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### **MS-4787: Abba Hillel Silver Papers, 1902-1989.**

Series IV: Sermons, 1914-1963, undated.

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The Miracles of Life, 1950.



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THE MIRACLES OF LIFE

Sunday, April 9, 1950

Some religions, dear friends, are built on miracles. Take the miraculous art of their basic saga, and their distinctive character disappears. Miracles are their credentials and their distinctive message is based on miracles.

Judaism is a religion which is not built on miracles. You may discard all the miracles of the Old Testament and Judaism remains unaltered, not a single feature is changed, not a single doctrine or institution is discredited, not a single belief is invalidated.

For example, the deliverance from Egypt is an historic fact, even if the Red Sea did not part miraculously to permit the Jews to pass through it. The Jews did leave Egypt. They did cross the wilderness. They did enter the Promised Land. These are historic facts, and these are the essentials of the story. The miracles and legends which have accrued to the historic exodus story - and miracles and legends have a way of clustering round every great historic event and every great historic personality - these miracles and legends are purely incidental. One may question their creditability, one may reject them altogether without rejecting the authenticity of the historic event itself.

The Torah is a fact. It is here. The Ten Commandments are facts. They are here. And whether they were actually hewn upon two tablets of stone, miraculously given at Mt. Sinai, is secondary to the fact itself. The people which received them and for centuries lived by them and carried them into the world and moulded civilizations by them - that people is here. The incidents in the Book of Exodus describing the manner in which they were handed down at Mt. Sinai may be doubted. The ineluctable core of the historic fact that a new moral law with an unprecedented spiritual insight was at some time or other vouchsafed unto this people which, at the hands of prophets and seers, developed, perfected into the foremost spiritual religion of mankind, Judaism - that remains. That is the essential.



Judaism is not built upon the miracle of the crossing of the Red Sea, the miraculous events recorded about the revelation at Mt. Sinai; Judaism is built upon the spiritual and ethical truths enshrined in the Ten Commandments and in the Torah.

The sun and moon may never have stood still for Joshua to help him complete his victory over the Amorite kings at Gibeon and in the valley of Aijalon, but the historic fact that the Israelites did defeat the kings of the Amorites, did conquer Canaan, did settle there, did build a nation there - that is the established, historic fact, and that is what is important.

All the miracles performed for Israel recorded in the Bible may never have taken place, but the miracle which is Israel did take place, for Israel is still here. The people of Israel did not remain slaves in Egypt, they did not perish in the wilderness. They did fight their way into the Promised Land. They did establish a nation, a civilization, a world-conquering faith - all else is relatively unimportant.

It is interesting and intriguing to note from time to time attempts at the scientific explanation of miracles, attempts to explain the miracles of the Bible scientifically, to give a natural explanation for them. All this is interesting and somewhat amusing to the skeptic and should be rather disconcerting to the orthodox believer. For the whole point of a miracle is that it is a miracle, that it was a deviation from the known laws of nature, and interruption, as it were, a supernatural intervention which was to be the sign and the proof of the power of God or of the Divine character and mission of His prophets, his saints. A miracle which is explained naturally ceases to be a miracle, and can no longer serve as a prop for faith or authenticate the nature or the mission of the prophet or the saint. It means that those who recorded what they saw as miracles simply misinterpreted what they saw.

Recently a scientist by the name of Dr. Emanuel Velikovsky aroused considerable discussion both in scientific and in religious circles by propounding a new theory which



explains these very miracles to which we have referred: the parting of the waters of the sea of the reeds, the Red Sea, and how the sun and moon stood still for Joshua. According to Dr. Velikovsky, at about the time when Moses and Joshua lived, about 1500 years before the Common Era, a comet passed close to the earth and exerted an attraction upon it sufficient to slow down its rotation and to make it appear as if the sun stood still, as if the sun stopped in the sky, and Dr. Velikovsky presents the accumulated evidence from many peoples and many parts of the world in the Eastern hemisphere and in the Western hemisphere, for about this time, about the 15th century before the Common Era, there was recorded some extraordinary natural phenomena which startled them, some unusually long day or an unusually long night which came upon them. Dr. Velikovsky marshalls an amazing amount of facts from all parts of the world. This comet, according to him, erupted from the planet Jupiter and wandered erratically for a time causing cataclysmic upheavals, convulsions on the surface of the earth wherever the comet got close to the earth, as it did twice at the time of the crossing of the Red Sea and at the time of Joshua, until this comet finally swung into its own orbit and became the planet Venus, the brightest of the planets known to the ancients, but strangely enough, not recorded by them until about this, the middle of the second millenium before the Common Era, while the other planets - Saturn, Jupiters, Mars and Mercury - were recorded by them prior to this time.

