

MIRACLES: THE MAJESTIC AND THE MUNDANE

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

With Yaakov's decision to descend to Mitzrayim (Egypt) begins a period of exile from the Holy Land. The Torah gives the count of Yaakov's family at that time as seventy. Chazal, our Sages, note that a simple tally of the names gives us a grand total of only sixty-nine. Ibn Ezra (46:23) notes that there are those who answer that it is not unusual for the Torah to "round-up" (perhaps for the sake of brevity) a number ending in 9 to an even number. For instance, the Torah instructs us to, "count fifty days" between Pesach and Shavuot, when in fact there are only 49 (Vayikra 23:16). Similarly, the Torah gives the count of the flogged's lashes as "forty," (Devarim 25:3), when in truth he only receives 39. Ibn Ezra, however, dismisses this idea off-hand: The discrepancy, he argues, does not begin with the final total, but rather already appears with the tally of Leah's children, which the Torah gives as 33, when in fact listing only 32 names! Nowhere do we find that the Torah arbitrarily miscalculates numbers for no apparent reason!

Rashi (46:15) quotes the Talmud (Bava Basra 123a) that "the case of the missing descendent" hinges upon the fact that Yocheved, daughter of Levi, (and mother of Moshe, Aaron, and Miriam,) was born just as Yaakov's family entered Egypt; thus, she did not, technically, descend to Egypt with the rest, yet she is counted among those who comprised the Egyptian exile.

Ibn Ezra takes issue with this interpretation: If Yocheved was born at this point, she would have been 130 years old when she gave birth to Moshe! If so, why does the Torah publicize the miracle that Sarah gave birth to Yitzchak at the age of 90, while ignoring the far greater miracle of Moshe's birth to a centenarian-and-then-some?! Consequently, Ibn Ezra concludes that the thirty-third person is Yaakov himself. Perhaps he is included with Leah's offspring because her branch of the family was by far the largest.

Ramban, however, vehemently defends the position of our Sages. First of all, even if we do not accept that Yocheved was born "between the walls," putting her birth some time later, it is undeniable that some form of miracle has taken place: Levi, her father, was 43 at the time of the descent to Egypt. Moshe, his grandson, was born 130 years later. Let's say, for the sake of argument, that after 57 years in Egypt, Levi gave birth to Yocheved. That would put Levi at the age of 100 when he gave birth to Yocheved (as old as Avraham when he bore Yitzchak!), and Yocheved at 73 when she gave birth to Moshe - two events which are themselves no small miracles!

Furthermore, he contends, it is not at all unusual for the Torah to completely omit discussing

obvious miracles, such as the miracles that occurred to Pinchas when he killed Zimri (see Bamidbar 25:6-9). And if you want to compare Yocheved to Avraham, why does the Torah make no to-do about Avraham's additional children, which he bore forty years following the birth of Yitzchak!

Rather, writes the Ramban, we must distinguish between revealed and hidden miracles. Generally, the Torah only publicizes revealed miracles, which involve a clear contravention of the natural order, such as the splitting of the sea, or the Ten Plagues. Conversely, miracles which function within the bounds of nature (even if stretching its limits) are not, as a rule, revealed in the Torah. Giving birth at an advanced age falls within the realm of hidden miracles, and is not normally publicized.

In the final analysis, he writes, everything is a miracle! Nature does not function independently of Hashem. The reward of the righteous, and the punishment of the wicked, are not self-evident occurrences; in a controlled environment one could not demonstrate that the deeds of man change the course of the heavens or the agricultural cycle. What we call "nature" is what we are used to seeing. We do not see nature as a revelation of Hashem's control of the universe, because generally, He prefers to govern the world in ways that appear to be "normal."

Why indeed does the Torah not get excited about "everyday" miracles - reserving its accolades for only the most grandiose and majestic manipulations of nature? And why does the Torah break its policy of non-disclosure by publicizing the miraculous birth of Yitzchak, while hiding the even-more-miraculous birth of Moshe?

Avraham is the forefather of monotheism. It was Avraham who took on the idolaters of his time, and publicized that there was one G-d Who controls all of creation. Not only did He create the universe; He continues to oversee its function, and guide the course of history largely unbeknownst to man. Although monotheism is now accepted and practised by most of the modern-day world, Avraham in his time was a radical and a revolutionary. Perhaps in recognition of this battle, and his unswerving commitment to Hashem, G-d breaches standard policy by publicizing that the laws of nature were altered on his behalf. "Will I indeed give birth - and my husband is old... (Bereishis 18:12)"

By contrast, the birth of Moshe signals the beginning of a new era. We are no longer at the "discovering G-d" stage; now the time has come to find out why Hashem created us, and what He wants from us. Moshe will ultimately receive the Torah, and teach it to the Jews.

In a narrow sense, the Torah is comprised of 613 mitzvos. In a broader sense, the Torah is the instruction manual of life itself: It charges us with the task of bringing G-d into even the most mundane aspects of our existence. G-d is not found, the Torah teaches, only in the splitting of seas, but even in the still blessing over a morsel of kosher food, in birth and in death, in sleep and in waking. The Torah does not make an issue about the miraculous birth of Moshe, nor about "the miracles that You do with us each and every day (prayer of Modim)," for it is up to us to discover, recognize, and internalize these miracles, and find the hand of Hashem in the most remote regions of our universe and our existence.

It brings to mind the words of the Psalmist: "Who is wise, let him note these things; and they will comprehend the kindnesses of Hashem. (Tehillim/Psalms 107:43)" Every moment of our lives, every breath we take, is itself a miracle. Yet only the wise and discerning know this and internalize it.

Have a good Shabbos.

This week's publication is sponsored in honour of the upsherin (first haircut) of our son Chaim Aaron Aryeh; may he grow up to be a talmid chacham and a yirei- shamayim. Anonymus.

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