



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SHEMOT > Vaeira

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January 12, 2013

Vaeira

Do You Believe in Miracles?



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

Do you believe in miracles? What even defines a miracle? Would you believe that you can become a miracle worker? What would it take?

These questions arise as the Torah introduces to us the first miracle worker in history – Moses. In this week’s reading, we see him begin to work miracles intended to cow the mightiest empire on earth: Egypt. What is the meaning of these miracles, and why are we told about them today?

Many would respond to the miracles in the Torah by saying: “Ah, but that was long ago. It could never happen today.” Is that true?

Unfortunately, when we think of miracles we automatically think of something supernatural, something biblical, something ancient. We do not think of miracles as a modern phenomenon. And certainly, not as something we, ourselves, are capable of.

Sure, we use words like “miraculous” but we just mean “highly unusual” or “unexpected” or “statistically impossible.” But if it is “statistically impossible,” how did it happen?

This sermon explores the anatomy of a miracle, both ancient and modern. It suggests that miracle workers do exist in our age and time, and that we need only understand what it takes to become miracle workers ourselves.

The “Miracle Worker” story of Helen Keller and her teacher Anne Sullivan, and an inspirational tale of a Chassid who wanted to meet the miracle worker Elijah, help explain how we can all tap into that mysterious power that lives within each and every one of us.

DO YOU BELIEVE IN MIRACLES? THE MIRACLE WORKER IN YOU

1. The Helen Keller Story

We all know the true story of the famous Helen Keller, which has been retold innumerable times – in book, play and movie form – as “The Miracle Worker.”

Born in 1880, Helen Keller contracted a mysterious disease before age 2, which left her deaf and blind. By the time Helen reached age 6, she was an uncontrollable child whose every whim was granted and who lived at the level of lovingly-doted-on pet animal, having never been educated in either manners or letters. Since she could not communicate with anyone, everyone pitied her, humored her and patronized her.

And then her family hired Anne Sullivan, a young teacher who refused to relate to Helen as a pitiable creature. She saw her highest potential, demanded the best of her, and succeeded in teaching her to communicate and eventually to become a fully-actualized human being.

Because of Anne Sullivan’s insistence on seeing the highest potential in her charge, Helen Keller became the first deaf and blind person to graduate college, and she went on to even greater achievement as a famous author, lecturer and political activist. She became a trail blazer for other handicapped people, showing them that despite their physical challenges, they could achieve anything.

But, in the Helen Keller story, it is Anne Sullivan who is the miracle worker – the one who brings out the best in herself and in another.

2. The Chassidic Version

Now let me give you the Chassidic version of the miracle worker.

A story is told about a distinguished Chassid, a disciple of the Baal Shem Tov, who wanted to see the legendary miracle-worker, the Prophet Elijah. He had heard that certain mystics and Kabbalists had had this privilege, and he asked the Baal Shem Tov which spiritual exercises in order to merit the same.

The Baal Shem Tov discouraged him, but the Chassid persisted. For months he implored the Baal Shem Tov, yet the great master kept rebuffing him. Finally, a few days before Passover, the Baal Shem Tov acquiesced. He told the Chassid that he would help him to meet Elijah, but on one condition – he'd have to carry out his instructions exactly as conveyed, without deviating even one iota. The Chassid readily agreed.

“If you want to see the prophet, this is what you need to do,” the Baal Shem Tov instructed. “Fill up nine boxes with large quantities of food: fish, meat, matzah, wine, etc. Then, on the day before Passover, travel to the neighboring town with all the food you purchased. At the outskirts of the town, at the edge of the forest, there is a dilapidated house. Shortly before the holiday begins, knock on the door and ask if they would put you up for the holiday of Passover.”

With enthusiasm, the disciple followed the instructions of the Baal Shem Tov. He purchased parcels of food and drink, and, on the designated day, traveled to the impoverished home. He knocked on the door. The woman of the house opened it, and he asked her if he could stay with them for the holiday.

“How can I welcome you when I don't have any food in the house?” she cried. “We are a very poor family.”

“Well, I happen to have plenty of food here with me,” he replied. “I have enough food for all of us.” The woman could not believe her ears and welcomed him in; she introduced him to her husband and children and gave him a bed to sleep in. Seeing the entire family overjoyed and the children dancing around, the guest realized how impoverished they truly were. These poor kids had never seen so much food in their life.

And the parents were the happiest people in the world, feeling that they could finally celebrate Passover properly, with abundant food, matzah and wine.

The Chassid spent the first two days of Passover with them, celebrating together. All the while, he was eagerly waiting to see Elijah. But to no avail ... Elijah never showed up.

Frustrated, he returned to the Baal Shem Tov and complained: "I was in that house for two days, but I did not see Elijah! Why did you disappoint me?"

"Did you do everything I told you?" asked the Baal Shem Tov.

