

DO YOU BELIEVE IN MIRACLES?

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A few years ago one of our Confirmands brought his girl friend along on the boat ride through which we celebrated the end of the year. It was only gradually that I learned that his girl friend was not Jewish, and in fact she was a rabid believer in another faith. This young man had brought this young lady along for the pleasure of having her challenge me to a debate on religion. If the young lady was not out to convert me, she was at least out to test me.

"Tell me", she said, "do you believe in miracles?" "Of course", I said. "Then do you believe that Jesus was born of a virgin birth?" "No", I replied. "Do you believe that he rose from the dead?" "No", I said. "Do you believe that Jesus fed an army with a loaf of bread?", she continued. To which I replied, "I don't even believe that Elijah fed an army with two loaves or that he poured 100 bottles of olive oil out of one bottle, even when our own Testament says so." Finally with a smirk of self satisfaction, the young lady ended the conversation with the statement, "I can see that you don't believe in God!"

There are two ways of believing in miracles. One way is to believe that a violation of the laws of nature is a miracle induced by God. The other is to believe that the very laws of nature are so complex and profound that they constitute, in and of themselves, a miracle. I am very much a believer in miracles but only in the second sense.

Early man did not believe in the established order of nature. He believed that Springtime would reoccur only if the Gods could be persuaded to make the decision to reestablish Spring once again. For ancient man, the advent of Spring each year was a new thing made possible only by the resurrection of the God of vegetation. The God of vegetation or growth was believed to have been consigned to the underworld for the period of Winter, but his resurrection or rebirth was not at all guaranteed. To help assure the God's release from his underground prison, the pagans believed they had to appease the high Gods who had imprisoned the God of vegetation. The way to appease or seduce the Gods was through magic, and so through rites of magic controlled by the priests, ancient man participated in the miracle of the rebirth of vegetation.

The God of Judaism, unlike the Gods of other faiths, is not a dying and rising God. He is an "El chai", "an ever-living God", and since He does not die, the rebirth of vegetation in Springtime is tied in Judaism to some other force than the resurrection of the God. It is tied, Judaism teaches, to God's ordered plan. The miracle, Judaism teaches, is that Spring comes every year, without fail, and precisely because God has ordained that it will. Since we can rely upon God's faithfulness and regularity, magical rites designed to compel Him to reprocess Spring are not necessary.

Judaism with its teaching of an ordered universe, made possible the development of modern science, but Judaism does not rob us of the wonder of miracles. It merely teaches that miracles are of a different kind than we humans had previously imagined.

Let us talk for a moment about the miracle of birth, human birth. Is it the product of a deviation from the natural order as created by God, or is it the direct result of the process that God has created and which He still feeds with His power? Recently, I saw a movie which describes the en utero process of a child's birth. Through this movie you can follow the development of the child from the moment of the woman's impregnation. First, you see the live semen seeking out the egg to fertilize it. You are witness to the extreme difficulty the semen has in reaching the egg. The chances of the semen reaching the egg are minuscule, so God has provided that there are countless numbers of live sperm, only one of which succeeds in reaching the egg. Then you see the fertilized egg subdivide, and the long and miraculous process of subdivision of cells and development begins. From the one cell many cells are formed, each identical to the other; and yet, somewhere down the line, the identical cells,

each with the same potential to be anything else, begin to form specific parts of the child's body. Some cells become the arm, some the leg, some the finger nails, some the hair, some the eye, the ear, the tongue, the sexual organs.

How do these cells know which part of the body is assigned to them? How do they know how to convert the specific program or potential which exists within them? Who or what gives the signal for the cells to become active and differentiated? It is a miracle or series of miracles which no one understands as yet, and still it is an orderly process, so orderly that it seldom fails. In time, as we all know, the eye is able to see, the ears are able to hear, the tongue is able to speak, and the mind is able to think. A thousand miracles are contained in one tiny cell at the beginning. Is this not proof enough of a Masterplanner! What need have I to believe that God is revealed only in the deviations from nature? It is the order of nature which proves God best!

The growth of a child in the mother's womb is a miraculous process of evolution. It would not be more of a miracle if the child were born instantaneously, or if it were made out of a lump of clay. Indeed, as one observes the evolutionary process within the mother's womb, one wonders how it is possible that when there are so many opportunities for things to go wrong, in the overwhelming majority of cases, they go amazingly well. So in the birth of a child, there is not one miracle, but an endless stream of miracles.

The miracle of life, as Judaism presents it, is that God created a process capable of reproducing itself. The Bible tells us that God created seed, "zo-ray-ah zeh-rah" capable of reproducing itself. You and I are able to participate in the miracle of procreation because God, in His infinite wisdom and love, created us with the potential to be fruitful both in ourselves and with the potential to help control the processes of nature.

