

Miracles Then and Miracles Today

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This essay is from the forthcoming book, "The Encyclopedia of Jewish Values: Man to G-d Issues and Rituals." This essay is not intended as a source of practical halachic (legal) rulings. For matters of halachah, please consult a qualified posek (rabbi).

The very idea of a miracle is difficult for most people today to accept as an event that occurred in the past or could occur today. Even for those who believe in the general concept of a G-d find it hard to believe the notion of the occurrence of a supernatural event, whether in modern times or even in Biblical times. People tend to be skeptical of that which they have never seen. Since a miracle has never been part of their experience, many human beings tend to doubt if such events as described in the Bible took place. In addition, modern man has been trained to think logically, to be analytical, and to believe only in that which has been proven scientifically. People find the notion of a miracle that defies natural law, impossible to accept, as they need logic and proof before believing in something. The Talmud¹ seems to indicate that each succeeding generation is less spiritual than the generation before it, starting with Revelation. Since then, world is moving further and further away from the most spiritual moment for the Jewish people, when G-d spoke to entire people at Mount Sinai. Each generation is less spiritual, and, therefore, believes less in spiritual concepts such as miracles.

The very idea of a miracle has different meanings to different people. Do miracles even occur today in Jewish thought? Was the founding of the Jewish state in Israel in 1949 a miracle? The Six Day War in 1967? Should we view the transporting of 14,000 Ethiopia Jews to freedom and safety in Israel from Ethiopia, in the middle of a war zone, in one day in 1991, as a miracle? To some, all of these or some of these events may be considered a miracle. To others, there is nothing miraculous about these events in modern Jewish history. Can an event be considered a miracle if the laws of nature are not violated? To answer these questions, we need to define the Jewish concept of a miracle. In order to help understand and define a miracle, however, we should first analyze and define its purpose.

PURPOSE OF A MIRACLE

Many people feel that the purpose of any miracle is to convince its witnesses to believe in G-d. Although this may be a Christian notion, Judaism and the Torah do not accept this as the explanation. The Torah itself implies this,² in its description of any prophet who arises and tells the people that G-d appeared to him. Then He performs miracles to "prove" that he is a true prophet and then tells the people not to follow G-d and the ways of the Torah. The Torah instructs the Jews how to react to this situation. Despite the miracles openly performed, one may not believe this person as a true prophet, and he should be killed.

If the prophet is not legitimate, the question arises, then, why G-d would allow this false prophet to perform the many miracles? The Torah continues and answers this unwritten question by saying that G-d is testing the people to see if they truly believe in Him or not. This entire passage shows that the people's belief in G-d cannot and should not be based on the performance of a miracle, but must be based on a commitment that goes beyond what the eye can see and that which can be proven only through experience. A miracle cannot prove the existence of G-d, as G-d himself allows false

¹ Berachot 35b

² Deuteronomy 13:2-6

MIRACLES

prophets to do miracles in order to test the people's faith. This notion is codified by Maimonides³ where he rules that a person may not base his or her belief in G-d upon the existence or performance of miracles. He explains that many magicians and charlatans can perform what appears to be miraculous but is only a sleight of hand or a trick. Miracles, then, cannot form the basis of belief in G-d. (It should be noted that miracles can and should be used to verify if a prophet is a true prophet, providing that he or she does not instruct the people to violate any aspect of the Torah. This is the general procedure for any Jewish prophet, in general,⁴ and was specifically demonstrated in Moses' attempt to prove his legitimacy to the people.⁵ But a miracle is not a means test to prove the existence or legitimacy of G-d.)

What, then, is the main purpose of miracles in Jewish thought? According to G-d's own statement in the Torah,⁶ the purpose of the miracles of the Ten Plagues is to demonstrate to the world that the Egyptian gods are powerless. Miracles demonstrate G-d's greatness and ultimate power in the world. The miracles sanctify G-d's name, i.e. cause people to think better of G-d. While the purpose is not to prove G-d's existence, miracles do enhance the name of G-d for those who already believe. The Hebrew term for miracle in the Torah is *Ot*, which means a sign or symbol. The Rabbinic and modern Hebrew term for miracle is *Nes*, which also means a flag or banner.⁷ Why is the term for miracle the same as the term for a flag? Just as a flag or banner is a symbol for an idea for all to see and rally around, the miracle also symbolizes a concept that Jewish people can rally around.

