

From the Rabbi's Desk @ Hillcrest Jewish Center

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D'var Torah for the First Morning of Rosh Hashanah

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The story goes that Moishe is driving in New York. He's late for a meeting; he's looking for a parking place, and can't find one. In desperation, he turns towards heaven and says, "God, if you find me a parking space, I promise that I'll eat only kosher, keep Shabbat, and observe all the holidays." Miraculously, a place opens up just in front of him. He turns his face up to heaven and says: "Never mind, I just found one."

The hero of our story had just experienced a miracle, the miracle he was waiting for. However, he refuses to acknowledge the miracle. *"Never mind, I just found one."* Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, in his funny, yet profound book "Jewish Humor: What the Best Jewish Jokes Say about the Jews," reminds us that trivial jokes are a privileged way to address important issues, and it is no secret that rabbis usually include jokes in their sermons.

When Moishe, the anonymous hero of our story, *turns his face up to heaven and says: "Never mind, I just found one,"* he is implying: I took care of it myself, God. I owe you nothing. I don't have to change, I can continue with my life as usual.

We are surrounded by miracles, but we refuse to accept their existence, because accepting God's miracles would imply taking responsibility for a change in our life, and, as in our joke, we, human beings, are not in a big rush to change.

Now, we are, for the most part, people who demonstrate many responsibilities. We go to work, we provide for our families, we contribute to several charities, and we even volunteer our time to help with various meritorious organizations. However, when we do all these praiseworthy daily activities, we are still in charge: We go to work, we provide for our families, we contribute to several charities, and we volunteer our time to help with

various meritorious organizations. Our implicit feeling, at the end of the day, is "I am in charge, and people owe me for my various valuable contributions."

In our story, Moishe is not in charge. He is late for a meeting. He needs a parking space, and he cannot get it himself.

He wants a miracle, but he is not ready to pay for it. He realizes that the price is too high. We are not talking here about a few coins, or even 25 bucks. We are not talking about giving money, or going to work every day, or even volunteering a couple of hours a week in our neighborhood's charitable organization. We are talking about taking responsibility for change in our lives, and as we all know, it is never easy to change.

But, what is the first change in the list? How to start? Is it to eat only kosher, to keep Shabbat, to observe all the holidays? Those of course are very important (this advertising is paid for Rabbi Manes Kogan). However, the first change, the one that precedes all future changes, the one that the hero of our story resists, is to open our eyes to the presence of the miracle itself.

The most difficult challenge is to acknowledge that we are not in charge, that we owe more than what it is owed to us.

We may be able to get away with a parking space. "Never mind, I just found one." But what about my healthy, beautiful children? (Kain Ain Hore) Can I really have the chutzpah to turn *my* face up to heaven and say "Never mind, I just found three!" And what about my wife, my healthy parents, my comfortable home? Will I take them for granted? What about the sun that shines every day and the loyalty of my friends? What about all these forty years you gave me, God, as a gift? What about yesterday, and the day before yesterday, and the few beautiful hours you gave me today? Will I have the impudence to exclaim –using the words of our Holy Torah- *"It is my strength and the might of my hand that has accumulated all this for me?"*

In this morning's Torah reading, *"Hashem remembered Sarah as He had said, and Hashem did to Sarah as He had spoken. And Sarah conceived and*

bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him" (Genesis 21:1-2).

And how did Abraham and Sarah acknowledge the miracle? Did they say, like Moishe in our story, "Never mind, I just found one?"

Let's listen to the voice of the Torah. Let me give you a preview of what you are going to hear soon:

"And Sarah said, "God has made joy for me" (Genesis 21:6) and "Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned" (Genesis 21:8).

Deep in our soul, we, who are fashioned after Abraham and Sarah, our first father and mother, we know better than Moishe, the hero of our story.

We laugh about Moishe because his story is our story. We got much more in life than a parking space...We were blessed manifold, even those among us, who are suffering, were still blessed manifoldly. Like Moishe we resist acknowledging God's presence in our lives, but deep in our soul, we know better and we don't take God's gifts, blessings and daily miracles for granted.

Later on, in our same Torah reading, Abraham sends Hagar and Yishmael away. Things didn't work out well in the family, as it some times happens. Mother and child ended up wandering in the desert *"and the water was depleted from the leather pouch, and she cast the child under one of the bushes. And she went and sat down from afar, at about the distance of two bowshots, for she said, "Let me not see the child's death." And she sat from afar, and she raised her voice and wept. And God heard the lad's voice, and an angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, "What is troubling you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heard the lad's voice in the place where he is. Rise, pick up the lad and grasp your hand upon him, for I shall make him into a great nation" And God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water, and she went and filled the pouch with water and gave the lad to drink" (Genesis 21: 15 – 19).*

"And the water was depleted from the leather pouch." Like Moishe, the hero of our story, Hagar needs a miracle. Like the hero of our story she, in desperation, turns towards heaven, raises her voice and weeps.

The miracle comes for Hagar not from heaven, not from sudden rain, not amidst lightning and thunder.

"And God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water, and she went and filled the pouch with water and gave the lad to drink."

The miracle takes place when God opens Hagar's eyes. God seems to imply "the water was always there. My blessings are ready for you. You just need to open your eyes."

God's miracles come in many shapes and colors. Some times those miracles are evident to the naked eye, as in the biblical stories, and some times, they are clothed in what we call "good luck," or "hard work," or in a good friend, who is there to give us a big hug when we most need it.

Here is a great story from the Jerusalem post office, which was published in one of the Israeli newspapers a couple of years ago. Many letters addressed to "God" are sent to the Jerusalem post office. A few years ago a postal worker got curious, opened one and read it. "Dear God, my situation is terrible, no income, no savings. My daughter is due to marry in a month and I don't even have 5,000 shekels to get her a dress and what she needs to feel like a bride under the chuppah." The postal worker was so touched by the letter he organized a collection, raised 4300 shekels and sent it to the fellow in an envelope with "God" as the return address. A few weeks later the postal worker sees another envelope arrive for God with the same return address. Inside is a note: Dear God, thank you for responding to my previous letter. The money was a big help, but next time, do not send it though the postal service. The mailman helped himself to 700 shekels before delivering the envelope."

Indeed, we are surrounded by miracles. They come in many shapes and colors. They are disguised as parking spaces, as laughing children, as good friends. Some times they come in an envelope...

Are we going to say, "Thank you, God, for your gift," or are we going to remind Him that *"the mailman helped himself to 700 shekels before delivering the envelope?"* Are we to quote Moishe and say to God, "Never mind, I just found what I was looking for," or are we going to pay the high, yet beautiful price of acknowledging that we are not in charge, that we owe more than what it is owed to us?

I know. It is easier said than done. When I speak to you, however, I am also speaking to myself. I tell myself: Manes, last year you used the same words, last year you made the same commitment, last year you said that you were going to change, and here you are again, making the same promises, saying the same things, trying again to grasp God's presence amidst the racket of your own search...

But I tell myself and I tell you as well: this coming year is going to be different, this coming year I am not going to take God's gifts for granted, this year I am not going to say "the envelope you sent to me was not full!"

Open my eyes, Oh God, that I may behold your wonders.

Help us to exit these High Holy Days wiser, more sensible and ready to live more meaningful lives, and bless every one of us and our families with health, and joy, with peace of spirit and sustenance, with a good and sweet year.