



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

DEVARIM > Re'eh

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

August 23, 2014

Re'eh

How to Work Miracles



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

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ABSTRACT

What are today’s miracles? Who are today’s prophets?

Today, when someone says “profit” you think of the margin between cost and retail. In biblical times, when someone said “prophet,” you thought of an old man with a long beard dressed in white robes – a seer who could convey in a dreamlike trance the holy, unadulterated Word of God.

Today, if someone claims to be a prophet, he or she does so for one of two reasons: 1) either because he is trying to *make* a profit (preying on the insecurities of people, which often works miraculously); or 2) because he has serious mental problems.

Strolling right along with prophecy is its bedmate – the miracle. The miracle is the prophet’s way of proving, by way of a wondrous sign, that he is indeed a messenger of God.

So what are today’s miracles – who are today’s prophets?

Today’s miracles are the Jewish people. Today’s prophets are you and me.

And we get to make that claim as long as we *follow the Lord, our God, revere Him, keep His commandments, heed His voice, worship Him, and cleave to Him.*

HOW TO WORK MIRACLES

1. It's A Miracle! (Joke)

Doctor Bloom, who was known for his miraculous cure of arthritis, had a waiting room full of people. One day a little old bubby, completely bent over in half, shuffled in slowly, leaning on her cane.

When the receptionist called her name, she hobbled into the doctor's office. Amazingly, as everyone in the waiting room watched, the little old bubby emerged within half an hour walking completely erect, her head held higher than a credit card interest rate.

A woman in the waiting room who had seen all this walked up to the little old bubby and said, "Unbelievable! You walked in bent in half and now you're walking erect. It's a miracle! What did that doctor do?"

The bubby, wise and wrinkled, looked up and answered: "Miracle, shmiracle. The doctor gave me a longer cane."

2. Miracles, Profits and Prophets

Where are today's miracles?

In the absence of prophets it seems that miracles have disappeared.

Today, when someone says "profit" you think of the margin between cost and retail. In biblical times, when someone said "prophet," you thought of an old man with a long beard dressed in white robes – a seer who could convey in a dreamlike trance the holy, unadulterated Word of God.

Today, if someone claims to be a prophet, he or she does so for one of two reasons: 1) either because he is trying to *make* a profit (preying on the insecurities of people, which often works miraculously); or 2) because he has serious mental problems.

But no prophet, whatever his claims, is worth a plug nickel unless he can work miracles. The miracle is the prophet's way of proving, by way of a wondrous sign, that he is indeed a messenger of God. And let's face it – we haven't seen many miracles lately.

Today, along with the biblical-style prophet, the biblical-style miracle is pretty much concealed by what we call normal reality and the rules of nature. I mean, when was the last time a prophet unleashed his (or her) staff to split the Red Sea, the Hudson River, or Miami Beach? When was the last time a rock was turned into water? Have you ever had dinner that fell straight from heaven?

In other words: There is a much greater chance a doctor will heal an arthritic back by prescribing a longer cane than by zapping the arthritis with some miraculous cure.

3. How to Know God

The absence of classical prophets and wondrous miracles seems to leave us with a quandary:

How to know God? How to see the Lord?

God, we assume (though we shouldn't) is supernatural. The events we automatically associate with the Divine are supernatural things like the biblical flood, the ten plagues, the splitting of the sea, the manna from heaven ... These supernatural occurrences – and the Bible is chock full of them – can leave us feeling, here in 2014, more than a little inferior. I mean, come on, our closest thing to a miracle is when a sports team pulls off a goal at the last minute.

The time of real miracles is long gone. Today, if we can make a small *profit*, we are happy – never mind trying to find a prophet. If we are merely *natural*, we are happy – never mind supernatural.

But that brings us back to our original question: Confronted with a dearth of supernatural incidents or phenomena, how are we to know God, believe in God, or relate to God?

4. Parshat Re'eh

Where better to find the answer than in the Torah? Where better to turn to than to God's own Word? And, what better place to look than this week's Torah portion, which is named *Re'eh*, meaning "to see"? What better way to understand how to "see" God than by studying a section in the Torah that is all about "seeing"?

