

This month's study with
Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein



Miracles: God's Signs and Wonders



*He performs
wonders that
cannot be
fathomed,
miracles that
cannot be
counted*

—Job 5:9

David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first Prime Minister, once famously said: "In Israel, in order to be a realist, you must believe in miracles."

Miracles are central to both the Jewish and Christian faiths, and both biblical narratives are replete with miracles; God performing signs and wonders on our behalf. In truth, we are ever so dependent on God's grace and intervention in our lives.

As Basilea Schlink, a German theologian and founder of the Evangelical Sisterhood of Mary and *Fellowship* supporter, said, "For only when you have become utterly dependent upon prayer and faith, only when all human possibilities have been exhausted, can you begin to reckon that God will intervene and work His miracles."

But what exactly is a miracle, and why are some people confident that they see miracles everywhere while others maintain that they have never seen a single miracle? Is it imperative to both our faiths to believe that miracles still occur?

There is a famous story in the *Talmud*, the Jewish Oral Tradition that was written down, about the daughter of Hanina Ben Dosa, a revered teacher and scholar who lived in the Galilee during the 1st century CE, around the same time as Jesus. Rabbi Hanina was on his way to pray as the Sabbath began one Friday evening when he saw his daughter looking sad and despondent.

When he asked his daughter what was wrong, she explained that she had accidentally used vinegar to light the Sabbath lamps instead of oil. Since it is prohibited to kindle any fire on the Sabbath, it is imperative that lamps are lit in each home before the Sabbath begins. In addition, the light shed from these lamps is said to bring peace and holiness to the home.

Understandably, the young girl was upset

with her error. It was already the Sabbath so replacing the vinegar with oil was out of the question. She feared that because of her mistake there would be no Sabbath lights at all. Rabbi Hanina looked at his daughter and told her not to be afraid, that the same God Who declared that oil should burn could decide that vinegar could also burn. Indeed, those vinegar-filled Sabbath lamps burned not just through the night but for the following day as well, until the end of the Sabbath.

This powerful story teaches us that miracles are everywhere, if only we would see them. Oil burning is both just as miraculous and just as natural as vinegar giving way to flames. God could easily cause either to occur, and whether things happen as we might expect them to, or if they seem supernatural, everything is the result of God's doing. As Augustine, an early Christian theologian, explained it, "Miracles are not contrary to nature, but only contrary to what we know about nature."

Moreover, if it were not for miracles, both grand and small, both common and rare, none of us could survive in this world. As David Ben-Gurion so poignantly pointed out, the very existence of Israel and the survival of the Jewish people is a testament to our miracle-performing God.

Join us in this month's *Limmud* study as we explore the meaning of miracles. We will discover what defines a miracle and why God performs them when He does. We will study Jewish and Christian teachings that explain how we might relate to miracles. Finally, we will explore how we might receive the miracles we need as well.

Join our quest for understanding and inspiration regarding God's divine intervention in our lives and the wondrous works of His hands.

Rabbi Eckstein

The Reason for Miracles

Then the LORD said to Moses, “Go to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the hearts of his officials so that I may perform these signs of mine among them that you may tell your children and grandchildren how I dealt harshly with the Egyptians and how I performed my signs among them, and that you may know that I am the LORD.” — Exodus 10:1-2

A question that has bothered many scholars for centuries is: If everything is essentially a miracle, why does God at times choose to perform obvious, show-stopping miracles?

He can perform miracles secretly, as He does daily. He can steer the course of the world in any direction He chooses, as He does at all times, without anyone knowing it. In theory, God could have brought the Israelites out of Egypt through seemingly natural means – a natural disaster that destroyed Egypt, or some other divinely contrived scenario.

Why did God choose to bring His children out with signs and miracles, wonders and marvels?

God reveals the answer Himself in the Exodus narrative. Scripture reads: *“And the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring the Israelites out of it”* (Exodus 7:5). A few chapters later, we come across a similar statement. Regarding Pharaoh, God told Moses: *“I have hardened his heart and the hearts of his officials so that I may perform these signs of mine among them that you may tell your children and grandchildren how I dealt harshly with the Egyptians and how I performed my signs among them, and that you may know that I am the LORD.”*

In short, God performs miracles so that all – even those who were not firsthand witnesses – would believe and know Him as the one true God of Israel. It is an underlying principle found in the Christian Bible as well. In the book of John, Jesus performed his first public miracle, changing water into wine, so that *“his disciples believe in him”* (John 2:11). Similarly, according to the Christian Bible, God enabled Paul and Barnabas to perform *“signs and wonders”* as confirmation of their message (Acts 14:3).

In both the Jewish and Christian traditions, God’s work is often accompanied by, and accomplished through, miracles. In the Exodus story, God wanted to demonstrate to the Egyptians, the Israelites, and ultimately to the whole world, that He alone is God. Unlike the Egyptian pantheon, which included more than 2,000 deities, God’s miracles proved there is only one Who created the world and can do with it as He pleases.

