

Eye on Religion: A Jewish View on Miracles of Healing

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Jewish tradition understands a miracle as a wonder that manifests God's beneficent power. A miracle (*nes* in Hebrew) could be supernatural, but it need not be. While God has the ability to act in a manner that goes against the "orders of creation" (*sidrei breishit*) that He has established, the regularity of this order itself wondrously manifests God's beneficent power. A central goal of Judaism is to train its followers to appreciate God's wonders in daily life.

The Hebrew Bible does not use a term for miracle, though it does speak of wonders and signs. In unusual situations, it emphasizes that the wonder goes against normal expectations, as a clear sign of God's power and will. When Korah challenges Moses's authority, Moses proclaims that "if the Lord creates something unheard of, so that the ground opens its mouth and they all go down alive into Sheol, you shall know that these men have spurned the Lord." The earth split and swallowed the rebels, proving that Moses was God's true servant (Num. 16). Later, the prophet Elijah staged a contest with the priests of Ba'al. He arranged sacrificial animals on altars, doused them with water, and challenged the priests of Ba'al to call on their gods to accept and consume the offering. The priests of Ba'al prayed, but nothing happened. Elijah then prayed to the Lord to act so that the people would realize that He alone is God. "Then fire from the Lord descended and consumed the burnt offering, the wood, the stones, and the earth . . . When they saw this, all the people flung themselves on their faces and cried out, 'The Lord alone is God'" (I Kings 18).

Many times, however, God's beneficent power is manifested in ways that are consistent with the patterns of nature. When the wandering Israelites are hungry, God provides quail by having a wind blow them in from the sea (Num. 11, Ex. 16). Psalms praise God's wonders as reflected in unusual events in history, and also in familiar patterns of nature. God is to be praised by the sun and moon, stars and waters; "He made them endure forever, establishing an order that shall never change" (Ps. 148). God wondrously causes rain to fall and grass to grow for cattle (Ps. 104). God (supernaturally) fed the Israelites with manna in the wilderness, to teach that "man does not live by bread alone," and to teach the Israelites to thank God when they enjoy the (natural) produce they cultivate in the land of Israel (Deut. 8).

The Bible presents God as Healer and also as one who causes illness (Ex. 15, Deut. 28). Examples of miracles of healing are provided by similar stories told of the prophet Elijah and his disciple Elisha. Each was approached by a woman whose son was grievously ill or dead. Each prophet prostrated himself over the boy's body and prayed to God, and each boy returned to life (I Kings 17, II Kings 4).

The Talmud (compiled between the years 600–700 of the Common Era) includes stories of rabbis who effect miraculous healing, reminiscent of Elijah and Elisha. Rabbi Yohanan reached out to ill people and asked them to grasp his hand; when they did so, they were healed. Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa's intercessory prayers were remarkably effective.¹ In general, however, the rabbis were cautious about such miracles. In part, this hesitancy to endorse supernatural miracles in their own time reflected concern for their own authority and worries about false prophets. Deuteronomy 13 warns that a false prophet might produce a sign that comes true but must not be followed. Supernatural occurrences were not authoritative in matters of normative practice. During a legal dispute regarding the ritual purity of a certain oven, Rabbi Eliezer proclaimed that his position would be supported by a carob tree, which moved a hundred yards; by a stream, which flowed backward; and, finally, by a Heavenly voice that supported him. Rabbi Joshua argued against him, quoting the Bible, "It is not in Heaven," (Deut. 30). Following Rabbi Joshua's challenge, the legal arguments endorsed by the majority prevailed.²

Max Kadushin argues that the rabbis of the Talmud were uncomfortable with the conflict between the value of *nes*, in its expression as supernatural miracle, and *sidrei bereishit*, the regular order of creation. Accordingly, they restricted the application of the concept of the supernatural miracle and emphasized the wondrous quality of daily experience.³

