

Sermon: Parshat Tzav & Shabbat HaGadol

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Rabba and Rabbi Zeira wanted to get together for a celebratory Purim feast. Following the talmudic dictum of *ad d'lo yada*, drinking until one cannot distinguish between Blessed Mordecai and Cursed Haman, Rabba and Rabbi Zeira drank too much. In their drunken stupor, Rabba killed Rabbi Zeira. Waking up the next day and realizing this grave mistake, Rabba prayed to God, and Rabbi Zeira was miraculously revived.¹ It was a Purim miracle! Why am I telling a story about Purim on this eve of Passover? Two reasons. First of all, the events of the Purim story actually take place during the Pesach season. We celebrate Purim on the 14th of Adar, the date when the Jews of Persia were to be slaughtered, but instead were saved. But the narrative itself takes place during Nisan, even during Passover. Beyond the calendrical association, there is also the theme of miracles. Many of our holidays encompass the celebration of miraculous events: the oil on Hannukah, the saving of the Persian Jews on Purim, the plagues and the splitting of the Sea of Reeds on Passover. Miraculous events remind us that God's metaphorical hand is at work in this world, and thereby stir within us a deeper sense of trust and faith in God.

Let us turn to a different Passover miracle. According to Rabbi Ya'akov ben Asher, the author of the *Arba'ah Turim*, a great miracle happened for our ancestors in ancient Egypt shortly before the exodus.² In the Torah, the Israelites were instructed to take a goat into their homes on the 10th day of Nisan, which coincided with Shabbat that year. When the Egyptians saw this, they came to the Israelites and asked why they were doing this. The Israelites proudly

¹ Talmud Bavli, Megillah 7b.

² Arba'ah Turim, Orech Chayyim 430.

declared: God commanded us to slaughter these goats as a Pesach offering. The Egyptians were horrified; the goat was a revered Egyptian deity. How could these Israelite slaves round up all of these revered animals and slaughter them as a sacrifice to their God? Alas, by a miracle of God, the Egyptians were unable to stop them. The Israelites' demonstrated their faith in standing up to the Egyptians, and God intervened to protect them. And that is one of the reasons why we call today Shabbat HaGadol, the Great Sabbath, because on it God performed a *great* miracle to protect the Israelites, allowing them to fulfill the command to offer the paschal sacrifice.

You may have to search hard to find it, but you can also find a miracle in this week's *parsha*, Parshat Tzav. After providing additional instructions about sacrificial offerings, God addresses Moses and says, "Take Aaron along with his sons, and the vestments, the anointing oil, the bull of sin offering, the two rams, and the basket of unleavened bread; and assemble the whole community (וְאַתְּ כָּל־הָעֵדָה הַקְהֵל) at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting."³ The whole community?! Aren't there hundreds of thousands of Israelites in the community? Ibn Ezra offers a solution to the problem: that "the whole community" refers to the heads of the tribes and the elders. In other words, it refers to the leaders who *represent* the whole community. But Rashi takes a markedly different approach. Reading the text literally he suggests that this is one of the instances in the Torah where the smaller encompassed the larger. In other words, a miracle took place, somehow expanding the *smaller* area at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting such that the *larger* community was able to stand there together. A miracle!

Ibn Ezra's explanation is certainly more rational, but sometimes when we plumb the depths of our tradition, it is not logic or rationality for which we search. Sometimes, we seek

³ Leviticus 8:2-3.

the miraculous, the wondrous, the moments when God's Divine Presence is made manifest in our world. On this Shabbat HaGadol, when we recall the miracles that God brought in Egypt, it is particularly fitting that we embrace this miracle of Parshat Tzav: the expansion of the courtyard before the Tent of Meeting so that the whole community of Israel, each and every individual, could stand before Moses and God.

