

Parshas Mikeitz 5772

PRAYING FOR A MIRACLE

אין סומכין על ה' – “We do not rely on a miracle.” The source for this well-known and oft-quoted principle is the *Toras Kohanim* (to *Vayikra* 22:32), which speaks of the mitzvah of *Kiddush Hashem* (sanctifying Hashem’s Name through martyrdom). The Medrash remarks that when one prepares to be *moser nefesh* (avoid transgression by sacrificing one’s life), he should do so with the assumption that he will, in fact, be killed and not saved by a miracle. “Whoever sacrifices himself while relying on miraculous salvation will not merit to have a miracle performed on his behalf.” As proof, the Medrash cites the example of Daniel’s colleagues Chananyah, Mishael, and Azaryah, who were cast into a fiery furnace for their refusal to bow to the monarch’s idol. They readied themselves for actual death, and only then did they miraculously emerge unharmed from the fire.

MIRACLES, REQUESTS, AND CHANUKAH

The issue is that it appears that Matisyahu of the Chanukah story did exactly that. The Medrash (quoted by the Rokeach) depicts the opening moments of the Chashmona’im’s valiant struggle against the much larger fighting force of the Yevanim (Greeks). Matisyahu declared, “I am certain that Hashem will perform a miracle for us (and grant us victory)!” Immediately, Eliezer grabbed a sword, severed the head of the Greek leader, and the battle ensued, with the small band of Jewish fighters turning the Greek warriors into a heap of corpses.

An apparent contradiction in a similar vein appears in the *halachos* of the special Chanukah liturgy. During Chanukah, the *Al Hanisim* paragraph is added to *bentching*;

if one inadvertently omits it, he need not repeat *bentching*. Nevertheless, there still is an opportunity to recite the omitted paragraph even after concluding the regular blessings. The Rama maintains that it may be added among the recital of the *Harachamans*. That is, when reciting that section, he adds a special, seasonal *Harachaman* (“The Merciful One”) statement, as follows: “The Merciful One should perform miracles for us, just as He did in those days... In the days of Matisyahu, etc.” (*Orach Chaim* 187:4).

In this special *Harachaman* formulation, we pray for a miracle. This seems to run counter to the general notion that one is not licensed to make extraordinary requests from Hashem. This we see from the Mishnah in *Berachos* (9:3), which states:

הַיְתָה אִשְׁתּוֹ מַעֲבֵרֶת, וְאָמַר, יְהי רָצוֹן שֶׁתֵּלֵד אֶשְׁתִּי זָכָר, הָרִי זוֹ תִפְלֹת שָׁוָא.

“The wife of a certain individual was expecting. The husband (desirous of male offspring) issued the following prayer: ‘May it be Your Will that my wife will give birth to a boy.’ Such a prayer is considered meaningless (and unwarranted).”

As the baby’s gender has already been set at this point, the father is basically asking that Hashem perform a miracle and reverse it, a request the Mishnah clearly considers an inappropriate one. How, then, can the Rama state that in the Chanukah *bentching*, one may ask “The Merciful One” to “perform miracles for us”?

“NATURAL” VS. “SUPERNATURAL”

To clarify this latter point, the *B’chor Shor* (*Shabbos* 21b) draws a distinction between overt and “natural” miracles.

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of זאב בן יעקב ע"ה, a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of his neshamah.

In memory of my departed mother on her yahrtzeit

רות בת משה ע"ה

by Mr. Mark Scherer, Bellmore, NY

When Chazal discouraged praying for a miracle, they were referring to a request for an overt miraculous deed. For a baby that has already developed as a female to “become” a male requires a miracle of supernatural proportions; this type of request is unsanctioned. The request that we make in the *Harachaman* is a different matter. Note that the *Al Hanisim* prayer does not refer (explicitly) to the miracle of the menorah, but only to the victory in battle. True, this was also miraculous, but – on the surface, at least – it still remained within the confines of the natural order. The miracles that we ask for in the *Harachaman* on Chanukah – patterned after the miracles of the military victory – are not considered to be of the supernatural variety. Thus, the request for such miracles is authorized.

Matisyahu’s attitude can be understood in the same light. The injunction against relying on a miracle refers to the extraordinary type, such as hoping to remain unaffected when surrounded by fiery flames. However, to rely on prevailing militarily is considered within bounds, even when the odds seem low.

NOT SO FAST

While it seems that the discrepancies have been neatly resolved, there does remain one serious issue. The concluding section of the Selichos liturgy contains the following passage: “The One Who answered Chananyah, Mishael, and Azaryah in the midst of the fiery furnace should answer us, as well.” Apparently, Chananyah, Mishael, and Azaryah themselves prayed for deliverance. And in their case – which can only be described as “extraordinary” – such a petition would unquestionably be considered a request for a miracle.

It would seem, therefore, that we must pare down the distinction a bit. Apparently, at times, it might be appropriate to pray for a miracle, even where a “great” miracle is necessary. However, the Mishnah that discouraged such petitions may have been referring to *overt* requests. In other words, to ask: “Please change my baby into a

male one,” is definitely improper. Likewise, if Chananyah, Mishael, and Azaryah were to have explicitly asked that the flames turn to ice (or something of that order), their request would have been deemed unwarranted. It is possible that they merely prayed for a general salvation, which could come in any form. Maybe the wicked monarch would change his mind, rescind the decree and order the fire extinguished; maybe others, armed with buckets, would attempt a rescue. As long as no request was submitted asking specifically for an elaborate miracle, the petitioner is considered within bounds (based on *Inyano Shel Yom*, ch. 49).

(The above represents an academic examination of a Torah topic but does not necessarily represent definitive *p’sak halachah*.)

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