

HOW MANY MIRACLES?

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Moshe summoned all of Yisrael and said to them, "You have seen everything that Hashem did before your eyes in the land of Egypt, to Paroh...the great trials that your eyes beheld, those great signs and wonders...I led you for forty years in the Wilderness, your garment did not wear out...bread you did not eat..."^[2]

The Torah tells us^[3] that after the death of their father, Yosef's brothers grew apprehensive about his attitude towards them. Perhaps Yosef indeed hated them for their treatment of him, and would now exact vengeance. Chazal^[4] expand upon this. What precipitated their fear, Chazal say, was Yosef's behavior when he came across the pit into which they had cast him before they sold him into slavery. Yosef pronounced the *berachah* for such occasions: Blessed is the One who performed a miracle for me in this place.

We are perplexed by this. There was nothing remarkable about Yosef's behavior that should have alarmed his brothers. In marking the place with gratitude towards Hashem, Yosef did exactly as halachah requires! Why were they so concerned?

Upon reflection, however, Yosef's *berachah* was somewhat peculiar. While Yosef's life was spared that day at the pit, it was not the last time Hashem performed a miracle for him. His deliverance from Potiphar's dungeon-pit was perhaps more significant, elevating him to the position of Viceroy over all of Egypt. Halachah^[5] requires a person who was treated to several miracles to acknowledge all of them when he visits the place that any one of them occurred. If Yosef wished to fulfill his obligation as the beneficiary of miraculous assistance, he should have included this other miracle as well in his *berachah*.

Perhaps Yosef attached little importance to his position of greatness in Egypt. He never ceased longing for the days in which he lived an idyllic Torah life, studying Torah with his father. Perhaps he lived his role so reluctantly that he did not think of it as a miracle at all.

This, however, was the worst fear of his brothers! Looking back with guilt at their mistreatment of Yosef, the *shevatim* could console themselves (as Yosef in fact told them earlier) that their evil intention had been reversed by Hashem into a great blessing – for Yosef, and for the family. Listening to Yosef's *berachah* at the pit, however, they heard that he omitted mention of the miracle of his elevation to greatness. They realized that Yosef did not see it as a great blessing to him. If so,

they reasoned, there was nothing to mitigate the evil they had perpetrated against him, and they began fearing for their lives.

The precision of Chazal's choice of words becomes apparent. Yosef's brothers became agitated when they heard him give thanks for the miracle performed for him "in this place," i.e. at that one, single location, in contradistinction to other places, which Yosef disregarded.

From Yosef's response to his brothers' fears we can determine that they did not understand Yosef's mindset. He certainly did regard his rise to power as important and significant. It allowed him, to save the lives of his family in famine-ridden Canaan. He appreciated this miracle, and thanked Hashem for it.

Why, then, did he not mention this later miraculous intervention when he stood at the site of his sale into slavery, where his life had been spared after his brothers had originally agreed to kill him? Perhaps the difference is in the beneficiary or beneficiaries of the miracle.

Ordinarily, it makes sense for a person to recollect all the miracles performed for him whenever he mentions any single one. Why? Because it is not only the quality and magnitude of a miracle that is impressive, but the number of Divine interventions on a person's behalf. The reason is that every miracle has a price; the way Chazal put it, each miracle results in a reduction of a person's available pool of merit. This means that after a first miraculous deliverance, a person has less spiritual currency to draw on. If he merits a second, or third deliverance, we become even more impressed with Hashem's *chesed*. The beneficiary has less to "offer" for the special treatment; nonetheless, G-d comes through for him. It follows that when a person thanks Hashem for His intervention at some location, he should mention all other interventions. In doing so, he adds greater dimensions to Hashem's goodness.

This line of reasoning does not apply to miracles performed for the *tzibbur*, for the many. Hashem ordinarily delights in heaping much kindness on the community. "Hashem rejoiced over you to benefit you and to multiply you."^[6] He does not "deduct" anything from some corporate account. To the contrary, it is meritorious for the community to be the vehicle for displaying Hashem's *chesed* on a grand scale.

It follows that in the case of miracles performed for the many, each one can be considered by itself. There is no compelling reason to mention other, unrelated, miracles when focusing upon a single example.

We've arrived at the different positions of Yosef and his brothers. The latter assumed that Yosef was not particularly grateful for his miraculous rise to fame and fortune. He, they thought, would have preferred to do without it.

Yosef, however, corrected them. He certainly did appreciate the material benefits of his position. Why had he failed to make mention of it when he thanked Hashem for his earlier deliverance?

Because, he explained, he viewed his position as a benefit not chiefly to himself, but to the many.

While they had intended to harm him when they sold him, "G-d intended it for good."^[2] Hashem saved him that day, and years later, elevated him to a position of prominence, not for his own pleasure, but so "that a vast people be kept alive." The second miracle was performed primarily for the many, and he therefore did not mention it in his *berachah* for the first.

As far as Yosef's attitude towards his brothers, however, nothing had changed. Yosef indeed valued his position, and understood that the Hand of G-d had been involved in his sale to Egypt. He had long ago forgiven his brothers for their intentions towards him. Nothing had changed. They had no reason to fear for their lives.

1. Based on HaMedrash V'HaMaaseh, Ki Savo, by R Yechezkel Libshitz zt"l.
2. Devarim 29:1-5.
3. Bereishis 50:15.
4. Tanchuma, Vayechi, end.
5. Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 218:5.
6. Devarim 28:63.
7. Bereishis 50:20.