

Do Miracles Really Build Faith?

Parashat Beshalach



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In the Bible, we read about amazing miracles, similar to what we read in this week's Torah portion. Our weekly Torah portion describes the miracle of the Exodus, the parting of the Red Sea, manna in the desert, water out of a rock, and the war with the Amalekites, where Moses raised his hands and brought victory for Israel.

All of this brings about an important question in our modern society: Where have all the miracles and wonders gone? If I were to personally witness a miracle, like the ones that the people of Israel saw in this week's parasha, of course I would be touched, my life would change, it would be improved, and I would become a true believer.

Believing Without Seeing

There used to be a show on TV called “Fair & Square”, in which technicians and other professionals were invited to people's homes to deal with simple problems. They were secretly filmed to see if the contractor, electrician, plumber, or mechanic will try to inflate their prices, to sell unnecessary

services to innocent customers, or if they'll be “fair & square” and solve their simple problems in a cheap way.

The point is that if everyone knew that they were being filmed, obviously they would all behave honestly. The key is to be “fair & square” even when no one is watching.

This is an example of dealing with temptation. The same goes for miracles. If we experience a miracle, then there is no real meaning to our struggle. Our struggle is in how we deal with life without experiencing a miracle, how we deal with our lives through faith.

Still, I believe that most of us can identify with this idea - that a true, great, and amazing miracle will drastically change our lives. Spoiler alert: This way of thinking is wrong. Human beings don't work that way. I believe that this parasha teaches us the opposite.

God's Guiding Hand

Let's go back to the beginning when God created the world along with the rules of nature. Then He gave us the power over His creation, He gave us the reins.

Did God abandon us? Not at all. Our belief is that God is with us, helping, guiding, and giving to us - even if He's doing it behind the scenes.

Most of the events in the Bible are considered to be natural occurrences, but we as believers see God's guiding hand in all of it. Take Moses in the basket for example. Was it an explicit miracle that Moses came to Pharaoh's daughter?

Likewise, the fact that she agreed to a Hebrew wet nurse and chose to raise Moses as a leader in Pharaoh's house instead of drowning him, was this a miracle? Did this happen by chance or possibly by the hand of God? It is clear to us, as students of the Torah, that this was the hand of God.

But even this was made clear only after a long period of 80 years. Anyone else who saw what happened could have made up 1000 excuses having to do with natural human compassion towards babies. Indeed, we didn't see anything happen - no change in status - for the people of Israel for 80 years since the time that Moses was saved up until the time he returned from

Midian.

So where was the miracle? My point is that most people who lived in Moses' time did not consider his rescue as a baby or his being raised in Pharaoh's home to be a miracle.

With historical hindsight, we can see God's guiding hand in this, we can see the phenomenon.

Can a Miracle Strengthen Faith?

I think the same goes for us. History marches on slowly, and we can point to many events that we as believers can see as being caused by God's guiding hand, while others can be seen as happening purely by chance. For example, after 2000 years in exile, God gathered us, and is continuing to gather us from the four corners of the Earth in order to establish the State of Israel.

As a believer, I see the State of Israel, the fact that the Jewish people have returned to the Promised Land and the fact that the state maintains one of the most considerable armies in the world, as proof positive in the existence of God. We are still the same people that God brought out of Egypt, the chosen nation.

Take for example the Six-Day War. Jerusalem returned to Israel's hands and God prevailed over the combined power of the armies of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria. These armies were supported by Russia, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Sudan, Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria. We were about 200 fighter jets against 1000, and 800 tanks against 2500. Only with historical hindsight can we see God's hand guiding, helping, and supporting.

In the Exodus from Egypt, a formative event occurs - the creation of a nation. God proves to a people who came out of a nation filled with idols who is the true and only God. In regards to the Exodus from Egypt, we are well acquainted with the following verses:

...That you may tell your children and grandchildren how I dealt harshly with the Egyptians and how I performed my signs among them, and that you may know that I am the Lord. - Exodus 10:2 [NIV]

But I have raised you up for this very purpose, that I might show you my power and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth. - Exodus 9:16 [NIV]

...So you may know that there is no one like me in all the earth. - Exodus 9:14b [NIV]

The people of Israel needed these miracles in order to succeed in getting out of Egypt, survive in the desert, and in order to get to know the Creator for the first time. After the people of Israel entered into the land of the promise, the public miracles became more and more hidden.

Yet we ask, can a miracle, however big, strengthen the faith of man? Today I will strive to answer this question.

The People of Israel Saw and Believed

This Shabbat, we encounter one of the most impressive and well-known miracles: the parting of the Red Sea. In this miracle, the people of Israel were trapped between sea and land, the Egyptian army was closing in, and everything seemed lost and hopeless. When you read the text, you can really feel the panic of the paralyzed and frightened people. We read and imagine the approaching Egyptian army. It's scary, they would have without a doubt punished everyone.

