

WEEK IN REVIEW

ועד הנחות
התמימים

*Based on the works of
the Lubavitcher Rebbe*

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ESSAY

Do You Believe in Miracles?

People often talk about miracles. There are firm believers that miracles happen in our lives, and firm skeptics and non-believers. But before we discuss and debate the issue, wouldn't it be wise to first define the meaning of a miracle?

And what better time to do so than in this month of Nissan, which is a time of miracles? What exactly is a miracle and how does it play out in our lives? Are their miracles today? If yes, can we see and experience them?

In this disarming insight the Baal Shem Tov offers us a novel interpretation of a miracle, and in the process turns the entire concept on its head. We learn how each of us can recognize – and create – miracles in our lives.

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We are now in the month of Nissan – 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.

The very name of the month – *Nissan*, a word with two Hebrew letter “nuns” – stands for “miracles upon miracles,” a time when one can expect miracles upon miracles. Our sages tell us that Nissan is the New Year for the miraculous order (while Tishrei is the New Year for the natural order).

What better time to take a deeper look at the meaning of miracles and how they play out in our lives.

People often talk about miracles. There are firm believers that miracles happen in our lives, and firm skeptics and non-believers. But before we discuss and debate the issue, wouldn't it be 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 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 says that the difference between a miracle and a natural event is only in frequency. “A miracle is a novel event, a new thing that happens for the first time in nature. But after it repeats itself, this too becomes nature.”

In other words, “miracle” and “nature” are not objectively different; they are distinguished simply by our attitude. We see something new and novel as a miracle. But if it happens consistently – despite its miraculous personality – we call it “nature.” Our fickle personalities then find this “natural” occurrence as common and monotonous and we go off seeking a novelty, a new thing, anything that seems different and will turn us on.

Truth be told, we don’t really understand the “laws” of nature. Yes, nature operates according to a design that we have come to accept as normal. But while this makes life more predictable and, therefore, comfortable, it doesn’t necessarily make it any more understandable. When we know, for instance, that the sun will rise tomorrow morning, we feel a sense of order and control; but we still have no idea as to why nature was created this way. Just because we label something “natural” doesn’t mean that we understand it any better than we understand a “miracle.”

The difference between a miracle and an act of nature is only in frequency. Imagine that the sun were to rise only once in our lifetime. Everyone would rush to see it, proclaiming it the most miraculous event they had ever witnessed. But since we experience a sunrise every day, we see it as just another ordinary part of our lives.

We dismiss it as a “natural” unexceptional event, though in truth it is simply a miracle repeating itself again and again.

This is an inherent human trait – we become so accustomed to something that, no matter how extraordinary it may be, we take it for granted. We constantly need a new rush of excitement to arouse our interest.

Is there a greater miracle than life itself? Take the human breath: A person living to 80 will take over 700 million breaths in a lifetime! Is it not a miracle that we are able to exhale and inhale hundred of millions of times throughout life without fail?!

When we visit someone struggling, G-d forbid, to breathe, we suddenly realize the miracle involved. But in our own lives, since we breathe again and again, it loses for us the miraculous touch. Due to its regularity we dismiss it – if we think about it at all – as... “nature.”

Is life itself a miracle? What are the odds of 75 trillion cells in the human body working hand in hand, and allowing us our health?!

No wonder King David remind us at the end of Psalms: Every soul praises G-d. On every breath we take we should be praising G-d.

Miracles, then, are all around us. They are lost on us because we see them happening so “regularly” and “consistently,” but that doesn’t make them less of a miracle.

Miracles abound everywhere. We just have to pause and appreciate them.

A miracle then is actually seeing the extraordinary in the ordinary and the supernatural in the natural. Recognizing that no matter how many times a miracle repeats itself, the miracle does not weaken (even if our interest does).

Now, based on this new definition of miracle, ask yourself: Do you believe in miracles?

Do we even need faith to appreciate the miracles in our lives – in our health, in nature, in our children, in the magic all around us?

Blake put it so well: To see a world in a grain of sand, And a heaven in a wild flower, Hold infinity in the palm of your hand, And eternity in an hour. But how? How can you hold infinity in the palm of your hand? And how can you keep it there?

Prior to Blake, the Baal Shem Tov, laid down the foundation and taught us how to see and touch the miracle: By seeing the extraordinary in the ordinary.

Someone may say, “If I only saw a miracle, then I would believe, then I would change my life!”

What are we waiting for – the splitting of the sea? Miracles are happening around us every moment. Life itself is a miracle; consider for just a moment the sheer wonder of human birth. In fact, we do often refer to birth as a miracle; why, then, do we so easily forget that every person on earth is the product of a miracle?

