



WORKING FOR MIRACLES

DO MIRACLES HAPPEN NOWADAYS? THIS QUESTION IS PARTICULARLY RELEVANT in the challenging times in which we live. The Tanach (Hebrew Bible) has many accounts of miraculous events. But do miracles happen now? In the view of our Sages - of course they do! This too is the experience of many individuals in their personal lives. However, this having been said, we must also take into account the Jewish idea that there are different kinds of miracle. A miracle, *nes in Hebrew*, a word which also means 'ensign', is a sign of the presence of the Divine.

On one level, Nature itself has a miraculous aspect to it. Sunset and sunrise, the blossoming of a flower or the birth of a child can each be seen as beautiful and wondrous events which reveal G-d as the Author and Guide of Creation. Yet as we know, the sun will also rise and set beautifully tomorrow. It is part of the Divinely ordained pattern of life, as are the flower blossom and childbirth. Hence every detail of existence, whether a pebble, leaf or mountain range, expresses the presence of G-d.

Another level is when 'natural' events happen in the right way and at the right time, as part of a more inward, spiritual pattern within Creation. The Jewish victory against the Syrian-Greeks celebrated on Chanukah is such a miracle. The Greek armies were large, well trained and had powerful weapons. It was a miracle that a small group of dedicated Jews, the Maccabees, were able to conquer them. Throughout Chanukah we say Hallel praising G-d for this miraculous victory. The survival of the Jewish people through the ages likewise

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has a miraculous quality. The odds have often been against us. Our continued survival can be seen as an expression of the presence of G-d.

A third level is when the event altogether transcends the pattern of Nature. The Chanukah miracle of the oil is in this category. Pure olive oil for the Menorah in the Temple, which was sufficient for only one day, in fact burned for eight days, long enough to obtain fresh pure oil. This had the effect of an extra level of revelation of the Divine. The Sages tell us this was a kind of spiritual reward for the dedication of the small group of Jews who were determined that Judaism would survive, despite all odds.

Our Sedra¹ presents us with an interesting combination of these last two categories. It was quite natural that sometimes there would be years of plenty and at other times years of famine. However, the fact that Pharaoh should have disturbing dreams which signalled this, and that Joseph was able to see their meaning, brings an element of the supernatural into the story. Further, Joseph's presence in Egypt was on account of the dreams he himself had, as told in last week's Sedra. These dreams had aroused his brothers' jealousy, till they captured him and sold him as a slave. In the end, Joseph's dreams also turned out to foretell the future.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe points out an interesting distinction between the dreams of Joseph and those of Pharaoh². Pharaoh was passive, an observer, watching the seven thin cows devour seven fat cows, or the seven blighted ears of corn devour seven healthy ears. By contrast, in Joseph's first dream he and his brothers were working in the fields, binding sheaves. They were doing something, an effort was being made. Then Joseph's second dream concerned a more exalted plane of existence: the sun, moon and stars.

What does this teach us? That in order for the Jew to carry out his or her special function in the universe, *effort* is needed. The Divine response to that effort is revelation of ever higher spiritual levels, including the wonders and miracles which are indeed part of our personal lives and of the ongoing history of our people.

1. Genesis 41:1 -44:17. 2. See *Likkutei Sichot* vol. 3, pp.819-822.

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SEDRA MIKETZ

TAKING RESPONSIBILITY

It was a mad rush in the Kahn's house as everybody ran back and forth, preparing for the party. In only ten minutes, the neighbours would come. First they'd light the Menorah, followed by some singing and doughnuts, and then Michael and Leah would go on to entertain the kids, with a whole programme they had planned together.

Suddenly amidst the last minute touch ups, Mr. Kahn turned to Michael and Leah. "Soon, you're going to be taking care of the children. You're going to be leaders of the group, you are going to be responsible," he said, "I want to tell you something about being a leader...."

"Really dad? Now?" asked Michael sceptically, from the ladder where he was trying to stick a banner to the wall.

"Yeah dad, we're kind of busy." Balancing three trays of doughnuts, Leah too was not interested in listening to a lecture. But the look of determination on their father's face made them stop what they were doing and turn to him.

"Actually, I learnt something about leadership this week," Leah said, wiping some jam off her skirt with a tissue.

"When Judah and the rest of the Macabbees saw what the Greeks were doing, rather than just sitting back, they got up to fight for the sake of G-d. I'd say that's being a leader, taking responsibility."

"Wow, Leah, very impressive. That definitely showed true leadership," said her father. "And you know where else we see leadership displayed? In this week's Sedra – Miketz."

We learn that Pharaoh had two dreams....”

“I remember that,” Michael grinned, “One was that there were seven super fat cows, and then seven skinny ones came and swallowed up the fat ones. But get this - they stayed skinny! And then the other dream was that there were seven healthy grains of corn. Then, all of a sudden, seven shrivelled ones came and swallowed up the healthy ones., and like the cows, somehow remained shrivelled!”

“Yes that’s correct Michael. Do you know how Pharaoh found out what the dreams meant?”

Michael shrugged, but Leah jumped in, “Yup I do! First he asked all his advisors what they thought, and they gave various interpretations, which all related to him as an individual. Then Joseph came and told Pharaoh that there would be seven years of loads of food, and then seven years of famine. But the famine years would be sooo bad that everyone would forget about the good years – they’d swallow them up and still remain thin and shrivelled!” Mr Kahn smiled. “Very good. But do you remember why Pharaoh believed Joseph’s interpretation over all the others?”

They looked at each other blankly. Their father continued: “Well, Pharaoh was a king – leader of the people. The other explanations weren’t relevant to the people of his kingdom. Pharaoh knew that if G-d was trying to tell him something then it wasn’t just something personal, it was relevant to his role as leader. So, when Joseph told him about the famine which would affect the whole country, Pharaoh knew that this was the correct meaning of his dream.”

“So I guess it’s not only if you’re a king. Even if say like us – we’re taking care of some kids at a Chanukah party, so we’re taking responsibility, we should make sure that we have the right focus all the way,” Michael said thoughtfully.

Just then the doorbell rang. “Here’s our cue,” Leah whispered, as she opened the door with a smile. Mr Kahn winked at them encouragingly. Both Leah and Michael uttered a silent prayer that they would indeed be able to be good leaders, taking full responsibility for the children in their care.

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