

FREEDOM TO MAKE MORAL CHOICES

By Rabbi Moshe ben Asher, Ph.D. & Magidah Khulda bat Sarah

One of the problems some of us have as modern Jews is that, if we can't believe in the validity of our people's history, we find it difficult to imagine that the tradition has any practical relevance for our day-to-day lives.

Consider the problem of miracles, which we're inclined to think about, one way or another, during the Passover week. Parasha hashavua (weekly Torah reading) Beshalach describes the events surrounding our liberation from Egypt and our salvation at the Reed Sea. (Exodus 13:17-15:21)

On the one hand, most of us find ourselves uplifted by the story and the Passover celebration of our liberation. On the other hand, we don't want to think too much about the details of the story for fear that its implausibility will be more than we can swallow.

So the posture of modern Jewry, for the most part, is one in which we find the tradition valuable for establishing our identity, celebrating our peoplehood, and even occasionally stimulating our intellects, but rarely do we adopt it as the practical guide for our active daily life.

The significant issue of the events at the Reed Sea obviously has to do with their "miraculous" nature.

But was it a miracle or not?

In a way, it's unsatisfying to ask the question, because we have reliable reports of comparable phenomena in our own time. For example, a colleague posted the following report in 1997:

"I wanted to share with you an extraordinary event I was fortunate enough to witness yesterday. On Monday night, the same storm that delivered the snow to New England made itself felt here on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. Throughout the night there was a strong East wind. It blew throughout the night. When I awoke, the Chesapeake Bay had receded at least thirty feet, laying bare the dry land. The wind held back the wall of water as I watched my neighbor climb down a lad-

der walk around the docks that just hours ago had hovered over the water. The dry land extended as far north and south as the eye can see, and it remained that way all day. Parts of it were so dry that the wind kicked up dust storms from what is usually thick black mud. The water that separates this island from the mainland a little further north was also blown back and one could truly walk across the channel to the next town. It truly was a wonder and I'm grateful to have been privileged to have this gift—especially so close to Pesach. I wish each of you could have been here to share it with me." (Posted Wednesday, 2 April 1997 07:27:51-0500 EST on the Pnai Or/Aleph/Renewal Rabbinic List by Naomi Hyman.)

Were those events "miraculous"?

Certainly no more so than any other extraordinary phenomena of nature—earthquakes, floods, tsunamis, or volcanic eruptions—which we understand to be part of God's management of natural and human history.

Rabbi Yehuda Tzvi of Stretin (d. 1844) said, "A man must believe in miracles which happen *b'derech ha-tevah* (בדרך הטבע), not contrary to the laws of nature, and for everyone who believes that these miracles that happen in a natural way are truly miracles, the Holy-One-Blessed-be-He will perform supernatural miracles; for to the Holy-One-Blessed-be-He there is no difference between natural and supernatural miracles."

What makes such events extraordinary is not *that* they occur, but *when* they occur, *who* is present and *why*, and thus *what* their effects are on human life.

Rabbi Menahem Hacoen relates that, "A scientist once came to Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov [1698-1760], the founder of Hasidism, and told him, 'In my studies, I found that when the Jews crossed the Red Sea, the sea had to split, purely by natural means. What then is left of the famous miracle?'

“The Baal Shem Tov answered: ‘Don’t you know that God created nature? He created it so as to have the sea split just then, when the Children of Israel would cross it, and that is the great wonder.’” (*The Passover Haggadah—Legends and Customs*)

Thus in one respect, the so-called miraculous events at the Reed Sea are a diversion from the truly miraculous, which is that the people were *there*, at the sea at *that* moment, and *how* they got there.

We superficially treat as fact the Torah’s reporting of a series of prior events, which explain how the Hebrews found themselves at the edge of the Reed Sea after centuries of slavery. But, certainly, there is little or no extra-biblical evidence of those events—nothing that independently substantiates the existence of Moses, Aaron, Miriam, Yocheved, Shifra, Puah, the plagues, and the liberation.

