

MIRACLE VS MIRACLE: PART ONE

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

This week we read the Parsha of Revelation. Revelation was the most profound moment in our nation's history. It was a singular moment that will never be repeated. It was the only time that G-d spoke "face to face" to a nation. It was the greatest miracle of all time.

In order to understand the importance of Mattan Torah and why I consider it to be the greatest moment of all time, we need to contrast Revelation with Kriyas Yam Suf - the Parting of The Red Sea.

Revelation must have been something in order to qualify as "the greatest miracle of all time." Six weeks earlier, at the parting of the Yam Suf, the Jews had been treated to an unparalleled display of G-d's majestic might. Their spectacular "save" from the clutches of Mitzrayim had left them awestruck and overwhelmed by G-d's actuality. Not only was the venue of the miracle extraordinary and singular, the profundity of the event was equally unique.

We see this from Yisro's proclamation in the beginning of this week's Parsha, "Now I know that G-d is greater than all others! Why? Because, His manner of saving the Jews and punishing the Egyptians revealed His judiciousness and fairness. The very same mechanism Pharaoh used in his attempt to destroy the Jewish nation, was the exact mechanism G-d employed in punishing the Egyptians. They attempted to destroy you by drowning your sons in the Nile River; therefore, G-d drowned their sons in the Yam Suf! Such poetic justice executed through the power of nature is absolute proof of a G-d Who is both the master of nature as well as the standard bearer of truth. There is no other god in the universe except for the G-d of the Jews!" (Rashi, 18:11)

The first Rashi in the Parsha (18:1) says that there were other events that influenced Yisro's conversion, not just Kriyas Yam Suf. Rashi referenced only two of the three opinions recorded in the Mechilta and the Talmud in Zevachim 117a.

R' Yehoshua said, "Yisro was motivated to convert after hearing about Amalek's unprovoked attack and the Bnai Yisroel's victory."

R' Eliezar Hamodai said, "Yisro was compelled to convert after hearing about Revelation." (Obviously, this suggests that Yisro came to the desert after Revelation and that the ordering of the events in this week's Parsha is not chronological.)

R' Eliezar ben Yakov said, "Yisro heard about the parting of the Yam Suf and came to join the Jewish

people."

We learn from the same Talmudic passage that whether or not Yisro was present at Revelation is a matter of opinion. Some say he joined Moshe in the desert before Mattan Torah and others say he came to the desert after Mattan Torah. (Note the Ramban and Ibn Ezra on this topic.)

Regardless of the differing opinions in the Talmud, the literal record of Yisro's proclamation and subsequent conversion to Judaism does not mention G-d giving the Torah to the Jews as an incentive for his conversion. According to Rashi, the event that seems to have convinced Yisro to join the Jewish nation was the spectacle of Kriyas Yam Suf.

When we compare the grandeur and message of Kriyas Yam Suf to Revelation, Mattan Torah seems far less spectacular and impacting. More so, in the aftermath of Kriyas Yam Suf the Bnai Yisroel burst forth in Shira - song. In the aftermath of the giving of the Torah the Jews cried out in fear of dying! "You (Moshe) speak to us and we shall hear; let G-d not speak to us, lest we die!" (20:16) Following Revelation the Jews did not burst forth in song and dance. They wanted to distance themselves from G-d. They did not want G-d to continue "talking" to them. Instead, they wanted Moshe to act as a go-between. How can Mattan Torah be considered the "greatest miracle of all time" when the immediate effects were so different?

I would like to suggest that the reaction of the Jews following Revelation is proof positive that Mattan Torah was the greatest miracle of all time. The Rambam (Maimonides) in the beginning of the second chapter of Hilchos Yisodei Hatorah (The Laws of The Torah's Fundamental Principles) discusses the Mitzvah of Ahavas Hashem - Loving G-d, and Yiras Hashem - Being In Awe of G-d. The Rambam considers Ahava as the prerequisite for Yirah. First we learn to love G-d and then our understanding of G-d grows beyond love and enters the realm of awe.

(The popular translation for Yirah is "fear." True awesomeness is accompanied by a sense of nervousness, trepidation or fear. In the classic texts of Musar and Chasidus it is called Yiras Haromimus - Fear of G-d's exaltedness. To be fearful of G-d's exaltedness requires a comprehensive understanding and appreciation of Who G-d is and what He does.)

