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Miracles in the Old Testament

The mankind has always been fascinated by *something else*, lying beyond the limits of ordinary experience. Since in all ancient polytheist societies gods and humans were thought to share the same world, magic was a universal practice consisting of elaborate techniques of activating and manipulating supernatural forces hidden in nature, in the universe “at hand”. While miracles are expressions of the supreme divinity’s righteous governance of the world, magic is performed by humans, namely by practitioners of the art, who are able to force their will upon creation and creatures alike; the use of magic demands for supernatural assistance, that provides immediate relief from specific ills. The religion of Israel expresses real concern about how to distinguish between miracles (displaying God’s absolute power) and the acts of magic, that also appear as wondrous deeds. Biblical monotheism (centred on the omnipotence of One Universal Creator God) is totally irreconcilable with magic. Still, the Bible admits (although in a very small voice) the existence of magic, only acknowledging its limited power – which however does not imply any acceptance. The Bible explicitly prohibits magic; it frequently presents such beliefs and practices as being negative and it relentlessly fights them:

When thou art come into the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee, thou shalt not learn to do after the abominations of those nations. [...] For whosoever doeth these things is an abomination unto the LORD; and because of these abominations the LORD thy God is driving them out from before thee. Thou shalt be whole-hearted with the LORD thy God. (Deuteronomy 18:9,12-13)

Nevertheless, there can be found in the Bible (as relics of old beliefs, probably) neutral (or even positive) references to a wide range of magical and divinatory practices: dreams, clairvoyance, magic staffs, decisions by lots, blessings and curses, apotropaic measures. Their frequent mentioning in the Old Testament is sure testimony to their hold on popular imagination, to the great difficulties encountered in combating them. Sometimes, people were confused, they were unable to make the difference between miracles and acts of magic, between a prophet (God’s messenger) and a magician. In order to distinguish between the two series of phenomena, three elements must be taken into account: 1) the *source* (the agency) of the extraordinary deed; 2) its *aim*; 3) *the way it functions*.

A miracle is essentially distinct from magic not only in that it is a completely free divine act, but more particularly in that it subserves the intelligible purposes of the divine will. In the same way, revelation is different from oracle and augury for the secrets of the future are not unlocked by a mysterious causality, but are revealed by God himself for a specific purpose. (Guttman, 10)

A miracle is always wrought by God (even if sometimes through a human agent), to a moral end, while magic (performed when and how the magician pleases) does not necessarily abide by the moral law (rather on the contrary). A magician is thought to be the very source of the marvellous

power; the power of working wondrous deeds appears as a talent, a special gift “like painting or composing”, and it is used “within a personal framework of source and action” (Steinsaltz, 179). The magic endowment is called *madregah* (“step”, “grade”); the term can refer to various forms of supernatural revelation, vision, clairvoyance, etc. and it sometimes may even designate a prophet’s supernatural gift – only a prophet always remains essentially dependent on and devoted to the *real* source of his power, a source that is objective and external to (i.e. *above*) him.

The competition between Moses and the Egyptian magicians presented in the ten plagues narrative (Exodus 7:14-11:10; 12:29-30) reveals the decisive test (or proof) concerning the *nature* of the miraculous deeds.

God in the Bible does not employ, in contrast to the other gods, magical devices. Those who make use of them [i.e. of signs, portents, even acts of magic] are only His messengers. The wonders of the Egyptian sorcerers emanate from their magical arts, which influence supradivine forces. Moses’ wonders are a finger of God, who commanded him to perform them; they thus stem from His will. It is God Who works miracles. (Urbach, 103)

Moses is definitely not a magician, he does not possess esoteric knowledge (i.e. rituals of manipulation and control – spells, incantations, occult techniques, in general). He is a “man of God”, chosen to be a temporary instrument of the Divine Power. As a prophet, he is not a initiator of the miraculous, but only its executor:

For these nations, that thou art to dispossess, hearken unto soothsayers, and unto diviners; but as for thee, the LORD thy God hath not suffered thee so to do. A prophet will the LORD thy God raise up unto thee, from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me; unto him ye shall hearken. (Deuteronomy 18: 14-15)

The Hebrew religion has been “shaped and formulated by men of revelation, by prophets” (Baeck, 10). The prophets are vehicles of the unpredictable and uncontrollable divine communicative will. The miracles they (can) perform are not proofs of their extraordinary qualities or abilities, but only signs that were meant to be God’s messengers. In Hebrew, a prophet is called *nabi* (which is not a Hebrew word; it seems to be related to the Acc. *nabitu*; *nabu* means “diviner”) – occasionally, *ish [ha]elohim* (literally, “man of God”) or *hozeh* (“visionary”; derived from the root *h-z-h*, meaning “to see”, “to look at”; “to foresee”, “to predict”, “to prophesy”). All these terms reveal the particular status of a prophet: he is an intermediary between two levels of reality, between the sacred and the profane; having “terminals’ in both worlds, he connects the timeless and the timely. Not only *can* he see, but he is “programmed’ by God to see what humans cannot perceive, and to transmit the information to them. He is a sort of *mass medium*, a means invented to serve a purpose, which is to broadcast the divine message. Rather than a foreteller, he is a forthteller.

