



Min ha-Meitzar

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Watching my kids paint a dreidel sculpture as part of a family art project last weekend, I started reflecting on the letters: *nun, gimel, heh, shin*. While the letters stayed mostly the same, my brain filled in the words differently this time. I saw in the dreidel not a prayer of gratitude for an ancient victory, but a desperate cry to God in the present: “נס גדול ניצטרך שם” - *nes gadol nitztareikh sham*—a great miracle is needed there!

Living through this war, we can feel an overwhelming desire to pray for a miracle. What we really need is lasting and ultimate peace and security. This seems almost impossible to imagine, let alone achieve. We long for a miracle.

The Talmud warns us that praying for a miracle can come at a cost.

תלמוד בבלי תענית כ:

דאמר רבי ינאי: לעולם אל יעמוד אדם במקום סכנה ויאמר, עושין לי נס, שפא אין עושין לו נס, ואם תימצא לומר עושין לו נס - מנכין לו מזכיותיו.

Talmud Bavli Ta'anit 20b

R. Yannai said: A person should never stand in a place of danger and say: “A miracle will be



performed for me!”—lest a miracle is not performed for them. And if you say that a miracle will be performed for them, they will deduct it from their merits.

In a time of danger, we must not take it as a certainty that a miracle will come. Prayer alone is not a valid security plan. And even if we do experience a miracle, it will be “deducted from our merit.” To understand what this means, the Talmud turns our attention to a verse in this week’s *parashah* (VaYishlah) about Ya’akov, in the moment right before he goes to meet his brother Esav, whom he fears still wants him dead. He says to God,

בראשית לביא

קִטְנֹתִי מִכָּל הַחֲסָדִים וּמִכָּל־הָאֱמֶת אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתָ אֵת־עַבְדְּךָ

Bereishit 32:11

Katonti from all the goodness and from all the truth that You have done for Your servant.

We usually understand this verse as Jacob asserting his unworthiness of God’s constant protection, but Rav Hanan (Ta’anit 20b) reads the words hyper-literally. He sees *katonti* and finds the word *katan* (small). Ya’akov admits: living a life that is dependent on constant miracles from God has made me lesser—it has diminished me.¹

The same may be true for us. The need to pray for a miracle leaves us feeling lesser, emptier, even more hopeless. We don’t want miracles, we want agency and a clear, actionable way forward. Even when we feel a miracle has been granted, that we were saved from an acute danger by the grace of God, we are left feeling out of control, which can lead to panic and anxiety. Miracles can be demoralizing.

But there is another way to understand this word, *katan* (small). Sometimes it’s important to feel small. Praying for a miracle can keep us humble. It is painful not to be able to see how

¹ For more on this word, see R. Avi Strausberg’s Dvar Torah for Thanksgiving, “Can We Be Worthy?,” available here: <https://hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/can-we-be-worthy>.

this conflict ends, how we find our way to a lasting peace for all. The not knowing is very hard. But that smallness we feel when we engage in this kind of prayer can protect us from hubris that is also incredibly dangerous. Praying for a miracle forces us to acknowledge that we don't have all the answers. Ultimate truth (*emet*) lies outside of us.

As the season of miracles approaches on our calendar, I am holding both of these teachings. On the one hand, prayer is not a strategy for change; on the other, it's important to acknowledge how much I don't know. As I strive to be humble, and strive to not lose hope, I will continue to pray for the miracle we need.