

### **Miracles**

I imagine that in the previous difficult year, many of us in this room have called out for help. God, I lost my job, I can't afford to send my child to college, it's getting more difficult to keep up with the bills.

God, I've put in so much hard work to graduate from college and I can't find a job to begin my new life.

God, I worked my whole life and now I am older, medical costs are going up and my retirement plans are in jeopardy.

In a time of great adversity, adversity that even extends beyond our borders, we connect with our hope and desire for miracles, for something to show that God loves us and acts on our behalf.

We find ourselves asking, where were you God when Mr. Madoff bankrupted many Jewish charitable organizations and individuals of all backgrounds are forced to face the grim reality of a financial future whose security is at best uncertain.

And war continues abroad as our soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan continue to serve. The security of the State of Israel remains an issue of concern.

And the crushing oppression in Iran earlier in the summer and saber rattling from North Korea directed at our shores both reminded us about the belligerence that exists in our world.

During these gloomy days, we may be praying for answers, for guidance, and indeed for miracles.

But do miracles still occur for us or are they a thing of the legendary past, limited to the days when God guided Abraham and his descendants on their physical and spiritual journeys toward the Promised Land?

And what are they for us today? For what do we hope and pray, what should we expect of God?

The Torah and our Machzor, our High Holiday prayer book, remind us that Rosh Hashanah is a day that celebrates miracles, and is an *eit ratzon*, an auspicious time to reinvigorate our faith in God and in the way that God interacts with the world. Rosh Hashanah teaches us to *be open to the possibility and potential of miracles*.

The Rabbis of our tradition chose the story of Isaac's miraculous birth for us to read from the Torah today, a miracle God grants to Abraham and Sarah, one that will allow their line to continue and become the Jewish people. We recall the story of our founding mother Sarah who could not bear a child, the visit of the angels to their tents, and God's promise to her and to Abraham that she would bear a child of her own even at her advanced age. And let us not forget that Rosh Hashanah also celebrates another birth, another creation, today is *hayom harat olam*, the birthday of the world, the beginning of time.

I ask you to join me today in a journey of faith from the days of Abraham to the days of the Rabbis of ages past who with great respect for the stories in the Torah helped us to **reclaim** and **renew** our faith in God and miracles.

In the Torah stories we know so well, miracles occur all the time, as God demonstrates God's presence and power through *pla'im* and *nifla'ot*, through wonders, and through *otot u'moftim*, "extraordinary and surprising events".

Writer Jacob Licht teaches us that the "Bible writers simply do not question God's ability to do anything, by any means." ("Miracle", EJ online)

For us today, we might hope for the miracle of divine intervention in the economy and in the relationships among peoples and nations, but we live in a world that in large part has become ambivalent about God's direct intervention in human affairs. A world that routinely questions God.

The Rabbis of the Talmud, over 1,000 years ago, already taught us to have faith in miracles, but to think about them in a more complex way, a spiritual path that perhaps we as moderns can better appreciate. This is what I hope to share with you today.

The Rabbis motivated us to not *rely* on miracles alone as a means of validating our faith. The idea that miracles themselves do not on their own validate our faith or prove religious truth is helpful for us since we live out a faith that emphasizes action over belief, doing/mitzvah over dogma/ emunah.

If we had to wait for a Divine message to inspire us or to endorse the evolution of religious ideas and practice, we could fall into the trap of wondering whether God has really spoken and whether what we perceive as God's speech supports our ideas or not. Instead, we choose to carefully read, debate, and apply the concepts in our tradition and we hear God's voice through the dialogue rather than in the kol demamah dakah or bat kol, the still

small voice that prophets and the Rabbis of the Talmud tell us speaks from afar, from the heavens. In one classic story the Rabbis of the academy debate Rabbi Eliezer who calls upon signs and wonders to testify to the truth of his thinking, though they will deny each one, the carob tree will prove me right Rabbi Eliezer says, and the tree moves 100 cubits on its own. The river will prove me right, and the river reverses its course. The walls of the house of study will prove me right, and the walls buckle in. And then the heavens will prove me right—To which a voice from heaven exclaims that Rabbi Eliezer is correct, though the Rabbis do not listen to the heavenly voice, the Torah has been given, the decision is to be made by the majority.

