# *"Eikev:* Miracles and Mitzvot"

By Rabbi Dr Jeffrey M Cohen

Our sidrah refers to one of the most frequent and pleasurable of our daily mitzvot: *V'achalta v'savata uverachta et Hashem Elokecha* - 'And you shall eat and be satisfied and bless the Lord your God' (Deut. 8:10).

It is the natural reaction that we respond with awe to occurrences that seem to be outside the parameters of our normal experience or expectation, whereas the recurring events, however awesome in their perplexity, we take for granted. Examples of the latter are nature's provision of the sustenance we require for our growth and well-being, the seasonal rain and sunshine to nurture that growth, the vast varieties of food that we enjoy, and the minerals - such as calcium - that are indispensable for forming and maintaining the bone tissue and a variety of other bodily functions; and iron, which helps our muscles store and use oxygen and is also part of many other proteins and enzymes. Most of us blithely go about our life without giving much thought to that amazing, complex, and interactive mechanism.

Not so our rabbis. They were keenly sensitive to the wonders of nature which they describe in the *Modim* prayer of the Amidah as *nisecha sheb'chol yom immanu,*'Your miracles that each day are *with us*.' (Note how the final word, *immanu,* 'with us', directs our attention to the miracles of the human body that are ever 'with us'?)

One notable example of their sensitivity to the miraculous dimensions of nature, and to the God to whom our gratitude is due, is provided by the story of R. Chanina ben Dosa's daughter who, one Shabbat eve, accidentally filled her father's lamp with vinegar instead of oil. When questioned why she looked so upset, she told her father of her mistake. His response was that she shouldn't worry, since "the One who has endowed oil with the power of burning can readily endow vinegar with that same capacity." The Talmud relates that the lamp continued to burn throughout the whole of the next day (Tal. *Ta'ani*t 25a).

While many might treat the latter statement with skepticism - and relegate it to the realm of legend notwithstanding their readiness to joyfully celebrate the 'miracle' of Chanukah! - I was intrigued by a report contributed by Kevin Bullis to the *MIT Technology Review* (Sep. 9th September 2009), entitled, "Gasoline from vinegar!" Who said the Talmudic sages weren't ahead of their time?!)

Myth or truth, R. Chanina's main purpose was to convey to his daughter an awareness of the element of the miraculous in life and nature, and the very broad application of the term 'miraculous' that we should be making in the modern era. One such area is the field of medicinal chemistry wherein some substances - whose properties were hitherto exploited in one narrow context – are often discovered to be unexpectedly effective in others. Contemporary medicine— another such miracle— provides us with many instances of such drugs that have been successfully transferred to ''off-label'' or "repurposable" use. Most recently, for example, the World Health Organization (WHO) strongly recommended that corticosteroids (i.e. dexamethasone, hydrocortisone or

prednisone) be given orally or intravenously for the treatment of patients with severe and critical COVID-19.

Our sages composed a special prayer, *Al ha-Nissim* - for the miraculous deliverances of Chanukah and Purim - to be included in the Amidah on those festivals, as well as the blessing *she'asa nissim la'avoteinu* ('Blessed be He who has wrought miracles for our forefathers…'). They also composed the *Ha-nerot hallalu* composition and the blessing *Ha-rav et riveinu* as a thanksgiving for those respective 'miraculous' victories.

Before we use the term 'miraculous' to describe something that appears to defy the 'laws of nature,' we should be aware that within metaphysics there are two irreconcilable theories regarding the existence of such 'laws.' One view - referred to as 'the Regularity Theory' – is that the term 'laws of nature' is merely descriptive, meaning no more than that which has been observed as uniform or regular in the world. The opposing view – termed 'the necessitarian theory' – is that nature is indeed governed by laws. The latter are immutable principles which accordingly determine the existence of natural phenomena, all of which owe their character and being to those laws. According to the former view, the universe is a cosmic coincidence; according to the latter, it is the result of specific and eternal 'laws of nature.' Inevitably, one's perception of a miracle will be determined by the respective view adopted. If the former, the miracle is no more than that which, to date, has not yet been 'observed.' For exponents of the latter, it was already built into the basic code of natural law.