Among the upheavals which this comet caused, according to Dr. Velikovsky, were vast tidal waves. The seas receded and then surged back again. They divided and they rose to break over the land. The Israelites, escaping from Egypt at this time, "saw the waters drawn aside and heaped up in a double tide, and after they crossed, the waters of the Mediterranean fell and broke with the Red Sea in a great wave." And according to him, it was an unusual event and because it was unusual, it became the most impressive recollection in the long history of the people of Israel.



And by this same ingenious theory, this scientist also interprets the Biblical account of the so-called miracle of the ten plagues which were visited upon the Egyptians. They were the effects, he maintains, of the violent shock of the shift in atmospheric conditions which resulted when the comet and its gaseous tail came close to the earth. And it also accounts, according to him, for the "great stones which the Lord cast from the sky". And on the day when the sun stood still for Joshua, those stones were nothing more or less than meteors falling in a torrent from the comet when it came close to the earth at this time.

Now, it all seems very ingenious and extremely interesting, and scientists will undoubtedly sift the evidence which Velikovsky presents. What one ought to remember is first of all, that a thing may sound very plausible and be very untrue. And I am always reminded what my teacher used to say when some member in the class would present a very clever and ingenious explanation of some Biblical story or suggest some revision of the text which to him appeared to be more logical, he would always say, "Were you there, Charlie?"

Whatever the final judgment about these miracles, they will not affect one whit the historic fact that the Jewish people left Egypt, that they became free and set out upon a career which led them into history, and that is the essential fact. If these events recorded in the Bible as miracles turn out to be facts, as Velikovsky maintains, it will simply indicate that the writers of the Bible did not spin yarns out of thin air, but witnessing strange and unaccountable happenings and unable to explain them in terms of their known experience, they recorded them as miracles.

But miracles, dear friends, I repeat, are not the foundations of our religion, even though the writers of the Bible and the Rabbis and medieval Jewish philosophers never questioned the authenticity of what is recorded in the Bible, the authenticity of those miracles. And even if we accept the position that miracles "cannot happen because they violate the laws of nature, the immutable and eternal laws of nature which are the decrees



of God" which is the position, for example, that Spinoza maintained, assuming that we know what really are the immutable and the eternal laws of nature - I say that even if we accept this position, our faith is in no way affected by it.

The great Jewish philosopher, Maimonides, declared, "Israel's belief in Moses and his law did not rest on miracles, for miracles rather create doubt in the mind of the believer. Faith must rest on its own intrinsic truth, and this can never be subverted by miracles which may be of a deceitful nature."

Already in the Bible we are told that if a "prophet arise among you and will offer a miraculous sign and that sign will come true, that miracle will actually happen, but if that prophet urges you to serve the idols on the strength of this miracle which took place, put that prophet to death. That is a lying miracle." And miracles are no test of true faith.

It is interesting how religions compete with one another as to the authenticity of their respective miracles. In browsing through the very ponderous and rather impressive "Encyclopedia of Religion of Ethics" - this "Encyclopedia of Religion of Ethics" is quite an important collection on these subjects - it is interesting to read how the writers of this Encyclopedia discredit and play down the miracles of the Old Testament with scientific objectivity. They reflect, they maintain, men of lower spiritual level. Few of these miracles have beneficent aspects. The miracles of the Old Testament are materialistic, they are illogical, they are legendary, they are fictitious and not true history. But the minute they start writing about the miracles of the New Testament, everything changes. The miracles of the New Testament are authentic. Evidence as good as anything short of signed scientific evidence is likely to be. The writers of these miracles were men who knew themselves to be witnesses and had regard for truth, and these miracles, the evidence for which is as good as anything short of signed scientific evidence, include, according to the writers of this Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, the incarnation, the virgin birth, the raising of the dead, the changing of water into wine, the walking on the sea, the resurrection, and the ascension.