Miracles tend to respond to needs. The Sea of Reeds was split to allow the Israelites to safely escape the Egyptian army. The oil in the Temple lasted eight days to allow the Maccabees to fully recommit themselves to the sacred work of the Temple service. But why was it so important that each Israelite stand before the Tent of Meeting in our parsha? After all, you have been following along and probably noticed that the parsha is full of details about sacrifices and offerings, a domain occupied by the priests, not by the people. But what follows the assembly of the people is the ordination ceremony of the priests—Moses conducts a ceremony that establishes the priests in their roles. We take this for granted because we know the rest of the story! But for the Israelites, Aaron and his sons were just Moses' relatives. The people must see and know that it was God who instructed Moses to ordain Aaron and his sons as priests. This was not nepotism; it was by God's divine instruction. And to ensure that all future generations honored the role of the priests (and also held them accountable for their responsibilities), all must stand there to bear witness to this momentous event. The miracle of the expansion of the courtyard was to ensure that all would witness this sacred moment.

In our day, when God does not part seas (or free cargo ships stuck in canals), when God does not act in the world as anthropomorphically as God does in the Torah, what then should be our approach to miracles? On Purim and Hanukkah we recall the miracles of those days, but

what about today? If a loved one is ill, do I pray for a miracle? If I have some other personal need, is it too much to ask God to intervene? The answers to these questions are complicated.

Let us return to that Purim story I shared in the beginning. When we left that story, God had just brought Rabbi Zeira back to life. But the story does not end there. A year later, when Rabba was preparing for Purim, he once again invited his “friend” Rabbi Zeira for the festive meal. But this time, Rabbi Zeira did not enthusiastically accept the invitation. Instead, he said to Rabba, *לֹא בְּכֹל שְׂעֵתָא וְשְׂעֵתָא מִתְרַחֵישׁ בִּיָּסָא*, “Miracles do not happen at each and every moment!” They were lucky last year, but they should not count on it again this year. This sentiment, not to rely upon miracles, shows up in other places in our tradition as well. As much as we celebrate, remember, and appreciate the miracles of the past, we are taught that we should not necessarily rely on miracles for the future.

I share one more tale that sheds light upon this quandary. The Talmud teaches us that when the Israelites came to offer their Pesach sacrifice at the Temple, they came in three shifts.⁴ Within each shift there could be many people, so when the courtyard was filled to capacity, the gates would close to prevent a dangerous situation of overcrowding. Abaye and Rava, two sages in the Talmud, debate about what actually took place: Abaye says that the doors miraculously closed on their own when the courtyard was filled, whereas Rava says that the people would close the doors themselves when the courtyard was full. Therefore, Abaye says that we can rely on miracles, *וְסִמְכִיבֵן אֲנִיָּסָא*, whereas Rava says that we should not.

In my life, I try to follow both Abaye and Rava. Like Abaye, I pray for miracles. I hope for things to be better. I have faith that they will. I rely on God to act in this world in a miraculous

⁴ Talmud Bavli Pesachim 64a-b.

way. And, like Rava, I believe that we must take action rather than sitting around and waiting for it to happen. We have to jump in and take the first step, rather than just waiting around for the miracle to appear. You all know that there is a lot to fix in our world. On my mind is the unbearable gun violence of these past few weeks, and the recalcitrance of lawmakers and leaders to do anything substantive about it. It feels like it will take a miracle to fix this, and many other problems that we face. And, like Abaye, I believe that we can and should pray for that miracle. But, like Rava, I cannot accept that we should sit around and wait for the miracle to take shape before our eyes. We must be like Nachshon, who in the *midrash* takes the first step into the Sea of Reeds, even before the winds blew and God caused the sea split. We hope and pray that God will come close to us with miracles, but we also have to do the work of stepping forward and laying the foundation upon which these modern miracles will flourish. We may not recite *Al HaNisim*, the prayer acknowledging God's miracles, today or on Passover, but on this Shabbat HaGadol, as we approach the end to the pandemic, brought about by a miraculous worldwide effort to develop vaccines and technologies to help us forward, we are reminded that God does act in the world today: God acts in partnership with each and every one of us. If only we can muster the courage to step forth into the sea... Shabbat shalom and an early *chag kasher v'sameach*.