I would like to suggest that the parting of the Yam Suf was on the level of Ahava - love, and that Revelation was on the level of Yirah - awe. Furthermore, in the aftermath of Kriyas Yam Suf the Jews sang Shira because they had ascended to the level of angels. In the aftermath of Mattan Torah, the Jews remained 100% human. Angels exist in a perpetual state of Ahava, while humans must advance to the stage of Yirah. Ahava is the stage at which we recognize G-d's loving benevolence. Yirah is the stage at which we realize that we must emulate G-d and respond to G-d's love.

Angels are non-free-willed creations. They are non-corporeal, although they do have form without physical substance. Their knowledge of G-d is limited; however, it is far more advanced than the limited intellect of humans.

Ahavas Hashem - loving G-d is recognizing G-d's constant caring benevolence. The free-willed human is the only creation who can actively engage in emulating G-d's Chesed (kindness) by doing Chesed. Therefore, the human is the only creation who can appreciate what it means to be a provider of Chesed. All other creations accept G-d's loving kindness as a given. For them Chesed is not earned, Chesed just is. For them the verse, "He opens His Hand and provides for all living things" is a given. Therefore, they cannot appreciate what it means to be the giver and provider. However, the human is the only creation in the universe able to understand what it takes to be a constant source of Chesed.

If we use the same logic we can conclude that we are also the only creation able to deny the constancy of G-d's Chesed in the universe. All other creations only exist within the framework of acceptance and taking. They do not give beyond the instinctual limits that G-d programmed. On the other hand, humans who choose to give and do, can deny G-d's constancy by attributing all consequences to human ability and endeavor. Human ambition and determination is the cause while success or failure is the effect. "My strength and the might of my hand are responsible for my great success."

Once the human realizes the extent and constancy of G-d's Chesed he is awestruck by the unlimited power of His loving care. Because the human is endowed with freewill he can decide to imitate G-d and initiate acts of Chesed. (Not so with the angels.) G-d then becomes the scale by which humans judge their own Chesed, and as such they must be found to be lacking. This results in the fear filled awesomeness of Yirah.

There is no doubt that the miracle of Kriyas Yam Suf was far more spectacular than the giving of the Torah. However, spectacle does not always equal greater. I'll prove it to you.

Kriyas Yam Suf was an event that involved the forces of nature and what appeared to be a change from the usual and the probable. Nature, removed from the momentary spectacle of change, is far more spectacular than any other physical event. The orbits and movements of the cosmos and the constancy of G-d's absolute, unending mastery is beyond miraculous and beyond amazing. It truly defies description. Yet, we take nature for granted. Therefore, the size of the spectacle does not define the magnitude of the miracle.

The Parting of the Sea was a change from the norms and therefore spectacular. On the other hand, Revelation imposed G-d onto, into, and within the norms and was therefore beyond spectacular. The Yam Suf did not mandate emulation of G-d - only angelic song. Who could possibly emulate the spectacle of Divine justice and mastery over all nature? On the other hand, Revelation demanded emulation of G-d through doing His commandments; or else they would suffer the total loss of self and purpose within G-d's spoken intent and plan. At Revelation, nothing was changed and nothing was altered. The world was as it always had been - with one exception - G-d had spoken! G-d had told them why He had created the universe and what His expectations were for humanity. G-d had

revealed Himself as having always been there behind the veil of nature.

(It also explains why G-d revealed Himself in the desert. The desert appears to be dead, barren and empty. It is almost as if G-d did not finish the project. However, to the biologist and the observer the desert is as complex as any other ecosystem on earth. One need only look a little closer in order to reveal the thriving presence of divinely gifted life and living behind the facade of emptiness and death.)

After the Yam Suf the Jews were like angels. For one short period of time the actuality of G-d's manifest power forced them to realize that G-d's love was given to both those who deserve and those who do not deserve. They understood that His love and Chesed were constant and by definition their miraculous salvation from the hands of the Egyptians was undeserved. As such, they could only sing the song of angels who are always aware of G-d's constant loving benevolence of which they are the undeserving beneficiaries. (Angels have no choice but to listen to G-d and do as they are told; therefore, they do not deserve reward for what they do.) The actions of the Jews up until Kriyas Yam Suf did not cause salvation. However, for whatever reason, G-d deemed them deserving of salvation regardless of their actions. Such seemingly undeserved salvation demanded thanksgiving that could only be expressed as Shira - song.

