

Shabbat Shirah 5773

What is a Miracle?

Rabbi Jon Spira-Savett

One day, little Noah comes home from Religious School, and his mother asks him what he learned.

Noah says: Today we were learning about how the Israelites left Egypt.

His mother says: Great, tell me about that!

And Noah says: Well, Pharaoh wasn't going to let the people go, but Moses called in these air strikes and destroyed Pharaoh's entire air force, and they had the chance to escape. So the Israelites started running toward the Suez Canal, but Pharaoh changed his mind and started to come after them with these tanks that had huge guns. When the Israelites got to the Suez Canal it looked like there was nowhere to go, but Moses called his engineers and they set up an enormous pontoon bridge, so the Israelites were able to go across. On their way across, they boobytrapped it. When the last Israelite goes over to the other side, he pushed a button and the whole thing exploded, and all of Pharaoh's tanks on the bridge fell right into the canal and sank.

Noah's mother didn't know what to say. After a moment, she asks: Is that really what you learned in Hebrew School today?

No, Noah says quietly. But you never would have believed it the way the teacher told it.

We read this morning about the miracle of the splitting of the Sea of Reeds, **קְרִיעַת יַם־סוּף**. This tremendous miracle that the Torah describes. And a lot of you are asking: What really happened there? What am I supposed to believe? It's easy to be like the child in the story -- one fantastic story is as good as any other. It's so hard in our world without miracles like that to know what to do with stories about miracles like the splitting of the Sea.

If you wonder like that, you're not alone. In fact every Jewish philosopher has struggled with this question, rabbis since the Talmud. If you look at major books of Jewish philosophy, often you'll find in the index absolutely nothing about miracles.

Rabbi Moses Maimonides, the Rambam, the greatest Jewish philosopher, went to great lengths to say that nature works the way that nature works. **עוֹלָם כְּמִנְהַגוֹ נֹדֵהָג**. He argued that there was one truly big miracle, which was the creation of the universe. And after that, there are only two possibilities when we encounter something miraculous. One is that we just don't understand it well enough, so we chalk it up to divine intervention. In time we could figure it out, or later generations might get to the natural explanation. This is true, Rambam said, even for many of the miracles that the Torah talks about.

The other possibility is that the miracle was actually programmed into the world at Creation, as a single exception to the usual laws of nature. The miracle was prearranged, set up to happen at a particular time. Since Creation, no new miracles are ever introduced, technically -- it just seems like something new. Rambam quotes Rabbi Yochanan from the

Talmud about the splitting of the sea. Rabbi Yochanan said that when the seas were created on the third day in Genesis, God made their reality conditional -- they could only exist if one particular sea would split for the Israelites on the day of **יְצִיאַת מִצְרַיִם**, the Exodus.

You can see that these two rabbis, Rambam and Rabbi Yochanan in the Talmud, are uncomfortable about something. I think what they really don't like is the idea that God is somehow clicking in and out of touch with the world and with us. I don't think the scientific thing is their main problem -- why do seas move one way most of the time, except one day this sea splits in half. It's much more that they want God with us all the time, the same way every day. So they say that the miracle at the sea is there all the time. It's either happening, or it's waiting to happen, or we remember that it happened. A miracle is revealed at a point in time, but it's always there.

What is a miracle? What does the miracle of the sea teach us about miracles? What makes that a miracle?

It's so appropriate that the miracle in our *parasha* is represented as a sea. The miracle of the **יַם-סוּף** was exactly like the place where waves of water meet each other, and create a wave even more spectacular. It was a time when something natural and something profoundly ideal converged -- when something unusual happened to water and something even more unusual happened to people. Who ever heard of slaves being rescued from a king by a God? When had someone ever come to stop that kind of suffering, before God came to the Israelites? And like a wave, the miracle doesn't just crest. When it falls, it presses outward and ripples in all directions. A wave is felt even when you don't see the wave anymore. The witnessing of the miracle changes everyone who sees it, and the story of the miracle changes everyone who is affected by it, or who hears the story of it.

A miracle is something that stands out from regular experience, because it's where the world we have and the world we dream of suddenly overlap. And we're surprised into hope, or we are brought back to hope, to believing in what is possible. It's true that as the Talmud says, we can't rely on miracles -- **אֵין סוּמְכִים עַל הַנֶּסֶם**. But we can be changed by witnessing a miracle, or by hearing about one.