There is no doubt in this story that God speaks and reaches out to us, that wonders happen, but even the story of Rabbi Eliezer ends with God laughing, My creations have defeated me, my creations have defeated me! The Rabbis of the academy don't make their decision based on the wonders and signs. But reason and faith, the rational and supernatural, can safely co-exist. They can co-exist for us as well.

The Rabbis help us to focus on the daily miracles that we recognize in the Amidah that they wrote, our most exalted regular dialogue with God, every day we say "*Nodeh lecha unsaper tehilatecha al..nisecha she'bechol yom imanu ve'al niflotecha ve'tovotecha she'bechol et, erev vavoker ve'tzoharayim*" "We thank You and share Your praises on Your miracles that are with us everyday, and on the wonders and good things that occur every moment, every evening, morning, and afternoon." These are the miracles

that are with us from day to day, those that flow from the world as God created it. The Rabbis want us to see a world full of wonders, they want us to wear lenses that magnify and clarify a world full of wonder, full of meaning beyond what we can see with our own eyes. As the poet Walt Whitman once wrote: *Why, who makes much of a miracle? As to me I know of nothing else but miracles... To me every hour of the light and dark is a miracle, every cubic inch of space is a miracle, every square yard of the surface of the earth is spread with the same, every foot of the interior swarms with the same...*

And as we enter this New Year together, let's try not to let miracles pass us by, as the great Rabbi Yisrael Baal Shem Tov once said, "The world is full of miracles, but people cover their eyes and so do not see them." That there are daily miracles inspired by the Divine order reassures us that we need not wait nor lag in hope for drastic Divine interventions. The miracles of existence, of friendship and love, the hidden order of the universe that we see and the universe beyond our vision—In the New Year let us commit ourselves to recognizing one of these every day.

And what is a miracle for us today? Can we open ourselves to the possibility that events may sometimes happen by design rather than chance? My wife Rachel, and my sister in law Abigail, and the family used to live in the small town of Orwigsburg, 2 hours north of Philadelphia. One evening they were on the road heading north from Philadelphia after visiting family, and their headlights burnt out while they were driving up the highway. They were suddenly and completely in the dark. They pulled over to the side of the road,

alone and afraid. A car soon pulled up behind them. It was the Hebrew schoolteacher from their synagogue. On a darkened road, at night, in an unfamiliar place in the middle of nowhere, a familiar person somehow noticed their car and stumbled on them on the side of the road. She led the way and guided them back home. Do you have a similar story? So many times we hear of small ways that Divine light filters into the world.

And today on Rosh Hashanah we are keenly aware of the miracle of teshuvah, of the potential for repentance, for our ability to renew our faith in a world filled with God's presence as we stand in amazement of the rising of the sun and the moon, the passage of seasons, and in our own ability to bring up from the depths of our souls the strength to apologize, to reconcile, to commit ourselves to positive and meaningful activity in the year ahead, to pledge ourselves to maturing and evolving in our Jewish identity and commitment.// Each year we have the opportunity to be renewed, created again and remade into a new person, with a fresh outlook, with a chance to hear and respond to God's voice.

While the Rabbis accepted on faith the reality of the biblical miracles, there was a strain of ambivalence similar to that of our own age. They ask the question (Berachot 20a), "What's the difference between the earlier generations and us, that for them miracles occurred and for us they do not?" The same Rabbis who saw the tree move and the water reverse its course wonder why miracles on the Biblical scale no longer seem to occur. In this discussion they try to figure out why. Is it because they back then were more

learned than we? But we have learned more by now than they! We've elaborated and fleshed out much of what was once hidden!

We must read this passage as a way of saying we still are ready, to experience miracles. We need miracles!. We want to live in a world that has the potential to defy our expectations! We want to live in a world that stretches us beyond the small space that we take up standing on this planet in this enormous universe!

Let's envision the New Year 5770 as a time for miracles, instead of allowing the pervasive gloominess to set the tone,(join me now) let us breathe deeply, untie the knots that bind our mind and hearts into stress and pain, and let's together see in our minds the miracles that already exist around us and the miracles for which we sincerely hope. We cannot guarantee the outcome since we cannot control God, but in the act of envisioning what our lives and the world could be, perhaps we will sense God's presence—a gift to ourselves in the New Year.

And so when we say the Amidah day by day, when we think about the birth of Isaac and the creation of the world that Rosh Hashanah celebrates, let us no longer think of miracles as something that happen to other people, at other times, but also to us and for us.

L'shana Tovah tikatevu, may we all be inscribed in the book of life for this New Year.