Would it be better to return to slavery in Egypt? Or perhaps it would be more merciful to jump into the sea and drown. Would this not be better than allowing the women and children to fall prey to the hands of the Egyptian army, and to return to slavery, without any hope or future?

Amongst these suicidal thoughts, panic arose and despair took over. Suddenly God tore the sea in two, the people of Israel passed safely on dry land, and the Egyptian army continued its pursuit into the Red Sea:

The water flowed back and covered the chariots and horsemen—the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed the Israelites into the sea. Not one of them survived. - Exodus 14:28 [NIV]

Immediately after the story of the crossing of the Red Sea, we have another well-known verse:

And when the Israelites saw the mighty hand of the Lord displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the Lord and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant. – Exodus 14:31 [NIV]

“The people... put their trust in him and in Moses his servant.” Why did they choose to trust? Because they saw the great hand of God.

Here we find the answer to our question. Indeed, according to the Torah, a miracle strengthens faith. See Exodus 14:31.

Is God’s Word Enough for Us to be True Believers?

When I was a child, one of my favorite parables was that of “The Rich Man and Lazarus” from Luke 16:19. I have always loved this story, most likely because of the combination of different factors, like justice, and the sense that there is a God, and that He cares even for a beggar like Lazarus.

In the story there is a rich and stingy man who did not have compassion for Lazarus, the suffering beggar, who always had with him the dogs who licked his wounds.

In the end, each received what he deserved. He who had it bad in this life went on to goodness in the afterlife, and he who had it good in this world received hardship in the end.

Despite the fact that I always enjoyed hearing this parable of Yeshua, and my mother would read it to me at least once a day, I was always bothered by Abraham's response to the rich man who asked for Lazarus to be brought back to life in order to warn his five brothers.

The rich man felt compassion towards his brothers and asked for Abraham to send Lazarus to his brothers to warn them, and Abraham's answer was:

...They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them. – Luke 16:29b [NIV]

The rich man insisted, he claimed that the Torah and the Prophets were not enough:

*...But if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent. -
Luke 16:30b [NIV]*

I never understood the fact that Abraham's answer was indeed Yeshua's answer. What does this mean? If someone does not respond to Moses, to the Torah, or the Prophets, then they will also not respond to the miracle of one who comes back from the dead.

If suddenly a miracle occurred before me that was great, wonderful, unbelievable, and beyond any imagination - of course I would respond in complete repentance, and from now on I wouldn't have even the slightest doubt.

So how could Abraham, or Yeshua more accurately, compare between believing in the Torah, in Moses, and in the Prophets, to a true miracle that happens right before your eyes?

You cannot compare between the two, and in my opinion, here lies the difficulty.

The Path to True Faith

In order to find a solution to this problem, we return to this week's Torah portion, to the great miracles of Exodus. Here we are confident in the people of Israel, who saw the great hand of God and believed.

This is not where the story ends, however. Only a few weeks after the parting of the Red Sea, the episode of the golden calf occurred. The people of Israel, the same people who saw the Red Sea split in two with their own eyes, are the same people who sinned terribly with the creation of the golden calf, and the Torah emphasizes that the whole nation participated in this offense.

How can it be that a nation who experienced God's salvation, through the parting of Red Sea, so quickly forget about God? The answer is simple: human memory is short. After 40 days of Moses being on Mount Sinai, the people of Israel already forgot the miracles and wonders, and returned to idol worship.

We would all be anxious if we had a serious test at a university, or somewhere similar, but afterwards we don't remember what was on the test, and the test no longer matters to us at all.

Our parasha reveals to us a very important message. The opinion that miracles raise faith is fundamentally misleading. The path to true faith is not a short path of miracles and wonders - impressive as they may be.

The path to true faith is a very long and hard path of daily devotion, through the study of scripture. This path requires deep thinking and living within a community of other believers, there are no shortcuts to faith.

The miracle of the parting of the Red Sea, together with all the other miracles of that time was not enough to save the Jewish people from the most insidious sins that caused the death of all the adults in the desert.

This was Yeshua's conclusion, when summarizing the parable of Lazarus and the rich man. Yeshua claimed that in order to come to complete faith in God, you must show a dedication that lasts your entire life.

True faith is acquired through long years of thought, of studying scripture, of fulfilling God's word, and of much work. It is not the result of a momentary lift in your mood, as a result of some sort of miracle, be it the most impressive one. Such an uplifting experience comes and goes within a moment.

The Teachings of Messiah Yeshua *in a Jewish Context*

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