In *Parshat Re'eh*, the Torah speaks of the many attractions in the world and the many distractions. The world is a vast marketplace – an amazon.com for this Internet generation – and the options are virtually endless. Thus the Torah gives us very defined instructions how to live, what to do, how to act, how to interact, who to interact with, when and why.

What happens if someone stands up one day and tells you to do something different than what the Torah says. What do you do? This is the Torah's answer:

Everything I command you that you shall be careful to do it. You shall neither add to it, nor subtract from it. If there will arise among you a prophet, or a dreamer of a dream, and he gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder of which he spoke to you happens, he says, "Let us go after other gods which you have not known, and let us worship them," you shall not heed the words of that prophet, or that dreamer of a dream; for the Lord, your God, is testing you, to know whether you really love the Lord, your God, with all your heart and with all your soul. You shall follow the Lord, your God, revere Him, keep His commandments, heed His voice, worship Him, and cleave to Him.¹

The Torah lays it out in a rather straightforward fashion:

There is one God and one Torah, with a defined set of commandments, and by these you must live. You've got your work cut out for you. Do not add, subtract, rearrange or change. Just do.

¹ Deuteronomy 13:1-5.

5. Signs and Wonders

If a prophet or dreamer stands up and shows you unbelievable signs from heaven on high, or magical wonders on earth below – make no mistake about it: This is not the sign of God or the true wonder of the Creator.

Rashi, the eminent 11th century biblical commentator, explains the difference between a sign (*oht*) and a wonder (*mofet*). He says that a sign (an *oht*) is a profound occurrence in the heavens, and a wonder (a *mofet*) is a miraculous occurrence on earth.

Whether the prophet or dreamer provides spiritual, heavenly evidence that he is a true messenger from God, or whether the prophet offers material, earthly evidence that he is God's mouthpiece and spokesperson, says the Torah, *you shall not heed the words of that prophet, or that dreamer of a dream.* It's as simple as that.

If these so-called wonders and miracles of this so-called² prophet and dreamer are not the signs of God and are not the true wonders of the Creator, what then is? How do we recognize the signs of the Divine and the wonders of the Creator? How do we know God?

You shall follow the Lord, your God, revere Him, keep His commandments, heed His voice, worship Him, and cleave to Him.

6. Following God

What does this mean? How, exactly and practically, do we *follow* God?

Perhaps by opening the holy pages of the Talmud we can open the holy recesses of our minds as well. This is what is written in Tractate Sotah:³

² Even if a true prophet, as the commentaries on the verse explain, makes this claim, you must assume it is false (see Ramban, Ohr Hachaim.)

³ *Sotah* 14a.

What does it mean *You shall follow the Lord, your God?* How is it possible for a human being to follow the Divine Presence, for has it not been said: *For the Lord your God is a devouring fire?*⁴

It means to follow/emulate the attributes of the Holy One, blessed be He. As He clothed the naked so shall you clothe the naked, for it is written: *And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife coats of skin, and clothed them.*⁵ As the Holy One, blessed be He, visited the sick so shall you also visit the sick, for it is written: *And the Lord appeared unto him by the oaks of Mamre.*⁶ As the Holy One, blessed be He, comforted mourners so shall you comfort mourners, for it is written: *And it came to pass after the death of Abraham, that God blessed Isaac his son.*⁷ As the Holy one, blessed be He, buried the dead, so shall you also bury the dead, for it is written – *And He buried him in the valley.*⁸

The most supernatural event we as human beings can do is to emulate God. According to all opinions, the most sublime thing we can do is to do what the Most Sublime does.

What does the Most Sublime do? God clothes the naked, visits the sick, comforts the mourners, and buries the dead. These are the most sublime acts a human being can do, so says the Torah.

We often get caught up looking for “signs” and “miracles.” But says the Holy One: Forget it – the true sign and miracle is when you dress the naked, visit the sick, comfort the mourners, and bury the dead.

