

Shabbat Shalom with a Side of Torah - Vayishlakh

It is that time of year when decorations go up, prices go down, and people prepare to celebrate a season of miracles. These miracles range from the theological to the cynical, yet at any point along the spectrum, we find some underlying common denominators. Whether it is the Jewish story of oil that should have lasted for one day but burned for eight, the Christian story of the birth of Jesus, the African American cultural story of faith and strength, or the cynical amazement that comes with knowing that the flat screen television one just bought for fifty percent off retail in December should be able to be sold for that same price year round, each one of us tries to make sense out matters beyond reason. The point of faith, though, is that it is beyond reason. It is the place where one finds one's self able to make absolute statements about matters over which there is no absolute knowledge. At some level, one might argue that there is no absolute knowledge. There is a scene from the movie "The Matrix," where a young boy bends a spoon with his mind. When asked how he did it, he responded simply, "There is no spoon."

Miracles are about faith. Our traditions dispute the nature of miracles. Some say they are the flashes that interrupt the course of nature while others argue that they are proof of the majesty of nature. I guess that one's experiences over the course of years might lead one to believe one way or the other, but the Talmud weighs in on this matter and seems to make the point irrelevant in terms of which is right or not. There is a much greater issue at stake. In commenting on this week's Torah portion, the sages focus on Jacob's prayer uttered upon learning that his brother Esau is coming to meet him: "I am unworthy of all the kindness and faith that You have shown me" [Gen. 32:11]. Throughout his life, Jacob has denied God's place in his own life. Now, on hearing that his brother who has vowed to kill him is coming, he prays in supplication for a miracle.

The Talmud's take on this prayer is that whether interruptions in nature or proof of nature, reliance on miracles diminishes a person's sense of self worth and capacity for good work. From elsewhere in our tradition, we learn, "Pray as if everything depends on God, but act as if everything depends on you," or "God helps those who help themselves." I always thought that this was abnormally harsh. Making people accountable for being their own help is not harsh, rather it is reality. Jacob's prayer for rescue from his brother will be answered by his own effort to make peace with his brother. Our problem is that we think of miracles as ways to make sure the impossible occurs. We pray and leave things in God's hands, as though we had no role in the outcome or the roll of the dice. Martin Luther king, Jr. called this "superstition," not religion.

This is not to say that the world is fair, or that we always get what we deserve. It does, however, mean that we have to pay attention to what we are doing and learn to accept the results of our actions in the best light possible. In terms of health, sometimes, the miraculous healing of one with a grave illness is his or her family's resolution and reconciliation, even where the illness will not go away. I remember while serving the nursing home in Cincinnati, there were times that the miracle I prayed for was the end of people's suffering. Sometimes the miracle is restoration, and sometimes it is only the ability to accept the inevitable and still find one's self able to smile going forward. In terms of the rest of our lives, there are people who step in to lend a hand at the most needed moments. There are those moments when

something uncanny happens ... something that makes you take a step backwards. Once, having written into my weekly commentary only that morning that "God" is a job description and not a proper name, I found myself in a bookstore with a now most dear friend reaching for the same book ("God is a Verb"), as she says, "I wish people would understand that God is a job description." The miracle of finding people with whom sacred thoughts are shared (long before they are verbally shared) is a miracle. But these miracles are the ones that we make happen, the one's that faith leads us to make real. I have no doubt that there are forces beyond me in this world that take part in these matters, but I also know that without my focus and commitment, these results would never take place.

As such, I am reminded that along this journey, and with his safe reunion with his Esau, Jacob takes responsibility for living with a great deal more integrity. It is in this week's portion that he acknowledges his challenges of faith in the above prayer. It is also in this portion (just verses later) while wrestling with God, that he comes to learn this valuable lesson: Only those who engage life create miracles. He was unworthy not because he had no faith in God, but because he had no faith in himself. As he wrestles with God at the river, Jabbok, Jacob's faith changes. How many things do we leave in God's hands, only to know in our hearts that had we acted as God's partners, the results would have made more sense? Whatever God is, and however God works, God cannot do what we will not do. There can be no miracle where we have no faith in our ability to make one real. Shabbat Shalom.