TYPES OF MIRACLES

The popular understanding of a miracle involves an event that defies nature. This concept is nurtured by films about the Bible that inevitably show G-d's intervention in the course of human events through supernatural means. This notion is further supported by the Torah itself, which contains most of the supernatural miracles performed by G-d. The most famous of these are the Splitting of the Red Sea (technically "Sea of Reeds") after the Ten Plagues in Egypt. If the Five Books of Moses were the only yardstick of Jewish miracles, then one might surmise that this is the only type of miracle acknowledged by Jews. But another Biblical story, much later in the Bible, broke the mold and redefined the Jewish miracle.

The story of Purim is certainly regarded as a miracle in Jewish thought. The specific prayer recited on the holiday of Purim begins with the acknowledgment of Purim as a miracle performed by G-d and states that G-d caused the events to occur in the story, and not take place coincidentally as they seemed.⁸ In addition, the very fact that the Purim story was canonized as part of the Bible in the Book of Esther shows that the Rabbis acknowledged the spiritual, religious and miraculous nature of the narrative (other books were rejected as part of the Bible). And, yet, there seems to be nothing particularly miraculous about the Purim story. The series of events described seem very natural as a political story in which the Jewish people were threatened with extinction. Through a series of coincidences (Mordechai overhears the plot to kill the King, the King could not sleep as Haman was approaching the palace) and good fortune (Esther, a Jew in secret, was selected as queen), the Jewish people were saved. The story seems no more miraculous than some of the events of our day, such as the mass exodus of Jews from the former Soviet Union after years of demonstrations and political pressure. Or the mass transport in twenty-four hours of Ethiopian Jews from a war zone to Israel. On

³ Maimonides, Hilchot Yesodai HaTorah 8:1

⁴ Deuteronomy 18:21-22

⁵ Exodus 4:1-9 and 4:30-31

⁶ Exodus 12:12

⁷ Numbers 21:8, Isaiah 5:26, Jeremiah 4:6 are a few examples

⁸ Shmoneh Esreh, Blessing of *Modim*, prayers for Special Days

MIRACLES

the surface, these events seem even more miraculous than a simple reading of the facts of the Purim story. And yet, Jewish tradition universally recognizes the story of Purim as a miracle, despite the lack of any supernatural occurrences in the story. This miracle first witnessed in Persia in the days of Mordechai and Esther was indeed a miracle, but a different type of miracle than the supernatural variety experienced up to that point in Jewish history. The Purim story was a Natural Miracle in which events happen without defying nature, and yet are still considered miraculous. How is this type of miracle defined and why the change?

The Purim story is the prototype of a natural miracle where G-d plays a role in Jewish history, but His role is not obvious to the non-believer. Any event that happens naturally but benefits the Jewish people can be legitimately called a natural miracle. Often, but not always, a series of "coincidences" occur which lead up to this special Jewish event. However, only a person who is wearing spiritual glasses and believes in an active G-d, will see G-d's hand in a natural miracle. A person who chooses not to believe, however, may view the entire story as a series of coincidences, such as the political struggle between the Jewish people and the tyrant Haman. This dual nature of viewing this event either as miraculous or as natural is symbolized by the very name of G-d in the Megillah (Book of Esther). Although the Book of Esther is accepted as part of the Bible and acknowledged in Jewish tradition as a miracle, the name of G-d does not appear even once in the story. However, Jewish tradition says that while the term King Achashverosh or King in the book refers to the King of Persia, the term "The King (*Hamelech*)" alone (without the name Achashverosh) refers to the Almighty Himself. While a simple reading seems to refer to King Achashverosh, one who chooses to see G-d in the Book of Esther can also understand the Book in terms of the actions of "The King of Kings," G-d. In fact, most Megillah scrolls today are intentionally written today in a fashion where the word "The King" appears as the first word in nearly every column of the scroll. Thus, like the miracle itself, the name of G-d is there and "obvious" for one who wants to see Him, yet is absent for the reader who chooses not to acknowledge the Divine aspect of the story. The name of the holiday itself alludes to this idea. Purim means drawing of a lottery, implying that the events happened by chance. On the surface, this was indeed the case. Yet, the reader of the story is able to see the Divine plan in all these ostensibly random events.

