



Emotional Exhaustion • Parshat Beshalach

Take a moment to empathize with Moses. How would you feel if after orchestrating a miraculous escape from Egypt and crossing the Red Sea, you were verbally assaulted and felt physically threatened by the very people you saved? First, the Israelites complained about the dearth of food and then they murmured concerning the lack of water. They even requested a return to Egypt so they could, at bare minimum, have enough to eat and drink. Moses called out to God in what seems to be a mixture of frustration, fear, and disappointment, “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me!” (Ex. 17:4).

Immediately after this incident, without pause in the verses, Amalek burst onto the scene, attacking the escaped slaves as they traversed hazardous desert terrain. Moses, presumably mentally and physically exhausted from the exodus and from internal conflicts, confronted the first combat scenario facing this young nation. He appointed Joshua to select troops to go to battle, and told him, “Tomorrow, I will station myself on the top of the hill, with the rod of God in my hand” (Ex. 17:9). He ascended the hill with Aaron and Hur while Joshua and the soldiers fought below. Without explaining the exact mechanism, the verse states that, “Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed; but whenever he let down his hand, Amalek prevailed” (Ex. 17:11). Despite the relatively clear military strategy, the momentum, however, was difficult to maintain. Moses’ hands became heavy, and he was unable to lift his staff any longer.

Why did Moses’ hands become heavy? The Sages in a certain Midrash weren’t satisfied with the simple natural possibility of physical exhaustion. They identify instead a feebleness that was forged from failure. They critiqued Moses on two fronts. First, as Rashi notes, instead of delegating to Joshua to “choose for us men” to fight, Moses should have done so himself. Second, instead of acting immediately, Moses said he would ascend the hill “tomorrow.”

According to these Midrashim, Moses’ heaviness of hands was a psychosomatic manifestation of his procrastination and a deflection of responsibility. As he stood on the hill trying to lift his hands and his people to victory, physical exhaustion, the residual emotional turmoil from the internal discontent, and the guilt from how he initially handled the conflict, all laid heavily upon his soul. It all took an immense physical toll. Perhaps also gnawing at his confidence and exacerbating the fatigue, was the question he asked immediately upon being called on by God, “Who am I” to lead these people? (Ex. 3:11).

It is precisely at this moment of crisis that Moses learned from his mistakes and modeled how a leader can be supportive of his people during crisis, even amidst personal exhaustion. Knowing that the war would take time, he pivoted to sitting, instead of standing. The verse mentions that he sat on a rock, which the Talmud highlights as a signal of empathy (*Ta’anit* 11a). While he could have sat on something more comfortable, his mindset was determined by the state of crisis: “Israel is in

tribulation. I will be in tribulation together with them.” This not only reflected emotional empathy but a concrete action that allowed him to feel some small aspect of the burden the soldiers were feeling physically. This small physical sacrifice symbolized a strong sense of solidarity.

But sitting and empathizing was not enough to replenish his strength. Moses could no longer hold up his hands or the nation by himself. It is at this point that Aaron and Hur played a pivotal role in supporting and holding up Moses. They provided the physical and emotional support for him to persevere.

In *Staying Human: A Wartime Chronicle*, Dr. Erica Brown highlights the fact that Moses ascended a hill, and not a mountain: “At war, leaders need to see and be seen,” she writes. “Leaders cannot be remote from those they serve at times of crisis.” As noted, the soldiers’ ability to see Moses’ staff played a critical role. According to the Mishna in Rosh Hashana, it was not the staff that performed miracles, it was a vision of God: “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.” Moses, with the support of Aaron and Hur, inspired the soldiers to retain their faith and commitment to God and their mission, which imbued within them a sense of purpose, hope, and Divine inspiration. This message was likely all the more powerful as the soldiers saw the physical exertion and sacrifice Moses was making to help them maintain their advantage.

As the war in Israel passes day 111, and we confront the devastating news of so many soldiers killed in battle this past week alone, our collective hands are being weighed down by physical exhaustion and the heaviness of distress. It is upon us to emulate Moses, Aaron, and Hur. We should demonstrate our empathy and solidarity with Israel and its soldiers with a personal token of physical sacrifice, our symbolic sitting on a rock. What are you sacrificing during this war? We can also work on inspiring ourselves and others by lifting our hands and our eyes in faith and prayer to our Father in Heaven. Finally, we need to embrace each other, affording the physical and emotional support we need to unite in victory.

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Character Challenge: What can you do to help yourself cope with emotional exhaustion? How can you better support those around you and those sacrificing on your behalf?

Quote from Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt”l: “It is the task of a leader to empower, but it is also their task to inspire. That is what Moses did when, at the top of a hill, in full sight of the people, he raised his hands and his staff to heaven. When they saw this, the people knew they could prevail” (*Looking Up, Covenant & Conversation*).