God speaks to a prophet through visions and dreams. With Moses only He speaks “mouth to mouth”, meeting him “face to face”. Moses experiences a special kind of revelation; his experience is personal and direct, and he is addressed messages that are not cryptic, but always plain and straightforward.

The Talmud [...] recognizes levels of inspiration when it says that there is a great difference between Moses, who looked upon the world with a clear telescope, and the other prophets, who looked out upon the world with a blurred telescope, obviously seeing things not quite as clearly as Moses did. (Gordis, 218)

Moses is considered to be the most important prophet – “there hath not arisen a prophet since in Israel like unto Moses” (Deuteronomy 34:10). In the Bible, he is repeatedly called “the servant of the Lord” or “the servant of God”, as the one who was allowed (i.e. chosen) to be the closest to the intangible divine entity. The purpose of the theophany at the burning bush is to show Moses’ election as an agent of the divine will.

At first, Moses is reluctant to accept the prophetic call. His initial reaction is one of personal unworthiness: “Who am I, that I should go unto Pharaoh, and that I should bring forth the children of Israel out of Egypt?” (Exodus 3:11) God promises Moses to protect him and to give a sign acknowledging his divinely appointed mission.

Then Moses objects again: he is not able to represent Israel, he says; he has no mandate from the people and he doesn’t even know the name of the God for Whom he is asked to speak. God answers: “I Am That/Who I Am” (or “I Will Be What I Will Be”). The Targums to the book of Exodus identify *HVH* as *Memra* (“word”, “utterance”) of the Lord and distinguish it from *YHWH* (a third person form of God’s Name), which is called “the Name of the Memra of the Lord” or the *Shekhinah* of the Lord. Moses is sent to tell his people the Name of the God and once again Israel is promised the redemption: “And I will put forth My hand, and smite Egypt with all My wonders which I will do in the midst thereof. And after that he will let you go.” (Exodus 3:20)

Moses raises a third objection: he might be rejected by the Israelites: “But, behold, they will not believe me, nor hearken unto my voice; for they will say: The Lord hath not appeared unto thee.” (Exodus 4:1) This time, God’s answer is not verbal anymore. He effectively endows Moses with the power to perform the miracles meant to be the two signs of his mission.

The final argument that Moses brings against his appointment as God’s spokesman is a technical one: “I am not a man of words, neither heretofore, nor since Thou hast spoken unto Thy servant; for I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue.” (Exodus 4:10). Now God reveals that He didn’t choose Moses according to his talents, but for an obscure (for humans) reason; personal abilities are only gifts from Him, the Lord, so He promises Moses: “I will be with thy mouth, and teach thee what thou shalt speak.” (Exodus 4:12)

Eventually, Moses is convinced that he is meant to be God’s messenger indeed and accepts the task. Later on, he will frequently act as an intercessor between God and the people suffering a miraculous punishment initiated by God. Facing the very authority that has given him a special power, he will make use of this power asking, as a personal favour, for absolution and salvation. Appointed mediator between God and His chosen people, Moses is allowed to enter the antechamber of the absolute. When he descends the mountain carrying the tablets, his face is radiant; this radiance is a reflection of the divine radiance, it authenticates the Source of the message that Moses conveys.

If the interest in miracles is not a distinctive feature of Judaism at all,

what is distinctive in Israel’s faith is the belief that God revealed His character in his activity, and that there was a moral purpose governing it [...]. God is conceived of as a moral being. In the revelation of himself the moral law was unfolded. (Rowley, 59)

A central concept in Judaism, *mitzvah* (word derived from the Hebrew root *tz-v-h*, meaning “to command”, “to ordain”) denominates a commandment, precept, or religious duty. In common usage, it has taken on the meaning “good deed”; its opposite is *avarah*, meaning “transgression”.

God reveals Himself to man as the *commanding* God, who permits and forbids. Man is allowed to choose whether he will observe the precept or not, but to transgress it spells death

[...]. The word of the Lord must be made *deed* by man. (Urbach, 315)

In Jewish thinking there is a connection between the revelation of God's power and human actions. Evil deeds and transgressions can banish Shekhinah from the world. Man's ethical and religious conduct determines both the manifestation of God's Presence and the revelation of His power. "The religion of Israel is ethical in its essence, and not merely in its demands" (Urbach, 315), since the ethical model for the mankind is God Himself. A miracle is a sort of metatextual device, revealing, defining, clarifying, or glossing on the nature of all the factors involved in the process of communication between God and humans.

