

B'Shalach: Searching for Passion

Moshe Taragin

Just as our desert journey began, an old enemy reappeared, hoping to thwart our entry into the land of Israel. Esav's family was still bristling at the injustice of Ya'akov's usurping the title of first-born from their grandfather. Ya'akov's descendants must be halted before they enter the land of Hashem and claim their historical legacy. Amalek, a grandson of Esav had formed a mighty warrior-nation and now, these armies ambushed the defenseless former slaves in an open desert terrain. A rag-tag collection of former slaves would be no match for the fierce Amalek warriors.

Even Hashem Himself had previously worried that exposure to violent conflict would traumatize the still fragile nation. For this reason, He navigated us on a circuitous route to Israel, rather than journeying along the Mediterranean coast, because the coastal plains were inhabited by belligerent Philistine armies. A military encounter with these well-trained armies would demoralize the untrained Jewish people.

Weeks after our flight from Egypt, without warning, Amalek brought war to the desert and, enjoying no cover and no escape route, we were left to face the full brunt of this vicious attack.

It was obvious that our victory could only be achieved through a combination of military engagement and spiritual intercession. While the armies battled in the valley below, Moshe ascended a nearby peak, and raised his hands to heaven in prayer. Glancing at Moshe's raised hands emboldened with greater courage, and we enjoyed several victories. Gradually though, Moshe's hands weakened, his hands lowered, dispiriting the fighters and tipping the war in favor of Amalek. Something had to be done to support Moshe's floundering hands, else victory would slip away.

Quickly Aharon, Moshe's brother, and a nephew named Hur joined Moshe on the mountain and braced his arms for the remainder of the battle, thereby securing Jewish victory.

Hands of Faith

The Torah refers to Moshe's heroic hands as "hands of faith" or "hands of emunah". Presumably this phrase is a metaphor: just as faith is enduring and sturdy, similarly Moshe's hands, with some assistance, remained steadily pointed to heaven. This colorful and poetic phrase is just another way of portraying Moshe's hands as rock steady and unwavering.

There is an additional connotation to the phrase "hands of faith": Moshe's hands elicited faith in the soldiers waging battle. Watching an elderly Moshe struggle to keep his hands aloft, inspired great faith in their leader and great faith in the success of their mission. Without faith the battle would have been lost. Moshe's hands of faith insured confidence and courage among the soldiers and delivered a victory of faith.

A Rough Seat

The soldiers were inspired by Moshe's struggle to keep his hands raised, but also by his posture and positioning during their battle. Typically, during ancient warfare, monarchs remained carefully protected in the rear flank of the camp, enjoying the comforts of the royal quarters while the common soldiers faced the harsh conditions of war. Monarchs were not expected to endure the filthy and bloody conditions of ancient battle.

Moshe was different, and though he was unable to participate in the actual battles, he stood on a nearby plateau, supervising the battle and praying for the soldiers below. More importantly, he didn't accept any luxuries or comforts while his nation below was locked in a life and death struggle. Instead of sitting upon a throne or a chair, this aged man sat on an uncomfortable boulder refusing to indulge in any pleasure while he subjected others to struggle. Moshe's passion and sacrifice inspired the soldiers to greater bravery and selflessness.

Sacrifice Inspires

Witnessing personal sacrifice in others inspires us to greater dedication. Sacrifice is generally, a result of deep passion. Passion is our ability to care about a person or an idea more than we care about ourselves and our own comforts. Caring about something more than ourselves compels us to sacrifice our own interests on behalf of others or on

behalf of great ideas. Passion empowers sacrifice, and similarly, sacrifice generates greater passion, as we are forced to justify why we are surrendering our comforts. Paying a personal price for a “value” heightens the importance of that value. Passion drives sacrifice which, in turn, generates more passion.

I was deeply inspired by the passion my mentor, Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, displayed for his Torah study. His lengthy and challenging Torah lectures would regularly extend 30 minutes into our break, and we all regularly missed lunch. I realized that his passion for Torah study was more important than his hunger for food. Likewise, I recall the extra moments he spent studying Torah after completing an all-night tikkun of Torah study on Shavuot. Evidently, his passion for Torah study overcame his need for sleep. These sacrifices for Torah study, taught me the value of passion and sacrifice. People are looking to be inspired by people of passion and of sacrifice.

Good Times, Weak People

Unfortunately, there is a shortage of passion in our modern world. Life has become easy, and men have grown soft. There is a common expression: hard times produce strong people, strong people produce good times, good times produce weak people, and weak people produce hard times.

Living through good times, we are rarely asked to sacrifice, and we rarely achieve passion. Previous generations fought great wars, endured economic crisis, or struggled on behalf of large ideas, often at great personal costs to their liberty or comfort. Their lives were harder, but their values and passion were each more sharply defined. Their sacrifices inspired us and enhanced the caliber of our own lives, filling them with content and meaning.

The modern world is too padded for passion and sacrifice. We face our own modern set of challenges and struggles, but they tend to be interpersonal and psychological, and they don't often demand relinquishing of comfort. If anything, we often solve our problems by *increasing* comfort, thereby decreasing sacrifice, and further diminishing passion. Without passion, life is empty and uninspired and unfortunately, we occupy an uninspired world.

Religious Passion

Religion is certainly easier than ever before. Earlier periods in history were far less friendly to Jews and to religious observance. Economic and social conditions were harsh and demanded great struggle and sacrifice. Facing endless cycles of antisemitism required great faith and great personal sacrifice. Religion required investment, courage and passion.

As the modern world has become more friendly toward Judaism, religion has become easier than ever. We have achieved wealth, political security and social influence, and can practice our religion freely, while still enjoying a reasonably comfortable lifestyle. Life in the state of Israel is triumphant and has become increasingly more comfortable.

Children look for passion in the lives of their parents and when they struggle to identify it, they remain uninspired. If the next generation does not detect any sacrifice for religion, they will assume, perhaps correctly, that we aren't passionate about religion. If we aren't passionate, why should they adopt life choices we made based on comfort and convenience. They can pursue their own independent lifestyles of comfort and ease. Without our own passion and sacrifice we have little to demand from the future.

Don't fear hardships or sacrifice, they will lead us to nobility and passion.

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