"Re'ei: Miracles and blessings"

By Rabbi Dr Jeffrey M Cohen

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

It is the normal reaction that we respond with awe to happenings that seem to be outside the parameters of our normal experience or expectation, whereas the recurring events, such as nature's provision of the sustenance we require for our growth and well-being, we generally take for granted. The latter includes the seasonal rain and sunshine to nurture growth, the vast varieties of foods we enjoy, and the minerals that are indispensable for the formation and maintenance of our bone tissue and a variety of other bodily functions. Most of us blithely go about our daily life without giving much thought to that amazingly complex and interactive mechanism and to the blessing of the food we enjoy, though Russia's war on Ukraine – Europe's breadbasket – which has threatened the provision of staple products and inflated their cost, should make us more appreciative of nature's gifts.

Not so for our rabbis. They were keenly sensitive to the wonders of nature and sought to instill that sense of wonderment within us through the medium of our daily prayers. Hence the second of the morning blessings we recite – *Asher yatzar* – acclaims the 'wisdom' with which God created the human being, the complexity of his biological make-up, and the delicate and proper interaction required for the functioning of all its parts. That 'wisdom,' underpinning the whole of creation, was already proclaimed by the

psalmist in the popular *Barchi nafshi* psalm that we recite to Shabbat Minchah throughout the Autumn-Winter period. In it he marvels at:

> 'How manifold are the things You have made, O Lord; You have made them all *with wisdom;* the earth is full of Your creations (Ps. 104:24. [*As I regard this as the most majestic of all the psalms, I have taken the liberty of attaching my own poetic version.*]

Recognition of nature's panoply of miracles is referred to in the *Modim* ('thanksgiving') prayer that we recite three times daily: *v'al nissecha sheb'chol yom immanu* – ('and we thank You) for the miracles that daily accompany us.' That the author had in mind especially the miracle of man's creation may be inferred from the preceding phrases: *nodeh l'cha un'sapper t'hilatecha al chayyeinu ha-m'surim b'yadecha v'al nishmoteinu ha-p'kudot lach* - 'we thank You and declare Your praise for our lives which are entrusted into Your hands and for our souls that are placed in Your charge.'

One charming example of the sages' sensitivity to the miraculous dimensions of nature is provided by the story of R. Chanina ben Dosa's daughter who, one Shabbat eve, 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, "He who has endowed oil with the power of burning can readily endow vinegar with that same capacity." The Talmud relates that the lamp burned on throughout the whole of the next day.[1]

For the skeptic, the point should not be whether one believes that this actually occurred, but that it exemplifies the notion that the element of the miraculous—in its broadest

sense— is manifest ubiquitously in life and nature. And R. Chanina's point may well have its counterpart in modern-day medicine wherein some drugs whose properties were hitherto exploited in one narrow context are subsequently discovered to be effective in others.

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 blessings *She'asa Nissim la'avoteinu* – both of which contain the reference to 'miracles both in those days *and* in our time' (*bazman ha-zeh*). And, similarly, the *Shehecheyanu* blessing which ends with the phrase *v'higi'anu lazman ha-zeh* ('Blessed be God for enabling us to reach this time'), indicating that we owe our present existence, freedom and prosperity to the sacrifice and heroism of past generations, and to the miracles that were wrought for them.

It may strike one as astonishing, therefore, that some ultra-Orthodox groups should refuse to recognise the hand of God in our modern-day redemption, after a two-thousand-year exile, by their refusal to celebrate Yom ha-Atzma'ut, or that even in some religious-Zionist circles the recitation of a blessing over the thanksgiving Hallel is regarded as controversial. How prescient was the rabbinic statement, 'the one to whom a miracle has occurred rarely acknowledges its reality.'[2]

This attitude is even more perplexing given that the Mishnah already prescribed a blessing – *Baruch she'asah Nissim la'avoteinu ba-makom ha-zeh* – for one who 'sees a place where a miracle occurred for our people'[3]

Joseph Karo points out that, although this blessing, in the form that it appears in our printed editions of the Mishnah, omits the customary opening formula which includes *Shem* (God's name) and a reference to His *malchut* (kingship) – namely, *Baruch attah Hashem Elokeinu melech ha'olam*) – yet, both of these must be included when reciting this blessing.[4] Does it not follow then, a fortiori, if a complete blessing must be recited over an historical place that one has merely visited, that the full traditional blessing should be recited over the recitation of an annual Hallel for our modern-day return to the land that was, and is, the scene of the countless miracles that helped secure that return? Prominent among those miracles was Israel's victory in the War of Independence and its deliverance from annihilation by five invading Arab armies, as well as its subsequent victories, its resilience and remarkable progress in every field of human endeavour. And, above all, its ability to offer a refuge, a home and a future to countless survivors of the Holocaust and to refugees exiled from so many other countries.

In this context, the words of the illustrious Rabbi Yechiel Michel Halevi Epstein (1829-1908) are pertinent:

> Even though our survival and existence are always miraculous…yet our sages taught that our ancestors' miracles benefit us directly in every generation…[5] Hence, we recite a blessing when visiting the places where those miracles were performed; *and those blessings are to include God's name and a reference to His kingship*.[6]

We Jews have always appreciated the 'miracles' of nature. We separate *challah* and make a blessing before baking bread from any of the five species of grain; we recite blessings over every kind of fruit, vegetable, herb, spice, natural fragrance, and beverage; we affirm our sense of gratitude for life and good health, and we greet the arrival of new blossom on the trees in Spring. We also express awe through blessings over thunder and lightning, over the rainbow, and 'the Great Sea,' which, for the sages of the early centuries CE, referred exclusively to the Mediterranean. And there are also blessings that express our awe in the presence of those endowed with outstanding scholarship. That this is not confined to our own sages, but also to illustrious secular scholars, speaks volumes for the breadth of Judaism's perspectives.

We may speculate that those many blessings — which our people have been reciting for over two thousand years, and which inculcated a curiosity regarding and an appreciation of the natural world — have contributed greatly to our people's widely acknowledged analytical propensity and 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 almost every sphere. This also accounts for the inordinate number of both male and female doctors in the medieval period and down to the 18th century – a high proportion (of the former!) having also been rabbis.[7]

Our distinction in scholarship may be gained by the statistic that Jews number over 20% of Nobel Prize laureates, which should be measured against the fact that we are a mere 0.2% of the global population! Our people have clearly attempted to fulfil God's promise

to Abraham that his offspring would be ‘a blessing to all the families of the earth’ (Gen. 12:3).

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Jeffrey

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NOTES

1. Tal. *Ta'an.* 25a.

2. Tal *Nid.* 31a.

3. Mish. *Ber*. 9:1.

4. See *Sh. Ar. O. Ch*. 218:1.

5. See n.3.

6. See *Aruch Ha-Shulchan,* sec.218:1.

7. See John M. Efron, *Medicine and the German Jews* (MC: Yale Univ. Press, 2008), p.13.