So we’re left with a rather stark choice:

Either we believe that we were slaves in Egypt and that we were somehow liberated, whatever the variations of midrash and commentary on the details, which we are free to debate within the bounds of the tradition; or we believe that our history as a people, from its very inception, is not only a fiction, but a hoax perpetrated on later generations, including ourselves.

And, incidentally, to believe in the plausibility of the latter possibility, we have to believe that a people with a subsequently unbroken oral tradition of several thousand years was hoodwinked into believing facts not in the evidence of such a tradition. It presupposes that our *peoplehood* came centuries before our *purpose* as a people.

In effect, if we lived in the eighth or seventh centuries before the Common Era, knowing the supposed unremarkable oral tradition of our people, we would ignore that knowledge. Instead we would find credible a newly minted story about our miraculous redemption from slavery, an encounter with God at Mount Sinai, a 40-year sojourn in the desert, and successful settlement of the Promised Land—none of which was previously known to us orally. Gullible would barely begin to describe a whole people that would believe such things about their recent ancestors, with virtually none of it known to them beforehand, despite their oral tradition.

So let us assume that it’s at least as likely to believe the essentials of the Torah narrative—that we were slaves in Egypt and we were liberated—as it is to believe in the denial of those events by those who reject the scripture.

With this in mind, let’s return to the question of the “miracle”—what, precisely, it was.

Certainly there is not any compelling argument that the “*non-violent*” liberation of a whole slave people can in any sense be described as a “normal

course of events.” Short of an armed insurrection or liberation by an invading army, there is no reason to believe that the Hebrew slaves would have ever attained their freedom in the ancient Egyptian world. By the overwhelming rights, resources, and realities of the time, the Hebrew slaves should not have gained their freedom.

Thus we have put our finger on the heart of the “miracle”—that *God* brought us out of Egypt—but can we believe it?

We certainly don’t know how the Mastermind of all Creation masterminded those events—we never definitively understand such things, which is why our tradition has generated so many interpretations. What we do know, however, is that neither our oppressors nor us is to be credited with our liberation. Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888) teaches that, when Moses first went to Pharaoh, the “community of Israel [was] not yet in existence.” We didn’t remotely have the power and Pharaoh didn’t remotely have the reason to effect our liberation without the intervention of a “third party.”

And to add another irony to the picture, the tradition teaches that the plagues had as their real purpose, the spiritual education of Pharaoh and the Egyptian people. Certainly if we accept God as our liberator, it’s not unreasonable to assume He could have liberated us equally without the plagues as with them. But the plagues were necessary to liberate the Egyptian leaders and people—all of whom, including Pharaoh, were completely bound in their own form of slavery—to fix God in their consciousness. In effect, the means of our physical and spiritual liberation were to serve simultaneously as the means of the spiritual elevation and physical liberation of the Egyptians.

Under the circumstances, the Hebrews went out of Egypt *b’yad ramah* (בִּיד רַמָּה), with a “high hand.” We didn’t go out as beggars but as free human beings, no longer slaves in our own minds, neither dependent on nor answerable to anyone. Our emergence from Egypt as a free people meant that we were free to make moral choices, which is the only purpose of our freedom.

Afterwards we subjected ourselves to divine authority of our own free will. Whether this happened at Mount Sinai or, according to the skeptics, centuries later, we’ll leave for another *devar Torah*. But what’s obviously inescapable is that we traded our status as “slaves” of Pharaoh to become “servants” of God—both words have the same Hebrew root, ע-ב-ד, meaning “to work subject to another’s will,” first Pharaoh’s, then God’s. We consciously chose the *ol malchut shamayim* (עַל מַלְכוּת שָׁמַיִם)—Numbers Rabbah 14:6), the yoke of heaven, over the heathenism of the ancient world.

And we prefer to believe it was in anticipation of that yoke that we were taken across the Reed

Sea, which would not have been possible without spiritual slavery in Egypt.
the *miracle* of our liberation from physical and

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