

# MIRACULOUS NATURE

*by Rabbi Aron Tendler*

If asked to list the five greatest miracles of all time, most of us would include Kriyas Yam Suf - The Parting of The Sea. This is due to a variety of reasons. First of all, of all the miracle recorded in the Torah, it is probably the most famous. Secondly, its theatrical presentation has all the elements of a real "keeper."

For example, its setting: The stark, barren, emptiness of the desert in contrast with the watery expanse of the Red Sea assured that nothing would distract attention away from the miracle.

The players also worked really well together. On the one side, the most advanced civilization and powerful army of its time. On the other side, a just freed nation of slaves numbering in the millions.

The Egyptians, the bad guys, tore across the desert in a thundering spectacle of dust and noise. The Jews, the good guys, were caught between the proverbial rock and hard place without hope of escape or reprieve. At the last moment, the cavalry came to the rescue! A fiery cloud of smoke insinuated itself between the two sides throwing the Egyptians into confusion and disarray. With the Egyptian horde at bay, G-d prepared the miracle. By morning, the Jews had crossed through the parted sea, the Egyptians had been destroyed, and nature had returned to its norms. The bad guys had been punished, the good guys vindicated, justice had been served, and history had its miracle.

The Rabbis explained that the miracle of Kriyas Yam Suf (Parting of the Sea) was much more spectacular than what we have been told. The Medresh says that the sea didn't just split into two. It actually divided into 12 separate avenues - one for each tribe. The Medresh says that fresh fruit grew from the walls of seawater providing the Jews with refreshments while they made their way through the sea. G-d went so far as to make the seawater-walls transparent so that each tribe could see the other and not be afraid that they alone had survived.

However, the most interesting detail not generally known is that the Jews entered and exited the Yam Suf on the same side! The Talmud says that the parting of the waters happened in a semi-circle! (Let's see Universal Studios do that!) The Bnai Yisroel entered on the western shore of the Yam Suf and exited on the same western shore! The only thing that was accomplished in the course of the miracle was the destruction of the Egyptians and the revelation of G-d's awesome power and majesty.

This means that the Jews did not have to cross the Yam Suf to get to the Promised Land. G-d could have led them along the Mediterranean shoreline through the land of the Pilishtim and they would

have arrived much sooner and not come anywhere near to the Yam Suf. This means that from the start G-d led them in a circuitous direction for the sole purpose of destroying the Egyptians!

There are many methods available to G-d if He desires to punish and destroy. Why did He specifically choose the parting of the sea for Egypt's punishments?

I believe that G-d designed Kriyas Yam Suf to be the premier miracle of all time and to teach us the essence of how we must relate to G-d as Creator of the universe.

Let me start with the aftermath of the miracle. Following their miraculous deliverance, Moshe Rabbeinu led the Bnai Yisroel in a spontaneous outpouring of recognition and praise for the Almighty. The singing of Shira (song) could only have happened if at the moment of singing, the Jew had been elevated to the level of angels. Just as angels have absolute recognition of G-d and acceptance of their individual and collective responsibilities to follow His commands, so too the Bnai Yisroel attained the very same absolute recognition and acceptance.

This national singing of Shira appears to have been a one-time in history event. I would like to suggest that we consider Kriyas Yam Suf, and for that matter all recorded one-time events, as the exceptions that teach us the rule. In this instance the lesson to be learned was that as revealed as G-d was at the time of Kriyas Yam Suf is as revealed as G-d is at all times. In essence, the greatest miracle of all was no greater a miracle than anything else that happens in nature or in history. If we have the correct perspective, we can conclude that existence, as we know it, is one endless miracle. Nature, as we know of it, is but one continuous revelation of G-d's awesome majesty, no less or more than the spectacle of Kriyas Yam Suf.

What is a miracle and does it differ from nature? Rabbi Dessler discusses this question in his essay "Nature and Miracle" and references the miracle of the Exodus in support of his thesis. Rabbi Dessler posits that we commonly consider the world from the perspective of cause and effect. The comfort of cause and effect is the assumption that so long as we follow the prescribed formula (cause) we should be able to predict and control the outcome (effect).

