

Q & A:

# Miracles

by Yisroel Cotlar



**QUESTION:**

What is the Jewish standpoint on miracles? How important or unimportant are miraculous phenomena to the Jewish believer?

**ANSWER:**

Let me flip your question around: "What is the Jewish standpoint on nature? How important or unimportant are natural phenomena to the Jewish believer?"

G-d manages every aspect of creation at every given moment. There are no rules He must follow. There are no forces He must contend with. All is in His hands.

Nonetheless, He chose to create a system called "nature." An arrangement of fixed rules,

an order of causes and effects. Why did he create nature? In order to conceal His identity and hide His footprints. He wanted a world in which things would appear as if they run on their own, and thus force humankind to discover G-d on their own. In fact, the very word for nature in Hebrew, *teva*, also translates as "sunk." Nature is G-d's way of submerging His presence under a sea of scientific laws and patterns. And we are the deep-sea divers given the task of finding G-d's hand lurking behind the surface of nature.

And so, life is very similar to a game of hide-and-peek. But every now and then, G-d emerges from His hiding place and breaks through the self-imposed shackles of nature. A sea is split. A scientific rule is broken. Mother Nature is proven wrong, or at least less solid a reality than she appears to be. Perhaps a child is cured from an incurable disease. Or our nation is saved from a seemingly hopeless situation. And it is through these supernatural events that we realize that nature too is merely a creation of G-d.

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nerve!" he shouted. "You slept in my house and ate at my table, and now you dare to hurl these false accusations at me!"

The man decided he would go make a claim at the rabbinical court, headed by the rabbi of Salé, the famous "Ohr HaChaim," Rabbi Chaim ibn Attar. Rabbi Chaim listened carefully to the two men, and then addressed the host: "This Jew claims the money, which he says he deposited with you before Shabbat eve. What do you say?"

"It never happened," the man answered. "This man is slandering me."

Rabbi Chaim turned to the guest. "Perhaps there was a witness to the transaction?"

The man felt even more dejected. "No, there was no witness. Just before Shabbat we sat under a tree. That is when I gave him my money pouch."

"Under a tree? Very good!" cried Rabbi Chaim excitedly. "Go summon that tree to be a witness on your behalf!"

The traveler was taken aback but, being aware of Rabbi Chaim's reputation as a miracle-worker, he left the house without questioning the rabbi's instructions.

After just a few minutes, the Ohr HaChaim remarked that the man had certainly reached the tree.

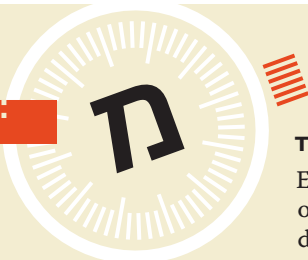
"What do you mean, Rabbi?" said the other man. "That tree is quite far from here."

Looking sternly into the man's eyes, Rabbi Chaim declared: "Give the innocent Jew his money!" Seeing the surprise on the man's face, the rabbi said: "If you didn't receive the money under that tree, how is it that you know where the tree is?"

The man turned pale. He promptly returned the money that had been entrusted to him.

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MITZVAH MINUTE:



# Tu B'Shevat

When's the last time you wished a tree Happy New Year? The 15th day of the Hebrew month of Shevat (this year, January 21) is a great opportunity. It's known as Tu B'Shevat, the New Year for Trees.

Why do trees celebrate their New Year so much later than ours? It has to do with the rainy season in Israel, which commences with the festival of Sukkot. It takes four months for the rains to saturate the soil, nurture the trees and coax them into producing fruit. This is important to know if you are planning to give your tithes of fruits, as is done in the Land of Israel, because the required tithes vary from year to year. It's also important if you are a tree and looking for something to celebrate.

We humans can also celebrate along with the trees. After all, the Torah says, "Man is a tree of the field." We are nurtured by deep roots, as far back as Abraham and Sarah; we reach upwards to the heavens while standing firmly on the ground; and when we do all this right, we produce fruits that benefit the world—namely, our good deeds.



**TRADITIONAL OBSERVANCES:**  
Eat some fruit on this day. Best if you can get some of those fruits for which Israel is famous: olives, dates, grapes, figs and pomegranates.

**THE BLESSING ON FRUIT:**  
*Ba-ruch a-tah Ado-nai, Elo-hei-nu me-lech ha-ol-am, borei pri ha-etz.*  
[Blessed are You, L-rd our G-d, King of the universe, who creates the fruit of the tree.]

If tasting a fruit for the first time in its season, recite the Shehecheyanu blessing before saying the fruit blessing:

*Ba-ruch a-tah Ado-nai, Elo-hei-nu me-lech ha-olam, she-heche-ya-nu ve-ki-ye-ma-nu ve-higi-a-nu liz-man ha-zeh.*

[Blessed are You, L-rd our G-d, King of the universe, who has granted us life, sustained us, and enabled us to reach this occasion.]

