

NO MORE MIRACLES

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In our early days of courting in New York City, my wife and I would take turns planning mini-adventures. One day, we'd take the ferry to Staten Island, standing on its deck, mist in our faces. The next, we'd take a walk and discover a shop with delicious home-made ice cream. Each date was an opportunity to dazzle the other person, to present them with an offering in the form of a new experience. Almost 15 years and three kids later, it's been a while since we've gone on one of these adventures. Now, we are lucky to find time for a walk to get coffee or to share a piece of dark chocolate after the kids settle down to bed. Yet our relationship today is built upon those moments of exciting new adventures and early offerings of courtship.

In the first stages of God's relationship with Benei Yisrael, God also sought to dazzle them. God presented Benei Yisrael with a series of wonders and miracles, each one an offering—an attempt to bring us into our relationship and take a step together toward intimacy. In Moshe's very first encounter with God—itself nothing short of miraculous—Moshe asks God, “But, what if [Benei Yisrael] don't believe me? What if they don't listen to me and say, ‘God did not appear to you?’” (Exodus 4:1). Moshe is doubtful that this new relationship with God will engender trust with Benei Yisrael; he is concerned that the people, like him, will be similarly dubious. God's answer to Moshe? Miracles. Just as God's relationship with Moshe began with a miracle, so too God's relationship with Benei Yisrael will begin with the miraculous.

God says to Moshe, “What's that in your hand?” “A rod,” Moshe answers. God instructs Moshe, “Cast it to the ground.” Moshe casts it to the ground and the rod miraculously transforms into a snake, and just as quickly, upon God's instruction, Moshe grabs the snake's tail and it transforms back into his trusty rod. As it transforms, God

says, “that they may believe that Hashem, the God of their ancestors, the God of Avraham, the God of Yitzhak, and the God of Ya'akov, did appear to you” (Exodus 4:5). Moshe's ability to perform a miracle will be the proof that Moshe really did speak with God. But what if one miracle isn't enough? God equips Moshe with the ability to transform his healthy hand to one covered in scales and back again, as well as to transform water into blood.

The beginnings of Moshe's relationship with God and God's relationship with Benei Yisrael are reliant upon miracles. In the beginning, it's with miracles that God dazzles the people into relationship and woos them into intimacy.

But miracles work not only as the flame that ignites the relationship; they are also the fuel that keeps Benei Yisrael going when they get discouraged. Soon after leaving Egypt, with several more miracles under their belts (a sea split in two, a piece of wood that transforms water from bitter to sweet, a sky that rains down manna), Benei Yisrael once again lose faith in God. Thirsty and without water, the people turn on Moshe (again) and complain, “Why did you bring us up from Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?” (Exodus 17:3). God instructs Moshe to take the very same rod that transformed the Nile to blood, and use it to strike a rock to release fresh water. Sure enough—the miracle works, the rock releases water, and the people's faith in God is restored. According to the Torah, we call this place Massah u-Merivah (meaning trial and quarrel), because it was here that Benei Yisrael asked, “Is Hashem among us or not?” (17:7). And it was here, only through the performance of yet another miracle, that God restored their faith, and they knew that God must, in fact, be among them.

Without these wonders that defy the laws of nature, there would be no

relationship between God and Benei Yisrael. It is the performance of yet another miracle, a grand gesture that goes above and beyond, that secures our faith and keeps us tethered to God.

But these miracles cannot sustain a relationship forever. Once Benei Yisrael get into the land, things will need to shift. They will move from a people completely dependent on God's miracles to one more empowered to shape their own destiny. No longer will Benei Yisrael experience God's presence and power directly through the performance of overt miracles. In the land, miracles might still exist, but they become tempered. There will be no strong arm to split the sea or to rain down manna from the heavens. Benei Yisrael will have some miraculous help in conquering the land, but they will have to do much of the work themselves.¹ So, too, will they have to plant the fields and harvest the food that will feed them; God may provide the rain,² but their bellies will no longer be lined with the magical substance of manna.

As Moshe prepares Benei Yisrael to enter the land without him, entering the next stage of their relationship with God, he summons the people and says:

דברים כט:א-ה

אַתֶּם רְאִיתֶם אֵת כָּל־אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה
ה' לְעֵינֵיכֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לְפָרְעֹה
וּלְכָל־עַבְדָּיו וְלְכָל־אֲרָצוֹ: הַמִּסּוֹת
הַגְדֹּלֹת אֲשֶׁר רָאוּ עֵינֶיךָ הָאֵלֹת
וְהַמִּקְרָאִים הַגְדֹּלִים הֵם: וְלֹא־נִתַּן
ה' לָכֶם לֵב לִדְעוֹת וְעֵינַיִם לִרְאוֹת
וְאָזְנוֹת לִשְׁמָע עַד הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה: וְאֹלֶךְ
אֶתְכֶם אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה בְּמִדְבָּר לֹא־כָלוּ
שַׁלְמֹתֵיכֶם מֵעֲלֵיכֶם וְנַעֲלֶךְ לֹא־בָלְתָה
מַעַל רִגְלֶיךָ: לָחֶם לֹא אָכַלְתֶּם וַיֵּין
וְשִׁכָּר לֹא שָׁתִיתֶם לְמַעַן תִּדְעוּ כִּי אֲנִי
ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

Deuteronomy 29:1-5

You have seen all that God did before your very eyes in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his courtiers and to his whole

1 Contrast this with their encounter with Egypt's military, during which they were specifically told by Moshe to “stand by and watch the salvation of God” (Exodus 14:13). There, they did not have to lift a sword; God did all the work for them.

