

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Portion of Tzav

“Nachash Tzefah; Nachash Tzefah.” I remember it like it was yesterday: it was nearly 2AM, and the phone was ringing. I picked it up and was surprised to hear it was my father calling me from America.

“Are you all right?” he asked, and I didn’t understand what on earth he was doing, calling us at 2 o’ clock in the morning; much less what he was concerned with.

“Of course I’m all right, why wouldn’t I be all right?”

And then everything changed, forever. He had heard on CNN that Iraq had launched a scud missile, which had fallen somewhere in Israel. He was more updated than I. As he was explaining what the news had said, the sirens went off, and I dropped the phone to wake up my wife and then one-year old eldest daughter, and rush them into our sealed room, as the code words for an Iraqi missile attack came blaring over the radio.

I can remember the fear in my daughter’s eyes as she cried hysterically from inside the sealed bassinet we had been supplied with by the army. It must have seemed like a nightmare to her, with both her parents in gas masks that made us look like monsters, trying to calm her down, barely audible to her through the masks and the sealed bassinet.

We heard the stories on the radio, night after night, as we sat through the missile attacks in our sealed room.

Thirty-nine missiles fell on the most heavily populated area in Israel, and yet there was not one direct casualty as a result of the bombs.

One story in particular stands out: a fellow was describing how, the night before, in the midst of the air raid sirens, he had to go to the bathroom, and was struggling with whether he should run into his sealed room, or go to the bathroom. Nature won out, and as he was in the bathroom, a tremendous explosion seemed to engulf him as the entire floor he was on seemed to explode. When he opened his eyes and the smoke cleared, he was amazed to find himself, still sitting on the toilet, looking out on the night skyline of Tel Aviv. His building had suffered a direct missile hit, and the entire top floor of his building, including the sealed room he was supposed to be in, was completely pulverized. All that remained was the tiny bathroom he happened to be sitting in....

Was it a miracle, or just a freak of nature? If G-d runs the world, aren’t miracles only natural? But then, since G-d created the world, all of nature is in fact miraculous.

A fascinating detail mentioned in this week’s portion, *Tzav*, sheds some interesting light on this subject.

“Ve’Ha’Esh Al Ha’Mizbeach Tukad Bo’; Lo’ Tichbeh.” “And the fire on the altar shall be set up (kept burning) on it; it shall not be extinguished.”

(“And the priest (Kohen) shall kindle wood on it every morning....”) (VaYikra Leviticus 6:5)

There is a special mitzvah described here, which relates to the *Mizbach Ha’Ketoret*, the altar used for the incense and the *Olah*, the whole burnt offering. There had to be a constant flame kindled on the altar. The Torah describes how the priests would keep it kindled and set it up every day, to ensure a continuous flame.

Indeed, this was such an important mitzvah, that the Torah actually repeats it again in the next verse:

“Esh Tamid Tukad Al Ha’Mizbeach; Lo’ Tichbeh.” “An eternal fire must be kindled (set up) on the altar; it cannot be extinguished.” (6:6)

Why the need for this repetition, when the Torah is normally so careful with its words, often relying on a single phrase to communicate entire volumes of tradition?

In fact, there are two sides to this mitzvah: that there must be an eternal fire and that it cannot be extinguished. It should be obvious that an eternal fire necessitates not being able to extinguish it! Both of these details are repeated, leaving us to wonder what the significance of this mitzvah really is.

And then there is the question as to the need for a constant or eternal fire; why not just light the fire when there are sacrifices to be consumed? Why must the fire be continuous? Even stranger is the fact that a closer look at what really transpired makes this entire commandment superfluous! The Torah, and certainly the oral tradition, makes it clear that there was a fire from heaven, which constantly kindled the fire on the altar, such that there was no *need* for the Kohanim (priests) to maintain the fire.

Although the Torah only mentions this on certain occasions, such as the dedication of the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle), (see VaYikra 9:24), the Talmud (Yoma 24b) makes it very clear that this was an ongoing occurrence, and learns from our verses that even though there was this miraculous heavenly fire which kindled the wood on the altar, there is nonetheless an obligation to bring fire from the natural world. In other words, G-d sets the wood on fire, but we have to add fire that we bring as well.

