

"WONDERING AT AND WONDERING WHY"

When I was a youngster, the Bible's stories of the various miracles, such as that of the splitting of the Red Sea which we read today, troubled me. As one who studied the sciences, I was perplexed by the obvious conflict between supernatural miracles and the laws of nature. The suspension of such laws seemed to me to be an unscientific principle.

Since then, and as I have grown older, I was no longer bothered by such problems -- for philosophic, scientific, and religious reasons.

Philosophically, I learned something about the category of significance which distinguishes between a miracle and an ordinary act. Scientifically, my own education taught me that the world was far more complex than the simple conception of cause-and-effect relationship that had once prevailed amongst scientists. These two are not the major subjects of this morning's talk.

Rather, I would like to share with you the third area. For religiously, I have learned much more about miracles.

First, both Maimonides and Nachmanides, as well as a host of other Jewish teachers of all the ages, have taught us that Judaism is not dependent upon miracles. Our major principles can get along very well even if there had never been any miracles, whose major function seemed to have been to make the truths of our faith manifest to those who otherwise might find them inaccessible.

(In a light moment, the great Hasidic wit, R. Naphtali Ropshitzer, pointed to the phrase from our Maariv service, in which we praise God who performed *אֱלֹהֵינוּ מְבַרְכֵינוּ בְּמִלְכָּם*, wonders and miracles in the soil of the children of Ham -- as if to say, that our faith would not falter even if all the wonders and miracles were buried in the soil of Canaan... I tend to take his witticism at least semi-seriously: *אֱלֹהֵינוּ מְבַרְכֵינוּ בְּמִלְכָּם*, signs and wonders, should be conceived of not as violating or superceding nature, but as if they were planted in the *אֲדָמָה*, the soil, or natural world, for while they are improbable and aberrations from the normal, they issue from within the natural scheme and accord especially with the significance of Israel's special role in history.)

Second, and more important, I consider the spectacular miracles as not different in kind from the every-day garden-variety. *וַיַּפְּצֵם בַּיָּם*, the splitting of the Red Sea, is merely a special case of miracles which abound throughout the world and all about us.

I pity the poor dogmatic souls for whom miracles mean only

the supernatural or magical events, and who therefore either accept Judaism only because of these stunning incidents, or reject it on the very grounds that all Judaism depends upon unlikely supernatural miracles. Both are wrong.

The Talmud teaches us that ^{האומר ה' כל יום בלתי יום ה' לה אחר ואין} one who recites the Hallel (which we do only on festivals) every day of the year, is a blasphemer. And the great author of "פירוש חזקוני" explained: the Hallel is offered as a praise to God in honor of His performing of a miracle to save the Jewish people. Whoever finds that his faith depends upon miracles every day, whoever discovers that he has no source for his faith except that of manifest miracles, is one who essentially disbelieves.

Indeed, it is blasphemous to view God as a kind of cosmic magician, and assume that when the magic show is over and He has put away His rabbits and His overturned silk hat, that the world runs under its own power, that Nature is independent of its Creator. Judaism maintains that nature is always under the direction of God.

Indeed, Nachmanides (to Genesis 46:15) put it this way: ^{כל יסודות העולם בסימנים סתומים} , all the foundations of Torah rest upon the "hidden miracles." All of what we call "nature" and accept so matter-of-factly, is really the ordered scheme of God's marvelous activity. All of nature is a miracle! The great Kabbalistic teacher, Rabbi Isaac Luria, pointed out that the numerical value of ^{הטבע} , nature, is equal to Elohim, the Hebrew word for "God." There is no independent force called Nature; it is merely the act of God expressed in systematic form.

Indeed, the conception of all of nature and world and life as miraculous, is more than just a way of avoiding theological embarrassment. Its real meaning is to tell us the orientation of the religious personality and the origin of the religious mood. For miracles inspire wonder. The very word "wonder" means two things: the object of our astonishment, and the reaction of astonishment itself. And it is a sense of wonder from which spring both science and religion.