2 See e.g. Deuteronomy 11:14.

country: the wondrous feats that you saw with your own eyes, those prodigious signs and marvels. Yet to this day God has not given you a mind to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear. I led you through the wilderness forty years; the clothes on your back did not wear out, nor did the sandals on your feet; you had no bread to eat and no wine or other intoxicant to drink—that you might know that I am your God.

Moshe reminds the people that they have witnessed all of God's wonders. In addition to the big miracles (the splitting of the sea, water bursting forth from rocks), there have also been small miracles along the way: the same clothes and shoes that they wore day in and day out are like new, showing no signs of wear. From the big things to the small, God's presence has been evident every step of the way through the performance of these miracles. But, now, it all must change.

R. Meir Simḥah Ha-Kohen of Dvinsk³ teaches that, until their entry into the Promised Land, the people “did not need a mind to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear.”⁴ Until now, the people only needed to experience God's miracles. R. Meir writes in his Torah commentary: “it becomes apparent, that given the condition of Benei Yisrael in the desert—manna falling from heaven, water emerging from the rock, their clothes not wearing out, clouds leading the way—who would have opted to deviate from the good path?”⁵ In the presence of God's miracles, there is no thinking or discerning required on the part of Benei Yisrael. They simply needed to follow God. It is only once they enter the Land—and God's presence, as manifested through those overt miracles, ceases—that the real reckoning and the work of deeper relationship begins.

R. Meir continues:

רק הנהגתם הנסיית היה להשריש
בלבבם יסודי הדת וללמדם כל
פרטיה באותן מ' שנה, והמה היו
סבה ויסוד להנהגת האומה עד
...היום

כל זמן שאתם מושגחים בהנהגה
הנסיית לא הגעתם אל התכלית
הנרצה, כי לזה לא צריך לב לדעת
ועינים לראות כו'...
ויהיה זה קיום לימים הבאים לשמור
דתו ולילך בדרכיו בעת אשר יהיה
הנהגתכם טבעי.

The point of having their affairs managed in a miraculous fashion [during their sojourn in the wilderness] was to implant in their hearts the fundamentals of the religion, and to teach them all of its fine points during those forty years, points that would serve as the basis for leading the nation until this day...

All the while your affairs are being conducted in a miraculous fashion, you have not reached the desired end state, for you do not need “a mind to understand or eyes to see” [while living miraculously]...

This [awareness of God] will carry on into the future, so that the people will maintain God's religion, and follow in God's ways, at a time when their affairs will be conducted in a natural fashion.

I am sometimes disappointed to live at a time when nature-defying miracles have ceased and God's presence is not clearly apparent. I even wonder at times if this is not perhaps a result of a failure on our part—perhaps as some kind of punishment.⁶ But, according to the Meshekh Hkhhmah, the goal is living without overt miracles—to get to a place where we can be in relationship with God, a relationship rooted in trust and faith, that is not conditional on the performance of nature-defying miracles. So long as we rely on those interventions to believe in God, we haven't yet reached the pinnacle of our relationship with God. We need to be able to see God as much in the small, everyday miracles as the Israelites did in the crossing of the Sea or the falling of the manna.

The performance of miracles in the wilderness was always meant to be temporary, a liminal stage meant to bring us into relationship with God and to teach us that God is the Source of

All Life. And once we understand that truth—once we come to know God and appreciate all of God's goodness—then we no longer need the miracles. Instead, we move to the next stage of relationship with God. On one hand, God's presence is perhaps less clearly evident, less undeniable than it was for Benei Yisrael in the wilderness. On the other hand, we are invited into a more mature relationship with God, in which our relationship is not contingent upon grand, impossible gestures but rather built upon a foundation of trust, and an appreciation of the smaller offerings that make up the day-to-day of a committed relationship.

Like Benei Yisrael entering the next stage of relationship with God, we, too, have to look more closely to find God's presence in the world. In the absence of manna falling daily from the sky, we need to cultivate “a mind that understands, eyes that see, and ears that hear.” If we cannot find God in the grand miracles of the Bible, we may have to look for God in the small, everyday common miracles. And, if we cannot rely on the undeniable proof of God that comes from split seas and magical manna, when we find ourselves in doubt, we may need to lean into faith.

If I'm being entirely honest, I miss the days of exciting new adventures, of dates that dazzled with newness and discovery. But, as foundational as those experiences were to my then-budding relationship with my wife, a mature relationship cannot be conditional on frequent grand, larger-than-life experiences. A relationship has to have space for the everyday, for the many dirty diapers changed, late night dishes washed, laundry sleepily folded. It has to have space for the stolen moments of short walks and dark chocolate. There will need to be grander moments as well, of course, where we go above and beyond for each other in undeniable displays of love. But, in between those, we need to cultivate “eyes that see” the small gestures of love, and “ears that hear” the offerings in the day-to-day of our relationships.

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3 1843-1926, also known as the Meshekh Hkhhmah.

4 Using the language of Deuteronomy 29:3.

5 Meshekh Hkhhmah on Deuteronomy 29:3.

6 The Torah expresses God's hiddenness as a potential punishment in Deuteronomy 31:18.