

How Do We Understand Miracles Today?

Our Torah is generally written as a scientifically plausible historical narrative, because we believe that G-d works through the normal courses of nature and human events. Occasionally, however, miracles intrude. Serpents speak, donkeys reprimand their masters, and solid rocks spout water.

Miracles are especially evident in the story of the Exodus from Egypt, cornerstone of the Pesach holiday and basic to the Jewish belief in a just, caring, providential G-d. How can we understand miracles today? How can people who are both believing Jews and scientific moderns speak to their children about split seas, rivers of blood, and day turning to night?

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, in his essays about Passover, teaches that Biblical miracles contain two aspects. There is, first, the wondrous workings, the supersession of natural laws. These are accepted on some level as true – and I would add, literally – by some, while they are viewed metaphorically by many. However, more important for day to day religious life is what change in behavior is inspired by knowledge of the miracle. How does it stretch my own will and imagination?

For example, because the first born Israelites were saved, we continue to redeem our first born sons after their birth. Because G-d demonstrated “Chozek Yad”, a mighty hand in Egypt, we pause first thing every morning, reflect and place Tefillin on our arm to dedicate our physical powers and material assets to the moral service of humanity and G-d. Because Israel had the courage to march towards a terrifying sea, we try to remember, especially at Passover time, that if we wait until all is clear, we will never grow. In business, we all agree that rising early, getting a jump, increases opportunities. In baking, we all know that waiting, letting the matzah rise and ferment ruins the mitzvah.

Pesach is a season to exercise the same zeal in our self-examination. If you have a sense that your life needs to move in a certain way, get out of neutral and do it!

Shabbat Shalom and Chag Kasher V'samei'ach: A Happy, Kosher Passover

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