

## CHAPTER 5, MISHNA 5: G-D SHOWING OFF

*by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld*

***Ten miracles were performed for our fathers in Egypt and ten at the [Red] Sea. Ten plagues did the Holy One, blessed be He, bring upon the Egyptians in Egypt and ten at the sea.***

This week's mishna makes mention of four sets of ten miracles, all of which occurred at the time of the Exodus: ten miracles performed for us in Egypt, ten miracles at the Red Sea, the Ten Plagues of Egypt, and ten plagues at the sea.

Moving from easiest to hardest, the Ten Plagues are of course well recorded in Scripture. They are: blood, frogs, lice, mixtures of wild animals, animal-afflicting pestilence, boils, hail, locusts, darkness, and death of the firstborn.

The ten miracles G-d performed for us in Egypt are explained by the commentators to be the sparing of us from the plagues affecting the Egyptians.

The ten miracles at the sea are not as explicit -- other than, of course, the splitting of the sea itself. The commentators, based on the Midrash, explain that together with the parting of the sea, many other miracles occurred: the seabed drying and hardening to afford easy passage, the sea dividing into twelve passageways for the Twelve Tribes, water flowing from the sea wall providing the Jews with fresh drinking water, etc.

Finally, the ten plagues the Egyptians suffered at the sea were the punishments they received in the process of drowning, such as the Pillar of Fire heating up the seabed, G-d removing the wheels of the chariots, and the continuous jarring of the Egyptians in the water.

The Ten Plagues, as well as the accompanying miracles, stand apart in Jewish History. Never before or since has G-d performed so much so spectacularly for a single nation. G-d revealed Himself in unprecedented glory and power, delivering us from an invincible, implacable foe, and leading us to our ultimate salvation.

There is an additional aspect to the story which in a way adds even more to its impressiveness. To some extent the Ten Plagues were not even **necessary**. G-d had many means at His disposal of saving us from servitude (of course). He could have easily provided us with magic carpets and whisked us away with much less drama and fanfare. Or He could have kept any one of the plagues going until we were well out of harm's way -- rather than bullying Pharaoh into acquiescence only to have him renege as soon as things quieted down.

Instead, G-d made a much lengthier saga out of it. (And we'll assume this was **not** with an eye towards producing a better motion picture.) ;-) In fact, if we look more closely at the story, Pharaoh wasn't even capable of bearing so many plagues. As the Torah attests, G-d had to "harden" Pharaoh's heart by the sixth plague in order to prolong the ordeal (see Exodus 9:12).

Furthermore, the splitting of the sea occurred -- as well as scholars can determine -- quite close to the northern tip of the Gulf of Suez. G-d could have easily led Israel slightly further north on a fully land-based route. Instead, He led them right up to the sea, pinned them between the water and their enemies, only to then split the sea in dramatic climax. Again, G-d seems to have almost orchestrated events for the sake of heightening the drama -- certainly beyond what was necessary to save us. What was the idea behind this?

Jewish thinkers distinguish between two types of miracles (see Sifsei Chaim Vol. 2, pp. 5-6). The first type is basically utilitarian: A righteous person is in trouble and cannot be saved via natural means. G-d will bend or break a few rules, so to speak, in order to save him or her. These miracles are not extremely rare occurrences. G-d ordinarily avoids tampering with the laws of nature -- preserving the concealment of His existence. However, if a person's greatness warrants -- if he is the type who serves G-d above and beyond **his own** natural abilities -- G-d may just reward in kind and look after him beyond the normal allowances of nature. (See Tales out of Shul by R. Emanuel Feldman, pp. 198-201.)

I mentioned this story not long ago, but I think it drives this home well. I can't remember who this story was said about, but I believe it was a great rabbi who lived in America in the mid-20th Century. He had been accosted by a mugger and turned to flee. The assailant shot him point-blank from a few feet away. The rabbi kept running, only to discover later that the bullet had lodged itself in his coat and went no further. He insisted on wearing that same coat with the bullet hole for years to come, long after it wore out, as a reminder of the great kindness G-d had performed for him.

