparent absence from the description of the miracle. The answer brings God (and Israel) back, as it were, to the story. According to the *midrash*, neither Moshe nor his arms caused the victory. Rather, the actual cause was God, who is moved to action by Israel's faith as they gazed towards Heaven.

In addition to interpreting Moshe's arms as guides towards Heaven, this passage also redefines God's role in the entire episode. It refers to God as "Him who commanded Moshe to do so." The *midrash* imagines that God has commanded Moshe to stand on the hilltop and raise his arms, even though, in the Torah, God speaks only after Moshe has acted. Elsewhere in the same section, the *Mekhilta* quotes the position of R. Eleazar of Modiin who declares "We can learn that this war was (conducted) only by the Almighty's order." In fact, according to the *Mekhilta of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai*, Moshe's very order to Yehoshua (17:9) is actually God's order to Moshe.<sup>7</sup> All of these

<sup>6</sup> All quotations follow M. I. Kahana, *The Two Mekhilot on the Amalek Portion* (Jerusalem, 1999). Translations are my own, made in consultation with the one published in J.Z. Lauterbach, *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael* (Philadelphia, 1933). A parallel version of this particular passage occurs in Mishna, *Rosh Hashana* 3:8. For discussion, see Kahana, *Mekhilot*, 256-258 (Hebrew).

<sup>7</sup> Kahana, *Mekhilot*, 163. For discussion, see Kahana, *Mekhilot*, 245-246.

readings demote Moshe, as it were, from his status as the general who conducts the battle. According to the *midrashim*, the real orders come from God, and Moshe fulfills them loyally.

This diminution of Moshe's role makes sense as a response to the first part of the Torah's account, where the verses seem to minimize God's role. The latter part of the story, where God claims victory and Moshe ascribes victory to God, seems to require the opposite corrective, namely a reassertion of Israel's own place in the story. Thus, the *Mekhilta of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai* records the following dispute regarding the naming of the altar in 17:15:<sup>8</sup>

"Moshe built an altar and named it Hashem-Nissi" (17:15)—R. Yehoshua says: Moshe named it Nissi ("my miracle"), saying to them, 'As for this miracle that God performed for you, he performed it on my behalf."

R. Eleazar of Modiin says: God called it Nissi ("My miracle"). For whenever Israel experiences a miracle, it is as if there is a miracle for Him. When they experience suffering, it is as if there is suffering for Him. When they experience joy, there is joy before Him . . .

**Mekhilta of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai, Amalek, 2**

ויבן משה מזבחה ויקרא שמו ה' נסי—  
ר' יהושע אומר משה קראו נסי.  
אמר להן נס זה שעשה לכם המקום  
בגיני עשאו.  
ר' אלעזר המודעי אומ' המקום קראו  
ניסי שכל זמן שישראל שרויין בנס  
כאלו הוא נס לפניו. שרויין בצרה  
כאלו צרה היא לפניו. שרויין  
בשמחה שמחה היא לפניו . . .  
מכילתא דרשב"י, עמלק, ב

When one compares the two positions' relationships to the straightforward reading of the verse, R. Yehoshua's position hews closer.<sup>9</sup> R. Eleazar of Modiin's position, in which God, rather than Moshe, names the altar, runs counter to the plain sense and is harder to justify. R. Yehoshua's interpretation, however, is more than an elaboration of the straightforward reading of the verse. Rather, he emphasizes the possessive suffix on the word נסי, *my miracle*, as an indicator of Moshe's own pride at being the agent of the miracle that God has worked on behalf of Israel. In doing so, he reclaims a place for Moshe in the story. At first glance, R. Eleazar of Modiin's position seems to extend his assertion of God's role. By suggesting that God names the altar, he further minimizes the part that Moshe plays. Moshe is "read out" of the story even here, where his personal involvement extends no further than acknowledging that he is, in the end, God's subject. But that is only part of R. Eleazar's position. His concluding statement establishes situational and emotional reciprocity between God and Israel. Even when God claims victory, Israel remains central. Moshe might not name the altar, and he might have no personal claim to the miracle, but God can only claim victory when Israel is victorious. When Israel suffers, God suffers, until Israel is happy.

In a sense, then, the *Tannaim* continue the story of the battle against Amalek where the Torah began. The Torah tells a story of how God comes to Israel's aid at a time of war and how human warfare requires Divine assistance. For the *Tannaim*, the story exemplifies a partnership between God and Israel. By finding room for each partner where the other dominates the narrative, the *midrashim* allow each a fair share.

<sup>8</sup> *Mekhilta of Rabbi Yishmael* records a similar dispute, but there Moshe comes out humbler. For discussion, see Kahana, *Mekhilotot*, 316-318.

<sup>9</sup> In this regard, the dispute here exemplifies the broader general relationship between the two rabbis' different methods of interpretation. For comprehensive discussion, with additional examples, see Kahana, *Mekhilotot*, 288-320. I am grateful to my colleague, Dr. Aaron Koller, and to my wife, Leebie Mallin, for reviewing an earlier draft of this article.