

Are Miracles Real?

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Rabbi Barry Block

I will never forget the awe-inspiring moment when our younger son Daniel was born. Please don't think I'm playing favorites here. Robert's birth was also an unparalleled life experience, but he was born by Caesarian Section, so the two occasions were very different. Daniel was born the natural way. As the father, I had the privilege of standing right there, as my son emerged from being part of his mother's body. I glimpsed his head, and eventually his full body, as he became an independent human being. I saw him take his first breath.

I'm far from the only man in this Sanctuary today who has seen the miracle of his child's birth. Not incidentally, the mothers are there, too, they have an obstructed view. Be that as it may, all of us who are parents have been offered the opportunity to behold a blessed and unique encounter with creation. Grandparents, aunts and uncles, friends and relatives, too, rejoice at what is often called the "miracle" of birth.

And yet, I wonder, how many among us really see the hand of God, even in that moment of a child's birth? Do we experience the miracle, right before our very eyes?

The modern world tempts us not to notice. Most babies are born in the hospital. The medical environment suggests that birth is a scientific matter for health care professionals to control. In so many ways, birth is a natural experience, which means that it is not supernatural. We can come to see even the birth of our own child, as an act not of God, but of nature.

For me, though, the miracle was clear. God's presence was palpable. In that moment of Daniel's birth, I became aware of the continuity of life, of all the generations that had come before him, and all that would come after him, long after I am gone. I experienced God, because what I was seeing was so much more important, so much greater, than any act of nature. I saw, and I see, my children's births as moments when God intervened in my life. I witnessed a miracle.

Torah often describes birth as supernatural. Take Isaac, for example. Childbirth could not happen naturally to a couple the ages of Abraham and Sarah, as Sarah's own reaction makes clear. When Sarah is told she will become a mother at ninety, she laughs. Her body is no longer fertile; and neither, she suggests, is Abraham's.

We are not meant to understand Isaac's birth as natural. The Rabbis go to some lengths to describe the extent to which a miracle is involved. Sarah's body is said to produce so much milk, that it flows freely as though from fountains.

Geriatric childbirth isn't the only biblical miracle, of course. In tonight's portion, for example, we learn that the Children of Israel's clothes didn't wear out, and their feet never swelled, in forty years of desert wandering.

In our modern day, most people offer one of two responses to biblical miracles. Some say such things never could have happened, that the Bible is merely offering a fable, perhaps for a worthy purpose, but not to be understood as history. Others argue that the bible is historical, but that there must be some rational, scientific explanation for each purported "miracle." For example, these folks suggest that the ten plagues on Egypt were all natural phenomena, beginning with red silt floating down

the Nile from its headwaters in Ethiopia. The Nile, they say, turned red, and the people just thought it was blood.

I tend to disagree with the latter type of explanation. I believe that the Torah is true, whether or not specific aspects are historical. Our faith is emboldened by the loyalty of our people to a tradition that God turned the Nile into blood, not red silt. Our people lived past its first generation, because of the improbable birth of a baby to an infertile couple, historic or otherwise. The very existence of Judaism, to this very day, is a miracle, if we will only see it.

The miracle didn't stop with Isaac's birth. The worship of our God should have gone out of business when the Jerusalem Temple was destroyed, not once but twice. Early Israelite civilization was barely a blip on the radar screen of the ancient world. And yet, when our people was conquered and our Temple destroyed, the people of Israel lived on; the worship of the one God flourished.

Can we offer a historical explanation of why our faith and people survived? Yes, but no history lesson will make our survival any less miraculous. Unlike every other people, and every other religion of the ancient Near Eastern world, the Jewish people lives. We continue, and we intend to thrive in generations to come.

We moderns are not good at recognizing miracles. At the same time, we do tend to see God's hand in tragedies. We ask, "Why would God allow such a terrible thing to happen?" The question is understandable. Wrestling with God is entirely appropriate in Judaism. But do we ask: "Why would God cause the great blessings of my life?" The sad fact is that, when things are going well, most of us are not looking for the hand of God.

Let us now look for, and let us see, the miracles that abound in the world around us.

God is present in the birth of a baby.

God creates the miracle we call the Jewish people, living yet today, despite every kind of temptation, humiliation and adversity.

God can inspire us to notice the miracles that surround us naturally. Noticing, too, is a miracle.

Let us open our eyes, and let us see the miracles around us. Let us open our minds, and admit the possibility that miracles are real. Let us open our souls, and recognize that life itself is a miracle.

Amen.