

Miracles
Parashat Beshallah
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My graduating class at JTS commissioned an artist to create this piece of artwork.

The names of all the rabbis and cantors ordained or invested that day are in the center. And along the border, we each picked one pasuk, one verse from anywhere in biblical or rabbinic literature that was a personal favorite or expressed something in our hearts that day. (here's Rabbi Perkins' -- you might not be surprised to learn it's from Pirke Avot, but I'll let you ask him directly about it.)

Here is the verse that used to be my favorite, a verse that we will read next week, just before the giving of the Ten Commandments: *Va-esa etchem al kanfei nesharim va-avi etchem eilai*. I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to Me. This image still confounds and dazzles me. {Confounded because I have to wonder, why this metaphor? Why do we need to be carried?} Nevertheless, I am dazzled by the poetry. Can you picture this majestic eagle, its wings spread commandingly wide as it soars through the sky? It really is an awe-inspiring vision. Can you picture the power, the expansiveness of the eagle high above the other birds of the sky? Now imagine the Israelites perched atop those mighty wings, cradled lovingly as they are carried effortlessly to redemption.



Once we can envision this picture we can ask, what is the meaning of this metaphor? What are these wings that carried b'nai Yisrael? Rashi's image is one of great tenderness coupled with God's power: — as an eagle which bears its fledglings upon its wings. Scripture uses this metaphor because all other birds place their young between their feet since they are afraid of another bird that flies above them, but the eagle fears none except man -who might cast an arrow at it — since no bird can fly above it; therefore he places it (its young) on its wings, saying, “Better that the arrow should pierce me than my young!” ([Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael 18:4:3](#)). — “This is what I did, says God.”

According to Hak'tav V'hakabala, this transport on eagles' wings is a quintessential miracle: {as he writes} “The Holy, Blessed One raised b'nei Yisrael up at the time of the Exodus by directing all their affairs in a miraculous manner, splitting the sea, giving manna and so on, all miraculous things out of the ordinary from what the natural world behaves.... The raising was above the ways of the world.” This is the type of miracle with which we are most familiar in Torah – God upturning the laws of nature to bring us to salvation.

I love that Maya taught us today how we can look at miracles. She and I have different takes on the miraculous status of for example, trees. I don't see a tree as an example of a miracle. The size and majesty of trees may surprise and

impress us, but I view them as expressions of God's power, not an aberration, not something unexpected in nature. I'll have more to say about that later.

But listen, Maya, I agree with you 100% that if we wait around for God to split seas, or otherwise perform miraculous interventions we are likely to be disappointed. Thank you for noting that God may have partners in the unfolding of a miracle.

In fact, it is for that very reason that I now have a pasuk that speaks to me more than the one I chose many years ago. And it's from today's parsha, right there where you focused: *ma titzak alai?* Why are you crying out to Me?

In another indelible image, Moshe and the Israelites are trapped between the might of Pharaoh's army bearing down from behind and the impassible Sea of Reeds ahead. Moshe counsels the terror-stricken Israelites to have no fear: *hityatz'vu u'ru et yeshu-at haShem* - "Stand by and witness the deliverance which the Lord will work for you today....The Lord will battle for you. *Ve'atem tacharishoon*. Hold your peace." This passive stance, this willingness to rely on God's miracle, turns out not to be what God has in mind. "*Mah titzak alai?*" Why are you crying to Me to resolve this?" What's your part in this redemption? God asks. *N'tei et yadcha* – hold out your arm over the sea and split it." I suppose I was inclining toward this verse anyway, but it was clinched as my new favorite this time last year. You may recall that last year, as congregations all over the world

were reading this very Torah portion, Parshat Beshallach, Rabbi Charlie Cytron Walker and his congregants at Beth Israel in Colleyville Texas, were taken hostage by a gunman. Bayamim hahem bazman hazeh, in those days at this time, we all watched a miracle unfold.