Since we are so distracted by the daily struggle to survive, by our responsibilities and obligations, we tend to ignore such simple facts. The very noise of life drowns out the underlying sound of what should be most real to us. It is not that we don't believe in miracles; we simply stop taking the time to appreciate them. To see a miracle means to appreciate the uncommon within the common, the extraordinary within the ordinary.

When you can recognize the extraordinary within the ordinary, supernatural occurrences are not so significant. Your faith – and life – is not dependent on such miracles, for you have a mature relationship with a reality that is higher than yourself, and you realize that the ultimate miracle is our very existence.

Just contemplate the awesome design and balance within any one family of the animal, vegetable, or mineral kingdom, to say nothing of the beauty of the human body or the elegance of the solar system. The miracle of nature is not to be found in its once-in-a-lifetime events,

but in its relentless regularity. Whereas every creation of man is ephemeral, every part of nature is boundless, permanent, and inexplicable – in a word, miraculous.

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

By looking 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 – the successes you've had and the very miracle of life. Thank G-d for these miracles; don't take them for granted.

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

Watch a beautiful sunset. Listen to a stirring symphony. Smell a delicate fragrance. Taste a delectable

wine. Touch the soft cheek of a child. Those are our five senses at work – taking in and experiencing the aesthetics of our universe. But what else enters through our sensory doors? How stimulated – overstimulated – are we by the multitude of sights, sounds, smells, tastes and touches inundating our daily interactions? And what impact does it have on us? Are we products, perhaps even victims, of the forces seducing our senses? Take television: Does anyone know the far-reaching effects that visual stimulation has on our psyches? How much is it desensitizing us to “see,” “hear” and experience the more sublime aspects of our lives – the invisible and ethereal?

So when we observe the world around us, the people, events and experiences of our lives, what should we be looking for? When we are seeking a loving relationship – or standing before a person we love – how do we assure that we are looking at the important things that matter, and not at superficial externals? And how do we attain such perspective when we are swamped with the endless flow of information assaulting our senses, numbing and distorting our priorities?

This month of Nissan – and the holiday of Pesach – provides us with the answer. In this month we have the power to see miracles in our lives. To see the Divine in everything we do.

What does it mean to “see” the Divine?

When we look at any particular object what do we see? First we see the physical features of the object – its shape, color, size and position. We may also notice its functions and the benefits they serve. With more focus, we can discern subtle elements and other aspects that may not have been ostensibly noticeable. Upon further study we develop a “deeper look” at the object and learn its unique composition of elements and molecules, and its biological and chemical makeup. Further down and in we discover its atomic structure, which in turn is comprised of sub-atomic particles. How far down the “rabbit hole” can we go?

Left to our own mortal resources we can only go that far. But with help from an unexpected place we can actually come to perceive – to see – the essence of the object, and even beyond that.

When the Kotzker Rebbe was a young child he was once asked: “Where is G-d?” To which he replied: “Wherever you let Him in?”

To see the divine miracle is to see the Essence of all reality, and to recognize that this Essence is beyond all reality. “He is the space of the universe, but the universe is not His space.” In some ways it means to see the forest from the trees; the roots from the symptoms; the causes from the effects.

But to be able to open our eyes and see the miracle – to see the inner forces that shape our outer realities – two critical things are necessary:

1) We must leave our comfort zones and embark on a journey away from our subjective inclinations toward transcendence. You must travel away from your own subjective trappings and remove the immediate pressures that block you from seeing what lies within. This includes controlling the flow of images, sounds, tastes, touches and smells, which enter your being and clutter your life.

2) We must dedicate our lives and pass on this legacy to our children and generations to come – to focus not on the means, but on the end: To look beyond the seductive distractions of surface life and see what lies within; to search for the essence of things, rather than react to their symptoms. To seek out the purpose of existence and turn that purpose into the driving force of our decisions, rather than allow our existential needs and concerns to determine the course of our lives. You need to focus on the inner forces and the purpose of it all, ensuring that the means that lead you there are not confused with the end goal. 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.

This commitment to the higher goal, as opposed to the means, in turn manifests in a life driven by virtue and selflessness, rather than instant gratification and immediate needs.

Once you demonstrate your commitment to this approach, new doors will open up from within. And then you will begin to see the extraordinary in the ordinary. Every detail of your life begins to burst with enormous energy. You learn to savor every sight, every sound, every taste, every touch, every smell.

You can look at a wild flower and see a flower, or you can see Heaven. You can listen to a bird sing and hear a song, or hear the music of angels. You can gently caress the finger of your beloved and touch a finger, or you can touch eternity.

A new miraculous perspective emerges in your life, teaching you how to bridge the visible and the invisible, the sensory and the supra-sensory – how to use your senses to reach beyond your senses and experience new dimensions.

And above all, your new vision allows you to release fresh energy from every experience you

encounter: In a life driven by self-interest every situation is numbed and deadened by “what’s in it for me?” In stark contrast, a life driven by seeing the miraculous opens your eyes, ears, taste, touch and smell to experience yourself and others in unprecedented ways. You learn to see new things, and see old things in new ways.

