

Parshas Vayera – The Miracle of Oil – Rabbi Jonathan Shooter

י"ד חשוון תשע"ה – 7th November 2014 – שבת פ' וירא

The Haftara relates the miracle of the oil, where a certain lady was destitute. Elisha the prophet asked her what she had in the house. The Meam Loez says that in order for blessing to rest, there has to be something physical to begin with, a receptacle for the blessing in this world, through which the miracle can come down. Even this small jar of oil would be enough to trigger the miracle.

When all those vessels were full, she asked her son to bring more, until the only things left were some broken shards that were once vessels. Miraculously, they became whole and she filled them up. Again, there was something to begin with – even a broken vessel – and then the miracle could take place. Once the jars ran out, there was no longer any receptacle for the blessing, so the oil stopped. The verse says, *vayamod hashemen*. Rashi offers two interpretations of this: The plain meaning is that the oil stopped, as there was nothing to pour it into. The second meaning is that the price of oil rose. I would suggest that this was a further miracle. Usually when the supply of oil in the world increases, the price goes down. Here, she produced huge quantities, yet despite that, the price went up, thus benefiting her even further. Finally, she went to Elisha to tell him of the miracles. He told her to sell the oil to pay the creditors and live on the rest. Rashi then says that she came to take advice whether she should sell now, or hold on to her stock to see if the price would rise further. The basis for her thought was presumably because she had seen the price rise miraculously; therefore, she thought it may rise even more. Elisha told her to sell now, as she had enough to pay her creditors and live on the rest as well as provide for her descendants. Perhaps the basis of this response was that Elisha saw that the purpose of the miracle had been achieved with the oil production and the price rise. Since the aims were fulfilled, she wasn't guaranteed of any further increases or miracles, so now was, therefore, the ideal time to sell.

Rav Dessler explains the difference between a "miracle" and the "natural." People think that Hashem established the laws of nature to run on their own by way of cause and effect, and that a miracle occurs when Hashem overrides those laws that He had set out and performs some super natural feat, with no physical cause. According to this view, the world "naturally" runs on cause and effect; a seed is planted, then it rains, so it grows. The problem with this reasoning is, why does the effect necessarily follow the cause? Surely, each stage that takes place is in itself a miracle; but we have simply become used to it. Rav Dessler cites an example. Imagine a dead body in the ground. It decomposes and turns to dust. Suddenly, from that grave, something begins to grow; the body forms and emerges from the ground. According to the first way of looking at the world, described above, this is a supernatural miracle, above the laws of nature. According to Rav Dessler's thinking, there is no difference between this occurrence and a seed in the ground. The seed rots, and out comes a new shoot. This is surely similar to the "miracle" of the dead body growing anew. The only difference is that we have gotten used to the resurrection of seeds, but not of humans. In essence they are the same. It follows that, in essence, there is no difference between the natural and the miraculous. Everything is a miracle, because Hashem has willed it to be. It's just that we call some things miracles because they are unfamiliar to us, and we call some things nature because they follow patterns that are familiar. What now occurs is a great test of how we view the world. Do we see something happen and say that this is the will of Hashem, or is it that Hashem has made the laws of nature, and what occurred is just cause and effect? Nature is really just a veil to test us; when we see wheat growing, do we attribute it to the natural process, or is it the will of Hashem that it grew that way?

Rav Dessler says that there are people who devote excessive time to thinking about natural causes that affect their affairs. The irony is that even if they were successful in that particular endeavour, the path it took was totally different from what they envisioned. The path was affected by factors of which they had no idea whatsoever at the time. Therefore there is no point in overzealous manipulation of what we think are the physical causes of events. We manipulate on one side, and Hashem gives from the other. Take someone who is speculating on the financial markets. He tries to play his cards based on several factors that he knows of, the various interest rates, the growth forecasts, etc. Yet, the ultimate conclusion cannot be foreseen. There are thousands of factors at play which man has no idea of, and which will affect the outcome. It is thus ridiculous to think you can ponder all the factors, weigh them up, and make the correct decision. Rav Dessler says that there is no greater foolishness than to base one's life on these imaginary calculations. Man cannot know the future, or the total factors that affect the outcomes of his decisions. Rather, all that occurs is because it is the will of Hashem only.