

**Parshat Shmot
Miracle on the Nile
January 20, 2001
Rabbi Alan B. Lucas**

It was a miracle! Who ever thought that humans hurled into a river could survive? Who ever thought it was possible to endure such an experience and survive? Of course I am referring to the miracle on the Nile! What, you thought I was referring to events on the Hudson on Thursday? Well, that too was quite remarkable, maybe even miraculous – you know, maybe we should speak about that event as well.

When I spoke of the miracle on the river, I was referring to events that took place over 3500 years ago and half a world away – events which made up the subject matter of today's torah reading – the opening chapters of *parshat Shmot* which deal with Pharaoh's attempt to destroy the Jewish people by casting all the male's into the river and the miraculous story of one Jewish boy – Moshe – whose name comes from the fact that he was plucked from the river by Pharaoh's daughter and saved, raised in the royal palace and destined to lead his people to salvation. But when I spoke of miracle on the river, you I suspect, were thinking of what has become referred to as the miracle on the Hudson - the rescue of 155 people aboard US Airways 1549 out of LaGuardia, after its crash into the Hudson River. Both events were indeed miraculous – if by miracle you mean contrary to reasonable expectation – incredible, wonderful beyond belief. Although the two events are separated by some 3500 years and half a world apart – they share many features. There were heroes in the miracle on the Nile – Pharaoh's daughter, Moshe's mother and sister; and there were heroes in the miracle on the Hudson – the pilot Chesley B. "Sully" Sullenberg III, 57 years old of Danville, California. His masterful use of the Hudson as an emergency runway, along with his years of expertise as a pilot, allowed for all 155 people to emerge from that plane in one-piece. The flight attendants, the ferry boat captains and their crews, the first responders, all did their part, just like Pharaoh's daughter so long ago, to make sure that those who were cast into the river now as then, contrary to all reason and expectation – did not die and that their respective stories would have a happy ending.

From a literary perspective, what was the point of the miracle on the Nile story? Maybe if we can understand that miracle story – it can give us some insight into what we need to take away from our modern miracle story. What was the point of the miracle on the Nile? Does the Bible want us to gain an appreciation for the role of God in our lives, to be prepared for the possibility of miracles in our lives – that no matter how dark the crisis may seem that there at all times exists the possibility for God's intervention and for remarkable things to happen to change our destiny – to change the course of history? I suspect that message is certainly there, in the ancient story – and as a rabbi I would be the last to discourage you from such a lesson – but as miracles go – this definitely was not one of the big ones – in a Book that knows of burning bushes, seas that split and staffs that turn into serpents – the fact that Pharaoh's daughter decides to save one Jewish child cast into the river – well as miracles go – it seems a little bush league – if you will excuse the pun, not nearly as impressive as a jet plan landing on a freezing river and all 155 passengers and crew surviving.

As I read the Bible – the point of Moses' remarkable, miraculous survival from the Nile – is that sometimes in life we are given a second chance – and the question is when we get these

second chances what are we going to do with them? The way I understand the Bible - miracles are never the point but the prelude. Miracles are there to get our attention – the point of the story – any story that contains a miracle – is not the miracle itself – but what happens after the miracle. The Hebrew word for miracle, *nes* also means sign or banner. In the Bible a miracle is meant to be a sign, a banner – pointing the way to something beyond itself – miracles are always followed by messages – and the point of the miracle is always the message, not the miracle.

That is why whenever someone uses the miracle word, I never challenge him or her but rather I ask – “So what is the message you have learned from your miracle?”

“Rabbi, it was a miracle I survived that car crash – there was no way I should have survived – it was truly a miracle!” Was it truly a miracle or just dumb luck? I see no need to challenge their reading of events – I wasn’t there – miracles are often in the eye of the beholder – no I merely ask – “So what’s the point of *your* miracle? What message do *you* take from your experience? What will you do with your new lease on life?”

A member of our congregation had breakfast in the Windows on the World, the restaurant on the very top of the World Trade Center on the morning of September 11, 2001 – he had to excuse himself to attend a meeting up town. Everyone he was having breakfast with that morning perished – he survived. He wrestled with the miracle word – he was reluctant to embrace it as he felt for those who were not as fortunate as he – and yet he was pre-occupied with his own survival, why was he still alive? Once again, I did not debate whether it was or was not a miracle – the miracle is never the point – once it gets your attention it has a message to deliver – focus on the message not the miracle, I suggested. You have survived— you have a second chance – what will you do with the rest of your life?

Moses experienced the miracle and got the message. It took him awhile – all those years living in the lap of luxury being raised in Pharaoh’s palace – he must have considered himself quite the fortunate fellow. But then one day, according to our reading, he saw a taskmaster beating an Israelite slave – it was wrong, he knew it, he felt it and just as he was about to go on with his life, to return to the palace – the message struck him. He was one of them – but for the sequence of events that placed him in the river and delivered him into the hands of Pharaoh’s daughter - -this slave being beaten could have been him – how could he turn his back on this man? How could he not use his power, his learning, his strength to help those who were weak – he picked up the staff and beat the Egyptian taskmaster and he changed not only his destiny but the destiny of mankind. Miracles matter when their messages are received.

At first it does not dawn on Moses how dramatically he had just changed the course of his life – he flees for his own safety. He leaves Egypt and runs to the wilderness and another miracle confronts him – this one: a bush that burns but is not consumed. Wow! But he understands that this too is a sign – it turns him around - -the man who was fleeing from Egypt heads back to Egypt – message received – “Pharaoh, Let my people go!”