Now, there is not much food for the spiritual life of man in these invidious competitions, as between one class of miracles and another. Our sages - they were all orthodox in the past - were wont to discredit the element of the miracle in religious thought. One famous rabbi declared, "Of how small account is a person for whom the cosmic order must be disturbed."

Far from testifying to one's unique greatness, a miracle performed for one indicates the man's weakness.

It is enough for the religious man to put his full trust in God, relying upon him to run his world which he created in keeping with His supreme wisdom and power, seeing God's purpose unfolding in all that happens, even when we do not understand it, and aspiring at all times to do what God requires of us, and not striving to have God do what we require of Him.

The trouble with real miracles, my friends, is that they are so common-place that we overlook them. The Universe and all that is in it from the atom to the solar systems, from the amoeba to homo sapiens, the whole universe, is one stupendous inexplicable miracle, unknown and unknowable. The emergence of being from non-being, of cosmos from chaos, of the organic from the inorganic, of life from death, of man from beast, of the intellect from instinct, of civilization from barbarism - can one explain these mysteries, and do we explain them really by merely saying that they are in the order of nature? What is the order of nature? At every step there is a break in the past order of nature, and a thrust into a new order, a deviation, something new, re-formed out of the old. Great religious men and women of the past are found in all religions, not merely in Judaism. They saw the miracle and the wonderment in everything about them. The garment of their world was a garment of miracles.

Have you read Psalm 104 and have you read it often? It is a majestic psalm worth reading often. It is nourishment for the soul and the mind of man. "Bless the Lord, O my soul, O Lord, My God, Thou art very great. Thou art clothed with honor and majesty, who coverest Thyself with light as with a garment, who stretchest out the heavens like a



curtain, who layeth the beams of His chambers in the waters, and who maketh the clouds His chariot and walketh upon the wings of the wind, who maketh winds His messengers and His ministers of flaming fire, who laid the foundations of the earth that it should not be moved forever. Thou coverest it with the deep as with a vesture. The waters stood above the mountains. At Thy rebuke they fled at the voice of Thy thunder they hasted away. They went up by the mountain, they went down by the valleys to the place which Thou hast founded for them. Thou has set a bound that they may not pass over, that they turn not again to govern the earth. God sendeth forth springs into the valleys. They run among the mountains, they give drink to every beast of the field, the wild asses quench their thirst. By them the fowl of heaven have their habitation. They sing among the branches. He watereth the mountains from His chambers. The earth is satisfied with the fruit of his works. He causeth the grass to grow for the cattle and the herb for the service of man; that he may bring forth food out of the earth and wine that maketh glad the heart of man and oil to make his face to shine and bread that stayeth man's heart. The trees of the Lord are satisfied. The cedars of Lebanon which He hath planted where the birds make their nests and the sort, the fir-trees are her house. He appointeth the moon for seasons, the sun knoweth his going down. Thou makest darkness and it is night, wherein all the beasts of the forest do creep forth. The young lions roar after their prey and seek their meat from God. The sun ariseth, they get them away and lay them down in their dens. Man goeth forth unto his work and unto his labor until the evening. O Lord, how wonderful are Thy works. In wisdom hast Thou made them all."

This man walked in a world of miracles for all about him was the marvelous, the wonderment, the ecstasy of living. I know of ten miracles, of ten times ten, which occur everyday in the life of the world, in the life about you, for which we have little regard, which we hardly note. There is the miracle of birth and creation. Every new creation is a miracle. Life is a mystery; its transmission is an even greater mystery,



and every child born is as great a wonder as the first days of creation. In that bundle of pulsating life of the newborn infant, and even before, when the seed ripened in its mother's womb, were enfolded all the unnumbered generations of mankind since the beginning of time, all the memories of the human race, all instincts, all will, all passions. God created an infinite world and has given man infinity in which to create worlds without number, worlds within worlds. Man is the a co-worker of God in the miracles of the creation of the world. We are miracle workers, and not only in a physical sense - in a spiritual sense as well. Every artist creates new worlds because he transforms what already exists into something new. Out of stone or paint or wood or brass or word, he fashions an enchanted new world, the same world, to be sure, and yet a new world, a new guise, a new ecstasy, a transformed world; from the deep and secret sources that rise up in his soul, the artist summons a magic power which for want of explaining it, we give it a name and we call it inspiration. And he fuses and fashions out of the raw materials and substances before him, out of the clay and the dust from the four corners of the earth, he fashions new worlds of music and song, painting and sculpture.