When the Mishnah states that 'ten things were created at twilight on the eve of (the first) Sabbath of Creation' (*Avot* 5:9), it speaks from the perspective of 'the necessitarian

theory,' according to which those ten were already built into the laws of nature to be activated as historically required, but were essentially exceptions to natural or scientific law.

However, notwithstanding such exceptions, in general Judaism does not restrict the notion of a miracle to that which defies the laws of nature. The Hebrew word for 'a miracle' is *nes*, a noun derived from the root *n-s-s*, meaning 'to be high, or conspicuous.' Hence the associated meanings of *nes* - 'a standard, ensign or ship's flag.' (We are familiar with the term from the phrase in the Amidah, *v'sa nes l'kabbetz galuyyoteinu*, 'And raise the ensign to gather in our exiles.'). In other words, something that stands out - from our perspective - as astonishing, wonderful, or unexpected, may also falls within the orbit of the *nes*. This may be an unexpected victory, a windfall, or a pregnancy after years of waiting. The Orthodox Jew will always construe it – necessitarian-like – as the hand of God, and offer thanksgiving accordingly.

It may strike one as astonishing, therefore, that some (so-called) ultra-Orthodox groups refuse to recognise the hand of God in modern-Israel's redemption, after a two-thousand-year exile, by celebrating Yom ha-Atzma'ut, or that, even among those who do observe it, the recitation of a blessing over the thanksgiving Hallel should be regarded as something controversial! How prescient was the rabbinic statement, *Ein ba'al na-nes makkir b'nisso* — 'one to whom a miracle has occurred rarely recognises it as such' (Tal *Nid*. 31a). This attitude is all the more perplexing given that the Mishnah already prescribed a blessing – *Baruch she'asah nissim la'avoteinu ba-makom ha-zeh* – for one

who visits a place where a miracle was once performed for our people! (Mishnah *Ber*. 9:1).

Now, although our text of this Mishnah omits the usual formula for the beginning of blessings, to include the recitation of God's name, yet Joseph Karo rules that it must be included when reciting this blessing (*Shul.Ar. O.Ch*. 218:1). Is it not anomalous, then, that, although one should make a full brachah over a place that one merely visits, one is yet prohibited from reciting a brachah over the recitation of Hallel on such a festival of existential deliverance?

We Jews have always appreciated the 'miracles' of nature. We have a special blessing over the sun when it completes each of its 28-year cycles (See www.*birkat ha-chamah*); an announcement of the day when the new moon is calculated to appear, and an accompanying blessing, on the last Shabbat of the previous month (*Shabbat mevarchim*); an outside ritual of blessing the new moon (*Kiddush levanah*) on its first sighting in the sky; as well as the celebration of *Rosh Chodesh* to mark its monthly renewal. We separate *challah* and make a blessing before baking bread from any of the five species of grain; we recite blessings every time we enjoy a product of nature, hailing the miracle of Creation; we affirm our sense of gratitude for life and good health in one of our earliest morning blessings (*asher yatzar*); and, on seeing the blossoming of fruit-giving trees in Nisan, there is a blessing of wonderment and thanksgiving for nature's bounty.

We may speculate that those many blessings— which our people have been reciting for over two thousand years, and which focused our close attention upon the wonder and

complexity of the natural world— have contributed considerably to our widely acknowledged intellectual curiosity and analytical propensity. This, in turn, has enabled us to produce an inordinately large number of scholars, writers, poets and men of science, who have pushed forward the boundaries of knowledge in so many fields of human endeavor, especially in recent centuries, notwithstanding the anti-Semitic quotas (*numerus clausus*) that were adopted in the leading European universities.

**Shabbat shalom,**

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