

Simchat Torah

October 11, 2020 | 23 Tishrei 5781

D'var Torah: Seeing Miracles

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The Torah is full of miracles: food falls from the heavens, a staff splits the sea, a donkey speaks, the earth itself opens up, just to name a few. These events call attention to themselves and stand out both to those present and those who hear/read about them because they are exceptional and defy expectations about how the world works. As we begin again the cycle of Torah readings with Parshat *Bereshit*, these stories, and the notion of miracles in general, can be difficult for us to relate to.

Since the advent of the Enlightenment, it has become much less common to label events “miracles.” Rationalist philosophers like David Hume argued that since miracles violate the natural order when someone reports a “miracle” it is more likely a deception or error of judgment - the laws of nature are far more reliable than any human witness. If so, then what are we to think of our ancient stories and the central role “miracle” plays in Jewish religious life?

This question touches on the greatest threat religion faces today, and it is not unique to Judaism. Religion today is besieged by disbelief. The prevailing voice in society is that religion or science are diametrically opposed: one can believe in and be guided by one or the other, but not both. Many then, abandon religion in exchange for a materialistic and scientific worldview, and in so doing, cut themselves off from the ability to experience the miraculous.

In response, scientists/believers such as Harvard Paleontologist/Evolutionary Biologist Stephen Jay Gould argued that science and religion are compatible, but only because neither oversteps its jurisdiction and transgresses beyond its domain. In other words, religion asks **why** and science asks **how**. The problem with this view is that it relegates religion to a place in which it has nothing to say about some of the most important questions facing us today.

Our tradition offers us a third view, as the Jewish Sages of old were familiar with the science of their day and also faced the dilemma of how to reconcile empirical and religious truth. In the Mishnah Pirkei Avot 5:6 they taught:

Ten things were created on the eve of the Sabbath at twilight, and these are they: [1] the mouth of the earth, [2] the mouth of the well, [3] the mouth of the donkey, [4] the rainbow, [5] the manna, [6] the staff [of Moses], [7] the *shamir*, [8] the letters, [9] the writing, [10] and the tablets. And some say: also the demons, the grave of Moses, and the ram of Abraham, our father. And some say: and also tongs, made with tongs.

In other words, the miracles listed above, though exceptional, are part of the original creation. That this list is limited to only a few items may indicate that the Sages believed that *true* miracles were relegated to the Biblical past. But read more expansively, Pirkei Avot makes the more radical claim that miracles are not the natural order being overturned, they are the natural order at work. It is not that miracles stopped occurring, but that we do not recognize them as such when we don't take the time to look at the world with a sense of awe and wonder.

Jewish practice challenges and trains us to see the sacred in the mundane and appreciate daily miracles. Each day in the *Amidah* we recite the words of *Modim*, and the blessing concludes thanking God for “...miracles that accompany us each day, and for Your wonders and Your gifts that are with us each moment- evening, morning, and noon.” For many, the idea of a daily miracle is an oxymoron, but our tradition offers us the chance to approach each day with sensitivity to the

holy and sacred. It does not ask us to suspend our belief in scientific knowledge; it asks us to suspend our belief that little moments are not really big ones.

As scientific knowledge grew, the rabbis did not establish separate spheres for religion and science. Instead, they reinterpreted the Torah in light of their new understandings. This year, as we begin a new cycle of Torah, let us approach the text with the same openness and bravery - openness to look to our ancient heritage for wisdom, and bravery to demand its relevance to our modern lives.

Parsha Study & Discussion

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Text: Devarim 34:1-4

(1) And Moshe went up from the steppes of Moab to Mount Nevo, to the top of Pisgah, which faces Jericho. And the LORD showed him all the land, from the Gilead as far as Dan. (2) And all Naphtali and the land of Ephraim and Manasseh and all the land of Judah as far as the Hinder Sea. (3) And the Negev and the plain of the valley of Jericho...as far as Zoar. (4) And the Lord said to him, "this is the land that I swore to Avraham, to Yitzhak, and to Jacob saying, 'to your seed I will give it'. I have shown it to you with your own eyes, but you shall not cross over there."

- When Aaron died, his brother Moshe and his son Elazar were at his side. Compare Moshe's ascent to the mountaintop where he will die to that of Aaron's death. Why do you think that no one walked with Moshe up the mountain?
- The geographic description of what Moshe sees is very detailed (a full panoramic view). Why do you think that we are given this description?
- Why do you think that God showed Moshe the land, while telling him again that he will never reach it?

Commentary: Rashi Devarim 34:1

All the land - He showed him all the land of Israel in its prosperity, and the oppressors who in future time would oppress it.

- What word in the phrase "all the land" gave rise to the midrashic idea that Moshe saw not merely the geography but also the events that will shape the lives of those living there?

Commentary: Ramban Devarim 34:1

The reason for this sight which He showed him was because the land was full of goodness, a beauty above all lands. And since He knew the great love that Moshe our Master loved Israel, He made him happy by showing him the great good with his eyes.

- What does Ramban feel that Moshe saw? How does that compare to Rashi's idea?
- Think about what you know about Moshe. Which reading (Rashi's historic view or Ramban's physical view) would seem to you to be more satisfying for Moshe at this point of his life?
- Which of these views do you think that people would like see from their personal Mount Nevo?