Ambivalence about supernatural miracles is reflected in a Talmudic story about a poor man whose wife died, leaving their infant motherless. The man developed female breasts so that he could suckle the child. Rav Yosef commented that the man must have been a great man, considering such a miracle was done on his behalf. Abbaye responded that he must have been an inferior man, for the created order was changed on his account.⁴

The rabbis emphasized the wonders that manifest God's beneficent power in daily life. Numerous passages in rabbinic literature proclaim that such daily miracles are as great as the most striking supernatural miracles, or even greater. God's causing rain to fall is like His original creation of the world and is even more miraculous than the future resurrection of the dead. The sustenance of humans is even more wondrous than redemption; redemption is at times described as taking place by the hand of an angel (Gen. 48), while Psalm 145 proclaims that God opens His hand and directly gives sustenance to all.⁵ God daily performs countless wonders of which

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humans are unaware.⁶ The daily liturgy thanks God “for Your miracles that every day are with us, and for Your wonders and benefits that are with us at all times, evening, morning, and noon.”

Moses Nahmanides (13th century) continues the tradition’s emphasis on daily miracles, understanding the great miracles of the Bible as real but less important: “From the great and obvious miracles, a man comes to acknowledge the hidden miracles, which are the foundation of the entire Torah” (Commentary to Ex 12:16). Abraham Joshua Heschel (20th century) quotes Nahmanides, as well as the liturgy, in advocating the importance of “wonder or radical amazement. The sense for the ‘miracles which are daily with us,’ the sense for the ‘continual marvels,’ is the source of prayer. There is no worship, no music, no love, if we take for granted the blessings or defeats of living. No routine of the social, physical, or physiologic order must dull our sense of surprise at the fact that there *is* a social, a physical, or a physiologic order.”⁷ (Heschel continues: “We are trained in maintaining our sense of wonder by uttering a prayer before the enjoyment of food. Each time we are about to drink a glass of water, we remind ourselves of the eternal mystery of creation, ‘Blessed be Thou by Whose word all things come into being.’ A trivial act and a reference to the supreme miracle.”)

Many Jewish sources and thinkers emphasize God’s expression of His beneficent power through the often hidden miracles of daily life. This view does not deny the possibility of more obvious miracles, in the past or in our own day. One group that celebrates such miracles is that of Hasidic Jews. Hasidism is a movement of piety and popular mysticism that developed in Eastern Europe in the eighteenth century. Central to Hasidic life is the Zaddik, the popular leader who is especially close to God and serves as a link between his followers and the divine.⁸ The Zaddik’s authority is supported by his effecting supernatural miracles. Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, known as the Rebbe, led the Lubavitch movement from his home in Brooklyn until his death in 1994. There has not been any successor; many followers still believe that the Rebbe is the messiah and will return supernaturally.

Many stories are told about the Rebbe’s wondrous acts, including those of healing. One story concerns a woman who suffered back pain so severe that she could not sit still for more than a few minutes. Her doctor recommended an operation, but she was skeptical. Her husband phoned their daughter, who lived in New York, and asked her to approach the Rebbe’s secretary for a blessing. The Rebbe sent a fax directing that the woman should have every mezuzah in the house inspected. (A mezuzah is an object placed on a door post that contains a parchment inscribed with the Hebrew text of Deuteronomy 6:4–9 and 11:13–21.) There was found to be a crack over the words, “when you sit in your house” (Deut. 6:7). The scroll was replaced, and soon the woman’s pain was alleviated, and she did not need an operation. When asked

how the Rebbe knew about the problem with her mezuzah, she replied, “The Rebbe has a connection with God. He has a feeling for holiness because his soul is more spiritual than that of other men and the power of his prayer is greater.”⁹

Rabbi Louis Jacobs follows David Hume in arguing that it is difficult to claim that supernatural miracles are intrinsically impossible, but there is a question of evidence: “A famous rabbi was once asked what he thought of the miraculous tales told of their heroes by the followers of the Hasidic wonder-Rabbis. His reply was that he who accepts them is incredibly naive, but he who cannot accept them is an unbeliever. This may well be our attitude to the whole question of miracles. To accept uncritically every ancient account of a miracle is to surrender reason, to reject dogmatically every such account is to surrender faith.”¹⁰

