

Hiding in Plain Sight: A Journey to Everyday Spirituality

By: Rabbi Michael Zedek

Chapter 1 A Secret Hiding in Plain Sight

Exploring biblical stories about miracles, in a serious but not literal way, can help us recognize that we live in a miracle-infused world.

I once heard the much and justifiably admired minister, Dr. Fred Craddock,¹ describe a trip to Israel, during which his guide pointed to a location as the setting of some specific miracle. Craddock demurred with a polite, "I hope you don't mind if I understand the experience differently." Without missing a beat, the guide immediately responded, "Of course not. You can be sure if there is only one way to interpret something, it didn't come from God."

The guide's comment perfectly conveys a way of thinking about sacred texts that resides at the heart of my tradition, which happens to be Judaism.² It is captured in two Hebrew words, *Dvar Acher*, literally translated as "another word" or "thing." More precisely, it means another interpretation, not a better or worse one, not the right instead of your wrong one, just another way of seeing, of understanding, and of wrestling with the text and life's circumstances.

In effect, to understand the stories of the Hebrew Bible only literally, guarantees we shall miss their meaning, or more precisely, the meanings in them, and we miss the lessons they convey. For we take the text far too seriously to take it only literally. Don't misunderstand. These sacred documents convey truths, but that is not the same as facts. In short, and at least for purposes of this discussion, I request the reader to accept the suggestion (or at least suspend opposition to it) that biblical narratives, especially the ones that include the miraculous, are different and more complex than they may appear to be.

With that as our backdrop, perhaps a story or two may prove helpful.

Indian folklore includes a tale about a guru, whose ambition was somehow to impress the Buddha. So, the man determined to walk on water, for he was convinced that doing so

¹ Dr. Fred Craddock, Jr. (1928 – 2015) was Bandy Distinguished Professor of Preaching and New Testament Emeritus in the Candler School of Theology at Emory University. An ordained minister of the Christian Church, Disciples of Christ, he was universally regarded as a preacher and storyteller par excellence.

² Being a Rabbi, much of this material derives from Jewish sources. That said, I am confident of parallels in many religious communities and that these specific references connect to those who may be part of another, or even no tradition.

would gain him the attention he sought, albeit one would presume a perfect guru would not require any ego driven spotlight. But why ruin a good story with facts? For 20 years, he practiced intense meditation and total, disciplined mindfulness. And yes, at least in the story, he did it. He walked on water. The guru demonstrated his skill to the Buddha, who simply inquired, "Why didn't you just pay two rupees and take the ferry?"³

While far removed from the rarified air of a journey to enlightenment, comes this American folktale.

A hunter, excited to test his newly acquired dog, loaded his truck and took the animal to a favorite duck pond. He shot a bird and instructed the dog to fetch. The dog obliged, but rather than swimming, the animal walked out on the water to retrieve the duck. Taken aback, the shocked hunter packed his truck and rushed back to town. The next day, the hunter invited a friend to join him for another expedition.

Once again the same result, a duck is shot and the dog walks on water to retrieve the prey. Neither man says a word, as the pattern recurs several times. Finally, the hunter can restrain himself no longer and asks his friend, "You notice anything peculiar about my dog?" After some hesitation, the friend replies, "Come to think of it, yeah. The darn thing doesn't know how to swim."

More than what I hope are humorous anecdotes, these stories reflect an irony that repeats in the Hebrew Bible, with its plethora of so-called *miracle* stories. Namely, every time a miracle occurs, no one draws the "correct" lesson.

Consider, as some readers will recall, a situation comedy series from what is often referred to as the golden age of television. Called *Mister Ed*, it featured a talking horse of the same name, who introduces himself to his new owner by exclaiming, in an unmistakable baritone, "Willbuurrr." Wilbur (played by Alan Young for those trying to recall) is appropriately dumbstruck. For it is not in our experience to have animals speak, let alone deliver the best punchlines, even in classic situation comedies.

Yet the Bible has an exact equivalent in the story of Balaam and his ass.⁴ The difference, however, is that Balaam evidences not a moment of hesitation or surprise in his business-as-usual conversation with a donkey. Shouldn't we expect to find a more reasonable response, one not unlike Wilbur's? Simply put, wouldn't Wilbur's reaction be our own?

Even more puzzling, reflect on the Ten Plagues of Egypt.⁵ With all the attempts at explanation, from timely natural phenomena and Pharaoh's hard heart to supernatural interventions, one challenge remains. Why does it take Ten Plagues to convince Pharaoh to let the Israelites go? One, I'm sure, would have been enough to convince you or me. Further, when Pharaoh finally

³ As with this story, many of the stories I recount throughout the book come with a caveat of no longer known or traceable sources.

⁴ Numbers 22:21 ff. Every biblical citation, unless otherwise noted, employs the translation of the Jewish Publication Society.