A prophet who boasts of divine signs but does not do what the Divine does is no prophet. A dreamer who performs wondrous miracles – even *bona fide* ones – but does not visit the sick is more a nightmare than a dream come true.

⁴ Deuteronomy 4:14.

⁵ Genesis 3:21.

⁶ Ibid. 18:1.

⁷ Ibid. 25:11.

⁸ Deuteronomy 34:6.

The name of this week's Torah portion is aptly named – *Re'eh*, to “see.” If you want to truly “see” the Divine, do not look for miraculous wonderments or magical mystery rides. Those are great, sure, but there is something so much greater. If you want to truly see the Divine, look rather for the person that comforts the hurt and helps the needy.

7. The Month of Elul

This week – on Tuesday to be precise – begins the month of Elul, the twelfth and final month of the Jewish calendar, preceding the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah. It is a month of reflection and self-optimization, when we prepare ourselves for the upcoming Days of Awe. There is a wonderful tradition that describes this month as a month of *Melech baSadeh*, a month when the “King” (i.e. God) is in the “field.”

Normally the King is in the palace, and it is impossible to access the King, save through his ministers, red tape, bureaucracy, chambers, moats, gates and walls. But in Elul, the King is in the field, and any single person can walk up to Him and have a heart-to-heart conversation.

During the entire month of Elul for Sephardi Jews, and during the last week of Elul for Ashkenazi Jews, there is a custom to recite the *Selichot* prayers, which embody the Jews' intimate connection with God and ask for the King to highlight our good-deeds and erase all of our transgressions. We ask this so that we may enter into the New Year with total dedication to fulfilling our utmost potential of transforming this world into a home for God, our King.

What better way to do this than by following the King's example?

8. Inspirational Story (Optional)

There is a beautiful story, told by the renowned Yiddish writer, Yitzchak Leibish Peretz, called *Oyb Nisht Hecher*, about the supernatural effects of the *Selichot* prayers.⁹ This story truly conveys the meaning of wonders and signs from God, what it truly means to touch heaven.

In the wee hours of the morning, at the time of the *Selichot* prayers, the Rabbi of Nemirov would vanish.

He was nowhere to be seen – neither in the synagogue nor in the two study houses nor at a *minyán*. And he was certainly not at home. His door stood open: whoever wished could go in and out; no one would steal from the rabbi. But not a living creature was within.

Where could the Rabbi be? Where should he be? In heaven, no doubt. A rabbi has plenty of business to take care of just before the Days of Awe. Jews, God bless them, need livelihood, peace, health, and good *shidduchim*, romantic matches. We want to be pious and good, but our sins are so great, and Satan of the thousand eyes watches the whole earth from one end to the other. What he sees, he reports; he denounces, informs. Who can help us if not the Rabbi!

That's what the people thought.

But once a Litvak¹⁰ came, and he laughed. You know the Litvaks. They think little of the holy books but stuff themselves with Talmud and law. So this Litvak points to a passage in the Gemara – it sticks in your eyes – where it is written that even Moses our Teacher did not ascend to heaven during his lifetime but remained suspended two-and-a-half feet below. Go argue with a Litvak!

So where can the Rabbi be?

“That's not my business,” said the Litvak, shrugging. Yet all the while – what a Litvak can do! – he is scheming to find out.

⁹ This story was translated into English by Professor Ruth R. Weiss, under the title *If Not Higher*.

¹⁰ Term for a Lithuanian Jew, known to be more cerebral and cynical than his passionate Chassidic brethren, especially when it came to supernatural occurrences.

That same night, right after the evening prayers, the Litvak steals into the Rabbi's room, slides under the Rabbi's bed, and waits. He'll watch all night and discover where the Rabbi vanishes and what he does during the *Selichot* prayers.

Someone else might have gotten drowsy and fallen asleep, but a Litvak is never at a loss; he recites a whole tractate of the Talmud by heart.

At dawn he hears the call to prayers.

The rabbi has already been awake for a long time. The Litvak has heard him groaning for a whole hour.

