



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

PESACH > First Days

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March 26, 2013

Pesach

Do Miracles Really Happen?



Meaningful Sermons

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ABSTRACT

Did you ever see a miracle? Do you believe in miracles? Can miracles be reconciled with science? What, actually, is a miracle?

Passover is a good time to speak about this because it is a time of miracles. And it is the central focus of the month called Nissan, which is connected with the word nes, miracle. Actually, *Nissei Nissim* – "miracles of miracles."

Rabbi Yitzhak Aramo'ah, the great 15th century Spanish sage and philosopher, writes that there are two orders in existence – the natural order which begins in Tishrei and the miraculous one which begins in Nissan.

But what exactly does that mean? Nissan may have been miraculous three thousand years ago, but is it still miraculous now, today?

Is it possible that miracles are happening around us and we are unable to see them?

As shown by a recent experiment at Harvard Medical School involving radiologists, even people who should have eyes to see can miss a matchbook size gorilla on a cancer scan. Why? Because they are looking for cancer nodules not playful gorillas.

Can it be that we are actually missing the miracles in our lives because instead of looking for them we are looking with physical eyes for physical things, and our senses are being seduced by material life?

But there is a way to change all that. And Passover is the perfect time to do so. There is a way to open our eyes to the wonder within and around us. This sermon suggests some concrete ways how.

Pesach

First Days

Do Miracles Really Happen?

DO MIRACLES REALLY HAPPEN?

1. A Time of Miracles

Did you ever see a miracle? Do you believe in miracles? Can miracles be reconciled with science? What, actually, is a miracle?

Passover is a good time to speak about this because it is a time of miracles. The Jewish people experienced many miracles in this month, beginning with their miraculous exodus from Egypt, which was accompanied by many miracles.

Even the very name of this month, Nissan (whose central focus is Passover), is connected with the word *nes*, miracle. Actually, Nissan is a word comprised of two Hebrew letter “nun’s,” connoting *Nissei Nissim* – “miracles of miracles.”¹

Rabbi Yitzhak Aramo’ah, the great 15th century Spanish sage and philosopher, writes² that there are two orders in existence – the natural order which begins at Rosh Hashana (in the Hebrew month of Tishrei) and the miraculous one which begins in Nissan.

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2. Definition of a Miracle

Before we answer that, it seems wise to first define the meaning of a miracle.

Most of us associate a miracle with a supernatural event – a suspension of the natural order. The parting of the sea is a quintessential example of such a miracle. Imagine if the Atlantic or Pacific Ocean would

¹See *Talmud Berachos* 27a, and in *Rashi* and *Maharsha. Midrash Lekach Tov* Bo 12:2.

²In his classic *Akeidas Yitzchak*, commentary on Parshat Bo.

suddenly split into two, leaving a path in middle for humans to walk through. Or imagine the sun stopping in the heavens for several hours. These are magical paranormal events that defy the laws of nature and are impossible to scientifically explain.

Such miracles require a measure of faith, being that we don't see them very often, if at all.

But is this the true definition of a miracle?

The Baal Shem Tov, the 18th century founder of the Chassidic Movement, famously said: "The difference between a miracle and a natural occurrence is only frequency."³ Meaning that miracles occur all around us at every second of every day, but because they happen so often we don't recognize them as such – we take them for granted.

Based on this definition of a miracle as seeing the extraordinary in the ordinary, then we only need to open our eyes to see these ongoing miracles.

Existence is a miracle. Birth is a miracle. The fact that we breathe is a miracle. Anyone who walks into a hospital and sees someone struggling to breathe has to appreciate the miracle of health.

Indeed, the greatest miracle of all is healthy life itself. Just consider this: What are the odds that the 75 trillion – you heard that right, 75 trillion – cells in the human body should all work together as one symmetrical unit?! All it takes is one mutant cell to wreak havoc. So 75 trillion coordinated cells – is that not a miracle?

I would submit that the fact that healthy children are born, though it happens every day, thank God, does not make it any less miraculous.

If the sun were to rise once in our lifetimes, you'd have TV crews and photographers coming to record this astonishing phenomenon. (Witness people's fascination with the solar eclipse). It would be seen as a miracle. But since the sun rises every morning, we get accustomed to it. It loses its novelty and our attention. Instead, we are looking around for the next rush of excitement.

³ *Toldos Yaakov Yosef Parshat Tzav*. Kesser Shem Tov section 119. 256. See *Sefer Hasichos* 5749 vol. 1 pp. 372.

3. The Enemy Called Monotony (Optional)

Why the craving for excitement?

One of our greatest enemies is monotony. Nature abhors a vacuum, and so do we humans. Many of our problems originate from the wearing effects of boredom and routine. At some point, repeating the same activity again and again dulls our spirits, and we become desperate for something, *anything*, that will relieve our tedium and fill that hungry vacuum – whether that something is healthy or not. We need that rush of excitement, that chase, that high ... to make us feel alive again.