⁵ Exodus 7:14 to 11:10.

does relent, he almost immediately changes his mind.

As Cecil B. DeMille's 1956 movie version of the Biblical story imprinted upon generations,⁶ Dothan, played by Edward G. Robinson, sees in the distance the dust cloud of the Egyptian chariots. He thunders at Moses, played by Charlton Heston, "Why did you bring us out here to die? Weren't there enough graves in Egypt?" That theme rehearses throughout the Exodus story, as the Israelites default to a repetitive and limited repertoire of responses--panicking and complaining, griping and moaning. But why? Don't they realize that God is playing for their team? Why don't they conclude that the Egyptians must be suicidal fools?

As Moses tries to calm the Israelites, he turns to deity who, the text says,⁷ responds to Moses' plea with an unexpected and telling, "Why do you cry out to Me? Tell the children of Israel to go forward."

In some deep manner, that the people actually comply may be the real miracle. Namely, they go forward, but as you likely recall the text informs us that the sea splits and the children of Israel walk through on dry ground. So, that is not one miracle. It is at least two. What happened to the mud? A further consideration, were you an Egyptian chariot driver, would you follow the Israelites in? Of course not. You would have to be crazy to do so. Yet the text records, that is precisely what they do: "And then the Israelites beheld Egypt⁸ dead at the shores of the sea."

More critically, we then read, "The Israelites believed in God and in Moses, God's servant." That is until the next chapter, when they echo Dothan's grievance. "Why did you bring us out here to die? We have no water," a matter taken care of, as Moses strikes a rock and water gushes forth.

That "miracle" is also available to any tourist to Sinai. A guide may hand you a geology hammer and a piece of limestone, one of the principal rock formations of the area. Splitting the rock may reveal the hollowing effect of a modest bit of accumulated moisture. Far removed from enough water to slacken the thirst of twelve tribes and livestock, at least it offers a provocative basis for the biblical story.

Things are calm as order is restored, but only, alas, for a few verses. Now the crisis is a lack of food. So, the Israelites are provided manna, which must be one of the more subtle moments of humor in Hebrew Scripture. For the text informs us they called it manna, which is an extension of their declaration upon beholding this mysterious stuff: "*Mann hu?*" they inquire. "What is it?" The phrase may call to mind college and army references to "mystery meat" or worse.

Their hunger is satisfied, but not for long, as the people grow tired of the same menu and again demonstrate a singular talent to complain. Death in Egypt was preferable to life without leeks,

⁶ Entitled *The Ten Commandments*, this movie is still a regular part of ABC television's annual Easter and Passover schedule.

⁷ The careful reader will notice that I didn't simply say, "God said," as I can't be sure of that assertion. But it is clear that the text places this interrogative in the voice of deity.

⁸ A curiosity, perhaps even a red flag or clue to pay closer attention is that in the Hebrew text the word used, *Mitzrayim*, does not mean Egyptians. Rather, and unequivocally, it means Egypt.

pomegranates, onions, and garlic, for so they recall the delights of their previous condition as chattel.

They want, no, they demand meat. And wouldn't you know, the next day the Israelite camp is surrounded by birds. Often imprecisely translated as quail, this “miracle” occurs every year, as birds in extraordinary numbers make their semi-annual migrations between various parts of Europe and Africa. Since the journey over the Mediterranean provides no opportunity for rest, the relatively uninhabited and undisturbed Sinai Peninsula is a perfect location for birds to stop and gain strength for the next stage of the journey. If you are in Sinai at that time, you are likely to see enormous flocks of birds. Recovering from one part of their exhausting journey, they are, as the biblical account describes, practically unable to move.

For this discussion, the pattern is the point, as the Israelites panic and complain, gripe and moan their way across the desert. Finally arriving at Mount Sinai, the text informs that God, in what may be categorized as the single greatest personal appearance of all time, speaks to the entire community.⁹ Then Moses ascends the mountain, and the people, as is their default behavior, panic once more and force Aaron to build a golden calf.

Obviously, something is going on, even going wrong. One possible reading leads to the conclusion that the Israelites are the dumbest people ever to walk the face of the earth. How could they experience so many “miracles”, yet not draw the seemingly obvious lesson that everything will be alright, that they are safe, guarded and secure? Not surprisingly, I take issue with that notion, as it requires a literal reading of the Bible, which is far too limiting of its timeless wisdom.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. offers a deep and subtle alternative. Namely, the Exodus drama demonstrates that “it is easier to get the slaves out of Egypt than it is to get Egypt out of the slaves.”¹⁰ No doubt, such is true in the biblical account and of every journey toward freedom, be it a moment of national or personal liberation. What keeps us in chains is so often our inability or unwillingness to accept our independence and power. In short, we are free before that freedom is realized and embraced.

