

“I led you through the wilderness forty years; the clothes on your back did not wear out, nor did the sandals on your feet; you had no bread to eat and no wine or other intoxicant to drink—that you might know that I Adonai am your God.” (Deuteronomy 29:4-5)

A poem called “Miracles” by Yehuda Amichai begins:

From far away everything looks like a miracle,
but up close even a miracle doesn't look like one.
Even a crosser of the divided Red Sea
saw only the sweating back
of the walker in front of him
and the movement of his large thighs...

From far away the desert, mountains and sea gleam in the sunlight and look awesome; up close, we feel their harshness: stones we trip over on the trail; hot sand that fills our shoes or sandals; flies and snakes that bite; sharp rocks under the water. An aerial view of the 600,000 Israelites would have been a majestic scene; but close up, you'd have seen all the warts and sweat. Even when the miracle is right before your eyes, it looks like something else. Maybe the Rambam (the medieval physician and scholar, Moses Maimonides) means something similar to this when he says, “The truth of the matter is that the human mind is not equipped to perceive the reality of God's existence, as it is said: ‘Can you discover the deepness [the mystery] of God?’ [Job 11:7]” (*Hilchot Yesodei Hatorah* 1:9-10).

It is hard for us to believe that God is real, that amazing things happen in this world. And it is especially difficult to perceive the reality of God when we are enduring life's hardest challenges. So the Israelites trudging through the desert no doubt focused on the heat and the exhaustion, the monotony of their diet, and the loneliness of the landscape.

Commenting on Deuteronomy 29:4-5, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch writes: “It required forty years of Israel's miraculous preservation in the wilderness” for the people to attain complete knowledge of God. In other words, it took repeated instances of God's care before the Israelites were ready to acknowledge God's reality. They had to overcome what Jeffrey Tigay calls their “spiritual obtuseness” (Jewish Publication Society Torah Commentary).

But if we understand this passage from Deuteronomy in the light of Yehuda Amichai's poem, we realize that it was not repetition that was required but perspective, the distance of time. Only after completing their wanderings, looking back on forty years in the wilderness, were the people able to appreciate the miracles that had accompanied them every day of their lives.

So too people in the hospital or in a nursing home, for example, may find their attention focused on the pain, frustrations and discomforts of the moment, ignoring the miracles that surround them: the miracle of the human body, which continues to do amazing things even when it is sick; the miracle of modern medicine and all it is able to accomplish; the miracle of love and care.

Only afterwards, when we have attained some distance from the experience of illness, do we think about the astonishing journey we have made. Perhaps we would be more prepared to perceive the wonders that surround us if we expanded our definition of miracle. For miraculous events are not those that defy the laws of nature. Indeed, as Martin Buber teaches us, miracles are often embedded in the everyday. They are ordinary events in our lives that nevertheless fill us with “an abiding astonishment.” That is, we

think about them and we are filled with wonder. Even after we have heard all of the explanations and reasons, says Buber, these experiences continue to astound us (*Moses*, 1946, pp. 75-76). “There is in the event,” as Walter Brueggemann writes, “something overwhelming and overriding which does not submit to our modes of intellectual, analytical mastery. Moreover the awesomeness of the happening endures...” (*Abiding Astonishment: Psalms, Modernity and the Making of History*, 1991, pp. 30-31).

Even at times of illness and struggle amazing things can happen. Let us not “walk sightless among miracles” (from a prayer for Shabbat by Rabbi Chaim Stern – *Gates of Prayer*, 1975, p. 170).

Selihot

This Saturday night, the evening after the Torah portion *Ki Tavo* is read, Jews in many communities will gather for a reflective, penitential service of readings and hymns that preface the High Holy Day season. The *Selihot* service is meant to help us prepare spiritually for a season of striving and of forgiveness known as the Days of Awe.

Many Jews find themselves away from community at this time, whether homebound or in a larger institution, whether traveling or sidelined by illness. The potential heartaches of the season—for actions regretted, for relational hurts brought to the surface, for grief over a recent or recurring loss, for geographic or spiritual distance felt—may be magnified by isolation and loneliness, by an insensitive environment, or by the constraints of physical or mental illness.

How, then, to reach out to another person, or to God? How to pour out our hearts, even if there is no one close by who will understand? How to lighten the heartache with hope?

Along with the self-judgment that the liturgy encourages, we also appeal to *El Rahum v’Hanun*, God of Compassion. If we judge ourselves harshly, or feel ourselves cringing under God’s critical gaze, can we not also imagine some part of what the Source of Compassion sees in us, wants for us, planted and will yet harvest from us? As we recount our misdeeds over the past year, can we not also search out the blessings of which we have been a part, and be on the lookout for the healing words and deeds we might yet have the capacity to share?

Wherever we are, and in whatever condition, this is can be a potent moment for reaching deeply inside ourselves, and reaching out; for turning to God, to a loved one—near or far, or to the words and rituals of our tradition. How, in this season, would you like to live uprightly again after stumbling? What relationship would you like to be able to repair? What possibilities do you yearn to hold out for yourself? What good can you do in the world?

Especially if you are alone as we approach the New Year, may you find comforting support and inspiration in your own responses to these questions.

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