The purpose of a miracle is a utilitarian one and its particular forms (see Zakovitch) are:

1. *Trial*

God tests man – e.g.:

Then said the LORD unto Moses: "Behold, I will cause to rain bread from heaven for you; and the people shall go out and gather a day's portion every day, that I may prove them, whether they will walk in My law, or not." (Exodus 16:4)

Man tests God; the attempt at testing God is a transgression: God and man are not equal partners. Man should not request a sign from God; signs do come from God, but only on His initiative:

Wherefore the people strove with Moses, and said: "Give us water that we may drink." And Moses said unto them: "Why strive ye with me? Wherefore do ye try the LORD?" (Exodus 17:2)

2. *Reward and punishment*

A miracle may be performed as a reward for one person (never for a group). There are few such miracles (the only one in the Pentateuch is Enoch's ascension in Genesis 5:24). Miraculous punishments are more frequent; not meant for individuals only, they are triggered by a certain disrespectful attitude towards God and/or His messengers (and not for harming one's fellow, for instance). A punishment may be sent upon an individual who transgresses God's word (Lot's wife turns into a salt pillar because she does not observe God's interdiction "look not behind thee", Genesis 19:17-26) or upon a group complaining against God:

And the people were as murmurers, speaking evil in the ears of the LORD; and when the LORD heard it, His anger was kindled; and the fire of the LORD burnt among them, and devoured in the uttermost part of the camp. (Numbers 11:1)

Sometimes, for a sin committed by an individual a whole group is punished (see the ten plagues narrative, in Exodus 7-12).

3. *Grace*

Many miracles wrought on behalf of the Chosen People (such as the parting of the Red Sea, the gift of manna and quail in the wilderness) combine God's grace and the accomplishment of His promises. After a wrongdoer shows regret, the punishment may be suspended as an act of grace (see Numbers 12:14).

4. *Faith in God and in His Messengers*

A miracle is meant to inspire faith in God. If people still lack faith in Him, in spite of His miracles, they stir God's anger:

And the LORD said unto Moses: "How long will this people despise Me? and how long will they not believe in Me, for all the signs which I have wrought among them? I will smite them with the pestilence, and destroy them, and will make of thee a nation greater and mightier than they." (Numbers 14:11-12)

Miracles authenticate God's messengers, the prophets. The miracles that Moses is endowed to perform when he returns to Egypt (Exodus 4:2-9) function as signs that he was chosen by God.

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In the Bible, faith is man's reaction to God's promise, to His manifestation or action (see Genesis 15:6; Exodus 4:31; 14:31). Faith is not only the recognition of God's existence; it is a permanent relationship between God and His Creation (the world and its creatures). Faith means trusting Divine Providence – the believer *entrust* himself to God; this way he feels secure. The manifestations of man's faith are love and fear of the Lord: love for the Creator and the Maintainer; fear of the absolute Sovereign of the world. Man must be absolutely submissive ("Trust in the LORD with all thy heart, and lean not upon thine own understanding." – Proverbs 3:5); he knows he is dependent on God's will, but he also knows he has a loving and protective Master. Miracles wrought by God represent a major basis for faith. At a certain point, man gets to realise that faith is the ultimate miracle.

The relationship with God involves a paradoxical feeling of closeness and of distance, at the same time; love and gratitude for God should not destroy the sense of the sublime, the right perception of His greatness. The worshipper experiences enthusiasm and awe: God, the Holy King, is a *mysterium tremendum*.

And now, Israel, what doth the LORD thy God require of thee, but to fear the LORD thy God, to walk in all His ways, and to love Him, and to serve the LORD thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul. (Deuteronomy 10:12)

The living covenant of God with His chosen people requires a relentlessly active (re)validation on both sides. Man's obedience is defined not only by interdictions, by negative precepts (rules that should not be transgressed), but also by positive commandments, by *mitzvot* (that is what "walk in all His ways" means). Man must serve God; and "what is the the service of the heart? Say, it is prayer." (Talmud Bavli, Ta'anit 2a). "Prayer is greater than the offering of sacrifices" and even more important and more relevant than the good deeds (Talmud Bavli, Berakhot 32b). Praying means speaking with God; it is an *act* (a symbolic one, more appropriate to approach the Supreme Being, Whose *word* created the world), not a verbal substitute.

