

(Dvar Torah continued from front page...)

itself. What we see as the mundane truth of the sun rising, or of the wind blowing across the surface of the water, is in fact a miracle, sign, and wonder. But we must choose to see it that way - to shift our perspective and see how God's influence is always present in our lives, not just at special moments. The Torah calls us to peer below the surface to see what miracles God is working on our behalf - miracles that we might not even recognize as such.

I recently spent some time with my family in the United States. It was an unplanned trip. My maternal grandfather, who has always been like a father to me, is in poor health. He was diagnosed earlier this year with dementia and Parkinson's Disease. His decline has been much more rapid than any of us expected. After a recent fall, he was hospitalized and spent the last three weeks in a rehabilitation center. By the time this is published, he will have been discharged to hospice care.

For me, the miracle of this situation - the active presence of the divine - is hard to see. But it has given me pause to reflect on the many reasons I love my grandfather. The times he took me to McDonald's after picking me up from after-school care. Even though he had absolutely no interest in it, he'd listen to me talk for hours about the toy that came with my Happy Meal and whatever comic book or TV series it was from. These memories, now so tinged with melancholy, are powerful in their simplicity. They are memories of moments, but also of a constant presence.

Each year at Pesach, we are commanded to remember the Exodus from Egypt as if we were there, too. Retelling the story makes it real for us. I become one of the hundreds of thousands following Moses to the sea. On the other side is opportunity and freedom. On the other side is a different story from the one we've been telling.

But when we reach the other side, we don't forget the past. We keep telling the story as a reminder of how far we have come, as a reminder not to take anything for granted. Because it is taking things for granted, and not miraculous, that makes us feel that God has forgotten us or is otherwise absent. Taking things for granted returns us to Egypt.

As in the parasha, God's miracles can bring both pain and joy. But perhaps, with a shift of perspective we can see both pain and joy as miracles. We suffer, yet still find the strength to smile. We grieve, we heal, and we remember. And just like the rain that comes in its due time, that is a miracle. We just have to dig a little deeper to find it.



TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Va'era

Mevarekhim Hahodesh

January 13, 2018 | 26 Tevet 5778

Annual | Exodus 6:2-9:35 (Etz Hayim p.351-368; Hertz p. 232-244)
 Triennial | Exodus 7:8-8:15 (Etz Hayim p. 357-362; Hertz p. 236-240)
 Haftarah | Ezekiel 28:25-29:21 (Etz Hayim p.1219-1223; Hertz p. 944-947)

Dvar Torah

Yonah Johnson, Conservative Yeshiva Student & Lishma Fellow

This week's parasha tells the story of the first seven plagues unleashed upon Egypt by God (with the help of Moses and Aaron): water turning into blood, frogs, lice, flies, death of livestock, boils, and hail. If you've ever been to a Pesach seder, you will likely be able to recite them without much thought. I recommend doing so with wine.

It might seem strange, but the Torah refers to the plagues brought down on Egypt as "wonders" and "miraculous signs". To the Egyptians, they were assuredly more like disasters. For the Israelites, the plagues were signs that their God – our God, the One God – was more powerful than Pharaoh. To Pharaoh, they were tricks, nothing more than that which his court magicians could perform. Wonders. Disasters. Signs. Tricks. It all depends on one's perspective.

The goal of these "wonders" was to prove God's control over the natural order. But while we tend to see miracles as violations of the natural order, perhaps there is nothing more miraculous than the natural order

Dvar Haftarah

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

Ezekiel was a prophet who lived in exile, during the period of the destruction of the First Temple. Not just a prophet, he was also a discerning critic of his nation's geopolitical situation. In his day, there were two world powers to be reckoned with, Babylonia and Egypt - with Judea, the nation of the Jews, stuck in between. Judea's fate was to be determined by balancing its relations with the two. Judea, however, had determined that its fate would be best served by an alliance with Egypt. Ezekiel thought this was tragic mistake.

Ezekiel described Egypt as a nation with a false impression of its power and greatness. Judea was taken in by Egypt's promises and thought Egypt to be a dependable ally in its defense against the Babylonians aggression. Ezekiel railed against this false conception and warned his countrymen of its consequences: "...You were a staff of reed to the House of Israel: when they grasped you with the hand, you would splinter. And wound all their shoulders, and when they leaned on you, you would break and make all their loins unsteady." (29:6-7)

The prophet likened Egypt to a staff made of reed. Rashi explained the significance of this image: "the reed is soft and cannot bear the weight of the one it is supporting.... It is like a person who is supported by his staff until it breaks. The person falls on it and splinters from it pierce his shoulders. After this, the victim must strengthen himself and stand on his own. [So, too, Egypt is like] someone upon whom others depend, but is weak. It finally says [to its dependents]: Strengthen yourselves. You can no longer depend on me." (Adapted translation)

Judea's mistake was more than just choosing the "wrong horse" in the geopolitical struggle. Egypt boasted that it was the "greatest" nation. Its leader glorified himself to the extent of being a deity. It is this false idolatrous sense which could not be trusted. It was naive to attach Judea's fate to this false assessment.

Ezekiel's warning is important not only in the realm of international relations. There are lots of false idols urging us to put our trust in them. We are urged to take care lest those who claim greatness and trustworthiness turn out to be nothing more than a "staff of reed" which will splinter and cause our downfall. Sometimes, religiously inspired cynicism can be a saving force.

Table Talk

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

Moshe tells the people that God plans to take them out of the slavery in Egypt to the land promised to their ancestors. In the process, God sends 7 plagues to Egypt (for the last 3, come back next week) but Pharaoh does not let the people go.

1) The parasha opens with the Godly plan for the people of Israel (6:2-8). It opens and closes with the phrase: "I am the LORD". What do you think is the reason for this 'frame'? The phrase appears once more in the middle of the passage. Why?

2) Chapter 6 contains a (partial) family tree of the tribe of Levy, concerning some of the people that we have met or will meet. How many children does Aaron have? Who is his wife? Who is her brother and why do we care? (Bamidbar/Numbers 7:12 might help.)

3) Moshe is sent by God to speak to Pharaoh, with Aaron as his speaker. He is also told that Pharaoh will not heed their words (7:1-5). If you were to ask Pharaoh, would he tell you that God compelled him not to listen, or that he chose not to listen? Why do you think God told Moshe off?

4) In the first of the plagues the Nile turns to blood. Moshe is told to go meet Pharaoh as he goes to the water in the morning, and warn him of what is about to happen (7:15-18). Why do you think that this time and setting were chosen?

5) Two more plagues open with the early morning meeting (8:16-19, 9:13-21). What plagues are these? Where is the meeting place? Do you detect any pattern in the narrative of the plagues?

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