The scientist is finished when he has all the answers, when he fails to ask and to marvel and to be baffled. The scientist who is untouched by the gift of wonder is merely a technician, nothing more. Prof. Einstein, in his memoirs recently reported on in this week's New York Times, maintains that he came to his discoveries by always asking himself simple questions, like a child wondering naively at such things as time and space. Indeed, a long time ago Aristotle taught that wonder is the beginning of wisdom.

Now, religion too must begin with a sense of wonder. Solomon taught us that *חילתה חכמה' ויראתה' ה' אלוקים*, the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord, and Maimonides (in his *דרכי משה*) told us that "fear" or reverence is the stunned reaction of man to the marvels of nature. The origin of "wisdom" is the fear of the Lord which issues from the wonder at God's greatness. So that Prof. Heschel is right when he maintains that Judaism is founded on the attitudes of "radical amazement." To be religious means to constantly wonder at the *נסתרים*, at the hidden miracles all about us.

But while both religion and science begin with a sense of wonder, they differ in the forms they take and in the consequences they lead to.

To put it more succinctly, we may say that scientific wonder is "wonder why" and religious wonder is "wonder at." The scientist is manipulative, the religionist contemplative. Scientific wonder is a form of curiosity, which leads to investigation and analysis and theorizing and experimentation and verification. Religious wonder is amazement, astonishment in the face of the divine mystery. Scientific wonder takes the unknown and tries to make it known. Religious wonder sees even the known as revealing, at bottom, greater and more mysterious unknowns.

Of course, there is no reason why both attitudes cannot co-exist in one person, as indeed they have such as in Newton and religious scientists throughout the ages.

Let us turn back to religious wonder. We may say that it develops according to several stages.

The first step is silence. *ה' ילחם לכם ואתם תהיו דמים*, the Lord will fight for you and you will be silent. Or, in the Psalms, *שקט לפני ה' אלהים*, to Thee silence is praise; or, in the words of the Prophet *הם כל בשר ודם*, let all the flesh be silent before the Lord.

The vulgar reaction to the sudden confrontation with vast magnificence, with majestic greatness, is a puerile "gee whiz," or "Oh Boy," or even "How beautiful," or "How wonderful!" However, the sensitive spiritual reaction is, quite literally, to shut up, to be overwhelmed and stunned into silence. Wonder begins in silence.

The second step, after silence is, worship. Or, in Hebrew, *שירה*, song. For *שירה* -- such as the Song of Triumph at the Red Sea which we read this morning --- is the result of *התפעלות*, wonder.

The Talmud records that King Hezekiah was not made the Messiah *למלך המשיח*, because he failed to recite *שירה* after the defeat of Sanecharib. But does a failure to sing disqualify a

man from the greatest commission in history, that of being the Messiah? The rabbi of Kotzk explains: **הוֹרָאָה** refers not to one's musical abilities, but to one's spiritual sensitivity. The problem with King Hezekiah was that he took the defeat of the enemy as something natural, as part of a military process, no doubt the result of his own strategic talents. He failed to be bemused, to wonder, to marvel. And when there is no wonder, when there is no **הוֹרָאָה**, there is no possibility of becoming the **מֶלֶךְ הַמְּלָכִים**.

The third step is that of inner growth. The word for wonder we have used is **הוֹרָאָה**, which is in the reflexive case, and can best be translated literally as: reworking one self, i.e., a deepening awareness of divine wisdom.

Indeed, wonder-at, unlike wonder-why, is non-manipulative, but affects the entirety of one's personality and character. Ultimately, this reworking of the self as an expression of wonder must lead to -- humility.

Maimonides, in the passage referred to above where he describes **הוֹרָאָה**, piety or fear of God, describes the effects of such wonder-piety as:

וְכַתּוּב בְּמִשְׁנֵי הַמִּשְׁנָה שֶׁהָיָה הָיָה לְפָנָיו וְלִפְנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים וְלִפְנֵי הַמַּלְאָכִים וְלִפְנֵי הַבְּרִיּוֹת וְלִפְנֵי הַבְּהֵמָה וְלִפְנֵי הַטָּמֵא וְלִפְנֵי הַטָּהוֹר וְלִפְנֵי הַחַיִּים וְלִפְנֵי הַמֵּתִים וְלִפְנֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם וְלִפְנֵי הָאָרֶץ וְלִפְנֵי הַיָּם וְלִפְנֵי הַבַּיִת וְלִפְנֵי הַמִּזְבֵּחַ וְלִפְנֵי הַכֹּהֵן וְלִפְנֵי הַלֵּוִי וְלִפְנֵי הַיִּשְׂרָאֵל וְלִפְנֵי הָעוֹלָם כֻּלּוֹ

