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Korach and Miracles
Congregation Adat Reyim
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We read in Pirke Avot,ⁱ “Ten things were created on the eve of the Sabbath in the twilight”; the Mishna then proceeds to specify them. The first thing in that list of miracles is the mouth of the earth. This is a reference to Numbers 16:32 in this week's portion, Korach. The mouth of the earth swallowed Korach and his rebellious associates.

This triumph over Korach was done via a miracle, in literary terms a *deus ex machina* ending of the rebellion. This and the other miracles in the Tanakh cause problems for Judaism, which is why the tannaim included this Mishna in Pirke Avot. It was the ancient rabbis' attempt to solve the problem Judaism has with miracles.

Many great Jewish leadersⁱⁱ emphasized the fact that the fundamental tenets of Judaism are not dependent on miraculous events or on wonders performed by Moses, Elisha, or others. Indeed, as I just indicated, these events raised for the ancient rabbis the question: why did they occur? After all, we read in the first chapter of Genesis that after completing creation, God looked at all that He had done and saw that it was very good. Not just good, but very good – in Hebrew, *tov maod*. If creation was so very good, why should God have to ever intervene and change the order of nature? The Mishna explains that in fact the events are not miracles. On the eve of the Sabbath these events were built into nature and so the mouth of the earth did not require divine intervention; it was built in from the beginning.

Other events that appear to be miraculous are similarly explained away. In Bereshith Rabahⁱⁱⁱ Rabbi Jonan taught “God made a contract with the Red Sea that it should be divided for the Israelites.” His colleague, Rabbi Jeremiah, the son of Eleazar, stated that God had contracts with the ravens to feed Elijah; with fire not to burn Hananiah, Mishel, and Azariah; with the fish to spit out Jonah; and so on. Some fifteen centuries later Spinoza, arguing that divine interference with nature's laws is illogical, proclaimed that God provided for miracles at the creation.

This rationalizing to take the miraculous out of miracles is, to my mind, a beautiful, but in the end, unsatisfying approach to the role of miracles in Judaism. While logically I cannot find fault with this approach, it is an explanation that can be used to explain away any event that appears to be unnatural.

A second approach to explain the Bible miracles is to allegorize them. The medieval Jewish philosophers used this approach, although we find it used earlier in the Talmud and Midrash. For example, the rabbis explained the passage in Exodus “And it came to pass, when Moses held up his hand that Israel prevailed, and when Moses let down his hand Amalek prevailed”^{iv} in psychological terms. They were skeptical about the miracle itself. The rabbis remarked: “Could it happen that the hand of Moses could make or break a battle?” It was decided that the hands had only a psychological effect: “As long as the Israelites looked upward and kept their hearts in submission to their Father in heaven they prevailed; otherwise they were defeated”.^v

Maimonides, Ibn Ezra, and other later rationalists pushed this interpretation even further. Maimonides stated that all miraculous events associated with the careers of the prophets did not happen in reality; they were a prophetic vision^{vi}. Saadia Gaon said it was a religious duty to allegorize any passage in Tanakh that was in conflict with reason or experience.^{vii}

Within Judaism, miracles cannot be invoked in support of truth or to prove the correctness of an opinion. The Talmud tells the story of how Rabbi Eliezer caused water to flow backward, moved a carob tree, and

caused the walls of the study hall to incline and move back to the upright position to prove his interpretation of halacha was correct. It was of no avail; the other Amoraim quoted Deut 30:12 "it is not in heaven" and refused to accept R. Eliezer's position.^{viii} Moses Mendelssohn, the 18th century German rabbi, wrote to a Christian correspondent that miracles couldn't be used to prove the truth of any religion.^{ix}

Indeed, Moses tells Israel not to trust in miraculous events, or those who perform them.^x Outside of the Tanakh the number of miracle workers in Judaism is few and the names are generally unknown. How many here today know of Honi the circle drawer? The miracle performers are known today only because of the legends associated with them. However, they have left no lasting mark on Jewish belief or ritual. Indeed, with respect to Honi, the Talmud states that he was deserving of excommunication.^{xi}

Uneasiness and opposition to miracles was not and is not unanimous within the Jewish community. There have always been those who held that the Tanakh should be read literally. For example, Josephus in his "Antiquities"^{xii} appears to accept at face value the story as told in this week's parsha. However, most leaders and those with the most followers have downplayed miracles and did not want them as props for belief. Even the Chassidim, who revere their rebbe, speak in terms of their rebbe's wisdom and insights, not the miracles performed.

Korach's dramatic exit was the Torah's way of emphasizing again that Moses held a unique position within Israel. The miraculous swallowing of him and his followers obviously did not impress the people. A few verses later they accuse Moses and Aaron of causing the deaths of many of Korach's followers -- another miracle that was not persuasive.

End Notes

ⁱ Chapter 5, Mishna 9 (some editions Mishna 8).

ⁱⁱ Trude Weuss-Rosmarin in the second chapter of her book "Judaism and Christianity: The Differences", Jonathan David Publishers, Inc. 1943, 1989 edition points especially to Saadia Gaon and Maimonides. Many of the examples in this paper are based on her analysis.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bereshith Rabah V, 5.

^{iv} Exodus 17:11.

^v Rosh Hashonoh 29a.

^{vi} Guide for the Perplexed, Part III, Chapter 46. Referenced by Weiss-Rosmarin, op. cit.

^{vii} Weiss-Rosmarin, op. cit.

^{viii} Baba Metzia 59b.

^{ix} Weiss-Rosmarin, op. cit.

^x Deut 13:2ff.

^{xi} Taanith 23a, referenced by Weiss-Rosmarin, op. cit.

^{xii} The Works of Flavius Joseph, translated by William Whiston, Vol II, Antiquities of the Jews, Book IV, Chapter III. Baker Book House, 1992.