

YLJC Judaism 101

**MOSES'S STAFF
PROBLEMS:
A LOOK AT JEWS
AND MIRACLES**

Study pack



GW 19.10.17



THE BIG ONE

As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites caught sight of the Egyptians advancing upon them. Greatly frightened, the Israelites cried out to the Eternal One. And they said to Moses, “Were there not enough graves in Egypt that you brought us to die in the wilderness?”

Then the Eternal One said to Moses, “Why do you cry out to Me? Tell the Israelites to go forward. And you lift up your rod and hold out your arm over the sea and split it, so that the Israelites may march into the sea on dry ground.”

Then Moses held out his arm over the sea and God drove back the sea with a strong east wind all that night, and turned the sea into dry ground. The waters were split, and the Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.

Then God said to Moses, “Hold out your arm over the sea, that the waters may come back upon the Egyptians and upon their chariots and upon their horsemen.” Moses held out his arm over the sea, and at daybreak the sea returned to its normal state, and the Egyptians fled at its approach. But God hurled the Egyptians into the sea. The waters turned back and covered the chariots and the horsemen, Pharaoh’s entire army that followed them into the sea: not one of them remained.

But the Israelites had marched through the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.

From Exodus 14

THE BRAVE ONE

Rabbi Meir would say: “When the Jewish people stood at the Red Sea, the tribes were arguing with one other. This one was saying: I am going into the sea first, and that one was saying: I am going into the sea first.”

Rabbi Yehuda said to Rabbi Meir: “That is not how the incident took place. Rather, this tribe said: I am not going into the sea first, and that tribe said: I am not going into the sea first. Then, in jumped the prince of Judah, Nahshon ben Amminadab, and descended into the sea first.”

Sotah 37b

THE SHOWY ONE

There was a dilapidated wall in Neharde'a, under which Rav and Shmuel would not pass, although it stood in place thirteen years. One day the great sage Rav Adda bar Ahava happened to come there and walked with them. As they passed the wall, Shmuel said to Rav: "Come, Master, let us circumvent this wall, so that we do not stand beneath it." Rav said to him: "It is not necessary to do so today, as Rav Adda bar Ahava is with us, whose merit is great, and therefore I am not afraid of its collapse."

Ta'anit 20b

THE PUBLIC-SPIRITED ONE

There is another story about the righteous deeds of the Sages involving a dilapidated wall. On every cloudy day they would take Rav Adda bar Ahava out in a golden carriage, and he and I would survey the entire city. And he would command that every unstable wall be torn down, lest it fall in the rain and hurt someone. If its owner was able to build another, Rav Huna would instruct them to rebuild it. And if they were unable to rebuild it, Rav Huna would build it himself with his own money.

Ta'anit 20b

THE CAUTIOUS ONE

Rabbi Yannai would examine the ferry before crossing the water in it, saying, "A person should never stand in a place of danger saying that they on High will perform a miracle for them, lest in the end they do not perform a miracle for them. And, moreover, even if they do perform a miracle for them, they will deduct it from the person's merits." Similarly, Rabbi Zeira would not go out and walk among the palm trees on a day when there was a southern wind blowing due to the fear that the trees might fall on him.

Shabbat 32a

THE PETTY ONE

Rav Huna had a certain quantity of wine in a certain dilapidated house and he wanted to move it, but he was afraid that the building would collapse upon his entry. He brought Rav Adda bar Ahava to there, to the ramshackle house, and he dragged out a discussion with him concerning a matter of Jewish law until they had removed all the wine. As soon as they exited, the building collapsed. Rav Adda bar Ahava realized what had happened and became angry.

Ta'anit 20b

SOME OTHER ONES

Miracles of biology	Talking serpent (Genesis 3) A child at 99 (Genesis 21) Talking donkey (Numbers 22) Samson's hair (Judges 16) Raising the dead (II Kings 4) Dem bones, dem bones (Ezekiel 37)
Miracles of good timing	Noah's rainbow (Genesis 9) Moses's arms win the battle (Exodus 17) Joshua's long day (Joshua 10) Jonah and the big fish (Jonah 2)
Miracles of physics	The burning bush (Exodus 3) Moses's staff (Exodus 4) Aaron's staff (Numbers 17) Time runs backwards (II Kings 20) Surviving the furnace (Daniel 3) The writing on the wall (Daniel 5) Surviving the lions' den (Daniel 6)
Miracles of supply	The water-yielding rock (Numbers 20) Manna (Exodus 16) The feeding of the 100 (II Kings 4)
Negative 'miracles'?	Noah's flood (Genesis 7) Turning Lot's wife into salt (Genesis 19) The ten plagues (Exodus 7ff) The death of Korach (Numbers 16) Persecuting Job (Job 1)

THE GEOLOGICAL ONE

The Eternal One said to Moses, “Pass before the people; take with you some of the elders of Israel, and take along the rod with which you struck the Nile, and set out. I will be standing there before you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock and water will issue from it, and the people will drink.” And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel.

