

EVERYDAY MIRACLES

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"And Israel saw the great hand which G-d used among the Egyptians, and the people feared G-d, and they trusted in G-d and in Moshe, His servant." [14:31]

This week's reading is about miracles. Actually, the miracle is a culmination - after a series of 10 plagues, the first few of which could have been dismissed as natural events, it became clear that the Hand of G-d was at work. And then, at the Sea, our Sages say that "a lowly maidservant saw that which Yechezkel in his prophecy never saw."

The Chofetz Chaim, Rabbi Yisrael Mayer Kagan, tells us that in this case - as in all others - we perceive the miraculous nature of events only once they reach the point that "we can feel the miracle with our hands." Once it is plain as day, we know what is happening, but until then we do not realize what is going on around us. Every miracle is built upon events which preceded it - which we didn't recognize.

He uses the example of Purim. When the two ministers of King Achashverosh plotted to kill their monarch, and Mordechai heard them speaking and reported them, did anyone see a miracle in the making? When the King couldn't sleep, would anyone refer to insomnia as a miracle? When the servants ran to get the history books of the kingdom, would anyone have thought something was unusual about finding boring literature to put the King to sleep? Of course not. Even when the King heard them read of Mordechai's good deed, and asked if he had been rewarded - still, nothing was strange, nothing was out of the ordinary.

But then, at the end of the story, when Haman was forced to lead Mordechai through the street proclaiming his greatness, even Haman's own family saw a miracle at work. They realized that Haman would not win over Mordechai's people. At the end, the miracle was clear - after a series of events which were entirely 'natural.'

So too, says the Chofetz Chaim, with our Exodus from Egypt. When our forefathers went down to Egypt, and when they were subjugated and enslaved, people did not see a miracle coming. But after the 10 Plagues, at the sea, **then** our Sages say that "a lowly maidservant saw that which Yechezkel in his prophecy never saw."

A question: wasn't the splitting of the sea an obvious miracle? We understand the Chofetz Chaim's example of the Purim story, but wasn't the miracle clear in this case, regardless of the buildup?

The answer, perhaps, is yes and no. Whatever our answer, the Chofetz Chaim is still correct that we only recognize the obvious, and don't see the "build-up." But on the other hand, Purim is only an extreme case of G-d "hiding His face," letting miracles occur in hidden fashion. Even in the case of the Sea, we know that in our own time, scientists have ventured so far as to suggest that a comet flew by the earth at the right time, splitting the sea. It was, they say, natural!

So the Chofetz Chaim is correct even in our case. Even this miracle needed a "build-up," which helped to make it a clear miracle in our eyes. After the enslavement, after the Ten Plagues, after being caught between the Egyptians and the Sea with nowhere to go... **then** it was plain as day. No one stood up and said "Gee, what a fabulous coincidence! Aren't **we** lucky!"

The Chofetz Chaim is telling us something which the Rebbe R' Elimelech of Luzinsk also says concerning our parsha - that people only recognize the obvious miracles. What we don't recognize are the "everyday" events which are miraculous themselves. R' Elimelech says that we fail to realize that "nature" is itself one great miracle. If we would allow ourselves to look more deeply, we would constantly recognize the great works around us.

Only when impressed by an obvious miracle, says R' Elimelech, do we then acquire the ability to reexamine our "natural" surroundings. In a Chassidic twist on the verse "And the Nation of Israel went on the dry ground within the Sea", he says: when "the Nation of Israel" saw the Sea split before them, then they realized that even when they were going "on the dry ground," the truth was that even this was a tremendous miracle, as if they were walking "within the Sea." May we all see the Hand of G-d at work in our lives, as well.

Good Shabbos,
Rabbi Yaakov Menken