Whoever has heard the Rabbi of Nemirov groan knows how much sorrow for all Israel, how much suffering, lies in each groan. A man's heart might break, hearing it. But a Litvak is made of iron; he listens and remains where he is. The Rabbi – long life to him! – lies on the bed, and the Litvak under the bed.

Then the Litvak hears the beds in the house begin to creak; he hears people jumping out of their beds, mumbling a few Jewish words, pouring water on their fingernails, banging doors. Everyone has left. It is again quiet and dark; a bit of light from the moon shines through the shutters.

(Afterward, the Litvak admitted that when he found himself alone with the Rabbi a great fear took hold of him. Goose pimples spread across his skin, and the roots of his side-locks pricked him like needles. A trifle: to be alone with the Rabbi at the time of the *Selichot* prayers! But a Litvak is stubborn. So he quivered like a fish in water and remained where he was.)

Finally the Rabbi arises. First, he does what befits a Jew. Then he goes to the clothes closet and takes out a bundle of peasant clothes: linen trousers, high boots, a coat, a big felt hat, and a long, wide leather belt studded with brass nails. The Rabbi gets dressed. From his coat pocket dangles the end of a heavy peasant rope.

The Rabbi goes out, and the Litvak follows him.

On the way the Rabbi stops in the kitchen, bends down, picks up an ax, puts it into his belt, and leaves the house. The Litvak trembles but continues to follow.

The hushed dread of the Days of Awe hangs over the dark streets. Every once in a while a cry rises from some *minyán* reciting the *Selichot* Prayers, or from a sickbed. The Rabbi hugs the sides of the streets, keeping to the shade of the houses. He glides from house to house, and the Litvak glides after him. The Litvak hears the sound of his heartbeats mingling with the sound of the Rabbi's heavy steps. But he keeps on going and follows the Rabbi to the outskirts of town.

A small wood stands just outside the town.

The Rabbi enters the wood. He takes thirty or forty steps and stops by a small tree. The Litvak, overcome with amazement, watches the rabbi take the ax out of his belt and strike the tree. He hears the tree creak and fall. The Rabbi chops the tree into logs and the logs into sticks. Then he makes a bundle of the wood and ties it with the rope in his pocket. He puts the bundle of wood on his back, shoves the ax back into his belt, and returns to the town.

He stops at a back street besides a small, broken-down shack and knocks at the window.

"Who is there?" asks a frightened voice. The Litvaks recognizes it as the voice of a sick Jewish woman.

"I," answers the Rabbi in the accent of a peasant.

"Who is I?"

Again the Rabbi answers in Russian. "Vassil."

"Who is Vassil, and what do you want?"

"I have wood to sell, very cheap." And not waiting for the woman's reply, he goes into the house.

The Litvak steals in after him. In the gray light of early morning he sees a poor room with broken, miserable furnishings. A sick woman, wrapped in rags, lies on the bed. She complains bitterly, "Buy? How can I buy? Where will a poor widow get money?"

"I'll lend it to you," answers the supposed Vassil. "It's only six cents."

"And how will I ever pay you back?" asks the poor woman, groaning.

"Foolish one," says the Rabbi reproachfully. "See, you are a poor, sick Jew, and I am ready to trust you with a little wood. I am sure you'll pay. You have such a great and mighty God, and you don't trust him for six cents."

"And who will kindle the fire?" asks the widow? "Have I the strength to get up? My son is at work."

"I'll kindle the fire," answers the Rabbi.

As the Rabbi puts the wood into the oven he recites, in heartbreak, the first portion of the *Selichot* prayers.

As he kindles the fire and the wood burns brightly, he recites, a bit more joyously, the second portion of the *Selichot* prayers. When the fire is set, he recites the third portion, and then shuts the stove.

The Litvak who sees all this becomes a disciple of the Rabbi.

And ever after, when another disciple tells how the Rabbi of Nemirov ascends to heaven at the time of the *Selichot* prayers, the Litvak does not laugh. He only adds quietly, "If not higher."

