

"WHAT HATH GOD WROUGHT"

Three words, three interpretations.

The three words are: **מַה פָּעַל אֱלֹהִים**, "What hath God wrought."

They are not, strictly speaking, a question, but a statement; not interrogatory, but exclamatory. They are part of a verse in which Balaam prophesies that Israel will be the subject of great admiration, expressed as the adoration of God (Nu. 23:23).

The first interpretation of when this sentiment is applicable, is the worship and praise of God as we marvel over the wonders of nature, and consider them a revelation of divine **חִכְמָה** (wisdom). The glory of the cosmos, the intricacies of natural phenomena, move us to a spirit of wonder, and thereby to worship. Thus, the spirit of **מַה פָּעַל אֱלֹהִים** as a response to **חִכְמָה** is evident in the verse we recite every day as part of the blessing over Nature which precedes the Shema: **מַה רַבּוֹ מַעֲשֵׂיךָ ה', כָּל־בְּחִכְמָה יָצַרְתָּ**, "How manifold are Thy works, O Lord, all of them hast Thou made in wisdom."

However, this sense of wonder should not be restricted to natural phenomena. Unfortunately, secular man often sees human genius in competition with God's work. According to this conception, religion is meaningful only where science has no answers, as if faith in God is a function of human ignorance. This theory has been bandied about since the great "Secular City debate," and still seems to be with us. Thus, science and technology are seen as progressively displacing religion. In a less sophisticated manner, we often hear an echo of this concept when people say, "How can you believe in God, or perform those rituals, in a Space Age?"

The answer, of course, is that there is no contradiction. On the contrary, a truly religious person sees God's wisdom in man's wisdom, for God and man, in Judaism, are recognized as partners in creation. If indeed man is the "image of God," then, to continue the metaphor, man's achievements (whether in science or the arts) are a reflection of divine wisdom. It is no wonder that when we behold a particularly wise man, whether Jewish or non-Jewish, we are bidden to recite a blessing which praises God who gives of His wisdom, or shares it, with flesh and blood.

Indeed, Samuel B. Morse in Washington in May 24th, 1844, tapped over his newly invented electric telegraph the very first message which ushered in the age of telegraphy: "What hath God wrought!" He understood, as many of us unfortunately do not, that not only nature but also human creativity should elicit in us the reaction, "What hath God wrought," for the wisdom of God is refracted through human brains.

The second area where this kind of reaction is appropriate is that of divine power or **גְּבוּרָה**. The word **אֱלֹהִים** itself means not only God, but power. For instance, in the Biblical Hebrew idiom if one wants to say, "I have the power to do it," he says: **יֵשׁ לִי אֱלֹהִים**.

Natural outbursts are considered a manifestation of God's power. Thus, when we hear thunder, for instance, we recite a blessing in which we speak of God **שְׁכֹחוּ וּגְבוּרָתוֹ מִלֵּא צוּרָם**, Whose power and might fill the world. Normally, however, we tend to see divine power as revealed

only in the face of human weakness, only in the presence of human vulnerability, such as earthquakes or tornadoes or any explosions of nature in which man is helpless and people are victimized.

This is reflected in the modern insurance industry, where an unusual disaster -- such as a flash-flood in Manhattan! -- is referred to as "an act of God." But this is unfortunate and incomplete, because it implies that only calamities are "acts of God," such that they deserve and inspire the reaction, "What hath God wrought." This leads to absurdities. Someone once told me about a devout insurance broker who was explaining a policy to a client, and said, "Now, if God forbid there should occur an 'act of God'..."

Religiously it makes more sense to see divine **גבורה** in happy as well as unhappy events, in life as well as in death. In the Amidah, we refer God's power to His life-giving propensities: **אתה גבור לצולם ה' מחיה** , God's power is revealed in His resurrection of the dead. Similarly, Judaism sees divine power in rain that fructifies and enriches the earth, as well as in rain that comes in destructive torrents. The words **משיב הרוח ומוריד הגשם** , that God "causes the wind to change and the wind to descend," is part of the **ברכת גבורה** , the blessing over divine power.

Many people tend to attribute their defeats to God, and their triumphs to themselves; their ill fortune to God's power, their good fortune to their own prowess. This is revealed not only in words but functionally, in actions. I often meet people who inform me that a certain year was economically bad, and therefore they are cutting their budgets -- and the first place to cut, of course, is charity. This is a roundabout way of saying: my bad luck is an "act of God," and since God is responsible, He must suffer the first consequence. Curiously, the same people, when they have a year of great economic advancement, do not that casually attribute the happy news to God and therefore increase their charitable contributions...

A genuine religious person will say **מה פעל א-ל** at all occasions, and see in his felicity and fortune, as well as his suffering and deprivations, "acts of God."