Exodus 17:4-6

Some of the Sinai Camel Corps had halted in a wadi, a dried up river stream, and were digging in the loose gravel accumulated at one of the rocky sides to obtain water that was slowly trickling down through the limestone rock. The men were working slowly and the Colour Sergeant seized a shovel and began to dig with great vigour. One of his lusty blows hit the rock, when the polished hard face that forms on weathered limestone cracked and fell away exposing the soft porous rock beneath, and out of the porous rock came a great gush of clear water. It is regrettable that the soldiers hailed their non-commissioned officer with shouts of “What ho, the prophet Moses!”

Major C S Jarvis in his biography ‘Yesterday and Today in Sinai’, published 1936

THE MEDICAL ONE

Elisha came into the house, and there was the boy, laid out dead on his couch. Elisha went in, shut the door behind the two of them, and prayed to the Eternal One. Then he mounted the bed and placed himself over the child. He put his mouth on its mouth, his eyes on its eyes, and his hands on its hands, as he bent over it. And the body of the child became warm. He stepped down, walked once up and down the room, then mounted and bent over him. Thereupon, the boy sneezed seven times, and the boy opened his eyes.

II Kings 4:32-35



THE CATHOLIC ONE

For a person's recovery from an illness or injury to be considered a miracle, the following conditions must be met:

1. The illness or injury has to be a serious one.
2. It has to be incurable and the patient must not have been recovering at the time of the cure.
3. The patient should not be getting medical treatment around the time of the cure.
4. The healing should be instant and not gradual.
5. The healing must remove all traces of the disorder.
6. The cure must not come at a time when some natural cause could make the patient think he is cured or which simulates a cure.
7. The cure must be permanent. There must be no relapses.

Pope Benedict XIV

A RABBINIC VIEW

Rabbis of the Mishnah already had a number of problems with the idea of miracles. They argued that, if God's world is perfect, why would God choose to upset the perfect natural order with a 'supernatural' miracle?

So they attempted to take the supernatural out of what appear to be miracles and to make them instead natural, albeit unique, phenomena.

The rabbis understood perfectly natural events to be nonetheless miraculous. We read in our prayer book: "We thank and praise You for our lives, which are in Your hand; for our souls which are in Your keeping; for the signs of Your presence [literally: miracles] we encounter every day."

The natural world is itself miraculous without the need for 'special' miracles. God's creation is a continual miracle.

Rabbi Stephen Howard

A LIBERAL VIEW

Attempts have been made to 'explain' miracles in the light of scientific knowledge. While there may be some basis in these 'explanations', they miss the true purpose of the stories themselves. There may, indeed, have been a set of circumstances giving rise to a possible passage on foot for the Israelites across the northern Red Sea, a passage too muddy for the following Egyptian chariots, but the message of the story has to do with trust in God even in the face of apparent disaster, not with weather and tidal conditions.

The Holocaust has given rise to the anguished question, "Where was God in Auschwitz?" For some this question becomes, "Why did God not intervene with supernatural miracles to stop the torture and death of the innocent?" The implications are that either God could not (a God who is not all-powerful) or would not (an uncaring, vengeful or, at best, mysterious God), or that God was absent or does not exist at all.

Liberal Judaism rejects interpretations of the question and their implications. Instead, we seek to find God, and miracles, even in Auschwitz. Every act of humanity was a miracle. Every unselfish thought and deed was a sign of God's presence. Everyone who survived or died clinging to their human dignity experienced the miraculous.

Liberal Judaism affirms a traditional, yet rational, understanding of miracles. We, along with rabbis of the past, reject the idea of the supernatural overturning of the natural order. However, we embrace the whole world as continually miraculous and the human spirit capable of the heroic. This, too, is miraculous, and both the world and the human spirit affirm God in our lives.

Rabbi Stephen Howard