

THE MEANING OF MIRACLES

by Rabbi Yehudah Prero

Miracles. That is what the holiday of Chanukah is all about. The triumph of the weak over the strong. One day's worth of oil lasting for eight days. Miracles are events out of the normal course of everyday life. The B'nai Yisaschar's explanation of the nature of miracles illuminates the uniqueness of our holiday celebration.

The Hebrew word for miracles is "Nes." The B'nai Yisaschar defines a "nes" as an action, from G-d, that is supernatural. The word "nes" also means the sail of a boat. The sail of a boat towers over the boat from above. The sail enables the boat to move along, to travel in a path. A miracle is an outward display of G-d's divine providence. G-d's providence directs the movement of our lives, and keeps us on the paths we have chosen. When one looks up at the billowing sail of a boat, one can see that there is a force controlling which way the boat is traveling. When a person experiences a miracle, it becomes clear that there is a force controlling the direction of his life. The choice of the word "nes" to encapsulate the meaning behind a supernatural occurrence should not be lost on us.

The word "nes" is a short one. It is composed of two letters: "nun" and "samech." The Talmud (Berachos 4b) writes: Rav Yochanan says: Why is there no "nun" in Ashrei (Psalm 145, which is arranged alphabetically, except that the verse beginning with the letter "nun" is missing)? Because the fall of Israel's enemies (euphemistic for Israel) begins with it, for it is written (Amos 5:2): Fallen (which in Hebrew begins with "nun") is the virgin of Israel, she shall rise no more. . . . Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak says: Even so, David refers to it by divine inspiration and promises them an uplifting, for it is written (Psalms 145:14): Hashem supports (which in Hebrew, begins with "samech") all the fallen ones.

The letter "nun," as the Talmud states, represents downfall, suffering, and misfortune. The letter "samech," which in the alphabet, and in the word "nes," follows "nun," represents uplifting, salvation, and redemption. A miracle, a "nes," is the combination of these two elements: we are faced with trials and tribulations, and our situation is perilous. Yet, through divine providence, a supernatural occurrence rescues us and provides us with salvation. The word "nes" is a reminder of the ups and downs in life and the role that G-d has in our lives.

Chanukah, as the prayer Al HaNissim recites, celebrates the delivery of the strong into the hands of the weak, the many into the hands of the few, . . . the wicked into the hands of the righteous. This victory sent a message that resonates until this day: our victories and successes in life, while brought to fruition through our efforts, are truly a result of divine providence. When the odds are against us, we can still prevail. When we have reached a point from where we believe we can go no lower,

when our situation is dire, we should not despair. Salvation can come. A one-day supply of oil can last for eight days. Small bands of ordinary people can defeat trained warriors in battle. Miracles can happen. It is up to us to recognize them and appreciate them. Merely reflecting on the meaning of the word for miracle can enhance that appreciation.

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The author has Rabbinic ordination from Mesivta Tifereth Jerusalem, NY.