"Yes, I did!" he asserted.

"And you didn't see him?"

"No!"

"In that case," said the Baal Shem Tov, "go back to the house for the last days of the holiday, but this time remain outside and just stand near the window, listening.

The Chassid wondered about the meaning of this strange instruction. But he followed orders. He went back to the house. He stood near the window. Inside he heard the following conversation taking place between the wife and the husband: "Sarah," the husband was saying, "Where will we get food for the last days of the holiday? I am so concerned."

To which his wife responded: "Why are you worried Yankel? Didn't we see how God send us Elijah during the first days of Passover with all that delicious food? Surely God will send Elijah again for the last days of Passover!"

And suddenly the man understood what the Baal Shem Tov was telling him. You want to see Elijah? Don't look for him in the heavens above, or among the holy people living in the mountains or caves. You want to see Elijah, the miracle worker? Fill up nine boxes with food, feed hungry children, then take a good look in the mirror!

You will see Elijah in yourself. You will see the miracle worker in you.

3. This Week's Theme

This is the theme for this week, as we read in the Torah about Moses, the first miracle worker in history, who confronted the Pharaoh of Egypt and showed him wonders that challenged the very laws of nature ... and who taught all of us how to be miracle workers ourselves.

This episode evokes all our questions about miracles. Do you believe in miracles? What even defines a miracle?

Many would respond to the miracles in the Torah by saying: "Ah, but that was long ago. It could never happen today." Is that true?

Now, of course, when we think of miracles we automatically think of something supernatural, something biblical, something ancient. We do not think of miracles as a modern phenomenon. And certainly, not as something we, ourselves, are capable of.

Sure, we use words like "miraculous" but we just mean "highly unusual" or "unexpected" or "statistically impossible."

But if it is "statistically impossible," how did it happen?

4. Believing in Miracles

Judaism believes in miracles, and it classifies them into three categories:

The first type of miracle openly defies the laws of nature. God has created the universe and the laws of nature, and it follows that - if He wants to - He can alter or suspend them.

The ten plagues which devastated Egypt - the subject of this week's Torah reading - were this type of miracle. God stood nature on its end and showed the Egyptians (and the Israelites for that matter) that He was master of the universe. God does not do this every day or even every one thousand years. The biblical miracles we read about are extremely rare occurrences.

Skeptics hate to acknowledge that such miracles are even possible. They think they can always be explained by some phenomenon of nature. One such skeptic was delivering a lecture on the parting of the sea, attempting to demonstrate that it was not a sea at all, but a tidal pool with water about two inches deep. As he expounded his proofs, an old lady from the back row exclaimed: "What a miracle!" This irritated him to no end. "Excuse me, Madam, I just explained that there was NO miracle. The water was two inches deep!" The old lady gasped, "I can't believe the magnitude of this miracle!" He was now really angry, "Lady! Are you deaf?!" he shouted, "No miracle! Two inches of water!" But she would not be denied: "What a miracle! The entire Egyptian army drowned in two inches of water."

The second type of miracle works within nature – but because it is also rare, it is absolutely wondrous. The amazing stories of rescue against all odds fall into this category. This is God's way of shaking us out of our reverie to elevate us to a higher plane of awareness. Here, it is not God's intention to supersede laws of nature but to give us a greater appreciation of our daily, natural lives. This type of miracle momentarily opens the door between the natural world that surrounds us and the spiritual world within to accomplish something that is "statistically impossible."

The third type of miracle is one we are hard pressed to recognize as such – it is the miracle of nature itself. The miracle of nature is by far the most common and the easiest to overlook – for it is constantly occurring around us and inside us. Life itself is a miracle, isn't it? Consider the sheer wonder of birth. In fact, we sometimes catch ourselves referring to birth as a miracle. So, we should not forget that every person on earth is the product of such a miracle.

Indeed, the great 18th century mystic and founder of the Chassidic Movement, the Baal Shem Tov, says that the difference between a miracle and a natural event is only in frequency. If the sun were to rise once in our lifetimes we would see it as a miracle. If we were to breathe smoothly only once, exhaling and inhaling seamlessly, we would see it as a miracle. Think of the multitude of steps and systems that need to be in place for us to take one single breath. But since these things happen continuously we dismiss them as “nature” – just another “regular” occurrence. Nothing special or novel. In truth, however, “nature” is simply a series of perpetual miracles that have for us become “routine.” Every aspect of life is a true miracle. A miracle, says the Baal Shem Tov, is seeing the extraordinary in the ordinary.

5. The Surprises of Nature (Optional)

Sometimes nature surprises us. And though the event is totally explainable and not at all supernatural, we experience it as a wake-up call. Anyone who has ever witnessed a tornado, a hurricane, a tsunami, a fire, or even in a building struck by lightning can testify to what I am talking about here.

