

**“Do You Believe in Magic?”**  
**Parashat Miketz**  
**Rosh Hodesh Teveth**  
**Shabbat Hanukkah**  
**December 8, 2018**  
**Rabbi Carl M. Perkins**  
**Temple Aliyah, Needham**

Today is an interesting anniversary for me. On this day in 1980, I was hit by a truck. Actually, that’s not precise. I was riding a bicycle on Mass Ave in front of MIT, and I was crushed between a truck and a parked car.

A lot of bones were broken. I was in the hospital for 31 days. I couldn’t walk for a while. But eventually, I regained my my strength and agility, and I still ride my bicycle now and then.

Last week, I met with our 7th graders, and I said to them: Judaism is a religion. It’s incompatible with magic and magical thinking.

I got some pushback: As one student put it, “There are lots of stories in the Bible that describe miracles.” That kid had a point! How can you say that ours is a faith that decries magical thinking -- when stories of miracles abound in the Bible and in our tradition?

And there’s no holiday like Hanukkah to exemplify that.

After all, the central ritual of Hanukkah is to light the menorah.

And if you ask, “Why? Why do we light the menorah?” The answer, seemingly, is simple. The purpose of lighting the menorah is “*pirsuma d’nisa*” -- to proclaim the miracle. So it would seem obvious: *Of course* we believe in miracles! What are you doing telling us that religion and magic are incompatible?



But already there's a hint that this isn't so simple when we realize that the Talmud does not describe precisely *what* the miracle of Hanukkah was: Was it the oil lasting longer than expected? Was it the unlikely military victory? And nowhere does it define the word "miracle": Does it refer to a supernatural event taking place? Or an unlikely but *not* supernatural event taking place?

The problem is compounded when we look closely at the way that we tell the story of Hanukkah in the liturgy.

We have lots and lots of special prayers for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. So many that we need a separate book to pray out of on the High Holidays. We have a fair number of special prayers in honor of the three pilgrimage festivals -- Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot. When it comes to Hanukkah, we have only one prayer. Only one. One small paragraph that we include in each of the *amidot* that we recite on Hanukkah. It's called the "Al HaNisim." The next time we'll see it is in the musaf Amidah, so let's turn to that at this time. It's on page 176 (in Siddur Sim Shalom).

Now, you can't tell from this page, but the Hanukkah miracle is not the only seasonal one we commemorate in our tradition. There's a different version of the Al HaNisim prayer for Purim. And in the Conservative movement, there's a third version that we recite on Yom HaAtzmaut, Israel Independence Day. The texts of those prayers happen not to be here in our siddur because those other holidays never fall on Shabbat. In all of these cases, the prayer begins the same way and then goes on to describe the events that are being celebrated.

Notice what we're giving thanks for in the version of the Al Hanisim that is specific to Hanukkah. We're thanking God for standing up for the Hasmonean priests who defied the Greeks: "You stood by your people," it says, "in time of trouble." This prayer sees those priests as heroes. With God's help, the "weak," the "few," were able to overthrow their oppressors and, as a consequence of their victory, they then purified the Temple and kindled lights in the courtyards, and established this holiday of Hanukkah in commemoration.

Notice: *There's nothing here about a cruse of oil lasting for eight days.* What we are focusing on is the bravery of the Maccabees (called the Hasmoneans in this prayer) and God's support.

But if that's the case, what then is the miracle? It seems as though the theology of this prayer is clear: if there's a "miracle" of Hanukkah, it is that, as unlikely as it may seem, Jews were willing to defy an oppressive regime, and were able to defeat it, against all odds. The miracle, then, is not something supernatural. It's something very *unlikely* -- though very *natural*: The courage to stand up for what one believes in. The integrity to be faithful to one's principles, no matter what, even though one may pay a grievous price for that. (Note: Judah Maccabee didn't live to see the victory of the revolt he led. He was killed in 160 BCE at the battle of Elasa.) There is one more thing that we celebrate, and marvel at, when we recite the Al HaNisim prayer: the ability to feel inspired and strengthened by God, even during dark times.

Similarly, in the version of the Al HaNisim recited on Purim, we thank God for the miracle of the Jewish revolt against Haman. And in the contemporary Al HaNisim composed for Yom HaAtzmaut, Israel Independence Day, we thank God for the faith, courage, and tenacity of those who rose up against the nations that vowed to wipe out Jewish settlement in the Land of Israel, and for the victory that these Jews achieved, resulting in the establishment of the first Jewish polity in our ancestral homeland, in 2,000 years.

As an aside, some of you may have seen an opinion piece published in the *New York Times* this past week, entitled, "The Hypocrisy of Hanukkah." In it, the author, a self-described assimilated Jew, writes that, as he sees it, he is a hypocrite for observing Hanukkah, because, given his embrace of Jewish assimilation, had he lived in the days of the Maccabees, he wouldn't have had a lot in common with them.