The Talmud reports: “Rabbi Alexandri said in the name of Rabbi Hiya bar Abba, the miracle that is done to cure an ill person is greater than the miracle that was done for Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah (who survived when Nebuchadnezzar had them thrown into a fiery furnace). That of Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah involved regular fire, which all could extinguish; but that of an ill person involves Heavenly fire, and who is able to extinguish that?”¹¹ Would this miracle of healing be exemplified by a patient recovering from influenza, or a patient recovering from bacterial pneumonia with the help of antibiotics, or a patient unexpectedly recovering from a severe case of septic shock? For the Jewish tradition, all of these would represent miracles of healing. Some cures may be more obviously miraculous than others. But all are wondrous manifestations of God’s beneficent power.

Whether an instance of healing is understood as natural or supernatural, many Jews will tend to desire the continuation of medical interventions even when healthcare professionals judge the chances of success to be slim. Life and healing are fundamental values of the tradition, and imperatives to heal and preserve life are powerful. The *Shulhan Arukh*, an authoritative code of Jewish law (16th century), rules: “The Torah gave permission for the physician to heal, and it is a *mitzvah* (commandment) and included in the category of saving life. If the physician withholds his services, it is considered as shedding blood.”¹² Traditional Judaism generally asks people to do what is right and fulfill their responsibilities regardless of the perceived likelihood of success. A paradigmatic expression of this approach is found in the Talmud’s elaboration of the Biblical incident in which Isaiah warns King Hezekiah that he will die (II Kings 20, Isa. 38). Isaiah criticizes Hezekiah for not having engaged in procreation, and Hezekiah responds that he saw by a holy spirit that his children would not be worthy. Isaiah replies that Hezekiah simply should have done as he was commanded and let God do whatever He pleases. Hezekiah then suggests that he be allowed to marry Isaiah’s daughter, so that through her merit he could beget worthy children. Isaiah responds that the decree against Hezekiah had already been set. Hezekiah

replies, "I have received this tradition from my ancestor: Even if a sharp sword rests on a man's neck, he should not despair of mercy."¹³

Tenacity in the face of apparent hopelessness has been supported by Jewish history as well as by Jewish texts. In 586 BCE, the Jewish state was conquered by Babylon, the people exiled, and the temple in Jerusalem destroyed. According to Ezekiel, the people lamented, "our hope is gone; we are doomed." This was the setting of Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones. God told the prophet to prophesy to scattered dry bones, and the bones came together and were restored to life (Ezek. 37). In accord with the prophecy, Jews returned from exile and the Jewish state was reborn. The conquest of the second Jewish state and destruction of the second temple in 70 CE was followed by exile and centuries of suffering, including the murder of six million Jews in the Holocaust. Yet the modern state of Israel was founded in 1948, and the Jewish people have survived.

The rabbis of the Talmud read this value of resilience in the face of adversity into the early narratives of the Bible. Amram was a leader of the Hebrews enslaved in Egypt. When Pharaoh decreed that all sons would be drowned in the Nile, Amram separated from his wife since procreation seemed hopeless. His daughter Miriam challenged him, arguing that Pharaoh's decree of doom might or might not be fulfilled, but Amram's path of despair was certain to become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Amram reunited with his wife, who subsequently gave birth to Moses.¹⁴

Jewish teachings with regard to life-sustaining treatment are complex and controverted. Most authorities would allow

the forgoing of treatment in some cases to avoid suffering, or if treatment could have no effect beyond prolonging the dying process.¹⁵ But Jewish tradition and many Jews would be reluctant to forgo treatment because it seems to offer little hope. God's beneficent power can be wondrously manifested in unusual ways as well as in the regular patterns of daily life.

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| *The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible.*

—Oscar Wilde