From this juncture in Jewish history onward, miracles take on the dimension of natural events. Why did this change in miracles begin at the story of Purim? This was the first national event in Jewish history outside the Land of Israel (once the Jewish people had entered the Land after the Exodus from Egypt) and the first national story after the destruction of the First Temple. Without the Land or the Temple, miracles became natural, not supernatural. In the Temple itself, the supernatural nature of miracles was evident each and every day. Flies were never seen in the Temple, despite the presence of raw meat and other foods. When the special Two Breads (Showbread) that were displayed for an entire week were removed, they were just as fresh as when they were put out one week earlier. These daily occurrences in the Temple point out the supernatural component in miracles associated with the Temple.⁹ Without the Temple, however, miracles became natural, not supernatural. In addition, the Talmud states¹⁰ that the people were no longer on such a high spiritual plane to witness such miracles.

Also, after the destruction of the Temple, the relationship between the Jewish people and G-d changed. In the past, G-d was more evident, as symbolized by the supernatural miracle. The people clearly saw G-d in their lives and believed in Him out of a sense of gratitude for the miracles performed. This is symbolized by the famous Midrash in which G-d holds the mountain over the people and "forces"

⁹ Avot 5:5

¹⁰ Berachot 20a

MIRACLES

them to accept the Torah at Mount Sinai.¹¹ This symbolic act, which has been interpreted to signify that the Jewish people, having witnessed all of the Ten Plagues, the Splitting of the Red Sea, the daily Manna and all the other overt miracles G-d performed, did not truly have a "choice" to accept or reject the Torah. Psychologically, they "had" to accept the Torah.¹² Who could reject a G-d that performed all these miracles and redeemed the people from Egypt? This relationship between G-d and the Jewish people continued for hundreds of years, as long as G-d performed supernatural miracles in which His presence was obvious to the Jewish people. With the Purim story and the beginning of natural miracles, the nature of belief and the relationship to G-d changed. No longer were the people "forced" to believe. It was now, for the first time, a matter of true choice. Those who chose to see G-d would believe, and those who chose to reject G-d could explain away the natural miracles in a rational manner. This new relationship with G-d began at the time of the Purim story and continues until today. The Talmud acknowledges this change in interpreting a verse written at the end of the Book of Esther. When it says that the "people observed and accepted,"¹³ the Talmud, says they re-accepted at that time what they had initially accepted at Sinai.¹⁴ Why this reacceptance specifically now? At Sinai they had been "forced" to accept a G-d who had performed overt miracles. Now, they were accepting a G-d out of true free choice, for the first time. This same acceptance or rejection of G-d and His natural miracles continues today.¹⁵ Those who believe in the Divine hand in history do indeed see the mass emigration of Russian Jews, the airlift of Ethiopian Jews, or the bombardment upon Israel of tens of Scud missiles by Iran in 1991, meant to kill Israelis but only one Israeli died as a result, as natural miracles. The creation of the State of Israel, the victories during its wars can be seen as miraculous. However, the non-believer can explain all these events in a natural logical manner, without accepting the notion of a G-d. Like the Purim story, events in which believing Jews acknowledge as natural miracles, can also be explained without any Divine belief whatsoever.

WHICH MIRACLE IS GREATER – SUPERNATURAL OR NATURAL?

On the surface, it would seem that a supernatural miracle would be "greater" than a natural miracle. The fact that the laws of nature need be altered to produce a miracle seems to make this a more difficult feat. However, to G-d, the Creator of those very laws of nature, it is no more "difficult" to create an event that defies nature or works within nature. This equality before G-d can be seen in the Silent prayer recited three times daily. In the second blessing, in praising the acts of G-d, the act of bringing souls back to life is followed by the act of bringing rain. While rain is certainly considered a natural event or natural miracle, resurrection is considered supernatural. And yet, both are placed in the same blessing, according to the Talmud¹⁶ to demonstrate that they are equal in the eyes of G-d and neither is more "difficult." The prayer continues with a series of actions performed by G-d, intertwining the natural and supernatural miracles: giving sustenance to the world (natural), resurrecting the dead (supernatural), causing the fallen to stand (natural), healing the sick (natural), redeeming the captives (natural), and keeping His commitment to bring the dead back to life (supernatural).

