

**Shabbat Shalom**  
**from Rabbi Michael Gold**

Candle Lighting Time  
Friday Erev Shabbat 5:44 pm

Services

Thursday Morning Jan. 29 8:30 am Minyan followed by Bagels and Bible

Friday Evening Jan. 30 5:30 pm Services followed by Shabbat Dinner

Saturday Jan. 31 9:30 am Shabbat morning service.

First, let us give thanks that the body of the final hostage Ran Gvili was returned to Israel for a proper burial. May his memory be for a blessing. I have been watching the news out of Minneapolis. We mourn the loss of two Americans, Renee Good and Alex Pretti. Their deaths must be properly investigated by objective authorities, so we can know precisely what happened. But most important, it is time for both sides to lower the rhetoric and find a way to alleviate tensions..

**PARSHAT BESHALACH**  
**MIRACLES**

“Then Moses held out his arm over the sea and GOD drove back the sea with a strong east wind all that night, and turned the sea into dry ground. The waters were split.” (Exodus 14:21)

This is the week to speak about miracles, and particularly the miracle at the sea (traditionally translated the Red Sea but in Hebrew *Yam Suf*, the Sea of Reeds.) God splits the sea and the Israelites pass through on dry land. We have all seen Cecil B. DeMille’s (1881-1959) depiction in his great 1956 film *The Ten Commandments*. But did it really happen?

Religious people often use miracles as their way to prove the existence of God. “My aunt was dying of cancer, we prayed for her, and she was suddenly cured. God worked a miracle.” But do such miracles really happen? I teach philosophy of religion at Miami-Dade College. Let me look at two of the great philosophers of history and how they understood miracles. This will lead to my own understanding.

The first was the great skeptic and atheist David Hume (1711-1776). Even as he lay dying Hume’s friends tried to convince him to give up his atheist ways, but Hume remained an atheist to the end. He argued with those

who used miracles as proof for the existence of God. Hume defined a miracle as an unexpected change in the laws of nature. If the water in the sea suddenly stands up and forms walls, that would be a miracle. Hume said that we never see such changes in nature. The laws of nature go about their business without changing. Therefore, we ought to be skeptical. If someone claims they saw a miracle, they must bring the burden of proof. If not, they are either lying or mistaken. Hume said miracles do not exist.

I prefer the argument of another great philosopher, Benedict (formerly Baruch) Spinoza (1632-1677). Spinoza was born a Jew in the Amsterdam Jewish community but excommunicated at the age of 23. (Personally, I think it is time to reclaim him. He had some brilliant if un-Orthodox ideas.)

I love Spinoza's description of miracles. Most people believe that at any moment, either nature or God is present. Usually, nature goes about its usual business and God remains hidden. But now and again, God comes out of hiding and makes some change in nature so that nature does not go about its usual business. (This is how Chabad describes miracles.) It is as if there are two entities at work – nature or God. Either one or the other is present.

To Spinoza, this entire image is mistaken. There is only one entity which we can call nature or God. God is nature and nature is God. (*Deus sive Natura* for those who know Latin. Spinoza was a pantheist, someone who says God equals nature.) Miracles are not changes in nature. Nature itself is the miracle. We see the workings of nature (for example, the birth of a baby) and say, that is a miracle. Einstein was once asked if he believed in God. He answered that he believed in Spinoza's God.

This is how I understand miracles. God does not reach down from some hidden place and change the laws of nature. Rather, miracles are built into nature itself. Nature goes about its business, and somehow, we see the hand of God. This is not some modern interpretation. It is how the Rabbis traditionally understood miracles. For example, the Mishnah (*Avot* 5:6) mentions ten things that were created by God on the sixth day immediately before God rested. All of these were to be used for future miracles. God built miracles into nature itself.

I do not believe God changes the laws of nature to create miracles. I believe nature itself is the miracle. Or to quote the Romantic poet William Blake (1757-1827) in his *Auguries of Innocence*, "To see a World in a Grain of Sand, And a Heaven in a Wild Flower. Hold infinity in the palm of your hand, And Eternity in an hour."