The author has a point: we shouldn't think that the Hasmoneans or the Maccabees were liberal, tolerant, pluralistic folks. But the fatal flaw in the piece, in my opinion, is the author's blindness to the oppression of the Seleucid regime, against which the Hasmoneans revolted: That regime banned circumcision! That regime

ordered priests to sacrifice pigs on the altar in Jerusalem! That regime tortured its opponents! It's clear then that the Seleucids -- and the Jews who supported them -- were not so nice either. If we had to choose -- and it may seem an uncomfortable choice, but most choices in the real world are -- between supporting devoted, committed, principled Jews who rebelled against foreign rulers attempting to suppress their ability to practice their faith traditions, and supporting Jews who were willing to sell out their co-religionists and join together with the Greeks in suppressing the practice of Judaism, ...well, let's just say that I don't think we should have any problem celebrating Hanukkah.

Note that when it's recited in the Amidah, the Al Hanisim prayer is part of a larger pre-existing prayer. In some prayer books, the first word of the Al HaNisim is preceded by the letter "vav," meaning, "and." This is significant. It means that the author wants us to emphasize that the Al Hanisim as very much a part of the larger prayer. But even without that letter vav, it's clear that the Al Hanisim prayer doesn't stand alone. It is inserted into a pre-existing blessing of thanksgiving in the Amidah.

And for what do we express thanksgiving to God in this pre-existing blessing? Well, let's read: "We thank you and praise you for our *lives* that are in your hands, for our *souls* that are in your charge, for *your miracles* that daily attend us, and for *your wonders and gifts* that accompany us, evening, morning, and noon."

Fascinating. We thank God for our *lives*, our *souls*, for God's *miracles* that daily attend us, and for God's *wonders and favors*.

For those who understand the word "miracle" -- the English translation of the Hebrew word, "*nes*" -- to refer to a supernatural event, this is at the very least confusing. *Miracles that daily attend us? Daily?* If that's the case, then miracles aren't rare. They happen every day. They are, well, commonplace.

So the "miracle" of Hanukkah, and the miracle of Purim and the miracle of Yom HaAtzmaut, etc.: these are but a few of many miracles that we should be grateful for, which occur not only at certain seasons of the year, but *each and every day of our lives*.

We so often overlook these miracles.

Again, we're no longer talking about supernatural events. Our classical texts make it clear that our tradition is very wary of "believing" in supernatural miracles. For example, we are forbidden to pray for the impossible. We can pray that something should happen in the future. We can't pray that something that already happened didn't. Such a prayer is called a *tefillat shav*, a prayer not worthy of the name. And we should certainly not act in such a way as to depend on a supernatural miracle occurring. "*Ein somchin al ha-nes*," the Talmud teaches. "Don't rely on miracles."

On the other hand, we should certainly always keep our eyes open to observe whatever daily miracles may be taking place right before our very eyes.

The other day, I was privileged to visit someone in a local hospice house. She had asked to be moved to palliative care, because the treatments were no longer working for her. When I visited her, I asked her how she felt. She said she was amazed at how well she felt. Now that all the tubes were gone, all the side effects of her medication were gone; now that she was in a quiet room, she felt, finally, at peace. It's not that she didn't want to live. She did! She was praying for as much life as possible. But she wasn't questioning her choice to move to hospice care. She motioned to me to give her a teaspoon of water from her glass. As she swallowed it -- which wasn't easy -- a broad, beautiful smile spread across her face. "That feels so good!" she said. "I feel blessed!"

I had given her a dreidel a few minutes before; a dreidel with the usual four letters on it: **Nun, Gimel, Heh, Shin**, standing for "*Nes Gadol Hayah Sham*," "A great miracle happened there." It occurred to me that an Israeli dreidel, with the four letters **Nun, Gimel, Heh, Peh**, standing for "a great miracle happened **HERE**," might have been more appropriate, because there was something about this person's smile that felt miraculous.

Not supernatural, not magical, but **miraculous** nonetheless.

*The miraculous is all around us, if only we open our eyes.* Look: we're here celebrating a young woman becoming a bat mitzvah. I'm not sure I understand that. I mean, I'm not a genius, but I'm a reasonably intelligent person. I remember officiating at her parents' wedding. It just doesn't seem that long ago. I remember Isabel's birth. I remember what she was like -- oh, so long ago -- when she was a little girl. How did this happen?

I don't know: to some people, supernatural miracles are very appealing. To me, they've never been. I find reports of supernatural events just not very interesting.

But **when I take note** -- when I open my eyes and look around at what is right in front of me, when I think about, and when I marvel at, the wonders that are right there in front of us -- that's when I feel I should spin a dreidel with the letters **Nun Gimel Heh Peh** on it; that's when I feel I should be grateful for and express gratitude for the "miracles that are with us every day," the "miracles that daily attend us."

I am not *thinking* any differently than I did when I met with Isabel's 7th grade class last week and told them that Judaism and magic are incompatible. But when I think about how wonderful it is to be alive on this day, December 8, 2018, celebrating Isabel's bat mitzvah, I *feel* myself in the presence of the miraculous -- and that feels very different.

*Shabbat Shalom, Hodesh Tov, and Hag Urim Sameach!*