

WISE WATER

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"With the wind from Your nostrils the waters were heaped up, the running water stood like a wall, the depths came together in the heart of the sea." [15:8]

According to the way we usually read and understand the verse and the story itself, G-d sent a strong wind, and parted the Sea. But the Targum Onkelos, the Aramaic translation of the Torah by Onkelos, says "chakimu maya" -- the water became wise. The water itself acquired intelligence!

The Gaon of Vilna explains that this happened exactly as it did in the Creation of Man. When Adam was created, he acquired intelligence when "He [G-d] breathed into his nostrils the soul of life." This is what the Targum says in translating the verse "and the man became a living being" -- "a spirit from above." The power of speech and knowledge was given to human beings, which was not given to the rest of Creation. Here as well, the water of the Sea of Reeds received intelligence and knowledge from the "wind from Your nostrils," to the point that it was able to know when to withdraw, and when to return to its place.

In Jewish thought, everything is equally natural, everything is equally miraculous. Everything is directed by G-d, whether it appears to us to be "natural" or not. Although it may appear to us that water parting is a great miracle, while the birth of an intelligent child is completely natural, both are equally dependent on G-d -- which is to say, entirely.

In the Siddur Be'er Chayim, a prayer book printed in Vilna in 5639 (1799), the author provides even a further explanation, on the verse "the water was a wall [chomah] for them." [14:22] The Yalkut quotes a Medrash which re-vowels chomah as "cheimah" -- "the water was anger for them."

Initially, the Accusing Angel came before G-d and said, "Master of the World, didn't Israel serve idols in Egypt? How can you be doing such miracles for them?" And the Ministering Angel over the Sea heard the Accuser and was enraged at Israel, and wanted to drown them.

Immediately G-d answered the Accusing Angel, "Foolish one! Do you think they made an intelligent decision to serve idols? You see that they only served them because of their enslavement, because they were being driven out of their minds. You are judging an accidental mistake like a deliberate error, a forced act like a chosen act." Since the Angel over the Sea heard this, the same anger which he had at Israel, he turned towards the Egyptians, and drowned them instead. And thus, just as the accuser was called a fool, "chakimu maya" -- the water was called wise.

G-d clearly recognizes the difference between a deliberate, hateful action, and an error -- whether through lack of awareness of the action itself, or lack of awareness of the gravity of that action. Frequently we feel that our misbehavior holds us back -- we are embarrassed. But we can rely upon this same principle, and recognize that our own acts so frequently depend upon our own lack of awareness of how important they are, of how important it might have been to behave a different way. G-d always allows us to start over, to the point that a person can commit idolatry, and shortly thereafter be worthy of miracles!

Sponsored for the speedy healing of Aharon Yoel ben Pinyah.