Some have the custom to eat carob. The master Kabbalist Arizal would eat fifteen types of fruit on this day!

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MANY OF THE IDEAS DEVELOPED IN  
THIS PUBLICATION ARE BASED ON THE  
WORKS OF **THE LUBAVITCHER REBBE,**  
**RABBI MENACHEM M. SCHNEERSON,**  
OF RIGHTEOUS MEMORY.

THE SCROLL EDITOR: **BASSIE ALPEROWITZ**  
LAYOUT & MANAGEMENT: **MENDY COHEN**  
FORMAT DESIGN: **BARUCH GORKIN**  
PRINTED BY: **718.PRINTER**

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**ב"ה**

**BESHALACH**  
January 18, 2019  
Shevat 12, 5779



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## Roots of resilience

by Rochel Holzkenner

The 15th of Shevat, celebrated this year on Monday, January 21, is the day that marks the beginning of a "new year" for trees.

In 1981 nine-year-old Jimmy Beveridge and his three brothers went hiking in the Palomar Mountains of California, while their folks stayed back at the camping site to prepare lunch. Jimmy separated from his brothers and got lost. Four hundred searchers joined the search for Jimmy, and he was found after four days. The end was devastating. He had died of hypothermia.

In his memory, some members of the search team developed an educational program for children to stay safe in the wilderness. They publicized a simple lifesaving principle: if you are lost, stay put and hug a tree until help arrives.

There is something very grounding about trees. They are solid, stationary and easy to hug. And, with roots knotted firmly in the soil and a dense net of branches that dance at its head, a tree can help anchor a lost and disoriented person in a very unique way.

The Torah tells us (Deuteronomy 20:19), "For man is a tree

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of the field.”

The Torah calls man “a tree of the field” as if to say: if you want to know something about yourself, look at the tree. We share an identity of sorts. In fact, according to Kabbalah, a tree is like a mirror that reflects my best self.

When interpreting the passage above, our sagas abound with thought-provoking insights about the lessons learned from a tree. For one, a tree needs to be attached to its life source, the soil, in order to grow. Animals, too, depend on the soil for sustenance, yet they don’t need to be glued to the earth in order to survive. But the tree is stationary, constantly soaking up the earth’s water and vital nutrients.

In the human tree, roots represent our faith. The trunk, branches and leaves symbolize our intellectual and emotional faculties. Finally, the fruit of the tree is our ability to create new life and to affect others.

One of the most admirable traits of the tree is its resilience. Like all perennial plants, they thrive through all four seasons. Many trees can withstand windstorms traveling at speeds of sixty miles per hour or more. And a tree can live to be over two thousand years old!

Resilience is a nice trait. It’s one that I constantly struggle to hone. But there are so many ups and downs in life that my boat of serenity seems like it’s always being rocked. There are always several things I’m worried about. Yesterday someone sent me an insulting message and almost ruined my afternoon. I recited to myself, “Be resilient, be a tree.”

The key to the tree’s strength is its thick roots, and the root of the soul is faith in G-d. The Hebrew word for faith is *emunah*. *Emunah* shares the same etymology as the Hebrew word *uman*, a skilled worker. Faith, like any good skill, needs to be cultivated and honed. And a psyche that is sated with faith in G-d is like a tree that is continually attached to its source of life. It is resilient and durable, and can withstand the winds of life with grace.

So, perhaps there is another dimension to the hug-a-tree principle. It’s too easy to get lost and distracted in the dense forest called life. Instead, I can get acquainted with the lessons of a tree, the ability to stay centered. If I’m aware that G-d runs the world and that He loves me, my boat is not that easy to rock.

FURTHER READING: WHAT IS EMUNAH?  
CHABAD.ORG/1398519

## INSIDE STORY :

# The witnessing tree

by Yerachmiel Tilles

The wheel of fortune had taken a downturn for a Jew who lived in the Moroccan city of Rabat. He was forced to wander from town to town in search of business that would enable him to support his large family.

He experienced many difficulties, yet he maintained his faith in the One who provides all, and finally succeeded in amassing a significant amount of money. Now he would be able to return home.



On the way he passed through the town of Salé, which is not far from Rabat. As it was late on Friday, he decided to remain in Salé for Shabbat. A friend from his youth whom he had not seen for many years lived there, and he knew he would find a warm welcome at his house.

Indeed, the friend insisted that his guest remain for Shabbat. The weary traveler accepted the invitation happily, and before candle-lighting he gave his money pouch to his host for safekeeping.

After *havdalah*, on Saturday night, the traveler was anxious to reach home, and requested his money pouch back from his friend.

“What are you talking about?” said his host. “You never left any money with me.”

The stunned guest could not believe his ears, and begged his friend to return the money.