In which case, one wonders why G-d (or why we) bothers to bring down heavenly fire in the first place?

If G-d is performing a miracle, doesn't the fact that we are also lighting a fire reduce the power and the perception of that miracle? Won't this allow people to suggest that there was no miracle here, and that the fire is from man alone?

Indeed, the **Sefer HaChinuch** (The book of Knowledge, in Mitzvah 132, quoted by **Rav Avigdor Nevensahl** in his *Sichot Le'Sefer VaYikra*) suggests that this is precisely the point: Hashem wants us to help hide the miracles He is performing.

So why must miracles be hidden? Here too, Rav Avigdor suggests that there is a hidden danger inherent in the process of the miraculous when it is revealed, from two perspectives.

For the person who chooses to deny the existence of Hashem, or at least to live life as though Hashem does not exist, revealed miracles would remove his ability to make that choice. The greatest gift we are given in this world, and perhaps that which separates us from animals, is our ability to choose how we view the world. It is this freedom of choice, which imbues our lives with purpose, and elevates us above the base world of instincts and desires.

For the person who truly believes in the existence of Hashem, and in Hashem's involvement in the world, regularly seeing the miraculous almost reduces the effect of a miracle and blurs the difference between what is natural and what is truly miraculous. And if there is really no obvious difference, then miracles become only natural, and one loses the value of the impact a miracle might have.

It was, for example, the impact of the miracles surrounding the Exodus from Egypt, which gave the Jewish people the strength to leave their Egyptian masters behind and venture into the desert.

If all of those miracles had appeared to be natural, we might never have left Egypt, much less received the Torah....

For example, witness the mistake the generation of the Tower of Babel (the *Dor Ha'Haflagah*) made, despite having heard from direct eyewitnesses (Noach and his family) of the flood, and the dangers inherent in rebelling against G-d. The *Midrash* (Oral Rabbinic legend) implies that they believed the flood to be a natural occurrence, caused by the weak structure of the sky, and that they assumed this would occur again after the passage of another 1650 years. This was why they undertook to build four pillars, which would stabilize and hold up the sky, beginning with the eastern tower, in Babel! While this may seem ridiculous to us, it may well have been quite plausible to them.

Indeed, our nature is to attempt to rationalize that which we cannot explain; we are extremely uncomfortable with any occurrences that remain a mystery. The danger of the revealed miracle is how easy it is to transform it into a natural, rational, and even explainable event.

The *Chinuch* gives a wonderful example of this principle. The Torah tells us that the entire night before the splitting of the Sea, Hashem directed a “*strong easterly wind against the sea all night.*” (Shemot 14:21)

Why would Hashem need a wind? Perhaps, suggests the *Chinuch*, this wind would allow people to suggest that the Sea was really split because of favorable weather conditions (sound familiar?).

In other words, here too, Hashem seems to want to hide His miracles.

This was the challenge of the eternal fire on the altar: if the people continually perceived it as miraculous, they would very soon begin to take the miracle for granted, eventually assuming it to be natural. (People would just assume the altar to be some fantastic form of lightning rod....) And yet, it was important that the fire on the altar not be perceived as all natural, hence the fire from G-d.

Interestingly, this is the central idea of the Purim festival, which we have just celebrated. There were no obvious miracles in the story of Esther; in fact, the series of events that led to the salvation of the Jewish people were quite believable in the scheme of things.

Achashverosh becomes the king, and three years later as a result of a wild party (which all the Jews, or at least the Jews of Shushan, attend, despite the unkosher food and the improprieties very much in evidence) he has his wife executed. But it takes four years until Esther becomes the queen, and only five years later does Haman issue his infamous decree desirous of annihilating the Jewish people.

The central question of Purim is, despite the normal course of events, do we see (or rather, do we *choose* to see) the hand of G-d pulling the strings?

In fact, it is no accident that Haman, the chief protagonist is the direct descendant (and inheritor) of Amalek. When Amalek attacks the Jewish people, Hashem tells Joshua to assemble an army and meet the Amalekites in battle. And yet, as they fight, Moshe is standing up on top of the Mountain, holding his hands to the heavens, and only when his hands are raised high, does the army of Israel prevail, but as soon as his arms tire, the Amalekites seem to be winning.