Miracles are always about compassion, about powerful *chesed*. We don't bother to pay attention just to unusual spectacles. We sometimes call it a miracle when someone heals from illness -- a dramatic recovery, or a cure discovered by a researcher who often was motivated by her own experience of loss or fear. Miracles are about overflowing concern -- a community showing up with meals for someone sick or displaced, or money raised in tremendous amounts after a tragedy or a crisis. Miracles are about rescue, just as with God and *B'nai Yisrael* at the sea -- especially when things are desperate.

And whether we tell it like the Torah, as the hand of God, or whether it is the overpowering miracle of human *chesed*, a miracle is a portal where God's concern suddenly rushes into our world, out of proportion to what we believed was possible.

My colleague and teacher, Rabbi Sharon Brous out in Los Angeles, shared this story around Chanuka this year with her congregation:

When Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn lived in China in the 90s, they met a skinny young girl named Dai Manju who lived with her family in a home with no electricity, no water, no possessions of any sort and a giant pig. Despite her desperate poverty, she was a star student in her rural elementary school, a four mile walk from her home. By the time Dai Manju reached 6th grade, her parents could no longer afford the \$13 annual tuition to her school so she was forced to drop out. But she dreamt of becoming the first person in her family to complete elementary school, so she would stand outside the schoolhouse picking up scraps of paper, hoping to learn something even though her parents could not pay.

Kristof wrote a story in the New York Times about Dai Manju and the travesty of a child yearning for an education but deprived of the opportunity to learn. Moved by the column, a reader living in New York donated \$10,000 to pay for her education. The school was ecstatic - it not only covered Dai Manju's tuition, but gave them the opportunity to construct a proper school building and provide scholarships for all the girls in the region. Seeing the extraordinary impact of the contribution, Kristof contacted the donor to offer a report, saying, 'You wouldn't believe how much difference \$10,000 will make in a Chinese village.' 'But I didn't give \$10,000,' the donor replied. 'I gave \$100.'

It turned out that the bank had made a processing error, accidentally wiring over \$10,000 rather than \$100. But when confronted with the necessity of shutting down the village school in order to retrieve the money, the bank graciously offered the difference as a donation.

Dai Manju finished elementary, high school and accounting school. She found a job as an accountant and then helped a number of old friends from the village get jobs as well. She sent home so much money to her parents that they became among the wealthiest villagers [- able to afford a stove and television and move the pig into a backhouse.] Her friends, who had benefitted from the scholarships as well, also got good jobs and were able to send home money to support their families too. By the time Dai Manju was 30, she was an executive in a large corporation and thinking of starting her own company.

A girl's unwavering dedication to learning inspired a gift. A bank clerk's careless error multiplied that gift exponentially. And from there the reverberative power of education went into effect as lives were changed, new possibilities were born and an entire region flourished.

This was a miracle -- a series of miracles. At each point, some *chesed* had to win out over the *yetzer hara* -- over someone's selfishness, or narrowness, or the possibility that someone would just not pay attention anymore. jThere are so many miracles here: the desire of a young poor girl to learn, over incredible odds. A writer who was moved to write her story,

and a reader to give in response. An error that multiplied the gift, and a bank willing to take responsibility retroactively for an act of good that they had no intention of doing originally.

We want, and we hope, and we pray that the world would work like this. Sometimes, it does. When it does, and when we notice it, and celebrate it, and tell it again and again -- that's what makes a miracle.

You may have noticed in our Torah reading that there were two groups of people who sang after the miracle of the **אֲדָמָה** -- the men sang with Moshe, and the women led by Miryam sang and danced with tambourines. According to midrash, the women brought tambourines with them, and the men didn't -- because only the women were ready to believe that the miracle of redemption was going to happen. They were ready, because they had already been telling the stories of other miracles, even during their slavery: stories of the midwives who defied Pharaoh to save baby boys, stories of Yocheved and Miryam who dared to talk to Pharaoh's daughter and raise baby Moshe. These women had been changed by miracles, and were ready to be inspired every time the real world and ideal world would overlap.

It doesn't mean that the world works the right way all the time. But when we see a miracle, we realize that the world can be a place where the right choices are rewarded, where dreams for what is really important are made possible by the compassion of others, where not just the mighty and powerful come out on top again and again.

This is why we come back to the Torah's miracles, and to the splitting of the sea. What happened there and then? This is about more than what actually happened there and then. Miracles like the one at the sea are revealed at a point in time, but they are built in from the beginning. Happening, or waiting to happen, or we remember they happened. Seeing miracles, telling the story of the splitting sea, strengthens the part of us that wants to hope that sometimes the world will be exactly as it should be. Telling these miracles inspires us to act and live miraculously, to do our part to make the world that is become the world that is supposed to be.