If Rabbi Charlie was redeemed by eagles' wings, they were wings of his own creation. Rabbi Charlie credits the grace of God for his safe escape. With no disrespect to the Kadosh Baruch Hu intended, I think **this** redemption had much to do with the actors on the ground. That is, I know it felt miraculous that all the hostages escaped physically unharmed. But the wings that carried them to safety were not like those that carried b'nei Yisrael, an uprooting of the ways of the world. Rabbi Charlie and his congregants made their own miracle. His non-anxious presence, his ability to humanize himself and the congregants to the assailant. The wings that carried the hostages out of that building were fashioned of courage and quick thinking in the face of real danger, the exact timing of a well-placed chair. The wings were created by hours of emergency training by the ADL and the Secure Community Network. Those wings were built in part by the immediate and full throttled response of the FBI, the North Texas Police, and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, among other agencies on the scene. Those wings were made of the generous wisdom of Rabbi Angela Buchdahl in New York who spoke repeatedly with the hostage taker. In

partnership with law enforcement, in relationship with local interfaith leaders and deeply rooted in faith and prayer, the hostages of Congregation Beth Israel created their own miracle. The miracle we witnessed *bayamim hahem bazman hazeh* was brought about through the efforts from this world and the world above.

La samchinan anisana: We are taught we do not rely on miracles. But sometimes we are called to partner with G. and help create our own miracle.

In addition to Shabbat Shira (and the celebration of Maya becoming a bat mitzvah) today has been designated nationwide as Refugee Shabbat, a moment for congregations, organizations, and individuals in the United States and around the world to dedicate a Shabbat experience to refugees and asylum seekers. This year marks a dubious milestone: for the first time ever, the total number of displaced persons globally is over 100 million.

You likely know, or know of, Reza Jawidan and Rauf Rostani, whom our congregation has more than adopted, taken into our hearts. Reza is here today, celebrating as his friend Maya becomes bat mitzvah. In six weeks, when we celebrate Men's Club Shabbat, Reza and Rauf will share with us the story of their journey. I will just say today, in recognition of Refugee Shabbat, that these two men, when they had barely become men, created their own miracle. The wings that carried them to safety were of a US airlift, but assuredly, Reza and Rauf did not wait passively for redemption, but partnered with volunteers, with allies human and divine, to set in

motion their safe passage. We will all be eager to hear them share their story on Men's Club Shabbat on March 18. I will note one detail, which I am sure they do not know. Reza and Rauf arrived in their new home in Massachusetts just over a year ago, mid-January of 2022, the week of Parshat Beshallah. The same week that Rabbi Charlie hurled a chair at his captor and rescued himself and his congregants, the same week that we read of Moshe extending his arm to aid in the splitting of the sea, these two refugees began their new lives in their new home, and in our hearts.

Refugee Shabbat celebrates the gumption, the courage to acknowledge that we are not meant to live in slavery, or oppression, or terror. And if God will not carry us from oppression on eagles' wings, then we had best look for our own role in our redemption.

Reza and Rauf, Rabbi Charlie Cytron Walker and Moshe Rabbenu remind us not to wait for G. to swoop down and rescue us, but to stretch out our arm. *Mah titzak alai?* What are you waiting for? Set your own redemption in motion.

Charge:

Maya, you and I do not completely agree on how to define a miracle. I hope that's okay with you. It's more than okay with me. I respect your definition and the thoughtful process by which you reached it.

So let me say this: in life there are many things—creations, milestone moments, accomplishments that are not miraculous but are nevertheless worthy of appreciation and awe (yay and wow).

The celebration of today's milestone is not a miracle. No laws of nature were upended, nor was there a fortuitous alignment of time and place. It is, rather, the result of hard work and appreciation of the significance of this day.

You studied, you taught, you led with seriousness, maturity and deep kavana. You moved our hearts and challenged our thoughts. You **lit up** this bima. It was not a miracle, but it was inspirational, and it was awesome.