Similarly, when Joshua began his conquest of the Holy Land, Jericho fell by supernatural means. After the

Israelites circled the seemingly impenetrable walls of Jericho seven times, the walls came tumbling down. In contrast, it seemed that human effort secured victory in the battles



Moses won while on his way to the Holy Land. While we know that God fought for the Israelites, He did so behind the scenes, where He would be unnoticed.

We see this in the battle against the Amalekites in Exodus 17:8-16, when Moses stood atop the hill with only the *“staff of God”* in his hands. As long as Moses kept the staff raised, the Israelites prevailed. But when Moses’ hands grew tired and he lowered the staff, the Amalekites rallied. Finally, Aaron and Hur came alongside and held up Moses’ hands until the Israelites were victorious.

Undoubtedly, God was fighting on behalf of the Israelites, but His presence was not evident to those on the battlefield. When it came to that initial battle of conquering Canaan, however, God wanted His presence clearly known. He was making a statement: He, and He alone, had given the land to the Israelites, and no one could stand in their way.

It makes sense then that the Hebrew word for “miracle” is *nes*. *Nes* can also mean a “banner,” something with a message that is held up for all to see, a sign. When God performs a *nes* it is so that we might take note of His statements, His work, His power. Indeed, following that victorious battle against the Amalekites, Moses built an altar and called it *“The LORD is my Banner”* (Exodus 17:15).

This being the case, we must consider all the miracles we have received in our lives with this perspective. We must view miraculous world events, such as the founding of the state of Israel, the return of the Jewish people to their homeland, and the battles that were inexplicably won against all odds, as the *nes* of God.

We must ask ourselves, both in our personal lives and in the global arena, “What statement is God making now? What work is He trying to accomplish in my life?” If we are blessed to witness a miracle, it is our responsibility to see the message behind it and respond accordingly.



Recognizing God's Wonders

Give thanks to the Lord of lords:

His love endures forever.

to him who alone does great wonders,

His love endures forever.

— Psalm 136: 3-4

Albert Einstein once said, “There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle.”

Einstein addressed a point that all believers can understand – if God is the source of everything, then what is the difference between the rising of the sun or the parting of the sea? Both are manifestations of the word of God; both are miracles. The difference? One happened one time, the other happens every day.

Indeed every moment, every breath, and everything that happens every day, is nothing less than miraculous. As the psalmist wrote, “*Who can list the glorious miracles of the LORD? Who can ever praise him half enough?*” (Psalm 106:2, NLT) In his book, *Miracles: A Journalist Looks at Modern Day Experiences of God's Power*, Christian writer Tim Stafford wrote, “Everything that happens in creation is pregnant with the power and the presence of God. Nowhere you can go escapes him. Nothing that happens, happens apart from his will. Everything is natural and supernatural at the same time.”

If you believe, like I do, that miracles happen every day, we can differentiate between three types of miracles. First, there are those things that happen all the time. These are the events we call natural and attribute to nature. These include our ability to open our eyes and see, a baby being born, or the crops that grow after we plant seeds and water them. Although these wonders are divinely ordained, they are common and expected. Most of these events are taken for granted.

We read in Psalm 19:1, “*The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.*” Again in Psalm 97:6, the psalmist reminds us, “*the heavens proclaim his righteousness, and all peoples see his glory.*” The Apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans declared that nature reveals the character of God to us. (See Romans 1:19-20.) God's miraculous handiwork is evident for all to see – if only we would pay attention.

Some miracles are hidden. God does many extraordinary things for us daily, only we don't know about them. The story of Balak, the Moabite king, and Balaam, the sorcerer, from Numbers 23 is a wonderful example of God's hidden miracles. Balak wanted the Israelites destroyed and had hired Balaam to curse the nation of Israel. But each time Balaam opened his mouth to curse Israel, God intervened miraculously, and only blessings came out. Yet, the Israelites were completely unaware of both the danger they

were in and of God's miraculous salvation for them.

How many times a day does God save us from disaster or cause things to come together for the good? Unlike “nature,” these miracles are extra-ordinary, requiring divine intervention, only we do not see them as such. I recognize this in my daily prayers, in which I thank God “for Your miracles that are with us every day; and for your wonders and favours in every season – evening, morning, and afternoon.”

The third type of miracle is the type most people think of – the eye-opening, obvious, and wondrous. They range from the parting of the sea during the Exodus to Israel's miraculous victory during the 1967 Six-Day War, to the many miracles that Jesus and the apostles performed in the Christian Bible. These miracles are what people refer to when someone survives what should have been a fatal disease or car crash or have experienced a sudden turn of fortune, what we call in Hebrew, *nes nighleh* (a blatant miracle).

Regardless of the type of miracle – natural, hidden, or revealed – our job as believers is to see all of God's miracles in our lives. The more that we can see them, the more we will receive them.

think about it...