The miracle of birth and creation. There is a miracle of mind, the mind in man, a force inexplicable, unfathomable, restless, forever seeking, questing, probing into itself and beyond to the utmost rim of time and space and into the invisible minuscule worlds of neutrons and electrons, protons, determined to know everything, to storm every bastion of darkness. Is there any greater miracle than the miracle of human thought? Man could not fly; his mind gave him wings - his mind! Man could not see far enough; his mind gave him the telescope and the microscope and the television. He could not speak far enough and his mind gave him the telephone and the radio. He needed more power; the mind gave him mechanical power and steam power and electric power and atomic power. The mind extended man, the mind expanded man, the mind re-created man. The miracle of the mind - one sees it every day, but seeing, we take scarce note of it.



There is the miracle of will and courage. My dear friends, whenever men and women refuse to succumb to overwhelming odds, whenever they refuse to submit to defeat, whenever they rise above pain and suffering and adversity, whenever they reply to all the battering of ill fortune and all discouragement with the words, "I will", a miracle is performed. The unexpected, the deviation from the norm, a divine miracle. I've seen these miracles time and again, and I bow in reverence to them.

There is the miracle of aspiration and Faith in man, "the uplifting, the upswelling, the yearning towards the sun". The poet called it "the soul's invincible surmise". "Columbus found a world and had no chart save one that faith deciphered in the skies." Never to be satisfied, ceaseless aspiring, ceaseless discontent, ever in motion, blithesome and cheery, still climbing heavenward, never wearying. That's marvelous, that's the miraculous in man.

There is the miracle of progress and evolution, blundering, uncertain with frequent halts and frequent throw-backs, man nevertheless moves forward towards greater freedom, towards fuller justice, towards higher truth. And the miracle is that there are always men, few in number, to be sure, but always men who will prod and goad and drive and coax and lead mankind on forward at cost to themselves. Every great leader of men is himself a miracle.

And there is the miracle, dear friends, of love and loyalty and sacrifice. Could life go on without them? Who can explain why men and women willingly will surrender all that they have, their ambitions, their careers, their possessions, their health - all for the sake of the one they love. Why do men die that others might live. Whence come the martyrs by whose stripes the world is healed? Oh, the miracles of constancy, of faithfulness, of renunciation, of self-sacrifice. And the world is full of it even as the world is full of that which is not miraculous, but quite understandable - selfishness and egoism and ruthlessness and exploitation. The miracles of love and loyalty and sacrifice are perhaps the most tender and precious and ineffable of all miracles in life.



Oh, I know of many miracles, and so do you. There is the miracle of repentance and conversion, the miracle of re-creating one's self, when a man who has lived one kind of a life and sunk his roots deep into it - the wrong kind of life, a life sinful and selfish and wicked and perverted - and when at some moment of insight or reflection or some shocking or awakening or shattering experience which comes to him, that man takes hold of himself, tears up the roots of his old life, his habituated life in an agony of self-discipline and starts out fresh - that, my dear friends, is a miracle. The unpredictable triumph of the slumbering spirit in man. That is Resurrection in the profoundest sense of the word. Tolstoy did call the conversion of his hero an act of resurrection, re-birth, rising from the dead. "Those who have sinned," say our Rabbis, "and repented rank higher in the world to come than the righteous who have never sinned at all." Because in the lives of these repentant, there was that cleansing and healing element of inner conflict, that purging of suffering without which conversion could not have taken place.

Suffering is holy and sanctifying. And so when you ask me, are there miracles in life, I say all you need to do is look for them, not in the sacred texts or in ancient legends. Open your eyes and see it all around you in the universe of God and in the universe of man. And most especially, in the inner world within world of man. There is power granted unto every human being to be a miracle worker. And that is really the message of all great religions.