

# THE MAGNIFICENCE IN THE MUNDANE

*by Rabbi Avi Shafran*

This time of Jewish year is a curious study in contrasts.

Mere weeks ago, the synagogue Torah readings were recounting the seminal events of Jewish peoplehood, the exodus from Egypt and the revelation at Sinai; then, abruptly, the subject matter turned to oxen goring one another and penalties for thieves; and, after that, the minutiae of constructing the Tabernacle and its vessels.

And then there are the two holidays of the season, Purim and Passover, a mere month apart but so very different in tone. The staple of the Passover Seder (besides, of course, the matzo and wine) is the grand narrative of the exodus from Egypt; the commemoration, all miracle and majesty. How different Purim, where so hidden is G-d's hand that no overt mention of Him is even made in the Megillah of Esther. In fact, the narrative of the deliverance of ancient Persian Jewry can easily (if wrongly) be read entirely as a sort of Shakespearean comedy, with fortuitous coincidences taking the place of divine intervention.

There is a lesson in the abrupt juxtapositions: We are always to remember that holiness can permeate not only the miraculous but the mundane. G-d, indeed, is "in the details."

The details of the Torah's laws and the details of history. The payment due the owner of a damaged ox no less than keeping the Sabbath day; the subtle miracle of Purim, no less than the splitting of the Red Sea.

In fact, Judaism teaches that G-d is in the details, even, of daily life. Ours is a religion where every area and moment of human endeavor is sublimated by the law - or, better "the proper way," a more precise translation of the word "halacha."

From the first words we speak upon arising in the morning until the final ones before retiring; from what we wear to what we eat; from how we pray to how we treat others, an observant Jew's every

utterance and action is governed by the Torah's directives. Nothing is mundane.

And more: Not only are our words and actions to reflect G-d's immanence, so are our mindsets. When we ponder the world, we must try to discern G-d's hand, which is ubiquitous if not always obvious. As a keen rabbi once put it: "Seas split every day, but only sensitive eyes notice." That is true about history - the Jewish people's perseverance a case in point - but also with regard to our immediate physical surroundings, the constant miracles so easily taken for granted.

Perhaps that is why the same season of the year that presents such contrasts in its Torah-portions and its holidays, is also the season for a special blessing that can be made no other time of year.

It comes from a category of blessings pronounced upon witnessing certain natural phenomena (like a rainbow, or thunder and lightning), and is made only in the early spring, in the Jewish month of Nisan (and only once a year), upon seeing two or more fruit-bearing trees in bloom.

"Blessed are You, G-d, King of the universe," it begins, as all such blessings do, "Who has omitted nothing from His universe, and created within it lovely creatures and lovely trees, to bring pleasure to human beings."

The springtime tree-blessing, fittingly made as we experience a contrast in climate, winter's darkness and cold giving way to spring's light and life, helps us focus on what we might all too easily overlook, lost as we all too often are, in "more important" concerns.

It makes us stop and look at something commonplace - trees - and see within the beauty of their blossoms and potential fruit a gift from G-d.

It compels us, faced with the mundane, to perceive the magnificent.

*[Rabbi Avi Shafran is director of public affairs for Agudath Israel of America]*

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