The third area, in addition to **חכמה** and **גבורה** , is **אהבה** , love. The Rabbis interpreted the full verse: **כעת "אמר זיקב ולישראל"** , **מה פעל א-ל** , as: Israel will prosper ( **כעת** refers to the future), so that even the very angels will ask Israel, in an interrogatory fashion, "What hath God wrought?" Israel will be so rich in spiritual insight, the result of love and closeness to God, that Israel will be privy to divine knowledge. Even as human lovers share secrets, so God and Israel share secrets too. How shall we attain such secrets? The Rabbis answer (partially quoted by Rashi) that Israel will sit before the Lord as students before their teacher and study Torah, asking over each section, "What hath God wrought?," as if to say, what does this and that mean?

In the folk imagination, this spiritual attainment is usually a sign of Messianic days, when Israel will prosper.

But that is not, strictly speaking, correct. The love between God and Israel, as between humans, requires **בטחון** , faith. Hence, if there is true love, then Israel must be confident that even when things are apparently not going well, that they ultimately will, that soon even the very angels will

ask us, "What hath God wrought?" Thus, the *חזקוני* interprets our verse that *כעת*, soon, a year from now, *וישראל זיעקב*, it will be said by the pagan nations concerning Israel, *מה פעל א-ל*, what hath God wrought, as they, the non-Jewish nations, witness the redemption of Israel.

We ought to recall that principle of faith in the divine love during these tense and uncertain days which are now upon us. These are days when we open up the newspaper every morning expecting the worst, and often find it. Even those days when there is little news of the Middle East or Israel, we go through a one-two reaction: at first relief, and then a nagging suspicion that something foul must be cooking up in the chancelleries of the world which holds no good for us. But we must know that we will emerge stronger from all this turmoil, and that in the final analysis, Israel, both State and people, will be such as to elicit from the world the admiring statement, "What hath God wrought?"

In the days of the Czar Aleksander III, terrible anti-Semitic promulgations were about to be decreed. The author of these was the confidant and advisor to the Czar, Constantine Probydonostsev, the infamous anti-Semite who in 1881 proposed a classic solution to the "Jewish question," namely: one third of the Jews to emigrate, one third to be baptized, and one third to be starved to death. At this time, Baron Ginsberg thought that a delegation of distinguished Rabbis ought to meet with the Minister of the Interior in order to mollify the Czar and modify the decrees. The Minister also invited Probydonostsev to join him during the discussions. After the Rabbis spoke, the anti-Semite turned to the Minister of the Interior and said: I believe that everything in the world has a purpose, a use, a function. I can understand what reason there is for God having created mosquitoes, horses, cockroaches. There is one thing, however, which I do not understand: why did He create Jews? They are a people who are of no use, they are parasites, a blight, a disease upon the face of the world. The Minister, who was already an anti-Semite, said that he was convinced by the powerful argument of Probydonostsev.

As the Rabbis left, they were sorely depressed and in deep gloom. Only one of them was smiling: the famous Rabbi Yitzhak Elchanan Spector of Kovno. His colleagues asked him the reason for this happy mood after such a terrible interview. He answered: Now that we have gone through this, I know that the redemption cannot be far off, that soon we will prosper. How do I know? Because we have just experienced the fulfillment of the verse *כעת אמר* *זיעקב וישראל מה פעל א-ל*, that as of this time, it has been said concerning Jacob and Israel, "What hath God wrought" -- why did He create this people which is apparently so useless and purposeless? We have seen supposedly human beings who actually question whether we have any reason and right to exist. Hence, the time cannot be far off that the next verse will come true: *הן עם כלבא יקום, וכארי יתנשא*, "Behold a people that riseth up as a lioness, and as a lion doth he lift himself up" (Nu. 23:24). Just as one verse follows the other, so will the redemption and the strength of Israel follow the humiliation to which we were now subjected.

So, we have seen how the attitude of "What hath God wrought" applies to the areas of *חכמה* (wisdom), *גבורה* (power), and *אהבה* (love). We have seen how *חכמה* includes our marvelling at God's wisdom as it is revealed in human technology as well as in raw nature; how *גבורה* includes blessings as well as disasters; how *אהבה* includes not only love during moments of felicity, but faith in the love and redemption of God even when things seem uncertain.

When we learn to exclaim, "What hath God wrought," in this manner, we shall be blessed with the kind of lives and homes and community, such that the same Balaam and his followers will say over us, <sup>מִהַ טוֹבוֹ אֶהְיֶה לְךָ</sup> <sup>יִשְׂרָאֵל</sup> <sup>מִשְׁכְּנֹתֶיךָ</sup>, "How goodly are thy tents O Jacob, thy dwelling places O Israel" (Nu. 24:5).