SIGNALING IN BIBLICAL WARFARE
AND MOSES' ROLE AS MILITARY COMMANDER

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In war, communication has always been a problem. Coordination between multiple groups in different locations is difficult enough in peacetime. It is much more so in the heat of battle. This was particularly so in ancient times, before the advent of modern communication technology.

BIBLICAL MILITARY SIGNALS

Yigael Yadin, in *The Art of Warfare in Biblical Lands in the Light of Archaeological Discovery*, states: "There is no specific information on the means of communication between units during an attack, but it was probably carried out by special runners, by semaphore [signaling by flag], or by trumpet-calls as in a later period."\(^1\)

In fact, other methods of communication were also used on the field of battle and are documented in the Bible. Alan Crown points to two accounts that specify other methods of tactical communication. Smoke signals were used to signal the start of the bloody conflict between the Children of Israel and of those of Benjamin after the abusive killing of the concubine at Gibeah (Judg. 20:38). Also in Judges, a complex of signals is detailed, including shofar blasts, the crash of breaking jugs, and the sudden appearance of the bright light of multiple torches in the dark of night (Judg. 7:20ff). This complex was the signal for Gideon's men to attack and was probably also meant to shock the Midianite enemy.

Another method of military communication is mentioned when Joshua is

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commanded: *Stretch out the spear (kidon) in your hand towards the* [Canaanite city of] *Ai*. This was the signal for his men to rise up out of ambush, attack and conquer the city, and set it afire (Josh. 8:18-19).

A verse in Isaiah also refers to methods of military signaling. It presents a set of three commands: *On a bare mountain, lift a banner (se’u nes), raise your voice to them (harimu kol lahem), wave a hand (hanifu yad), and they will come into the gates of the nobles (ve-yavo’u pithei nedivim)* (Isa. 13:2). According to the commentators, waving the hand is an order for soldiers to gather together: even if they are too far off to hear a shout, they can still see the sweeping motion of a hand or flag (Rashi, Radak, and *Metzudat David*, ad. loc.). Shmuel Laniado says that lifting the banner is a sign for soldiers to gather together, raising the voice is to confuse the enemy, and waving the hand refers to fighting with sword and spear.

Aron Pinker notes that lifting a banner is a visual signal, raising one's voice is a vocal command, and waving a hand (with or without a spear) is a manual signal. Thus, in addition to the methods of military signaling listed by Yadin, the Bible mentions a number of other techniques.

**ISRAEL’S BATTLE WITH THE AMALEKITES**

In light of the frequent mention of various methods of military communication in Scripture, a rereading of a well-known passage in Exodus may be in order. It concerns the role played by Moses in the very first battle the Israelites ever fought.

*Amalek came and fought with Israel at Rephidim. Moses said to Joshua, "Pick some men for us, and go out and do battle with Amalek. Tomorrow I will station myself on the top of the hill, with the rod of God in my hand." Joshua did as Moses told him and fought with Amalek, while Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. Then, whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed; but whenever he let down his hand, Amalek prevailed. But Moses' hands grew heavy; so they took a stone and put it under him and he sat on it, while Aaron and Hur, one on each side, supported his hands; thus his hands remained steady until the sun set. And Joshua overwhelmed the people of Amalek with the sword (Ex. 17:8-13).*

What is the significance of Moses' raising his hand? The sages of the
Mishnah consider it a purely spiritual matter: "How could Moses' hands determine victory or defeat? It is to indicate that as long as the Israelites looked upwards and made their hearts subservient to their Father in Heaven, they would overcome. And if they did not, they would succumb." This would suggest that Moses' function was mainly inspirational, while Joshua actually commanded the Israelite army.

But it is possible to interpret the passage in light of the military use of hand signals as described in the Bible and cited above. In this reading, Moses was signaling military orders to his army with his hands and/or staff. It is even possible that Moses' signals were actually specific tactical orders, such as indicating the direction in which to attack.

While most traditional commentators follow the interpretation of the Mishnah, there are several who read the passage in terms of actual signaling. Thus, Rashbam says that whenever soldiers see their banner waving, they overcome their enemy. If they see it has fallen, they retreat and are defeated.

Bekhor Shor understands the passage to refer to the raising of a flag or hand as a battle signal. When overcoming the enemy, it is held upright; when in distress, it is lowered to indicate to those in the rear that their help is needed at the battlefront. He suggests that in this way the staff of God in Moses' hand functioned as a signal flag.

Two contemporary authors present similar opinions. Aron Pinker suggests that "Moses' hand signals from the top of the hill may represent a case of misunderstood communications." He says that the Israelites knew that they were to attack when Moses raised his hands, but did not realize that they were to continue to attack even when he lowered his hands. Claire Gottlieb also makes a case for interpreting the raising of Moses' hands as a military signal and not merely as a gesture of supplication during prayer:

We have here a picture of Moses, the general of the army, standing on top of the hill, holding the divine rod and directing the progress of the battle. How did one direct a battle in antiquity? By means of hand signals . . . The word yad is used to denote hand signals many times in the Bible and also in the [Dead Sea Scrolls] War Scroll. In Exodus 17:15-16, yad is parallel to nes. In Exodus 17:15, Moses names the site of the battle Adonai nisi, "[the Lord] is my signal." In conclusion, it appears that Moses was present on a hilltop with his arms
raised because he was directing the battle with Amalek using hand signals. Limited by his ageing physique, he had to sit while "reading the battle" and directing it from his hilltop overview of the battlefield.

MOSES: MILITARY AND/OR SPIRITUAL LEADER?