It is reported that just before the plane went down, Captain Sullenberg informed his passengers and crew to “prepare for a hard landing.” They did and thank God everyone survived that ordeal. But having survived the hard landing, it is time to prepare for a meaningful living. As my colleague and friend Rabbi Rafi Rank observed, “No one lives life having been cast into a river. We live life by emerging from the river, intent on living ethically and gratefully.”

It has been a pretty rough year for many of us – some of us have lost our jobs, others live in fear of losing them in the future. We have watched our savings accounts disappear before our eyes. These are indeed unprecedented times. The name: Bernie Madoff has become a curse word. In hushed whispers we tell stories of people who lost entire fortunes – paradise lost in a moment and we feel for them and we worry for ourselves. The economy has us navigating in waters we have never been in before – we are frightened and we are unsure of what tomorrow will bring – we hope things will get better – we fear they could get worse and we are not at all sure how we will manage if they do. Wars rage in Iraq and Afghanistan – our leaders told us that by sending our young men to fight we could make things better, we could defeat terror and make our world safer but that does not seem to be how things have worked out – terror does not seem to be defeated, it seems to have been emboldened and now Israel finds itself sending its young men to fight in Gaza – in the hope that terror can be curtailed if not defeated.

The wars rage and the bombs fall and 2009 begins finding many of us feeling that we have been cast into the river, it is dark and icy cold and we are hoping for a miracle.

But our rabbis tell us – *ayn somchim al haneys* – we are not allowed to depend on miracles.

Why not? Because miracles no longer happen? On the contrary – these same rabbis who said that we should not depend on miracles for our salvation – also taught us to pray each day and give thanks *al nisecha sheb'chol yom imanu* – for the miracles that are with us daily. So I don't get it – if these rabbis believed that miracles are with us daily – why not depend on them? Why not count on them?

Because the rabbis understood that the miracles are not our salvation – it is never about the miracle – it is about the message that emerges from the miracle. *Ayn somchim al haneys* is not meant to discourage us from looking for miracles in our lives – on the contrary they wanted us to see miracles everywhere and at all times – they just didn't want us to depend on them for our salvation. Salvation came to the Jewish people not when Moses was drawn from the water but later when he realized the role of the miraculous in his life and turned around to lead his people to freedom.

This coming Tuesday, we will celebrate the inauguration of the 44th president of the United States of America, Barak Hussein Obama – his is quite a story. A black man elected to president of the United States? A man named Barak Hussein Obama elected to the presidency? Is it a miracle – a sign? Our economy needs a miracle. Israel needs a miracle. Our country needs a miracle. But we do not depend on miracles. I know we live in desperate times but the rabbis remind us: *Ayn somchim al haneys* - our salvation will not come through miracles.

There was a moment in the life of Moses when he was challenged to assume the greatest task of which he was capable. There are moments in the lives of everyone when we sense such challenges, such awakenings. Sometimes it comes after a serious illness, after a long trip, during a period of solitude. Sometimes it comes in the middle years, when we have completed some of the expected, predictable tasks of life, and we wonder about what new challenges, what new opportunities await us. Sometimes it comes when we are plucked from the icy waters of the Hudson River and recognize the miraculous in our lives. Sometimes it comes

when you stand on the steps of the Capitol and raise your right hand and accept the most awesome challenge a man can accept – to lead the most powerful country in the world. Suddenly it dawns upon us that life has more in store for us that we had accepted up until now. We must neither flee from destiny nor embrace it too eagerly - but we must accept the Divine call to become greater and more fully human than we have been up until now. It is indeed remarkable that Barak Obama has become our next president, but what is of much greater interest to me is what will he do now that he is the president?

We don't always get a second chance in life but some very lucky passengers on Flight 1549 have been given just that, and it should give us all reason to ponder the way in which we all choose to spend our days. None of us need to become Moses or even the President of the United States, but it would be more than sufficient if we all committed to becoming ourselves, that is, the very best of who we could be if we were to use all the resources available to us wisely, including our time, our money, our talents, our dreams, and all those who are here on earth ready and willing to help us.

There is an old Hasidic story - it has been used so often that I hesitate to quote it now if it were not that it is so perfect a way to conclude. It is a story of a saintly man whose name was Zusia. As the end of his life drew near, he turned to his disciples and he said: "As I think about the judgment of the world to come, there are some questions I am prepared to answer. But there is one that fills me with fear and trembling." His disciples wanted to know this awesome question that so frightened their master. So he continued, "When I reach the gates of heaven, and I am summoned to the final judgment, I'm not afraid of the question that will be asked, 'Zusia why were you not like Moses? Why were you not like Akiva?'" He said, "No, I can answer those questions easily. I didn't have the greatness of Moses. I didn't have the brilliance of Akiva. But there is one question that I face with awe and dread. I am afraid that I will be asked, 'Zusia, why weren't you like Zusia? Why didn't you achieve the best that you could have been?' And then what shall I answer?"

Each of us is asked, each of us must answer.

Miracle on the Hudson, Miracle on the Nile, Miracle on the steps of the Capitol – there are miracles all around us: *shebachol yom imanu* – miracles that are with us daily – it is not about getting the right miracle – it is about getting the right message.

I hope and I pray that the survivors of flight 1549 use their second chance wisely. I hope and I pray for each of us to make this New Year one of life and growth and new opportunity. And let us offer a prayer for the welfare of the new President of the United States of America. We do not expect him to be Moses - but we hope and we pray that he will be the best Barak Obama that he can be. For if he will - than he may yet attain the glory and the greatness with which God has endowed all of us - and let us say Amen.