

Hanukkah and Miracles

Friday night, December 19, 2008, Congregation Bnai Brith, Rabbi Steve Cohen

In Parent Education last Sunday morning I was teaching about Hanukkah to our 4th grade parents and mentioned that the Book of Maccabees, which is our primary source for the history of the Maccabean Revolt, makes no mention whatsoever of the miracle of the oil. I explained that the miracle of the small jug of oil which lasts for eight days and nights is first mentioned hundreds of years after the event, in the description of the festival of Hanukkah in the Babylonian Talmud.

A number of the parents were surprised.

But they were even more shocked when I, the rabbi, commented that the whole story of the miracle of the oil was probably invented long after the historical revolt...to provide a spiritual dimension to the holiday, instead of the celebration of the military victory. And then it was my turn to be surprised, when one of the mothers said: It has never occurred to me until this minute that it might not be true.

I asked her: “Do you really think that it is possible for a tiny amount of oil to continue burning for days and days longer than it would ordinarily?” And she replied: No. That’s why it’s a miracle!

That conversation has stayed with me all week long.

Later, in a quiet moment, I sat with the story and for the first time in a while, spent time imagining the flame from the oil lamp, on day two, on day four, on day six, on day eight.... burning and burning, long after it should have, and not going out,.... I just wanted to inhabit that mother’s world for a while, and to observe my own feelings.

A number of memories came into my mind. First, of watching Hanukkah candles throughout the years, and specifically, that magical period at the end of the singing and the draidels and the gelt, in which for some unknown reason one candle keeps burning, for five minutes, or ten minutes or more, after the others have gone out. Each time that happens, and I stay to watch, I feel that I am re-experiencing a tiny bit of the original miracle.

Then a very different memory came to mind, of Janet Laiches, who continued to live for days, and then weeks, with her family and close friends sitting and watching, and wondering, long, long after the doctors said she would die. Janet’s soul had become the oil lamp that kept burning. And then I remembered our congregant Daniel Haber, who was told definitively by all the doctors over two years ago that he had less than three weeks to live, but Dan did not die, and is alive and living with his sister in Massachusetts today. I found myself stuck on the question: how is Daniel’s survival different, if at all, from the miracle of the oil?

I raised the question with the 10th graders in Confirmation on Wednesday night. I asked them to choose: do you believe that the miracle of the oil a) definitely happened, b) could possibly have happened or c) definitely did not happen? Before I tell you how the class responded, let’s ask the same question right now. (Raise hands).

The class, it turns out, was evenly divided in thirds. One third of the students were clear that the miracle of the oil definitely happened; one third held that it could possibly have happened, and one third were certain that it did not happen. What an interesting split!—These kids all grew up in the same congregation. What makes one person believe in the story and another disbelieve?

Reflecting on my own upbringing, I realized that on this topic, my own thinking was influenced by the song from Fiddler on the Roof, Miracle of Miracles...sung by Tevye's son-in-law Motl the tailor, and performed most famously in Santa Barbara by our own Geren Piltz.

It is a great song, which we should have Geren sing for us later this evening, in which Motl thinks back on all the miracles of the Bible—the parting of the Red Sea, David slaying Goliath, Daniel emerging alive from the lion's den, the falling walls of Jericho, and he says, “yes! Those were miracles!” But then Motl sings of two miracles in particular. First, “out of a worthless lump of clay, God has made a man, today.” And then, at the end of the song, he declares that the greatest miracle of all is that he and Tseitl have found each other and are going to marry. That song taught a whole generation of Jews...my generation... that the greatest miracles are those that do not involve any suspension of the laws of nature, but which nevertheless reveal the presence of something else working in the world: the unseen, mysterious presence of God. The two greatest miracles of all, that song taught us, are the human soul and the coming together of two souls in love.

In writing that song, Jerry Bock and Sheldon Harnick were drawing on ancient and important Jewish wisdom about miracles, that goes all the way back to the Torah. In Biblical Hebrew, the words most commonly translated as “miracle” are **nes** and **ot**. But neither of those words implies the suspension of the laws of nature. **Nes** literally means a “banner,” and **ot** means a “sign.” Both words express the idea of something visible that calls our attention to a hidden, invisible presence. A **nes**...our word for miracle, means “banner,” because it points to, and reveals the hidden, invisible presence which is sometimes called spirit, and sometimes called God.