There are thus two conflicting interpretations of Moses' role in the battle with the Amalakites. The question of whether his hand-raising should be interpreted as of spiritual or military significance may well represent a deeper division in interpreting Moses as a leader. One approach acknowledges Moses' role as that of political and military leader, in addition to that of spiritual leader. The other views him almost exclusively as a spiritual leader. These interpretations may well be related to the ideological outlook and actual political circumstances of the respective commentators.

For example, the Zionist theorist and writer Ahad Ha-Am was convinced that the leadership of Moses was not of a military nature. He asked: "Was he a military hero? No! The whole canvas betrays no hint of physical force. We never find Moses at the head of an army, performing feats of valor against the enemy. Only once do we see him on the battlefield, in the battle with Amalek; and there he simply stands [sic!] and watches the course of the fighting, helping the army of Israel by his moral strength, but taking no part in the actual battle."

These conclusions of Ahad Ha-Am do not appear to be in keeping with a straightforward reading of the biblical text, as indicated below. They also contradict the account of the First Century CE military leader and historian Josephus. In *Contra Apionem*, Josephus repeatedly emphasizes the role of Moses as that of the general in command of the forces of Israel:

Let us consider his first and greatest work; for when it was resolved by our forefathers to leave Egypt and return to their own country, this Moses took the many ten-thousands and saved them out of many desperate distresses, and brought them home in safety. And [he led them]...over a country without water, and full of sand, to overcome their enemies, and, during these battles, to preserve their children, and their wives, and their property; on all of which occasions he became an excellent general of an army.

A broader reading of the biblical biography of Moses has led some to em-
phasize his military and political leadership. True, his role as lawgiver is highlighted in the Bible, and came to dominate his image in the minds of generations. Yet the biblical account of his role as lawgiver need not obscure the importance of the military, diplomatic, and political aspects of his leadership. The latter approach is suggested by a reexamination of Moses' life as presented in the Bible.

THE YOUTHFUL MOSES

As an adopted grandson of Pharaoh himself, Moses would have been trained and educated with the other young Egyptian courtiers. Much of their education would have been military, including practical experience in combat and in hand-to-hand fighting with enemies of Egypt. Such a military background for Moses in his youth is suggested by the way he unhesitatingly attacked an Egyptian taskmaster who was beating a Hebrew slave. Moses overcame and killed him in what seems to have been a hand-to-hand engagement (Ex. 2:12). Such hand-to-hand combat is illustrated in great detail in ancient papyri.

Moses' confidence in his physical prowess and ability was such that he later stood up, alone, against a group of Midianite shepherds. He was defending the right of Jethro's daughters (who included his future wife Zipporah) to water their flocks at the communal well (Ex. 2:16-17).

Sefer Ha-Yashar even attributes to Moses an international reputation for military leadership. According to this midrashic account, Moses was called on by the deposed King of Cush to command his army in a war to regain his lost throne. Sefer Ha-Yashar's legends would thus explain how and why Moses acquired a Cushite wife (Num. 12:1).  

THE MATURE MOSES

The Bible shows that Moses was proficient in a variety of secondary military activities. He successfully managed the logistics involved in the hurried departure of the whole host of Israelites from Egypt. He armed them and trained them well. They were thus able to resist the cowardly attack of the Amalekites on the noncombatants in their rear, proceeding to vanquish them in battle.

Moses directed military intelligence and specifically instructed his novice spies in the details of how they should "spy out the land" to be conquered.

He was the quartermaster-general, housing his forces in four mobile military
camps, each flying its own military standard. He was in charge of arranging for supplies of food and water during all the forty years in very difficult environments. The food supplies ranged from large quantities of bread (matzah) dough which they took with them from Goshen to adequate provisions of the divinely supplied manna and quail.

Moses conducted prolonged diplomatic negotiations with the king of Egypt, which were ultimately very successful. He sent military messages couched in very diplomatic, conciliatory terms to the rulers of the Edomites and Amorites. However, they would not agree to the requested safe passage for the Israelites through their lands.

As suggested above, in accordance with his first-rate military training and the extensive practical battle experience that he had acquired, Moses ordered tactical military movements of his Israelite forces by means of hand signals.

EPILOGUE

After he had led his people to the border of our Promised Land, Mosheh Rabbenu, Moses our Teacher, resigned his prolonged national leadership, civil, military, and spiritual. Mosheh, a famous old soldier, died there near Mt. Nebo. He was certainly not an "unknown soldier," although he was buried in a grave "unknown to this day" (Deut. 34:6).

Dedicated to the memory of Prof. Blondheim's grandson, Major Dagan Mosheh Wertman, Hy'd, son of Eliahu and Debra Wertman. Dagan fell in Gaza, defending the Land of Israel, on Asarah be-Tevet, 5769 (2009).

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NOTES

4. A. Pinker, "God's C in Habakkuk 3," Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft, 115 (2003), p. 261. He presents a theory (pp. 264-5) that Habakkuk 3:10-11 refers to communication in battle by spear-pointing and hand signals. However, that interpretation relies rather heavily on
textual emendations.
7. The Bible clearly states that Moses could not remain standing, but had to sit.
12. Under the command of Moses, the Israelites went up armed out of the land of Egypt (Ex. 14:18).
13. In Numbers 13:17-20, Moses gave the twelve spies specific instructions about gathering intelligence on the people and land of Canaan.
14. See Numbers, chapter 2.
16. Ibid., chapter 16 and Numbers 11.
17. These are described at length in Exodus.