1. Consider the major events in your life, such as finding a spouse, securing a job, being accepted into a particular school or program, etc. In what ways have hidden miracles played a role in those events?
2. Many have maintained that every birth, every breath, and every day is a miracle. Do you agree or disagree? How important to your faith is it to believe in miracles?
3. How might you find ways to become more aware of the miracles God is constantly performing in our lives? How might you inspire others to do the same?
4. Think about the miracles of the Bible. Which miracles come to mind? What message do you think God is giving to us today through His miracles?
5. Think about miracles that we are witnessing in our own times, such as the rebirth of the modern state of Israel and the ingathering of the Jewish exiles to the Holy Land. What message may God be conveying to us now?



Receiving our Miracles

“I am the LORD, the God of all mankind. Is anything too hard for me?”

– Jeremiah 32:27

Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” — Matthew 19:26

A question many people ask today is: “Where did all the miracles go? Are miracles still happening?”

We read in the Bible how God parted the sea for the Israelites, how He made the sun stand still for Joshua, how the manna rained down from the heavens, and so many more miracles unlike anything we experience today. Many folks are not even asking for a miracle of biblical proportions – just a miracle that would allow a loved one to be healed or put food on the table.

If nothing is too hard for God, how can we receive the miracles we are looking for?

First, we must understand that there is no magic formula; God is not the proverbial genie in a bottle. In addition, we must keep in mind that as difficult as it is for us to understand, what we think we need might not really be the thing we need right now. And the opposite could be equally true. What we are sure is a curse could very well end up being our greatest blessing. We must approach our requests for miracles with humility.

That said, the answer is yes, we can be a part of our own miracle-making, but it often starts with faith.

We see this repeatedly throughout the Bible. As Joshua was about to lead the Israelites into the Promised Land, they stood on the banks of the flood-ravaged Jordan River. Yet in faith, the priests carrying the ark of the covenant obediently walked into the river as God had commanded Joshua. The Bible records, *“as soon as the priests who carried the ark reached the Jordan and their feet touched the water’s edge, the water upstream stopped flowing...all of Israel passed by until the whole nation had completed the crossing on dry ground”* (Joshua 3:15-17).

Faith can bring about miracles. We see this in the Christian Bible as well. For example, when Jesus healed the woman who had been hemorrhaging for 12 years and who had reached out to touch the *tzitzit* (fringe) of his prayer shawl, he said to her: *“Take heart, daughter ... your faith has healed you.”* (See also Matthew 8:13 and 9:29; Mark 10:52; Luke 17:19 and 18:42 for other examples.)

Our supporters are a testament to faith-producing miracles. Consider the story of Mike and Kenna, a couple who for years lived paycheque to paycheque from the meager profits of their furniture store. One night they came across one of my early infomercials on TV, asking Christians to help bring Jewish exiles home to Israel. They immediately acted on faith and began giving enough to send one Jew home per month. That lasted for about a year, when their finances took a downturn. As Kenna recalls, “I prayed, ‘Lord why

have we been allowed to look like the tail when your Word says we are the head? We are your children. I have faith that your Word will manifest in our lives, because your Word never fails.”

The next day, a woman walked into their store and ordered enough furniture for 18 condominiums in Florida. Her one order far exceeded what their showroom could even hold. From that one sale, their previous goal of sending one Jew home per month turned into helping 20 needy Jews come home to Israel in a single month.

I pray that we will have the faith to help bring about the miracles we are looking for in our lives. And when we do receive our miracles, that we remember it is our sacred duty to share God’s wonders with the world.

As we read in Psalm 9:1, *“I will give thanks to you, LORD, with all my heart; I will tell of all your wonderful deeds.”*

apply it...

1. **KEEP A “MIRACLE” JOURNAL.** At the end of each day, write down a brief summary of the day’s events. From time to time, re-read your entries and see if you can detect the awesome hand of God guiding your life. (Psalm 111:2; Revelation 15:3)
2. **PRAISE GOD FOR EVERYDAY MIRACLES.** Just because water flows from our tap and we have food in our refrigerator every day doesn’t make those experiences any less worthy of our praise. Praise God for everything from the miracle of the rising sun to the ability to heat our homes. (Psalm 113:3; Ephesians 1:3)
3. **ASK FOR YOUR MIRACLE.** When we pray to God and ask for miracles, we demonstrate our faith in Him. While there is no guarantee that we will receive our request, God tells us to bring all our requests and concerns to Him. (Psalm 81:10; Matthew 7:7-8)
4. **GO ON A WONDER WALK.** Walk in a nearby forest, on a beach, or just around your neighbourhood, and notice God’s magnificent wonders. Take time to breathe in the beauty and exhale with thanksgiving. (Psalm 19:1; Romans 1:20)
5. **SHARE YOUR MIRACLE STORY.** In Jewish tradition, one who has received a miracle is encouraged to share his or her story. This glorifies the name of God, inspires faith in others, and encourages others to praise Him as well. (Psalm 9:1; Matthew 15:31)
6. **BELIEVE.** Remember that with God all things are possible. Never give up hope; the miracle you are seeking may be just around the corner. (Jeremiah 32:27; Luke 18:27)