Shabbat is called an **ot**, a sign...because by physically observing Shabbat, we bring the invisible, intangible but very real Divine Presence into the world. In this sense, Shabbat is a weekly sign...an **ot**...a miracle.

The Torah is strikingly unimpressed with magic...that is, with tricks that seem to mess with the natural order of things. For example, when Moses throws down his staff before Pharaoh and it turns into a serpent...we think at first that this looks like a fine miracle...it's certainly not something you see everyday. But then the story tells us that all the Egyptian magicians threw down their staffs and did exactly the same thing! Unusual and or supernatural events, the Torah seems to be saying, do not in and of themselves mean anything. The only thing that counts as an **ot** or a **nes** is an occurrence that reveals the hidden presence of God.

And while the parting of the Red Sea does certainly qualify as a great **nes**, the rabbis of the Talmud stated in a number of different contexts that when two people fall in love, and the timing actually works, and they decide to make a promise to each other, and they end up getting married...this said the rabbis, is as awesome a miracle as the parting of the Red Sea. Just like Motel sings in Fiddler: But of all God's miracles large and small, The most miraculous one of all; Is the one I thought could never be: God has given you to me.

The same rabbis, or their colleagues, taught in the mishnah that there were ten miracles performed for our ancestors in the ancient Temple in Jerusalem. It may interest you to know that the miracle of the Hanukkah oil is not one of the ten listed. Here they are:

1. No woman miscarried from the smell of the sacrificial meat
2. No sacrificial meat ever turned rancid
3. no fly was ever seen buzzing around the meat
4. the High Priest never had a seminal emission, causing himself to become impure
5. rain never put out the fire on the altar
6. wind never blew away the column of smoke rising from the altar to heaven
7. there was never a defect in the sacred bread
8. the large numbers of people crowded together to squeeze into the Temple, but when it came time to bow low, they were able to do so easily
9. no snake or scorpion ever bit or stung
10. and the tenth and final miracle: no visitor to Jerusalem ever said "I cannot find a place to sleep in Jerusalem tonight."

This, in my opinion, is a wonderful list...for several reasons. First, it recognizes explicitly all the kinds of things that can go wrong in our human efforts to bring holiness into our lives. Spoiled meat, flies buzzing, rain and wind, and snakes and scorpions....which in our world here correspond to broken air conditioners and fire alarms that go off accidentally. There are so many things that can go wrong, that when things actually go smoothly...it's a miracle! But the best thing about this list, I think, is that the final miracle, the culminating wonder is one that depends not even slightly on divine intervention, but simply on human kindness. In that idealized Jerusalem, the greatest **nes**, the final sign and banner pointing to the invisible presence of God in the world, is simply that everyone is invited somewhere to sleep at night....no one is left out on the streets.

As we discussed the Hanukkah miracle in confirmation class, the students had a lot to say. Several of them commented that it was not a particularly impressive miracle, that it would have been better for the story to have better special effects, like a huge fire breathing dragon...others said that whether or not it actually happened is not as important as the symbolic meaning. And one of them said simply: the story feels very important because it is about God.

We end class each week praying the evening service. On this Wednesday night, the prayers felt stronger, more focused and more sincere than usual. Twenty of us in the small chapel were experiencing the **nes**, the miracle of ancient Jerusalem....a moment of worship, in which the prayers were simply rising up like an unbroken column of smoke from our hearts. We had talked with each other, sharing our beliefs and our doubts. We had imagined together the story of the oil lamp burning and burning. That shared experience kindled a light in our group. An old light, that burns without end. The same light Moses saw burning and burning in the bush in the wilderness. The same flame the Jews saw glowing from the tiny oil lamp in the Jerusalem Temple, day after day after day. That light blazed in our midst last Wednesday night. It was a miracle, nothing supernatural, but still a wonder...a revelation of the hidden presence of God.