However, the Jews could not sustain that momentary angelic experience. As soon as their bellies began to grumble and their throats became dry, they returned to the status of human. They once again saw G-d in the context of providing for those who are deserving and denying those who are not deserving. They did not trust that G-d would always take care of them because they did not believe themselves to be deserving of His love. G-d's Chesed became part of the process of reward and punishment, rather than the given norm of all existence. In many ways the Jews were far more comfortable in a world of cause and effect that they could understand rather than trusting in the constancy of G-d's benevolence and wondering what G-d expected from them in return. (This provided the necessary cognitive and emotional preparation for Mattan Torah when G-d finally told them what He wanted.)

Yisro on the other hand had a much different reaction to Kriyas Yam Suf. He had already explored the realms of reward and punishment cause and effect. He had found all the other philosophies and religions designing illogical and non-sensical causes in hope of guaranteeing their personally desired result. However, upon hearing about Kriyas Yam Suf Yisro realized that G-d's constant benevolence was the product of cause and effect. The Egyptians had been evil and G-d punished them. The Jews were their hapless victims and they were saved. There was a Judge and there was justice! There was a standard for good and there was a standard for bad. All he needed to know was the next step. What does this Creator, Judge, and G-d want from humanity? What are the details that define the meaning of good and the meaning of bad? How do non-angels live within the context of G-d's world? (The answer to that quest was Mattan Torah.)

Yisro also recognized that the miraculous manner of their salvation reflected the order of the universe rather than its lack of order. The miracles, although spectacular, were not random or excessive. They were uniquely designed to punish the crimes in the most judicious way possible while at the same time displaying G-d's awesome mastery and love.

Yisro was also not present at the actual miracle. He only heard about them. Therefore, the immediate impact of the spectacle that had left the Jews breathlessly overwhelmed by G-d's loving might was not felt by Yisro. He had the necessary distance to see the message behind the miracle. He was able to perceive the physics behind the magic. The Jews on the other hand were left with a momentary awareness of G-d's majestic awesomeness that numbed their physical and intellectual senses and defied any and all interpretation or human response. Had they not been compelled by Divine inspiration to join in song they would have been left speechless.

At the time of Mattan Torah the Jews were not re-elevated to the level of angels. They remained humans, and only humans. The Torah they were about to receive had been written exclusively for humans and not angels! As such, the Jews were left with the contrast between their extremely limited and undeserving selves and G-d's expectations. Every person was forced to evaluate himself or herself and ask, "Am I deserving of this mission? Do I want this mission? Can I do this mission?" If I accept I will deserve life, if I do not accept I might as well die here beneath the mountain. I have no other reason to exist. There is no other reason why G-d would have created me except to accept this mission."

What was the mission? The mission was to be, "A kingdom of priests and G-d's holy nation." The mission was to represent G-d in the world of nations and societies and emulate G-d by doing for them the greatest act of Chesed. Their mission was to be the source of blessing for all the families of the world. Their mission was to sanctify G-d's name by doing His Mitzvoth and teaching the rest of the world to believe in Him.

At the foot of Har Sinai the Jews confronted their most basic existence. They came face to face with their unique destiny. They each saw the Burning Bush and heard G-d call their name. Their choice was simple. "Do you want My Torah or not? If you want My Torah you have to listen to all its instructions. If you want My Torah you must be like Me and become the source of constant loving and giving. You must become My agents for all that is good and noble in a mortal existence. I will be your example. Look to me and do as I do!"

The Jews responded, "Yes! We will do and then we will attempt to understand. However, we cannot emulate You! By comparison to you we are insignificant and irrelevant. Because we understand the act of giving it is beyond our comprehension how You give in the manner that You do. We are overwhelmed by the awesomeness of Your benevolence and constant love. We are humbled by Your unlimited compassion and ability to forgive. We do not understand your method of Justice but we trust in the essence of Your goodness.

Simply put we are in awe of You and we are determined to serve You, but please let us learn from Moshe. Let us hear Your intentions and wishes from the mouth of a human with whom we can relate. Otherwise, we fear that we will be undeserving of our designation as Your kingdom of Priests and Your holy nation. We fear that we will never be able to match Your expectations and we will surely die!"

Moshe served as a buffer. Moshe became the Ish Haelokoim - the Man of G-d - who represented G-d in all manners to the Jewish nation. It was exactly as Moshe himself had requested at the Burning Bush, G-d would speak to Moshe and Moshe would speak to the people. However, it did not have to be like that. G-d was willing to speak directly to the people if only the people had been willing to listen.

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