Individuals who subscribe to this philosophy consider themselves as partners with G-d in running the world. True, it is G-d Who created the universe and all the opportunities. It is G-d Who gave them individual talents and abilities. It is G-d Who designed each of their lives and ordered them to allow for success and failure. However, it was individuals who initiated the ambition and effort to advance G-d's gifts into the natural stream of cause and effect. It was up to them to start the natural process of cause and effect that resulted in predictable and controllable outcomes.

Regarding this perspective Rav Dessler writes, "People on this level subscribe to the philosophy of partnership. They place themselves beside G-d in the running of the world. In spite of all their talk about "faith" and "trust in G-d", denial is deeply rooted in their hearts. Deep down they are convinced that "My strength and the might of my hand have made me all this wealth". (Michtav M'Eliyahu 1, pg. 181).

A truer perception of G-d's relationship to nature concludes that nature is G-d's tool for running the world. It ascribes all things, ambition, effort, and accomplishment directly to G-d's intervention and doing. However, this perspective still assumes that nature itself exists. It assumes that nature has substance and actuality as the tool wielded by G-d to maintain His universe.

Regarding this perspective Rav Dessler shared his Father-in-Law's analogy. Imagine looking into a room through the keyhole of the door. The keyhole limits the field of vision so that all that is visible is a pen writing on a piece of paper. Nothing else is visible, not the table and not the hand of the writer. The person who denies G-d concludes that the pen is magically able to write by itself. However, once the door is fully opened and the writer is revealed, it is clear that the pen is only a tool at the disposal of the writer. So too, the one who believes in nature as G-d's tool sees all of nature as the pen in the hand of G-d. He concludes that all things are done and controlled by G-d.

Rav Dessler writes that although this person has a truer perception of G-d, nevertheless he still believe that nature, like the pen, has its own independent existence. It exists as the tool in the hand of the Creator.

A much truer perspective presents that nature only exists to obscure our clear vision of G-d. G-d does not use nature as tool to wield His might and power. G-d has no need for nature or for anything physical. Whatever He wills comes into immediate existence. Nature, as we perceive it, challenges our ability to understand this concept. What we see as actual and substantial is only an illusion of sorts that obscures the reality of G-d's absolute unity and oneness with all things.

The highest level of perception and belief is the understanding that nature is a destructive force in our perception of G-d. We were created for the sole purpose of recognizing and sanctifying the name of G-d. That means that whatever we do or do not do must proclaim His absolute sovereignty in the universe. What would be a greater expression of G-d's power; a person who eats and therefore survives or the person who does not eat and yet remains perfectly strong and healthy? Obviously, the one who does not eat and yet survives is a greater revelation of G-d than the fact that we eat and remain healthy! That is what Rav Dessler means by nature obscuring G-d and being a destructive force. Our need to eat presumes that it is food and nutrition that keeps us alive and healthy when in truth it is not hydration or nutrition but the direct will of G-d that allows us to live.

If Rav Dessler is right in his thesis why don't we just stop eating and see what happens?

The reason we have to eat in order to survive is because we distinguish between the miraculous and the natural. We are not on a level where we are willing to act on Rav Dessler's perspective. In fact, Rav Dessler himself wasn't on the level where he was willing to act on his own thesis. As a physical being he too harbored the mistaken assumption that nature has actuality. Rav Dessler writes extensively about the difficulties in attaining the third perspective. As products of the illusion we call nature, it demands extraordinary trust to act on such a fundamentally challenging belief. Only a handful of people in history have ever been able to do so.

The illusion of nature is a necessity for most of us without which we would not have freewill. However, that is not the way it has to be. The few who attain this exalted level, the level Moshe Rabbeinu, can just as well exist without eating as they do with eating. "Forty days I was with G-d without eating bread or drinking water.." They are the few who attain the level of the angels.

I would like to suggest that the Parting of the Sea was a moment in history that was so beyond the norm, so spectacular, that the entire nation was catapulted past the illusion of the natural into the realm of the heavenly and the miraculous. At that moment the veil of nature was lifted to reveal the actuality of G-d's absolute unity and oneness. The nation as a whole had no other choice but to collectively proclaim in spontaneous Shira (the song of angels), "This is my G-d and I will exalt Him.." (15:2)

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