While I have no argument with the accuracy of King’s reflection, I propose an additional perspective. I believe there is an alternative and essential lesson for all time and for all people. A great teacher and friend of Dr. King, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel succinctly remarks, “People are free to disbelieve the evidence of their own experience.”¹¹

⁹ This is a remarkable, perhaps *sui generis* moment in religious literature. Theophany, the technical term for an encounter with God, invariably includes just a single individual or, at most, a few persons. For example, the mystery of Fatima appeared to only three children.

¹⁰ While I cannot find a record in which Dr. King offers this precise wording, it does reflect a part of his thinking, not only about the Exodus drama but also regarding the challenge of encouraging folks in the battle for civil rights in America. For instance, Rev. Dr. Alison L. Boden, in a sermon delivered March 15, 2015, at Princeton University Chapel, links King’s efforts to persuade reluctant partners that they should not join the “Let’s Go Back to Egypt Committee.” She elaborates: “Those original marchers were leaving Egypt... but some were having a problem getting Pharaoh out of themselves.”

¹¹ I have long associated this comment with Heschel, the great 20th century teacher, writer, theologian, and champion of social justice. Yet, I no longer have the specific citation. Nonetheless, the statement all too accurately

There are few matters about which I am more certain than that statement. True of the ancient Israelites, true of me, and I would venture, at least some of the time, true of all. Or as Gates of Prayer, a prayer book of Reform Judaism, reminds, "Days pass. Years vanish and we walk sightless among miracles." But are there not methods and motifs to gain better sight and greater insight?

Part of the challenge, then, may be our notion of what constitutes a miracle. Just about any attempt to offer a definition likely includes reference to a supernatural intervention into the regular and routine of our experience. For some, the idea of a breakthrough in the natural order provides the vital attraction and power of these biblical tales. Others, the more skeptical among us, find the same material only leads to the inevitable conclusion that religion, at best, is nothing more than fable and, more likely, a collective fantasy. Curiously, however, there is no word in Hebrew for that notion of miracle. Now, before concluding that I am either willfully ignorant or disturbed, please note that Biblical Hebrew includes words often translated as miracle, but their core meanings are different and, for our purposes, provocative. Three specific words are *Nes*, which means banner, flag or sign; *Ot*, meaning a letter, symbol or sign; and *Peleh*, meaning wonder, marvel or an amazement.

For biblical tradition, then, the notion of miracles as discrete supernatural events may be understood as an illusion, one that may blind us to the allusions of a miraculous and sacred presence, one which is around us and in us always. For what isn't a sign, wonder and amazement? What doesn't point to something else, something more? Or as mystical tradition and equally, much of modern physics insist, behind all appearances, there is a unity, a singularity of energy in which everything that is, is no more than a manifestation. The world and the grain of sand are one, and we "hold infinity in the palm of [the] hand."¹²

In short, every event points to an ultimate reality, namely, as you'd likely expect a religious person to insist, behind everything is the One, the Infinite, or to use the traditional Western word, God. For those uncomfortable with that invocation, I ask your forbearance. We shall discuss notions of deity in Part Two of this undertaking.

In the novel Death Comes for the Archbishop,¹³ Willa Cather captures this notion as she informs:

Miracles... seem to me to rest not so much upon faces or voices or healing power coming suddenly near to us from afar off, but upon our perceptions being made finer, so that for a moment our eyes can see and our ears can hear *what is there about us always*.

Einstein was more precise: "There are only two ways to live. The first is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle."¹⁴ I believe we can make the choice to

reflects much of human experience. It echoes a statement in George Orwell's 1984 (Penguin Group, NY, 1950, p. 81): "The Party told you to reject the evidence of your eyes and ears ... It was [the] essential command."

¹² From *After*, by William Blake, in *Auguries of Innocence*.

¹³ Published by Alfred A. Knopf (New York, 1927). I added the italics for emphasis.

¹⁴ There is some question as to whether Einstein ever made this comment. Nonetheless, citations linking the statement to him go back at least to the 1940s and the writer, scientist Gilbert Fowler White.

live in that second way.

Indeed, the dividends on that path are substantial, even incalculable, as that journey may transform our lives, whatever their circumstance and condition, into a sacred pilgrimage. But for us to embark on that path, we must reorient our notion of the miraculous and recognize what the Hebrew Bible conveys, in a seemingly obscure even esoteric way, namely the inescapable conclusion that there are countless miracles hiding in plain sight. However, that does require a new way of seeing and understanding, so we may be present, as Cather insists, to “what is there about us [and in us] always.”

For further reflection:

1. How do you react to the idea that there may be multiple ways to understand the same story or experience?
2. If or when you’ve had an encounter with a person or persons who may understand the “same” experience or information differently than you, how might you engage in conversation toward resolution or perhaps deeper understanding?
3. What seemingly routine events in your life might be reconsidered as remarkable moments? How might that change the way you live and understand your life?