The most religious moment in my life was when I beheld our first child to whose life I had made the smallest contribution. Beholding that child, I thanked God with every aspect of my being for enabling me to share in the creative process. How much more thrilling must the birthing process be for a woman. She after all is the vessel through which the miraculous growth comes to fruition.

'But Rabbi', people say to me, "you have certainly been present when a person has survived an illness from which it seemed certain that he would die, does not this represent the sudden intervention of God? Is this not a miracle in the old fashioned sense?" Such a recovery of health is indeed a miracle, but it is not because God has suddenly intervened. The truth is that God intervenes at all times, for creation is an orderly process, and the divine power flows through His creation at all times. The healing process goes on at all times. It works an amazing number of times. Sometimes, it doesn't work!

My doctor tells me that his function is to place the body in a condition where its normal curative powers can go to work. The body sometimes, when it is invaded by an organism or when it meets with violence, goes into shock. Then it becomes the physician's task to help the body to heal itself. The physician does not work miracles. He works with the magnificent process built into the body. The physician's task is to diminish the shock or to control the disease. The body then does its thing. The body uses the self healing powers which are continuing evidence of the healing power of God.

You might ask, "well, if the healing power of God is always present in our bodies, how then should we pray when we are ill?" We should pray not for God to work a new and sudden miracle, but that we might become aware of the miracles God is already working. We might pray in these words, "Oh Lord, help me to be confident that You are already making for my cur

and that I have within me Your continuing gift of healing". The Psalmist said it this way, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want...surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life..."

Let me share with you one of the great stories from our Bible. The Book of Kings tells us that the Prophet Elisha and his aide had spent the night in the mountains north of Jerusalem. In the middle of the night, the aide awoke to discover that the Syrian Army had surrounded them. Fearful for their lives, the aide awoke Elisha and exclaimed, "Master, what shall we do? We are overcome". Elisha, we are told, simply smiled and prayed confidently, "Oh Lord, open his eyes that we might see that those who are with us are more than those who are with them". Then the scripture goes on to say, "And the eyes of the aide were opened, and he saw the flaming chariots of God surrounding the Syrians".

This story can be variously interpreted. An Orthodox Jew might say, "There actually were flaming chariots which overcame the Syrians". On the other hand, some of us think the story is intended to have symbolic meaning. What it means to teach is that those who have faith in the essential goodness of the world are not overcome by problems, no matter how severe they may seem to be, for people of faith have "open eyes". That is to say, they know that reality provides more than one means for solving a problem. The world, we would say, is created with many "flaming chariots of God", that is to say, with many possibilities for us to solve our problems, if we will look for these possibilities and employ them.

The person of faith, like Elisha has "open eyes". The person without faith in the goodness of God's world has closed eyes. He is blind to the breadth of possibilities all around us.

To have faith, as I understand it, is not to believe that God suddenly wheels in His flaming chariots to overcome our enemies. To have faith is to believe that the flaming chariots are there all the time, if we could but see them.

Let us apply this thought to the famous story of Moses and the burning bush which is told in the Book of Exodus. In the story we are told that Moses, while tending his sheep, sees a bush aflame and yet not being consumed. Moses steps aside from his daily routine to investigate this unusual sight, and he hears the voice which says, "I am the God of your fathers. I hear the cry of My people because of their suffering. Now, go to Pharaoh and help me to liberate them".

Many people have said to me, "Rabbi, how come there are no burning bushes today? How come God spoke so clearly to Moses, but He doesn't speak to anyone today?" Such people, I believe, fail to understand the deeper meaning of this story. The truth is that the burning bushes, the symbols of God's present power, are all around us all the time. The only question is who will see them. The truth is that God calls to each and every one of us all the time, now, at this moment, and the only question is, who will hear God saying, "I hear the cry of My people because of their suffering. Who will come with Me to help liberate them?"

The exceptional miracle in those days which led to the Exodus of the Jews from Egypt was not that God called to Moses. The miracle was that Moses heard God calling! For God calls to us at all times, and few seem able to respond.

What is a miracle? A miracle takes place when human beings respond to God's continuing and ever present call.

Do you perchance know what was the first message sent by wire by the man who developed the Morse Code? The precursor of the telephone and radio and TV was the transmission of "dots and dashes" arranged in such a way as to form letters and words. The first message sent by the inventor was, "What hath God wrought?" Samuel Morse, the person who developed this system of transmitting a message could have said, "Look how brilliant I am to have created this system", but Samuel Morse understood that he had merely discovered a reality-principle which had existed from the dawn of creation. The miracle was not what he had created, but what he had discovered or, in a sense, "heard".