The host was indignant. “You have some



## PARSHAH IN A NUTSHELL :

### BESHALACH EXODUS 13:17–17:16

Soon after allowing the children of Israel to depart from Egypt, Pharaoh chases after them to force their return, and the Israelites find themselves trapped between Pharaoh’s armies and the sea. G-d tells Moses to raise his staff over the water; the sea splits to allow the Israelites to pass through, and then closes over the pursuing Egyptians. Moses and the children of Israel sing a song of praise and gratitude to G-d.

G-d led the people about by way of the desert (13:18)

This is comparable to a king who had a son to whom he wished to leave an inheritance, but he argued: “If I give it to him now, when he is small, he will not know how to take care of it. I will therefore wait until my son studies the writings and comprehends the value [of the property]; then I will give it to him.” This is what G-d said: I shall first give them the Torah and then bring them into the Land [of Israel].

-MIDRASH RABBAH

Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dances (15:20)

How did the Israelites have tambourines in the desert? The righteous women of that

generation were certain that G-d would perform miracles for them, and they prepared tambourines and dances while still in Egypt.

-MECHILTA; RASHI

In the desert the people suffer thirst and hunger, and repeatedly complain to Moses and Aaron. G-d miraculously sweetens the bitter waters of Marah, and later has Moses bring forth water from a rock by striking it with his staff. He causes manna to rain down from the heavens before dawn each morning, and quails to appear in the Israelite camp each evening.

The children of Israel are instructed to gather a double portion of manna on Friday, as none will descend on Shabbat, the Divinely decreed day of rest. Some disobey and go to gather manna on the seventh day, but find nothing. Aaron preserves a small quantity of manna in a jar, as a testimony for future generations.

In Rephidim the people are attacked by the Amalekites, who are defeated by Moses’ prayers and an army raised by Joshua.

It came to pass, when Moses held up his hand, that Israel prevailed; and when he let down his hand, Amalek prevailed (17:11)

Did then the hands of Moses wage war or break war? No. Rather, so long as Israel looked upwards and subjected their hearts to their Father in Heaven, they prevailed; and when they did not, they fell.

-TALMUD, ROSH HASHANAH 29A

## SOUL COFFEE :

# Seek the truth

adapted by Tzvi Freeman



Why are the lives of the sages filled with miracles? Because they open their minds to truth and labor over it day and night. They are the awakened mind of the cosmos—through them the Infinite Light enters this world.

So, of course, nature bows to them, the angels wait upon them, and everything is arranged to serve their mission.

And so it is with any one of us who seeks the truth and clings to it with heart and soul.

## TORAH FOR NOW :

# The human tree

adapted by Yanki Tauber

The Torah likens man to “a tree of the field” (Deuteronomy 20:19).

A tree’s primary components are: roots, which anchor it to the ground and supply it with water and nutrients; trunk, branches and leaves, which comprise its body; and fruit, which contains the seeds by which the tree reproduces.

The spiritual life of man also includes roots, a body and fruit. The roots are our faith—our source of nurture and perseverance. The trunk, branches and leaves are the body of our spiritual lives—our intellectual, emotional and practical achievements. The fruit is our power of spiritual procreation—the ability to influence others, to plant a seed in a fellow human being and see it sprout, grow and bear fruit of its own.

The roots are the least glamorous of the tree’s parts—and the most crucial. Buried underground, they possess neither the majesty of the tree’s body, the colorfulness of its leaves nor the tastiness of its fruit. But without roots, a tree cannot survive.

Furthermore, the roots must keep pace with the body: if the trunk and leaves of a tree grow and spread without a proportional increase in its roots, the tree will collapse. On the other hand, a profusion of roots makes for a healthier, stronger tree, even if it has a meager trunk and few branches, leaves and fruit. And if

the roots are sound, the tree will rejuvenate itself if its body is damaged or its branches cut off.

Faith is the least glamorous of our spiritual faculties. Characterized by a simple conviction and commitment to one’s Source, it lacks the sophistication of the intellect, the vivid color of the emotions or the sense of satisfaction that comes from deed. And faith is buried underground, its true scope concealed from others, and even from ourselves.

Yet our faith, our supra-rational commitment to G-d, is our foundation. From it stems the trunk of our understanding, from which branch out our feelings, motivations and deeds, and from it derives the bulk of our spiritual sustenance.

A soul might grow a majestic trunk, numerous and wide-spreading branches, beautiful leaves and lush fruit. But these must be equaled, indeed surpassed, by its roots. Above the surface there might be an abundance of wisdom, experience and copious achievements; but these need to be grounded and vitalized by an even greater faith and commitment.

On the other hand, a life might be blessed with only sparse knowledge, meager feeling and experience, scant achievement and little fruit. But if its roots are extensive and deep, it is a healthy tree: a tree fully in possession of what it does have; a tree with the capacity to recover from the setbacks of life; a tree with the potential to eventually grow and develop into a loftier, more beautiful and fruitful tree.

FOR REFLECTIONS ON THE FRUIT AND SEEDS OF A TREE AND OF MAN, SEE THE FULL ARTICLE AT CHABAD.ORG/2775