"And when one considers these things (the greatness of God's creation), immediately he withdraws into himself and is afraid, and knows that he is a small, dark, lowly, and dismal creature who stands in such slight and diminutive intelligence before Him who is complete and perfect in wisdom."

So when we read of **הוֹרָאָה** this morning, whether the song of the splitting of the Red Sea or the daily miracles, this is the second step, following that of silence and leading to the transformation of character.

So let me return to my youthful dilemma concerning **פִּסּוּם**, such as the miracle of the Red Sea. My doubts have been resolved, my difficulties long bypassed by other and more urgent perplexities, as I have moved, as all of us must, from a rational-logical perspective to a far more existential and experimental outlook.

Where do I now stand? I believe in miracles. I believe not only in the miracle of the Exodus and the splitting of the Red Sea, but also in the "hidden miracles" which beg to be revealed; in the thousand different **פִּסּוּם** which stare us in the face, over which we trip daily, which pursue us hourly and cry out: Look! Be amazed! Marvel! For heaven's sakes, gape! Wonder at the sheer beauty and order and surprise and, yes, the holiness of it all!

We have become hard and insensitive, we have become dulled by routine and we have forgotten how to be silenced and how to sing *וְיִשְׁמַח*, and instead of a powerful and transforming humility we merely know that we are nothing...

Routine and habit and boredom have blinded us to such hidden miracles as the arrival of Spring, the *וַיִּשְׂרַח* of running water, the glory of a cloudburst or the gorgeous complexity of a human eye, the drama and mystery of electrons and protons and neutrons and mesons -- all insubstantial bursts of energy or, even more, merely mathematical abstractions which dance around each other and yet together constitute the hard and impenetrable matter of the macrocosmos. *וְיִשְׁמַח*, miracles and wonders!

The birth of a human being, for example, will always remain to me a miracle -- even after the obstetricians and the pediatricians, the geneticists and the physiologists, the molecular biologists and the anatomists have together patiently explained it all. After all the solutions that issue from their wonder-why, I shall still wonder-at -- at its orderliness and its regularity, its drama and its continuity, its promise and its risk and its fulfillment. I think I shall not at all be shaken when the Lord resurrects the dead, at *וְיִשְׁמַח*. For why should rebirth be more incredible than birth? In what way is birth less miraculous than resurrection?

When the Messiah comes, I shall be thrilled and be grateful, but not really incredulous. For as a Jew I have sung *וְיִשְׁמַח* at the redemption from Egypt and the crossing of the Red Sea, and so I am ready for another redemption. I have been staggered into silence and then into song by the miracle of Jewish history and the mystery of Jewish survival. I have lived through the birth of the State of Israel that emerged from the death-camps, and the incredible events of the Six Day War. We are indeed ready for the Messiah. All that remains for him to do is to come -- without too much dallying.

One of the most illuminating anecdotes to come from the 1948 war was the one about the Mapam'nick, the non-religious Marxist, who said to his friend: I still do not believe in God, but I am certain that He performs miracles...

For me, the greatest miracle is that there can be those who do not recognize that there are miracles all about them and who deny the One who performs them.

וְיִשְׁמַח, may He who performed miracles for our ancestors and endowed them with the sensitivity of wonder, grant us that same blessing, enabling us ultimately to recognize the finger of God which ceaselessly and firmly draws the lines of nature and the patterns of history, and writes for us in our hearts and on our minds the message of warmth and love and meaningfulness, so that we be moved

to proclaim our praise for God both for His special miracles, and
also *מִן הַמִּיּוֹת הַנְּסִיּוֹת הַיּוֹמִיּוֹת*, His daily,
hidden miracles that pursue us so blessedly, evening and morning
and daytime.