This begs a fundamental question: Why should our lives be monotonous in the first place? Everything in existence is in a perpetual state of change and movement. We begin our lives in a state of constant enchantment. Observe young children unceasingly crawling about exploring everything they encounter with unwavering curiosity. They never seem to rest in one place, and they are excited and stimulated by the simplest things.

One of the fascinating discoveries we all make as children is when we look into a microscope for the first time and see the microorganisms slithering about in a seemingly inanimate drop of pond water.

The fascination is due to the discovery of vibrancy in a place that seems devoid of any life. The same is true when we first learn of the vast ecosystem of life teeming beneath the otherwise benign water of the ocean surface. Or the unfathomable multitudes of stars, solar systems, black holes and dark matter in outer space. Or the (previously mentioned) 75 trillion vibrating cells within the human body. Or the complexity and symmetry of nature, connecting every organism, every mineral, plant and animal. Or the layers upon layers of microscopic particles shaping every detail of existence. Or the elegant DNA of the human genome.

Life is dynamic. Like electricity, every part of life is pulsating with energy. No two moments are alike, everything alive is always in constant flux – constantly moving and changing.

So when did we lose our sense of adventure, our sense of enchantment at the mysteries brimming beneath and within every fiber of existence? When did our curiosity and enthusiasm stop or slow down? When did monotony set in? When did a form of “death” set in, stifling the dynamic energy brimming within?

When?

When we began getting locked into the surface level of our lives, forgetting about the forces within that shape every aspect of our lives, our existence and our universe. The cruel reality of material life is that, as we get consumed with the crass materialism of our lives, a hard crust develops. It gets tougher with each passing day, and it conceals the vibrant life within. At some point our *outer lives* take complete control, and we are left with an increased sense of despair and weakened hope for rejuvenation.

4. Seduction of the Senses

If you were to shut off your senses – if you were to close your eyes and mouth, plug up your ears and nose – so that you could not see, hear, taste, touch or smell, what would you be left with? The very thought might be terrifying; you might think you’d disappear. But in truth none of those senses are necessary for survival, or for that matter for anything that you need internally. Because you don’t need eyes to see yourself, you don’t need ears to hear yourself, and you don’t need taste, touch or smell to experience yourself.

These five senses, which so dominate our lives, are about interacting with things *outside* of ourselves. With eyes we can see each other. And, of course our senses play an important role. But when our senses seduce us and we lose sight of the inner forces of our lives, then the external and the outer take control and desensitize the “inner” and “real” that is beyond our senses.

We live in a world that is hyper-stimulating our senses. If it's not television, then it's the Internet, or other forms of hi-tech. Ads in all shapes and forms inundate us. Every one of our senses is being assaulted all the time. Now, we may say that we accept or even welcome these assaults. We are consenting adults, so to speak. But the bottom line is that our senses are over-stimulated.

And the more over-stimulated we are, the less sensitive we are to the inner self. The less likely we are to see with the eyes of our soul. The less likely we are to see the divine out there – the extraordinary in the ordinary.

If we look with the eyes of the body, certain things are true. If we look with the eyes of the soul other things are true. It all depends on the tools that we are using.

5. The Fisherman Analogy

Sir Arthur Eddington in *The Philosophy of Physical Science* offers an excellent analogy to explain phenomenon beyond the scope of our conventional measuring instruments:

Let us suppose that an ichthyologist [a scientist devoted to the study of fish] is exploring the life of the ocean. He casts a net into the water and brings up a fishy assortment of many different species of fish. He began documenting all the fish he collected – their shapes, colors, sizes. Surveying his catch, he proceeds in the usual manner of a scientist to systematize what it reveals. And then he came up with a great revelation: "No sea-creature is less than one inch long."

Now the obvious reason for this "revelation" was that the strings of his net were an inch apart, and all the fish that were smaller evaded capture. So his conclusion was only correct as far as his tools went – but it was a false conclusion because his tools were limited. His myopic perspective meant that he missed the obvious.

It's like the young man from Chelm, newly arrived in Russia, who was walking through the countryside in the dead of winter. It was twenty below and he was desperately searching for a warm place to stay. As he was trudging to the nearest village, suddenly he came face to face with a huge Russian wolfhound. He reached for a stick lying at his feet to fend off an impending attack. But the stick was frozen solid to the ground. "What kind of a stupid country is this?" he cried. "Instead of tying up the dogs, they tie down the sticks!"⁴

You think it's funny?

Well, it's not just a joke. This myopic way of looking at things is truly part of the human condition.

A famous psychological experiment provides the proof. You must know the one I am talking about – it's the famous "Invisible Gorilla Study."