This equality in difficulty between natural and supernatural miracles is expressed in other sources as well. It is as difficult for G-d to match up men and women for marriage (natural) as it was for Him to split the Red Sea (supernatural).¹⁷ The Talmud describes a story where the daughter of Rabbi Chanina was sad because oil for Shabbat candles was replaced by accident with vinegar. When G-d

¹¹ Midrash Tanchuma, Noach 3

¹² Meshech Chochma on Exodus 19

¹³ Megillat Esther 9:27

¹⁴ Shabbat 88a

¹⁵ For an expansion of this idea, see Norman Lamm, "Royal Reach" (New York: Feldheim, 1970), pp. 12-20

¹⁶ Berachot 33a

¹⁷ Sanhedrin 22a

MIRACLES

caused the vinegar to light for Shabbat candles (due to this Rabbi's spiritual greatness), Rabbi Chanina remarked that it is no more difficult for G-d to cause vinegar to kindle than oil to kindle.¹⁸

It may be argued logically that a natural miracle is on a higher plane than a supernatural miracle. If G-d created the system of nature with all its wonders, then if G-d must alter that very system of nature to produce a miracle, it might show a flaw in the original system. It would certainly be a greater show of G-d's power to include the miracles in the very system of creation itself. This, then, may be the intention of the Talmudic passage that speaks about the creation of ten miracles in the twilight of the sixth day of Creation.¹⁹ Why were these supernatural miracles created at this precise time? This was the very last moment of Creation, the last instant when the system of nature was put into place. At this last instant, G-d already implanted ten supernatural miracles, such as the speaking donkey of Bilaam and the hole in the earth that would swallow up Korach. This shows that G-d Himself wished to include these supernatural events as part of the blueprint of creation. It follows that the supernatural events that are already part of nature are more miraculous because they are part of the original blueprint. While the Talmudic source only alludes to this idea, the Midrash²⁰ states openly that all the supernatural miracles were implanted in nature during the first six days of creation. Thus, the natural miracle does indeed demonstrate G-d's prowess even more than supernatural miracles. The Talmud²¹ expresses this concept most emphatically when it says that the (natural) miracle of rain is greater than the (supernatural) miracle of the resurrection of the dead.

This idea is also demonstrated through the supernatural events in the Bible itself. The most supernatural miracle in the Bible is, one could argue, the splitting of the Red Sea (Sea of Reeds). And yet, this supernatural event is brought about through very natural means, as the Torah describes the east wind blowing the entire night prior to the onset of the splitting of the sea.²² The Sefer HaChinuch²³ explains that G-d's greatness is enhanced by performing supernatural miracles through natural means. Other supernatural miracles in the Torah are also brought about through natural means. Each day, millions of Jews in the desert were fed by the supernatural means of the Manna, as bread came from Heaven.²⁴ Yet, the Manna appeared in a very natural way, between two layers of dew on the ground each morning.²⁵ The Midrash²⁶ comments on this phenomenon that G-d purposely wanted to make a supernatural miracle (Manna from Heaven) appear natural from the dew. Even at the end of the Torah, when G-d shows the entire land of Israel to Moses, G-d commands Moses to first go up to the Nevo mountain.²⁷ It is clear that from Mount Nevo, the entire land cannot normally be seen, and G-d performed a supernatural miracle to allow Moses to see the entire land. Yet, G-d asks Moses to go up to the mountain to see the land so that the supernatural miracle will appear to be brought about through natural means. Thus, in Judaism, contrary to the common sense belief, natural miracles are considered greater and more miraculous than supernatural miracles.

