

# MIRACLES - JUST WONDERING

*by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann*

One of the korbanos (sacrifices) enumerated by the Torah is the Korban Shelamim. As a rule, a Shelamim is considered a "second-tier" korban (kodashim kalim), inasmuch as its meat is eaten not only by the Kohanim (priests), but by its offerer and his family as well. A Shelamim is a non-obligatory korban - it can be consecrated and brought by any Jew for any reason. Its meat was eaten for two days and one night; after the second day it could no longer be eaten.

Singled out among the Shelamim offerings is the Korban Todah - the Thanksgiving offering. Rashi, based on the Gemara (Berachos 54b), explains that a Korban Todah is brought in very specific scenarios, when its offerer has experienced some form of miraculous salvation; namely, (1) one who has navigated the seas, (2) one who has traversed a desert, (3) a prisoner who was released from captivity, and (4) a sick person who was healed. Halachically, there is a difference between the consumption of the korban Todah and the consumption of other Shelamim offerings; it may be eaten for only one day and one night, after which it becomes disqualified. We may safely assume that this difference is not incidental. What, then, is the intrinsic connection between the Todah's one-day-only consumption and the fact that it was a korban brought to commemorate a miraculous occurrence?

The Seforno notes that in limiting its consumption to only one day, the Torah implies that although a Todah belongs in the category of second-tier korbanos, it is strongly connected to the first-tier korbanos (kod'shei kodashim), so much so that with regard to its consumption it indeed inherits the laws of kod'shei kodashim - which were also consumed for only one day. The notion of giving thanksgiving for an exceptional experience of Hashem's kindness, it seems, is according to Seforno "holy of holies" - a most sublime responsibility.

Have you ever thought to yourself, "If only I could have witnessed miracles like the splitting of the Red Sea, or the miracles of the Ba'al Shem Tov... then I would have such strong emunah (faith) in Hashem!"? Who wouldn't want to see a miracle? If you heard that down the street from you there was a Chassidishe Rebbe, or a Chacham, who was able to tell people their deepest secrets just by looking at their foreheads, or heal the sick with a few words, wouldn't you pick yourself up and see it for yourself? And if it were true, wouldn't it make a profound impression on your life and your faith? (And what if you heard a fish speak?...)

The Rambam, it seems, might have stayed home. He writes (Hilchos Yesodei Ha-Torah 8:1), "Anyone whose faith is based on miracles and 'signs' will always have in his heart a nagging-doubt ('yesh be-

libo dofi"). 'Perhaps,' he will later consider, 'such things could be accomplished through magic, slight-of-hand, coincidence, etc.'" This is not to say that miracles don't occur, nor that they can not serve to strengthen our faith. All the same, the Rambam feels that faith based on miracles and wonders alone is not a robust faith that will withstand the doubts and scepticism that are bound to arise with the passing of time.

What, then, is the purpose of miracles? Why does Hashem make them happen, and what are we supposed to take out of them?

In the shemona-esrei prayer recited thrice daily we say the Blessing of Thanksgiving: "We give thanks to You, Hashem, our G-d... for the miracles You perform with us every day, and for the wonders we experience every moment - evening, morning, and afternoon." Life itself is a most wondrous miracle. The function of the human body - with its countless millions of chemical reactions and electrical stimuli occurring each and every second completely unbeknownst to us - is a miracle of untold and unexplored proportions, for those with "open eyes" who are willing to see it. Chazal, our Sages, express this idea by explaining the verse (Tehillim 150:6), "Kol ha-neshama te-hallel Kah - Every soul (neshama) praise Hashem!; I.e. on every breath (neshima - a play on the word neshama) you take - give praise to Hashem! (Devarim Rabbah 2:36)" Take the time some day to read up on the processes of respiration and circulation - what goes on every time you inhale - and you'll be dumbfounded. Its complexity and intricacy is no less than miraculous.

In a severe instance of cardiac arrest, defibrillators are placed on the patient's chest, through which an extreme electric shock is administered to his body, in the hope of "waking up" his malfunctioning heart and shocking it back into service. Why don't we all just go out and get ourselves a pair or two - and give our hearts a daily wake-up call along with our vitamin-c? If an apple a day keeps the doctor away - why not a good zap? Even better, why don't they come out with a mini version that we can keep attached to our chests at all times, to ensure our hearts continually function on the up-and-up? Evidently, defibrillators are not made for healthy hearts. They are there to give the failing heart a wake-up call - it's do or die (in a most literal sense). But even after they've accomplish their task, all they have done is given the heart a one-time jolt back into reality; from there on in, the heart must regain its ability to function independent of external stimulation. (HaRav Moshe Reiss Shlita)

This, says the Imrei Emes zt"l, is the function of a miracle. It is a wake up call, there to remind us that life is not so simple, and that behind the scenes there's far more going on to keep things running smoothly than meets the eye. It is, so to speak, the defibrillator of the neshama. Sometimes we take things for granted; we forget to be grateful for life's daily miracles. When we experience something extraordinary, we are shocked; we experience extreme gratefulness and appreciation. The point, he says, is not simply to remember that amazing event; the point is to integrate that appreciation into our daily lives - to praise Hashem with every breath. It's just that sometimes we need that little wake-up call.

This is why, he explains, a korban Todah is only eaten for one day. It's as if to say: "Don't dwell on this miracle for too long - tomorrow is another day with its own miracles and wonders. You have seen how precious life is; don't cogitate eternally over a one-time occurrence. Rather, use it as a spring-board to appreciate all the miracles in life!"

Do fish speak? Maybe. It's really not that important. Would we become better Jews - better Ov'dei Hashem - if we knew that they did? Not unless we were willing to spend the time contemplating all the miracles that Hashem performs - evening, morning, and noon - and serve Him with more enthusiasm and more joy than we did yesterday!

Have a good Shabbos.

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