6. The Invisible Gorilla

Subjects are shown a video, about a minute long, of two teams, one in white shirts, the other in black shirts, moving around and passing basketballs to one another. They are asked to count the number of passes made by the team wearing white, a seemingly simple task. Halfway through the video, a woman wearing a full-body gorilla suit walks slowly to the middle of the screen, pounds her chest, and then walks out of the frame. If you are just watching the video, it's the most obvious thing in the world. But when asked to count the passes, about half the people miss it because they are so intent on their task.

This experiment⁵ is a striking demonstration of the zero-sum nature of attention. When you direct your mental spotlight to the basketball passes, it leaves the rest of the world in darkness. Even when you are looking straight at the gorilla, you frequently don't see it, because it's not what you're looking for.

⁴ Adapted from *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Humor*, compiled and edited by Henry D. Spalding, by p. 4

⁵ First published in 1999 by Christopher Chabris and Daniel Simons.

This same experiment was repeated recently at the Harvard Medical School⁶ with radiologists – medical professionals who are trained to focus on the minutiae of fuzzy images taken by X-rays, Cat-scans and MRIs. The radiologists were told to review the slides of lungs for cancerous nodules. Unbeknown to them a gorilla the size of a match-book was glaring angrily at them from inside one slide. Did they see it? No – 83 percent of the radiologists missed it.

This truly proves that what we are thinking about, what we are focused on, filters the world around us so aggressively that it literally shapes what we see.

And, of course, this is how we miss the miracles that are constantly around us. This is how we fail to see the extraordinary in the ordinary.

One way to change this is to stop focusing so much on your own objectives, tasks and needs, and instead, to be sensitive to others. That allows you to get beyond your own myopic vision and see the majesty of life, to experience its magic.

As Einstein said: “There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle.”

7. The Greatest Gift of All

The greatest gift of all is to be able to see the miracles in your daily life. And this is the message of Nissan.

A miracle may pass you by because you have your eyes closed, or you may not have allowed yourself to experience it. So pay attention. You do not know whom you may meet, and what kind of message you’ll get if you listen. Like beautiful music drowned out by extracurricular loud noise, every soul releases a subtle, gentle melody, but you need to shut off the external turbulence to hear it.

⁶<http://www.npr.org/blogs/health/2013/02/11/171409656/why-even-radiologists-can-miss-a-gorilla-hiding-in-plain-sight>

When you wake up in the morning and look at your children and family, and when you consider your own well being, there are miracles happening. In everyday encounters, there are messages ... there are answers to questions ... there are solutions to dilemmas. Opening yourself up to that deeper spiritual reality allows the miraculous in the moment, the extraordinary in the ordinary – indeed, the divine – to reveal itself.

How do we see the divine in the mundane?

When the Kotzker Rebbe was asked: “Where is God?” He replied: “Wherever you let Him in?”

To see the Divine is to see the essence of all reality and to recognize that this essence is *beyond* all that we perceive as reality. As the Midrash says, “He is the space/place of the universe, but the universe is not His space.”⁷

In some ways it means seeing the forest from the trees, the roots from the symptoms, the causes from the effects.

8. It is Possible

Too hard, you say?

No, it is quite possible, because our ancestors have paved the way.

The great 13th century sage Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman (also known as Ramban or Nachmanides) states a critical axiom:

Know this fundamental principle: All the journeys and events that happened with the Patriarchs come to teach us about the future ... There is nothing that happened to them that would later not occur with their children/descendants.⁸

⁷Midrash, Bereshit Raba, 61: “Why is it that we use ‘place’ (makom) as a name of God? It is because God is the place of the world but the world is not His place.”

⁸Ramban, Lech Lecha 12:6.

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – and Moses and Aaron and Miriam – paved the way for us to have a similar experience: to see the inner forces that shape our outer realities.

But in order to see in this special way, we have to commit to the same two things that they committed to:

1) We must travel away from our own trappings and remove the immediate pressures that block us from seeing what lies within. This includes controlling the flow of images, sounds, tastes and sensations which clutter our life.

2) We need to focus on the inner forces and the purpose of it all. Too often we get so consumed with the tools – earning a living, shopping, preparing – that we are left with no time, energy and space for the purpose of all these tools. Sometimes we may even forget that there is a purpose, like embarking on a journey and then forgetting the destination.

Once we demonstrate our commitment to this approach, new doors will open up from within. And then – and only then – will we begin to see the extraordinary in the ordinary. Every detail of our life will begin to burst with enormous energy, as we learn to savor every sight, every sound, every taste, every touch, every smell.

We can look at a flower and – as the poet William Blake put it – see “heaven.” We can listen to a bird sing and hear the music of angels. We can gently caress the hand of our beloved and touch eternity. We can see miracles every day.

To see the world in a grain of sand
And heaven in a flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand
And eternity in an hour.

May the sights, sounds and sensations of infinity be ours today. Amen.

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