

MIRACLES

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Usually we think of miracles as wonderful events which happen contrary to the laws of nature. These are the 'supernatural' miracles with which the Bible abounds: talking animals¹, seas and rivers dividing affording dry passage to the Israelites², water turning to blood³, Jonah's whale, resurrection of the dead⁴, the list goes on and on. Still, today, it is seen by some as a test of one's faith that one must believe in these miracles. If one does not, it is felt, one does not truly believe in God or in one's religion.

A TRADITIONAL RABBINIC VIEW

Rabbis of the *Mishnah*⁵ already had a number of problems with this view. They argued that, if God's world is perfect, why would God choose to upset the perfect natural order with a 'supernatural' miracle? We read: 'Ten things were created on the eve of [the first] Sabbath between the suns at nightfall: the mouth of the earth [which swallowed Korach], the mouth of the well [which followed Miriam in the wilderness], the mouth of [Balaam's] she-ass, the rainbow, and the manna and the rod [of Moses which turned into a snake] and the shamir, the letters and the writing of the tablets [of stone].⁶ Similar lists can be found elsewhere. These are an attempt to take the supernatural out of what appear to be miracles and to make them instead

natural, albeit unique, phenomena.

The *Torah* had already rejected miracles as 'proof' of faith. In Deuteronomy we read: 'If there appears among you a prophet, or a dream-diviner, and gives you a sign or a portent, saying, "Let us follow and worship another god" — whom you have not experienced — even if the sign or portent that was named to you comes true, do not heed the words of that prophet or that dream-diviner. For your Eternal God is testing you, to see whether you really love your Eternal God with all your heart and soul. Follow none but your Eternal God, and revere none but God; observe God's commandments alone, and heed only God's orders; worship none but God, and hold fast to God.'⁷ So miracles are not proof of prophecy and have no connection with belief in God.

The rabbis understood perfectly natural events to be nonetheless miraculous. We read in our prayer book: "We thank and praise You for our lives, which are in Your hand; for our souls which are in Your keeping; for the signs of Your presence [lit: miracles] we encounter every day; and for Your wondrous gifts at all times, morning, noon and night."⁸ The natural world is itself miraculous without the need for 'special' miracles. God's creation is a continual miracle.

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In the imperfect, human world there are miracles of the spirit. During the festival of *Chanukkah* the rabbis of Babylonia inserted the following into the daily prayer: "We thank You also for the miracles, for the redemption, for the mighty deeds, and for the victories in battle which You performed for our fathers in those days at this season..... You delivered the strong into the hands of the weak, the many into the hands of the few, the impure into the hands of the pure, the wicked into the hands of the righteous, and the arrogant into the hands of those who devoted themselves to Your *Torah*." ⁹

These victories of the human spirit were, and still are, considered to be miracles, brought about by the hand of God through human beings.

THE LIBERAL VIEW

Liberal Judaism has always prided itself on its rationalism. From its very beginnings it has accepted the discoveries of science and scholarship. As we understand more of the mechanisms of the world, and of the nature of our sacred literature, we begin to see that the reports of supernatural miracles are stories meant to inspire us and teach us rather than the factual reporting of actual events.

Attempts have been made to 'explain' these miracles in the light of scientific

knowledge.

While there may be some basis in these 'explanations', they miss the true purpose of the stories themselves. There may, indeed, have been a set of circumstances giving rise to a possible passage on foot for the Israelites across the northern Red Sea, a passage too muddy for the following Egyptian chariots, but the message of the story has to do with trust in God even in the face of apparent disaster, not with weather and tidal conditions. There are still phenomena which science cannot explain, and may never be able to explain, but which, as natural phenomena, are still part of creation and not supernatural.

The *Shoah*¹⁰ has given rise to the anguished question, "Where was God in Auschwitz?" For some this question becomes, "Why did God not intervene with supernatural miracles to stop the torture and death of the innocent?" The implications are that either God could not (a God who is not all-powerful) or would not (an uncaring, vengeful or, at best, mysterious God), or that God was absent or does not exist at all. Liberal Judaism, reflecting the strands of tradition mentioned above, rejects these interpretations of the question and their implications. Instead, we seek to find God, and miracles, even in Auschwitz. Every act of humanity was a miracle.

LIBERAL JEWISH VALUES

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Every unselfish thought and deed was a sign of God's presence. Everyone who survived or died clinging to their human dignity experienced the miraculous.

Liberal Judaism affirms a traditional, yet rational, understanding of miracles. We, along with rabbis of the past, reject the idea of the supernatural overturning of the natural order. However, we embrace the whole world as continually miraculous and the human spirit capable of the heroic. This, too, is miraculous, and both the world and the human spirit affirm God in our lives.

NOTES:

- 1 The serpent, Genesis chapter 3, and Balaam's ass, Numbers chapter 22.
 - 2 The Red Sea, Exodus chapter 14, and the River Jordan, Joshua chapter 3.
 - 3 In the Ten Plagues, Exodus chapter 7.
 - 4 II Kings chapter 4.
 - 5 The book of the 'Oral Law' completed during the first two centuries CE.
 - 6 Ethics of the Fathers 5:6.
 - 7 Deuteronomy chapter 13.
 - 8 *Siddur Lev Chadash* p. 101.
 - 9 Authorised Daily Prayer Book (Centenary Edition) p. 354.
 - 10 'Destruction'. This word has come to replace 'holocaust' as the term for the murder of European Jewry by the Nazis during the Second World War.
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