So if the battle is dependant on the prayers of Moshe, demonstrating that the battle is in the hands of G-d, then why must the Jews go out to battle?

Here too, there is a convergence of the miraculous and the seemingly natural, leaving it up to us to decide whether we believe the battle was won by Joshua and his men, or by G-d.

This idea strikes to the core of what Amalek is all about. The verse in Deuteronomy (*Devarim*) describing the acts of Amalek in attacking the Jews says:

“*Asher **Korcha**’ Ba’Derech*” (Devarim 25:18) which literally means: “*Who **happened** across you*” (from the same root as *mikreh*: a coincidence or happening.).

But the Midrash suggests that Amalek **cooled off** (from the same root as **Kor, cold.**) The other nations (who were afraid of us) by suggesting that all the miracles Hashem had caused were only natural and easily explainable ‘scientifically’.

In other words, the battle between the Jewish people and Amalek, is about how we look at the world: is it all coincidence, or fate, or does Hashem really run the world. Is everything random, or is it all part of some larger plan?

Haman, in fact, throws lots to see when to destroy the Jewish people, and is thrilled when the dice fall on the month of Adar, which he knows to be the month of Moshe’s death. This must all be fate, just part of the natural flow of the universe and its astrological flow.

But Mordechai knows differently; for five years, ever since Esther was taken to the palace, he has been regularly, even *daily* (Esther 2:11) enquiring as to her welfare, waiting to see what Hashem’s plan will be. There must be a reason for all of this, because there are no coincidences; Hashem runs the world, and there is a purpose to everything under the sun.

Incredibly, though, when the terrible decree befalls the Jewish people and they are perched on the brink of annihilation, only Mordechai comes to the palace gates in sackcloth and ashes (4:1). The rest of the Jews of Shushan are nowhere to be found; they are too immersed in the culture of Persia, they are more Shushanites than Jews. Indeed, Esther has to tell Mordechai to go and gather all the Jews (4:15) of Shushan, because, unlike Jews everywhere else (4:3), the Shushan Jews just don’t get it.

They do not, it seems, connect their serious infractions in attending the feast of Achashverosh, because that was nine years ago!

But in the world of Mordechai there are no coincidences, and if Esther is in the palace, then there must be a reason, and our task is to try and see it, even embrace it.

This then, is the fire that must burn always on the altar, while we add our own kindling as well. We have to be willing to fight the battle of Yehoshua, but at the same time, we have to recognize that it is really the hands of Moshe, representing the plan of G-d, that wins the war. And in truth, it would be so much easier if there were only the hands of Moshe; then it would be so clear that Hashem runs the world. But as we explained, that wouldn’t last, because it wouldn’t be us finding and seeing G-d, it would be G-d revealing Himself to us, and Hashem wants us as His partners in creating this world, every day.

And so, every day, and any day, in that place that represented the heart and soul of the Jewish people, burned an eternal fire, representing the challenge we have, amidst all of life’s turmoil, to recognize; to really see, that Hashem runs the world.

And whether this fire burns, or is extinguished, is in the end up to us, and how we choose to see the world, hence the two separate injunctions in the verse.

And so Mordechai comes to Esther, in sackcloth and ashes, but she is so immersed in the world of the palace that she doesn't see what is really going on.

And he says to her: *"Who knows but that for this moment, you were arrived at the palace?"*

"And if you will be silent, salvation will come to the Jews from some other source." (4:14-15)

Mordechai is giving Esther a chance to see the plan, but he does not tell her the Jewish people are dependant on her, because if Hashem's plan is for the Jewish people to survive, then they will survive whether Esther does what she is meant to do, or not. The question is, what role Esther will play in that salvation? Will she choose to see Hashem in the world, and merit to be the instrument of the salvation of the entire Jewish people?

May Hashem give us the strength to see Hashem's hand in the world, because the act of seeing Hashem's hand everywhere in the world *is* the eradication of Amalek.

Shabbat Shalom,

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