The most wonderful wonder of God, the most significant sign of the Divine is when one human being does what God does – and that is clothe the naked, visit the sick, comfort the mourning, and bury the dead. This, my dear people, is so much higher than heaven.

9. The Rabbi and the Priest (Joke)

A rabbi and a priest get into a car accident and it's a bad one. Both cars are totally demolished, but, amazingly, neither of the clerics is hurt. It is a clear miracle. After they crawl out of their cars, the rabbi sees the priest's collar and says, "So you're a priest. I'm a rabbi.

Just look at our cars. There's nothing left, but we are unhurt. This must be a sign from God. God must have meant that we should meet and be friends and live together in peace the rest of our days."

The priest replies, "I agree with you completely. This divine wonder is most certainly a sign from God."

The rabbi continues, "And look at this. Here's another miracle. My car is completely demolished but this bottle of 100-proof Hungarian Slivovitz didn't break. What a miracle! Surely God wants us to say *L'chaim*, toast and celebrate our good fortune." The rabbi hands the bottle to the priest.

The priest takes a few big swigs, and hands the bottle back to the rabbi.

The rabbi takes the bottle, immediately puts the cap on, and hands it back to the priest.

The priest asks, "Aren't you having any? Aren't you going to toast this miracle?"

The rabbi shakes his head and says: "Nah. I think I'll just wait for the police."

10. Conclusion: the Jewish Miracle

Generally, Jews don't talk about other religions. We simply have a lot more to say about our own religion than about other religions. We have, literally, tens of thousands of holy books and with our limited capacity of speech (though many a Jew has been known to push those limits), it would be wisest to study and grasp our own religion before we try to understand another's.

We have a thing called the Torah, which has not changed from the day it was given, and the portion we have just read is the same thousands of years later. We Jews are not impressed with prophets or with miracles. As a matter of fact, the argument could be made that we Jews become more *contentious* every time a prophet rises up or a miracle occurs. Just ask Moses if he had it easy. (Why this is, is a whole other sermon.)

But, perhaps we can give a good reason why miracles never impressed us Jews. And that's because every single Jew IS a miracle! Generation after generation, culture after culture, nation after nation has tried to destroy us, has tried to denounce us, has tried to label us as slayers of the prophets, as perpetrators of war crimes, and as evil occupiers of lands, and enslavers of poor people – all the while these same countries slew prophets and perpetrated heinous war crimes, and occupied lands not their own.

And what did we do? We taught them that there is One God. We taught them to stop sacrificing their own children to idols. We taught them to respect life. We taught them to repel darkness with light. Some of them learned, some of them have not yet learned.

All the while, the world tried to snuff us out. Yet we somehow survived. We remained a miracle, a wonder, a sign of God, evidence of the Creator!

What do you think is more miraculous – when a body of water splits open OR when a Jew with a number on his arm rolls up in his sleeve, puts on the *tefillin* and opens his heart to his Creator?

What do you think is more wondrous – when a piece of food falls from heaven OR when a group of people from North America travel to a tiny sliver of land between the Mediterranean and the Jordan just to comfort the mourners of Zion?

I'll tell you which miracle I would choose a million times out of a million.

There is no miracle like the miracle of the Jewish people. Every mitzvah we perform in this antithetical world is a miracle. Every a time a Jew breathes in this material plain, it is a miracle. Right here, right now, in this synagogue, I see a hundred miracles.

This is so much deeper than any prophet, so much more sublime than any magical wonder, so much higher than heaven itself.

The greatest miracle of all miracles – the miracle of a Jewish man, a Jewish woman, a Jewish child emulating and following in the path of his/her/our Creator.

You shall follow the Lord, your God, revere Him, keep His commandments, heed His voice, worship Him, and cleave to Him – doing this, my fellow miracles, is the greatest, most wondrous miracle of all.

May it be Your will, Creator of heaven and earth, of the natural and the supernatural, that such miracles become the everyday norm – and we can see them with our physical eyes of flesh and blood.

Together let us make it happen and let us say, Amen!

Shabbat Shalom!