

Of Technology and Miracles...and Radical Amazement

Parashat Beshalach - Rav Hanan Schlesinger

Have you ever agonized over religious faith and secretly hoped that God would miraculously prove His existence to you? Have you ever said to yourself that if only God would do this one little thing for you, then you would believe in Him and accept His sovereignty?

But the truth is that such hopes are vain - Faith based on miracles is ephemeral and illusory. There is no miracle in the world that could conclusively prove anything about the Ultimate Master of the Universe! There is nothing God could do to prove Himself that He has not done for you already!

Such is the position of Maimonides, one of the greatest Jewish thinkers and leaders of all times. And in our day modern technology has pretty much shown the truth of Maimonides' assertion...unless of course one mistakes Bill Gates - and many other mortal men - for God. Aren't there a slew of modern inventions that would have seemed miraculous to pre-modern man? You can walk down the street with literally a whole library of books hanging from your shoulder! Why, you can hold a small piece of metal to your ear and hear someone talking halfway around the world! And even sixty years ago you could drop a ball of metal from the sky and kill a hundred thousand human beings in an instant! But we all know that none of these 'miracles' or a host of others we live with every day prove anything about the divinity of their inventors or users.

So why does this week's Torah portion, Parashat Beshalach, as well as those of the past two weeks, seem to claim differently? The Torah says explicitly that the Ten Plagues, as well as the splitting of the Red Sea, were engineered not merely to extricate the Jewish People from Egyptian bondage or to punish Pharaoh and his people - these purposes God could have accomplished much more quickly and elegantly - but rather to teach the emerging Jewish nation and the world at large, that "there is none like God".

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The answer seems to be that God was employing pedagogical devices appropriate to the level of understanding of His students. God knew that ancient man would be duly impressed by His 'advanced technology', and He used it to its full effect. But at the same time, God knew full well that faith based solely on 'miracles' is undeveloped and immature, and easily undermined or swayed. Such a faith is only a beginning, a temporary jump start.

The real foundations of faith are to be found elsewhere. The erstwhile slaves who had just been spirited out of Egypt were about to stand in God's presence at Mt. Sinai, which was no mere miracle, but rather a direct and corroborated experience of a Being beyond all being. They did not witness only God's miracles, but rather the Israelites at Sinai witnessed God Himself. However, for Maimonides, even the theophany at Sinai does not yet bring us to the true bedrock of proper faith.

The key to it all is to be found in a totally differently place, specifically in the non-miraculous regularity of the natural world. The existence of the world as we know it and encounter it every day is the most direct proof of a Comprehensive and Unified Field of Being who conceived it all and brought it all into existence. "The heavens declare the glory of God" as the Psalmist already sang over three thousand years ago. Where did it all come from? What wisdom, what forethought, what incomprehensibly intricate interdependence is evidenced in the universe around us? Both through scientific inquiry as well as through straightforward and naive observation, we must make ourselves aware of the wonders of every moment, of the grandeur and greatness of the tapestry we call planet earth. When we learn to live every moment in radical amazement, our religious consciousness will be permanently elevated and altered. The sense of the holy and the ineffable will pervade every moment, and the vain hope for a miraculous proof of God's existence will fade.

The splitting of the Red Sea! That's nothing compared to the religious significance of what we encounter every single day of our lives!



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