Every situation then becomes an opportunity to generate innovative power to help others and improve the world – directing every detail of your life toward the sublime, revealing the Divine purpose in everything, fulfilling the very objective of existence.

Miracles are all around us; we must open our eyes to see them – The Lubavitcher Rebbe

A group of college students had a private audience with the Lubavitcher Rebbe. One student asked the Rebbe if he could perform miracles.

“This physical, natural world,” he explained, “is not a separate entity from the higher, spiritual world – rather, it evolved from it. And so, when someone connects himself to the spiritual world, to G-d, he can affect things in this physical world in a way that cannot be anticipated. Every person is given the choice whether or not to connect themselves to the spiritual world.

“We must make the right choice,” the Rebbe continued, “and use all our strength to live virtuously, to introduce harmony to everyone we meet, to encourage others to increase goodness and defeat evil – in effect, to make the world a better place.”

The Rebbe concluded: “So, in essence, by inspiring students like yourselves to go into the world and perform good works, yes, we can perform miracles.”

As we enter the miraculous Passover season we are empowered to recognize and perform miracles in our own lives.

Let us commit to not take our lives and gifts for granted. To see the miracle of life – the miracle in every breath we take, in every step we make, in every grain of sand and in every fiber of existence.

Let us stand humble and gracious before the miracle of our lives.

And when we do, we open up news channels that flow forth with even more abundant miraculous energies, blessing us all with great success, materially and spiritually, all in good health, happiness and nachas from ourselves and out families.

Happy Pesach. A celebration of the miracle.

A TELLING STORY

Beyond Paradise

All his life, Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov strove to reach the Holy Land. He would often say that if he and Rabbi Chaim ibn Attar,¹ who lived in Jerusalem, would join forces, they would bring Moshiach. But this was not to be. Several times, the Baal Shem Tov set out for his destination, but all sorts of mishaps and catastrophes forced him to return home empty-handed.

One of these failed journeys left Rabbi Israel and his daughter, Adel, stranded penniless in Istanbul on the eve of Passover, without matzah, wine or any provisions for the festival. Mysteriously, the Baal Shem Tov’s spiritual powers had also departed from him, and his great mind was blank – he could barely remember the forms of the alef-bet.

Rabbi Israel had already gone to the synagogue and his daughter was contemplating their empty seder table when a man knocked on their door. “I’m from Poland,” he said, “traveling through this city on business matters. I was told that two fellow Jews from my home country are staying here. I would like very much to spend the festival with you.”

“You’re welcome to share our lodgings,” said Adel, “but, unfortunately, we can’t provide

you with much of a seder. We have nothing—no matzot, no wine, no bitter herbs, not even a candle with which to usher in the festival...”

“No matter,” said the guest, “I have everything with me. I knew that I would be spending Passover on the road, so I brought along all the festival provisions. There is enough for all of us.”

When Rabbi Israel returned from the synagogue, he found a fully-furnished seder laid out before him: lit candles, matzot, wine and everything needed to fulfill the mitzvot of the day. His joy knew no bounds, for at that moment the divine spirit had also returned to inhabit his soul.

After they had recited the Haggadah, eaten the matzah and the maror, and were enjoying the festival meal, the Baal Shem Tov turned to the guest and said: “You have restored my life to me. How can I repay you? Ask for anything that you require, and I promise you that your need will be filled.”

“G-d has blessed me with wealth,” said the man, “and I want for nothing material. But my wife and I have been married for many years, and have failed to conceive a child. Rabbi, I see that you are a righteous and holy man. Surely your prayers can open the gates of heaven. Please, bless us with a child.”

“I swear,” said Rabbi Israel, “that before the year is out, you will be

holding your child in your arms.”

No sooner had these words left his mouth than there was a great commotion in the heavens, for this man and his wife had been born without the capacity to bear children. Yet even the heavens must abide by the law that “[G-d] does the will of those who fear Him.”² The oath of the Baal Shem Tov would have to be fulfilled.

A proclamation was issued which resounded throughout the supernal worlds: “This man and his wife will indeed bear a child. But because Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov has forced the hand of heaven to overturn the laws of nature, he has forfeited his portion in the World to Come.”

Upon hearing this proclamation, the Baal Shem Tov’s face lit up with joy. “How fortunate I am!” he cried. “I just learned that I have forfeited all heavenly reward for my good deeds. All my life I have been troubled by the thought that perhaps my service of the Almighty is tainted by the expectation of reward. Now, however, my service of G-d will be pure, free of the possibility of any ulterior motive!”

Adapted from the teachings of the Rebbe by Yanki Tauber

FOOTNOTES

¹ Author of *Ohr HaChaim*, 1696-1743.

² Psalms 145:19.

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