In Greek, the root-meaning of the verb *to pray* signifies "to wish", in Latin and in German "to beg"; in Hebrew, the main word for prayer comes from a root meaning "to judge". *Tefillah* ("prayer") has been understood as "self-examination". In the Jewish view, man must be worthy of being listened to by God. Prayer is an act of daring; it is

a mystery, directed in its essence towards changing the order of the world. Every star and sphere is fixed in its order, yet man wants to change the order of nature, he asks for miracles. (Nahman of Bratslav, *Judaism*, 296)

The miracle he is granted means, above all, communication with God. The Jewish religious service is conceived as primarily congregational: the petitions are made in the plural, in the name of the whole community. The words of the prayer have a miraculous power, they call God and He answers by revealing His Presence: “wherever ten persons pray the Shekhinah dwells among them”.

Man relies on God’s assistance in moments of distress, danger or despair. But petition is not the only form of speaking to God. The Lord should be praised and thanked for the marvellous gifts he bestows on people. “The Talmud Yerushalmi says that a *berakhot* [benediction] is the price we pay for being permitted to enjoy this world” (Simon, 102); creating the world, God wrote a magnificently intricate, mysterious book. Those who respectfully, humbly approach this book may become worthy recipients of the miracles wrought by God, they may become good (i.e. receptive, diligent, competent) *readers*; eventually, they may find out that the *price* they pay for this spiritual undertaking is also their greatest *prize*.

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Rezumat

Miracolele în Vechiul Testament

În credința iudaică, miracolele, semne prin care Dumnezeu își face simțită prezența în lume, sunt atent și insistent diferențiate de actele de magie, considerate „o urâciune” (v. Deuteronomul 18:9,12), deși în Biblie există (totuși) frecvente referințe neutre sau chiar pozitive la practici magice și divinatorii: vise premonitorii, trasul la sorți, binecuvântări ori blesteme, ritualuri apotropaice. Întrucât oamenii pot ajunge să confunde cele două serii de întâmplări *extraordinaire* și să nu mai distingă între, pe de o parte, un profet (trimis al Domnului) și, pe de altă parte, un „prezicător, sau ghicitor, sau vrăjitor, sau fermecător”, un „descântător”, „chemător de duhuri”, „mag” sau unul dintre „cei ce grăiesc cu morții” (Deuteronomul 18:10-11), se apelează la o „grilă” de verificare-diagnosticare a fenomenelor ieșite din comun. Acestea sunt examinate metodic și, pentru fiecare în parte, se identifică: a) sursa – instanța generatoare; b) scopul; c) modul în care funcționează.

Miracolul vine de la Dumnezeu (fiind uneori mediat de un *agent* uman *ales* de divinitate), are o *anume* finalitate morală, *limpede* indicată, excluzând hazardul (astfel, revelația diferă fundamental de sondarea viitorului și de încercările de a-i smulge secretele prin tehnici oraculare). Actul de magie este performat, cu intenții (adesea obscure) neconforme (sau chiar în marcată contradicție) cu legile morale, de o persoană umană înzestrată cu un *anume* talent (ca pentru pictură sau compoziție muzicală – v. Seinsaltz, 179), numit *madregah* („treaptă”; „grad”) – termen care poate fi utilizat și cu referire la un profet, însă, în acest caz, se subliniază de fiecare dată dependența și devoțiunea *agentului* în raport cu *sursa* (divină – deci externă și superioară lui) a evenimentului ieșit din comun. Exemplar pentru demonstrarea *naturii* miracolului este episodul biblic al celor zece plăgi (sau năpaste) trimise de Dumnezeu asupra egiptenilor ca pedepse (mereu mai aspre) pentru „împietrirea inimilor” lor (v. Ieșirea 7-12). Confruntarea dintre Moise și faraon pune în valoare, pilduitor, deosebirea de *esență* dintre miracol și magie, dintre „omul Domnului”, care, inspirat de acesta, *execută* sau *declanșează* acțiuni excepționale, și magician, care posedă cunoaștere esoterică, care stăpânește varii tehnici oculte de manipulare și control, dar care ratează previzibil în încheștarea cu puterea absolută.

Miracolul nu este important în sine, ci doar ca formă de manifestare a voinței Autorității Supreme; el funcționează ca: 1) *probă/încercare* (în ambele sensuri ale raportului dintre divinitate și om; dar, dacă Dumnezeu îl testează pentru om după voie, tentativa omenească de a-i cere lui Dumnezeu dovezi, „semne și minuni”, este un păcat); 2) *răsplată* ori (după caz) *pedepsă*; 3) semn al *îndurării* divine; 4) *inductor al credinței* în Dumnezeu și în trimișii săi. Performat indirect, prin intermediul unui profet, miracolul are menirea de a-l valida pe acesta drept *vizionar* (cu acces temporar și privilegiat la tainele cele mai înalte) și *mesager* („purtător de cuvânt”) al Domnului; profetul este un intermediar între cer și pământ, între sacru și profan. Credința este miracolul suprem; ea mediază comunicarea profundă și semnificativă a omului cu Dumnezeu, îl integrează armonic pe om în Creație și îl apropie de Creator.