However, many miracles of our history -- in particular ones with which holidays are associated -- were of a different sort. You could almost say they were for the sake of show. A classic example is the miracle of Chanukah. G-d did not **have** to make one day's supply of oil last eight days (long enough for the Jews to produce a fresh supply of pure oil). If the Jews, after recapturing and rededicating the Temple, did not have any more pure oil, it would have hardly been their fault. They tried their best and would certainly bring pure oil as soon as it became available. Why eight days?

The answer is that G-d had a message to deliver. There was something He wanted us to know. The victorious revolt of a small band of devout Jews against the world's greatest army was not just a successful guerrilla uprising. It was miraculous: It was the Hand of G-d. G-d Himself had been operating all along. And there was a message behind it -- that the eternal light of the Torah shines brighter and steadier than the darkness and barbarity of Greek civilization (for all its flair and sophistication), as well as all other "modern" philosophies which have come to take its place. And the

Sages rightly saw in the miracle Divine sanction to commemorate Chanukah for future generations. Its salvation was not a limited, short-lived one -- in order to save a few righteous individuals (who would not remain independent for all that long anyway). It contained a message which would endure for all time.

And the same is true regarding the Ten Plagues. As we have seen, G-d did not perform them out of necessity -- as the only means of bringing about Israel's salvation. They too were for show: to demonstrate unmistakably G-d's powerful and providential rule of mankind: "In order that you tell your sons and grandsons how I mocked the Egyptians and My signs which I placed upon them -- and you shall know that I am the L-rd" (Exodus 10:2).

The great and mighty Egyptian Empire, which for generations had humiliated the Jews and subjugated them to their service, was now cowering helplessly and miserably before our all-powerful G-d. G-d had made them His plaything, an object He could punish, subdue -- and ridicule -- at will. Never again would the Jewish people see physical might as the arbiter of authority. We would be subservient to G-d alone. All who challenge G-d's authority would ultimately become the butt and plaything of His infinite justice.

For this reason Judaism relates belief in G-d very closely to the Exodus. In the opening statement of the Ten Commandments, G-d identifies Himself as, "the L-rd your G-d who took you out of the Land of Egypt..." (Exodus 20:2). We relate to G-d not merely as the Creator of heaven and earth, but as the One who, in His greatness and power, delivered us from the bondage of Egypt, demonstrating the truth of His existence -- and earning our eternal gratitude.

The Ramban (Nachmanides, of 13th Century Spain), in His commentary to Exodus 13:16, elaborates further. Since the times of Enosh (grandson of Adam; see Genesis 5), there were various sects who did not believe in G-d at all, or who believed in a creator who either was not aware of or was not concerned with the deeds of man. Now, when G-d publicly performs a miracle on earth and takes control of the course of history -- as He did at the Exodus -- all such notions are swept away. And when a prophet foretells the occurrence of that miracle (as did Moses), it further becomes established that G-d communicates with man.

The Ramban continues: Since G-d does not perform open miracles for every generation -- since not all are worthy of it -- He commanded us to forever commemorate and memorialize the miracles He did for us -- so that the matter be firmly established for all generations. Thus, a great number of the commandments serve as reminders of the Exodus -- Passover, tefillin (phylacteries), mezuzah, as well as the daily obligation to mention the Exodus in our prayers. All these serve not only to remind us of G-d's awesome strength, but to remind us of the wonderful kindness He did for us.

The Ramban concludes with an even more profound message: From the recollection of open miracles we begin to recognize the hidden miracles of life -- the providence with which G-d always oversees us -- for this is the foundation of the entire Torah. Thus, Passover and the story of the

Exodus provide us with virtually the key message of life: that the same G-d who redeemed us from bondage to freedom continues to watch over us -- whether through miracles or within nature -- rewarding us, punishing us, and constantly spurring us to the greatness for which we are destined.

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