But even milder forms of nature’s grand shows communicate a message. Take a solar eclipse for example. It can wake us up to the appreciation and understanding of the solar system, solar and lunar movement, cosmic energy. For such natural events have uncommon power.

Into this category also fall all the many less dramatic events like apparent coincidences and chance happenings that – if we examined them carefully – guide and shape our lives in miraculous ways. This, too, is the miracle of divine intervention, also known as Divine Providence.

But, too often, we are so distracted by the daily struggle to survive, by our responsibilities and obligations, we tend to ignore the miracles all around us. Or if we notice them, we do not take the time to appreciate them. This oversight may also have a hidden subconscious motive. For if we acknowledge God's personal intervention in our lives, we must acknowledge all the implications and responsibilities that come with it.

6. Finding Meaning

Living a responsible life means finding meaning in everything we encounter (beginning with the wonders of the natural world), and responding to what is right in front of our eyes.

Nature affects our entire being, as is evident in our ability to breathe, walk, see, hear and taste. And nature also places many demands on our body – demands for food, clothing, shelter, and so forth.

We are not meant to be prisoners of nature. We are not meant to capitulate to its demands, or allow them to restrict our creativity, but to see them as a divine challenge to work our own miracles.

Indeed, this is exactly how Anne Sullivan worked hers, when she did not capitulate to the apparent limitations of a deaf and blind child. And we have so many more examples.

Certainly the people responsible for the technological advances that we take for granted in our lives were nothing less than miracle workers.

Consider: it is not natural that human beings should fly like birds. But someone found a way to do it. It is not natural for human beings to be able to walk on the moon, but it's been done. It is not natural for human beings to live in certain parts of the world, but we see how man has tamed the elements and transformed wilderness, swampland or desert into civilized habitats.

7. Technological Miracles

Today, we know we can work technological miracles. We can harness nature as never before and tap into its inner forces to dramatically improve our lives. And, thanks to science, we have a much more sophisticated appreciation of natural phenomenon, than we ever did. But, rational explanations don't negate the fact that a miracle has occurred.

Isn't it miraculous, for example, to walk down the street and answer a telephone call? Consider the sheer volume of cellular phones and hand-held Wifi devices occupying one city block and consider that, in this space, there are millions of waves, yet there is space for everyone and rarely is there interference. Isn't it miraculous that all this communication can be going on at the same time? That we can see images broadcast thousands of miles away almost instantaneously?

And on the subatomic level, we are now aware of the dynamic flow of quantum energy that makes possible for all types of new technologies. Same with medicine - our knowledge of DNA and the human genome allows us to uncover new and unprecedented ways of healing, conquering disease and prolonging life. Today, we have become comfortable with the invisible.

At the end of the 19th century, some thought that everything that could be discovered had been discovered. And that was before Einstein and computers. Since then we have had a virtual explosion of new discoveries. And we know we have barely touched the tip of the iceberg.

So we are generally aware that there are new undiscovered horizons, and that, thanks to hidden forces, miracles can occur at any time. And that we can be their facilitators - we can be miracle workers.

8. Deeper Unity

With all the communication at our fingertips, we are moving closer and closer to a deeper unity.

The world continues to grow smaller, thanks to all the new technology, which free up our time and energy to pursue nobler goals. Many of the physical obstacles that impeded spiritual and personal growth in previous generations have disappeared.

Every field – from science and medicine to business and commerce – is experiencing major breakthroughs at breathtaking speed. We must see such developments for what they are – not merely random events to be used for self-serving goals, but individual steps toward a path of redemption.

Yes, we can explain away many events, even “miraculous” ones. But then again, a good mind can explain away anything. Just as we have a choice in everything we do, we can use our mind to either seek out the miracles in life or deny them. Only we can know the degree of sincerity with which we are trying to understand life and instill it with meaning.

If you look honestly at your life, you will recognize the miracles within nature and the miracle of nature itself. You will recognize the Divine Providence in all your activities. You will learn to appreciate the miracles of your own life. Thank God for these miracles. Don't take them for granted. And then take charge – become a miracle worker yourself.

9. How To Be a Miracle Worker

How? All you need to do is to not be self-consumed ... to be sensitive to others and help anyone you can.

When you channel kindness and compassion into this material and selfish society, you essentially tap into the power to perform a miracle.

When you reach out and love others – when you see the best in them – you open yourself up to the channel of energy that allows that physical reality to be changed. Though you don't actually perform a miracle as such, you allow ourselves to be a channel for it. And the result is as if you had.

How do you become such a channel? Through faith in God and commitment to virtue. By recognizing that the spiritual reality of love transcends the physical one. And, when you acknowledge that, the physical reality changes.

The world around you is experiencing miracles within miracles, a revolution within. It is time to acknowledge that the world is hurtling toward redemption – and that is your choice and your choice alone whether to be a part of it.

Don't get left behind. Start working your own miracles now. The world needs you.

Amen.