¹⁸ Taanit 25a

¹⁹ Avot 5:6 and Pesachim 54a

²⁰ Midrash, Bereishit Rabbah 5:5

²¹ Taanit 7a

²² Exodus 14:21

²³ Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah 132

²⁴ Exodus 16:4

²⁵ Numbers 11:9

²⁶ Midrash Tanchuma, Beshalach 20

²⁷ Deuteronomy 32:49

MIRACLES

EVERYDAY MIRACLES

There is a third category of miracles which most people do not consider miraculous simply because they happen so often. We can easily imagine what would be the world's reaction if a sunset occurred only once a year rather than everyday. School classes would be canceled. Everyone would prepare for the yearly sunset and everything would stop in order to witness this great event. The fact that a sunset occurs each day does not make it less miraculous or less beautiful. Or, imagine if only one baby were to be born each year. Like the sunset, this baby would get the attention of the world. Reporters would report its hourly progress and scientists would marvel. The fact that millions of babies are born each year does not signify that the birth of each baby to be less miraculous. There are hundreds or thousands of occurrences each day, which taken by themselves are indeed miraculous, but, unfortunately, lose their specialness because they are repeated so often. This, then, is the Everyday Miracle. If a scientist were to describe precisely how a human being takes a single step, one would be amazed how miraculous this truly is. The messages sent by the eye, then to the brain, then to the leg involve the coordination of millions of neurons to work together in perfect unison, not unlike the millions of telephone wires across the United States having to work perfectly to make a single action happen. The body's balance also must be perfect each time that step is taken. And, yet, this miracle of nature is taken for granted because it so commonplace. Like eyesight, the ability to hear, touch and feel, these are everyday miracles which are often not appreciated until these abilities are lost.

How do we know that Judaism does indeed consider these miracles? In the Silent prayer, traditional Jews thank G-d for "all the miracles that are with us each day."²⁸ Judaism recognizes that these daily events are indeed miracles. We say in the prayers each morning²⁹ that G-d recreates nature each and every day. We should really think of everyday events with the same awesome appreciation of Creation itself. Everyone seems to appreciate these abilities and events only when they are no longer present. It is human nature to appreciate something only after it is gone. However, Judaism exhorts the Jew to appreciate these miracles each and every day, while they are still around and are being observed and before they are gone. The everyday miracle cannot and should not be overlooked. This is demonstrated through another everyday miracle of the body which people take for granted -- the ability of the body to excrete waste. And, yet, it is well documented how painful this process is when the body malfunctions in this area in some small manner. This status of this everyday miracle is reflected in a Talmudic statement³⁰ that states that the miracle of the body excreting waste is as great as the splitting of the Red Sea.

THE HIERARCHY OF MIRACLES

We have already shown that supernatural miracles in Jewish thought are not as "spectacular" as natural miracles. Where do everyday miracles fit in? It may be argued that everyday miracles are the greatest miracles of all. The Talmud³¹ records that it is a far greater miracle when G-d makes someone healthy after sickness, an everyday miracle, than the miracle He performed when he saved Chananya, Mishael and Azariah from the fire, which was a supernatural miracle. Psalm 136 describes many types of miracles.³² Since we know that in Judaism there is a principle of progression in ascending order of holiness, that is from the lowest to the highest,³³ it is logical to assume that each succeeding event described in Psalm 136 would be on a higher spiritual level.³⁴ The Psalm begins with the Creation and

²⁸ *Modim* blessing of the Silent Prayer (#18)

²⁹ First blessing before the Shema prayer

³⁰ Pesachim 118a

³¹ Nedarim 41a

³² Psalm 136

³³ Berachot 28a

³⁴ Malbim commentary to Psalm 136

MIRACLES

some of the supernatural miracles in Jewish history such as the splitting of the Red Sea. Then the verses continue with the Natural Miracles of the battles in the desert between the Jews and Sichon and Og. The Psalm concludes with the greatest miracle of all, the highest miracle on the rung – that G-d feeds the world daily. Thus, it is this everyday miracle of feeding the world that is the "greatest" and highest form of miracle. This is supported by the statement in the Talmud³⁵ which asks why Psalm 136 is called the "Great Hallel" but Psalm 114, which is recited each Festival, is called merely "Hallel," praise of G-d. It answers that while the regular Hallel describes the supernatural miracles of Egypt, only Psalm 136 describes how G-d gives daily bread to the world. Thus, this everyday miracle is what makes this Psalm an even greater miracle than the supernatural miracles of Psalm 114, the "regular" Hallel.

All three types of miracles, Everyday, Natural and Supernatural show G-d's intervention and benevolence in the world. They are also beyond man's comprehension. The Talmud³⁶ states that there were three events in the world whose "keys" G-d did not give to man for his understanding: the key to rain (natural miracle), the key to the midwife and birth process (everyday miracle) and the key to the resurrection of the dead (supernatural miracle). Although we cannot truly comprehend these events, it is up to the Jew to try to see how G-d manifests Himself in the world through all types of miracles, and to appreciate all that is given to us.

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³⁵ Pesachim 118a

³⁶ Taanit 2a