

Ordinary Miracles **[from Shabbat Chanukah 5773]**

On this day, Shabbat and the seventh night of Chanukah coincide. Chanukah, the Festival of Lights, celebrates miracles. The Chanukah addition to the Amidah begins:

Al Hanism V'al Hapurkan V'al Hagevurot V'al Ha t'shuot V'al Hamilchamot Sh'asitah Lavotenu Bayimin Hahem Bazman Hazeh ... for the miracles and for the deliverance and for the bravery and for salvation and for the (military) victories which you wrought for our ancestors in those days at this season.

These liturgical words embed a long-recognized ambivalence about the essential nature of this holiday and the miracles it would have us recall. Does it celebrate an unlikely military triumph featuring action heroes and the like? Or does it remind us that even in the darkest days, there is light, real light or, if you prefer, metaphorical light, the sort of light that burns within a human heart? The earliest, contemporaneous accounts of the events feature improbable military victories on the part of outnumbered but courageous fighters. However, the much later but oft-told tale of the miracle of the single cruise of oil that outlasted its one day expectancy by an eightfold factor celebrates a spiritual quality.

Over history, Jews have at times favored one or the other version or some combination, depending on circumstances. Rabbis have often sought to downplay the military origins of the holiday for many reasons, among them a not entirely favorable assessment of the Hasmoneans, the family name of the Maccabees. Today many of us might well regard such a clan as fanatical. During times of powerlessness and times of anti-Jewish persecution, it was often not the military heroism of the Maccabees that took this holiday's center stage but rather stories of spiritual strength and resistance such as that of Hannah and her children who chose to die rather than engage in idolatrous worship.

In the Diaspora, Jews could often relate more to a minor miracle of long burning oil than to brave warriors. However, in historical periods when we Jews have become embattled and had the capacity to look to our physical self-defense, the Maccabees have presented themselves as available role models, images of courage and hope. Thus have the Maccabees made a comeback in the Jewish conscience during the last century as we Jews have struggled to establish and maintain a nation in the ancient homeland of Israel.

Thus, the nature of the miracle being celebrated depends in large part on the social and historical context of the Jew who stands ready to light his or her chanukiah. But whether one emphasize the miracle of the battlefield or that of the long-burning oil, the holiday puts one in mind to consider the nature and role of miracles in human experience. On that, a few reflections arise from turning to the *Siddur*, the Jewish prayer book that serves, if we allow it, as our guide for mindful attention paid to the divine presence in the world around us.

One finds the idea of miracle – in the sense not of events that appear supernatural but rather those that excite awe or wonder – throughout the siddur, beginning with the very first prayer of the day, the one meant to be said upon awakening: “*Modeh Ani L’fanecha Melekh Chai V’kayam Shechezarta Bi Nishmati Chemlah Rabbah Emunatecha* – I am grateful to You, ever-living Sovereign, for returning my soul to me. How great is your faith!” Let me retranslate: “Wow! Look! I am still alive! Jumping Jehosephat! Thank you, God, for trusting me so much as to grant me yet another day!”

The *Modeh Ani* prayer expresses an appreciation for life as a miraculous and undeserved gift, an appreciation that constitutes, in the term coined by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, of blessed memory, radical amazement. Heschel associates radical amazement with the human disposition of wonder and regards that disposition as necessary for a clear perception of reality and of the divine presence in that reality. In his words:

Awareness of the divine begins with wonder. It is the result of what man does with his higher incomprehension. The greatest hindrance to such awareness is our adjustment to conventional notions, to mental clichés. Wonder or radical amazement, the state of maladjustment to words and notions, is therefore a prerequisite for an authentic awareness of that which is. (From Abraham Heschel’s *God in Search of Man*)

"Wonder or radical amazement [which I would equate with attentiveness to or appreciation of the miracles that surround us always]... is a prerequisite for an authentic awareness of that which is." To Heschel, our capacity to perceive the miraculous in the ordinary permits clarity of thought and heightened experience within daily life.

A little further along in the siddur, one comes to a series of one-line prayers, *brachot* (meaning they each begin with the formulaic phrase *Baruch Attah Adonai Eloheni Melekh Ha-olam* – Blessed are You Adonai Our God Sovereign of the

Universe followed by the theme of the prayer). The Talmud refers to this section as *Birkot Nisim B'chol Yom*, the blessing prayers for the miracles that we encounter every day. The very naming of this list reinforces the notion that Jewish prayer aims to slow us down, to cajole us into noticing the easily ignored gifts that we receive each and every day.

Especially when my instinct for wonder is low, our tradition helps me restore a greater balance by setting the proposition before me: miracles surround us ... always. Life, in all its details, is a wondrous miracle. The first in this series of brachot praises God for the crowing roosters, the alarm clocks of nature that arouses us to greet the day and notice the strange and precious moment of sliding from sleep consciousness to awake-but-only-partially-alert mode. It is as if to say: "Thanks, God, for the amazing restoration of my weary self that comes with restful sleep and now the opportunity to face a new day with new energy."

Another bracha praises God for making one a *Ben* or a *Bat Cholim*, free; and another for releasing the bound; and another for clothing the naked; another for lifting up the fallen. My collective translation for all of them: "Thanks, God, for the grace and good luck to live in a country where, for all its faults and imperfections, there is the rule of law, where conflicts are usually fought over in political campaigns and in the messy and awkward legislative process and not on fields of battle. Thanks for the good luck of a somewhat functioning brain and a mostly pain free body and a job and friends and an intact family and enough food to eat and a house that keeps me dry and warm and clothes to wear and leisure to play and so much more. All of these are undeserved gifts, ordinary miracles, if you will. Let me now pause, take note, and express my appreciation for them. "

Another *bracha* thanks God for giving sight to the blind. This particular daily miracle took on a newly poignant meaning for me the day I obtained my first pair of glasses at the age of forty-something. Before then, I had become accustomed to good, unaided eyesight. However, its decline and restoration with glasses heightened my sense of awe for the amazing capacity of vision that I had previously largely taken for granted.

Mary Oliver's poem "Mindful" captures the Jewish perspective on ordinary miracles.

Every day
I see or hear
something

that more or less

kills me

with delight,

that leaves me

like a needle

in the haystack

of light.

It is what I was born for---

To look, to listen,

to lose myself

over and over

in joy,

and acclamation.

Nor am I talking about the exceptional,

the fearful, the dreadful,

the very extravagant---

but of the ordinary,

the common, the very drab,

the daily presentations.

Oh, good scholar,

I say to myself,

How can you help

but grow wise

with such teachings

as these---

the untrimmable light

of the world,

the ocean's shine,

the prayers that are made

out of grass?

As we near the end of this festival of light on this day full of so many ordinary miracles, may we allow them to "kill us with delight" as we "lose ourselves to joy and acclamation" and "grow wise with such teachings."