



Light of Torah

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By Teresa Pirola

Can we see the miracle?

At last! After forty years of desert-trekking, the God-given homeland of the Israelites is within their grasp... But are they ready for this miracle? In Deuteronomy 29 Moses stands at the edge of the Promised Land and reminds the Israelites that the past forty years has been a story of God's signs and wonders, yet also a story of the people's rebellion.

Why this contradiction? Why have the Israelites been blind and deaf to God's miracles? Let's take a closer look at Moses' words in Deut. 29:1-3 with an ear to creative Jewish insights into this text.¹

"You have seen all that the LORD did before your eyes in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his servants and to all his land, the great trials that your eyes saw, the signs, and those great wonders. But to this day the LORD has not given you a mind to understand, or eyes to see, or ears to hear." (Deut. 29:2-4, NRSV).

Traditional Jewish commentators wrestled with these verses, especially with the last statement which seems to suggest that God was the cause of the people's blindness. How might we interpret this text?

Moshe Hefez, a 16th century Italian commentator interprets it as a statement about the dangers

of familiarity and habit. The closer we are to the miracle, the less we appreciate it:

"We do not appreciate [miracles] until they are far away from us, since familiarity breeds contempt and they are regarded as natural not supernatural phenomena. This is what Moses meant. You witnessed all those great wonders but only appreciated their full significance just now, at this time, after they had receded from view, as if you had heretofore lacked sight and hearing."²

Ponder this... Have you had the experience of recognizing a sign, wonder or miracle only after the event? What prevented you from 'seeing' it at the time?

Rabbi Meir Simha (19th century, Dvinsk, Russia) interprets the text this way: The Israelites often mistakenly attributed divine powers to Moses, forgetting that he was a mere mortal like themselves. For years they presumed the miracles to be Moses' doing. Only when he died did they come to terms with his mortality and acknowledged God as the true author of the signs and wonders that they had witnessed. Indeed, one tradition has it that this speech was delivered on the day of Moses' death.

But do either of these views really account for the reference to 'the LORD' in our text? This is the question posed by Nehama Leibowitz (20th century, Israel)

who goes on to offer this creative view: At the end of his life Moses looked back on forty years of toil as he had tried to bring his people into relationship with the Lord. Nothing had worked! Overcome by the mystery of this human 'failure' he looked for an answer in divine providence. Perhaps the people's resistance was not their fault, he reasoned, it was somehow part of the divine plan. Thus what we hear in this verse is a great sigh of disappointment that lays itself to rest in the unfathomable mystery of God's ways.

Our three commentators touch on critical tasks in the journey of life. We might name them as:

- The ability to look back on the past with clarity and to recognize the footprints of grace in even painful events.
- The importance of distinguishing God's message from the messenger, and acknowledging God as its true author.
- The willingness to accept that we can't solve everything in life, to surrender our imperfect lives to the divine mystery.

Three interpretations are presented from three different centuries of Jewish Torah study. Which 'speaks' to you and how does it agree (or not) with your own reflections on this text? •

1. Based on the teaching of Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Devarim* (NY, 1996).

2. Quoted by Leibowitz, 292.