

Parschas Beshalach 5772

NES (MIRACLES) AND TEVA (NATURAL OCCURRENCE): THE DIFFERENCE

The Talmudic records abound with accounts of great men who could be characterized as *melumadim b'nisim* (familiar with the miraculous). Choni Hamagil was one such individual. His ability to “summon” the rains is related in the Mishnah in Ta’anis (3:8):

מעשה שאמרו לו לחוני המעגל, התפלל שיגרו גשמים... התפלל ולא יגרו גשמים. מה עשה, עג עונה ועמד בתוכה, ואמר (לפניו), רבונו של עולם, בגיד שמו פניהם עלי, שאני קבו בית לפניך. נשבע אני בשמך הגדול שאיני זו מכאן, עד שתרחם על בניך. התחילו גשמים מנספין. אמר, לא כך שאלתי... התחילו לירד בוצע. אמר, לא כך שאלתי, אלא גשמי רצון, ברכה ונדבה. יגרו כתקון.

“It happened once that they said to Choni Hamagil, ‘Pray that rain should fall.’ He prayed, but no rain fell. What did he do? He formed a circle, stood within it and said before Him: ‘Master of the Universe! I hereby swear by Your Great Name that I will not move from here until You have mercy on Your children (by sending them rain).’ A few drops began to patter. (Resuming his prayers,) he said: ‘This is not what I requested...’ The rain turned into a furious downpour. Choni said: This (too) is not what I requested; rather, (I asked for) rains of appeasement, blessing and generosity.’ The rains then fell in the preferred fashion.” (The narrative there goes on to address the propriety of his petitioning tactics.)

In this capacity as “miracle worker,” Choni Hamagil is joined by many others. R’ Chanina reassured his daughter when she accidentally lit the Shabbos lights with vinegar instead of oil, “He Who said that oil shall burn, can just as well tell the vinegar to burn.” And this is exactly what happened (*Ta’anis 25a*). R’ Pinchas ben Yair commanded

a river that was blocking his way to split, and it complied (*Chullin 7a*). And the list goes on.

While these exploits may leave us feeling wistful and awed, they also may cause us to wonder: what is it, exactly, about these men that they merited to lead such “supernatural” lives? Is it simply a form of reward for their righteousness, or does the issue perhaps penetrate much deeper than that? And why do we not see or hear too much of such comparable activity these days?

A similar feeling of wistfulness may overcome us when contemplating such ancient miracles as the appearance of *mon* in this week’s *parshah*. Confined to a barren land, B’nei Yisrael were nevertheless provided with plenty, in the form of this miraculous substance they would discover each morning amongst the dew. The portions were attained with ease and were individualized to suit everyone’s particular fancy: the *mon* would assume the taste of whatever its eater would wish. (Wouldn’t this arrangement serve as an amazing and enjoyable solution to the current economic crisis!)

Although such notions are little more than a distant dream in most of our minds, the truth – asserts R’ Chatzkel Levenstein (*Ohr Yechezkel, Emunah*) – is that an almost identical situation does indeed exist today. We need only open our eyes, if merely just a bit.

A WORLD OF MON

Agricultural products make up a substantial part of our food intake. Fruits, vegetables, grain products – virtually all of our sustenance comes from the ground in almost endless variety.

But isn’t this phenomenon quite similar to that of the Jews in the desert? The supermarket boasts a huge selection of produce and products to appeal to all types of palates: sweet melons, tart apples, crisp lettuce, sharp radishes – to

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name a few out of countless options. And from where does this panoply of different delicacies all emerge? Dirt! Mud yields us our daily bread, side dishes and dessert, as well, in countless forms, shapes and tastes. In this respect, is our food situation so different from the *mon* experience?

In a similar vein, all everyday occurrences really share a common thread with the miracles of old. The *Michtav Mei'Eliyahu* (vol. I, pp. 177-183) goes so far as to state that there is actually *no inherent difference* between *nes* and *teva*; in fact, the very concept of “nature” is nothing more than a manufactured myth. Hashem’s Will is Hashem’s Will, no matter *how* it is carried out. The only difference is that we are accustomed to *teva*, while instances of *nisim* happen less frequently.

Imagine if we were to witness a resurrection at a burial site: Slowly but surely, from deep underground, a body begins to regenerate, with the development of limbs and flesh. Finally,

the surface dirt parts, and a full-grown person emerges to take his place amongst the living. Truly, a miracle to behold!

But how different is this event from the sprouting of a seed? When a seed is buried in the earth, its outer trappings begin to decompose. Yet, out of the decay of the seed casings, a stalk, or shrub, or tree emerges, to provide the glorious fruit of which was spoken earlier. Is this any less an act of “resurrection”? The only reason we are not “impressed” by the growth of a plant is because we see it every day. But if people would emerge from the ground on a daily basis, we would also call this a part of the “natural process”!

THE TEST OF “NATURE”

It is precisely to enable us to prove our spiritual mettle that Hashem has created such a “system.” According to the *Michtav Mei'Eliyahu*, the processes known as “nature” are intended to provide us with the ultimate test in *emunah* (faith): Will we perceive Hashem’s Hand bringing the rain and providing the sunshine, or will we fall prey to the delusion that somehow, these matters run of their own accord?

In light of the above, we can understand somewhat better how the great figures of antiquity merited to behold such overt, miraculous occurrences. Like every human being, they were also provided, initially, with the challenge of nature. But they consistently passed this test, recognizing the Hand of Hashem manifest all around them. And through persistent, hard work, they honed their “*emunah* skills” to the point that they clearly saw the embodiment of Hashem’s Will in every blade of grass and every aspect of their lives. At that point, there truly was no difference, in their eyes, between the miraculous and the natural. They perceived the fact that oil could burn and provide light as no less miraculous than the usage of vinegar for fuel. Having thus attained this heightened level of awareness, there was no longer a need for Hashem to conceal His Presence through the illusion of “natural process.” With no purpose in prolonging the challenge, Hashem simply suspended the usual “rules” of physics and nature when dealing with these accomplished believers – an option that is available, to some extent, to anyone who is prepared to reach for such heights.