Following up on Morse's discovery, other humans have harnessed the laws which made possible radio, TV and the telephone. Today we take these things for granted. Only a few years ago, people spoke of them as unbelievable miracles. A MIRACLE IS AN ASPECT OF REALITY WHICH WE DON'T YET COMPREHEND, and when we comprehend a specific reality such as the principle behind the transmission of sound or picture images, we no longer call these things a miracle. Let me assure you, they are none-the-less miraculous, for God's universe is filled with teeming miracles, that is to say with magnificent possibilities.

It is easy for us to see the miraculous in man's conquest of space - in the development of airplanes able to fly from here to Los Angeles, across the continent of North America in less than five hours. We perceive the miraculous in the development of a technology able to send a space craft manned with humans to the moon, which in turn is able to take pictures of Mars by satellite and to transmit these pictures clearly hundreds of thousands of miles through space. Each of these realities, which we still find it difficult to digest, is rooted in principles or laws which God has woven into His plan for our universe. They are awaiting our appropriation.

It is more difficult for us to observe the miraculous in everyday routine things. A Rabbi, as one who lives in the heart of life, is able to witness such routine miracles all the time. One of my first acts as a Rabbi was to officiate at the funeral of the only child of a couple in my first congregation. The young man was killed when his car went out of control on an icy road. As you might imagine, and as some few of you sadly know from personal experience, the greatest tragedy is for a parent to lose a child, and this was an only child. I did my best for this couple, although I felt completely inadequate to the task. How could I expect them to deal with this cruel blow, when even I, who had not known the boy, found it almost impossible to handle the situation?

Yet, somehow, miracle of miracles, the couple dealt with the tragedy, and after a period of tears, hysteria, and anger, they were able to face life in a reasonably normal manner. As a young Rabbi, inexperienced in these matters, I could not help but marvel at the strength manifested by this father and mother.

Through them, I witnessed the power of the human spirit in time of travail, and I could not help but be reinforced in my faith that there is a Supreme Power that feeds us and enables us to endure the unendurable. These people thanked me for helping them in their time of crisis. I shall be eternally grateful to them for spurring my faith; but surely behind all of us was God's spirit, the spirit with which He endowed Adam and Eve and which He allots to each of us from the moment of our conception. When we pray to God for new strength, we should really pray for the ability to become aware of the strength which God has already given us and which awaits our tapping. In such a human crisis, we might well repeat the prayer of the Prophet Elisha. "Oh Lord, open our eyes that we might see that those who are with us are more than those who are with them". The answer to a prayer may not be something we can see, but something we can feel inside. One of the purposes of prayer is to help us unleash the spiritual power which God provides to each of us.

Let me tell you about another one of the miracles I have experienced. Many years ago, I visited one of my members who was ill in Mt. Sinai Hospital in Manhattan, New York. In the next bed to my member was a young girl about five or six years old. Her mother, a Jewess, asked if she could talk to me, although she was not a member of my congregation. We went into the hallway, and the woman, who was obviously very anxious, told me that her daughter seemed to have a mass on her appendix. The doctors had told her that the mass visible on an x-ray was probably a tumor, and if it was a tumor, it might be cancerous. Obviously trying to pump up her courage, the woman told me a story someone had told her when she was younger. The story, which comes from our Jewish tradition, is that a man was very sick, and he was worried whether or not he would survive. An angel appeared to him in a dream and took him to a place where there was a huge stone. The angel lifted up the stone and showed the sick man a large number of worms that miraculously managed to live out their life underneath the massive weight of this stone. "See," said the angel, "if God can take care of these insignificant worms underneath this large stone, He will take care of you." I tried to support the woman in her faith, and I reminded her that surgeons perform seemingly impossible feats these days.

The next day I came to visit my member again, and this same woman who had been a stranger to me the day before, bounced joyously over to my side. "Rabbi", she said, "good news! The surgeon did not find a tumor on my daughter's appendix. He found instead a stone. He has removed it, and my daughter is fine".

Now what is the miracle that took place here? Shall we say that the woman's faith in an ancient story from our Jewish heritage produced a modern miracle in its image, or shall we say that the miracle lay in this woman's ability to tap her heritage to find solace and comfort in her time of greatest need?

Our Jewish heritage is filled with insight and wisdom which could support us in our modern crises, and some of us are able to draw strength from them, but others of us see nothing in them.

The truth of the matter is that miracles are all about us, even under the heaviest stone. Life thrives in every barren corner of our universe. Trees grow out of stones in Colorado, and oases are to be found in the middle of the driest Asian desert.

The miracles are evidence of God's intent for our universe. The divine spirit inspires the mother bird to ravage all day for food for its young ones. Fish are enabled to lay a thousand eggs in order that ten might survive. The human child repeats in himself the whole miraculous process of learning and survival that has made civilization possible. The surviving concentration camp inmate slowly finds his way back to life.

The problems of human existence are abundant and complex, but let us not despair. There are always "the flaming chariots of God," the infinite realms of possibility, assuring us that those who are with us are more than those who are against us.

(A High Holiday Sermon
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