

Why Miracles Happen: Acts of Righteousness or Pure Happenstance? Hanukkah

By Rabbi Jason Miller

This past week, amidst the news of the bombing at the Israeli-owned hotel in Kenya and the terrorist shooting at a Likud polling center, came news of an attempted attack on an Israeli-chartered jet leaving Mombassa Kenya enroute to Tel Aviv. Al Qaeda allegedly fired two heat-seeking shoulder-launched missiles at Arkia's Boeing 757. The pilot, Rafi Marek, explained that he saw a brief flash of light and felt a bump upon take-off. He saw trails of smoke following the plane. When he established radio contact with his Arkia command center at Ben Gurion airport and learned of the connected terrorist attack at the hotel, he understood the magnitude of what he saw. The plane landed safely in Israel, guarded by an Israeli fighter jets on each wing.

Rabbi Daniel Gordis, in the most recent of his now famous e-mail dispatches from Israel, writes that after the unsuccessful attack on the plane, Israeli news "interviewed some alleged aviation expert about the attempted attack. He explained how these missiles work, and gave a whole dissertation on the ease of operation of heat-seeking shoulder-launched missiles. When he was done, the interviewer asked him, 'Then how did they miss? After all, a lumbering 757, barely off the ground? How do you explain this?'" Gordis continues, "His answer, I thought, was telling. He said, 'I can't explain it. Either they fired without priming the heat-seeking element on the missiles, or they were faulty. But normally, there's no way to miss. It was a miracle.'"

I could not agree more. It was a miracle. Yes, a miracle. Those souls on the airplane, who were returning to their beloved homeland had done nothing other than try to get away from the *matzav* - from the ever worsening situation of terror and uncertainty they face each day in Israel. They needed to get away for a holiday, and now they were coming home to the place so many Jews around the world love, but are not visiting as they once did when times were better. 271 innocent lives. Men, women, and children sitting on an airplane as so many of us do, trying to relax, read a magazine, maybe eat some peanuts or pretzels. And little do they know, as they are getting comfortable on the flight and reminiscing about their Kenyan get-away, two heat-seeking missiles have become their traveling companions. But, it was as if the missiles looked at the contents of the aircraft, the faces of those 271 travelers, and decided to avoid the target of their destination. A miracle.

In the rabbinic tradition, our ancestor Joseph is known by the appellation "Joseph the Righteous," *Yosef Ha'Tzaddik*. Genesis Rabbah teaches that the lineage of Jacob is described beginning with Joseph because these generations came about only for Joseph's sake. After all, it was Joseph's acumen in saving food during the famine that brought the children of Israel down to Egypt in the first place, setting the stage for the beginning of the Jewish people's shift from slavery to redemption. Much of Joseph's greatness, his righteousness, like so much else in his life, is hidden from us, it is cloaked in disguise. Yet, we learn that one of the greatest of God's miracles happened specifically because of Joseph.

In Midrash Yalkut Shimoni on the Book of Psalms, a question is raised about the verse in Psalm 114 that states *hayam ra'ah vayanos - The sea saw and it and fled*. What did the sea see? It saw the casket carrying the bones of Joseph. Hence, the sea fled from before the one who had himself fled - Joseph fled from the temptation of sinning with the wife of Potiphar - as the verse (Genesis 39:12) says, "*Vayanos vayeitzei hachutzah - And Joseph fled from the wife of Potiphar and went outside*."

As the Egyptian army chased after the freed slaves - our ancestors - the waters of the Red Sea caught sight of the bones of Joseph, which the Jewish people had brought from Egypt. The sea promptly parted in deference to Joseph's righteousness, leading to the dramatic conclusion of the exodus and the ultimate redemption of the Jewish people from their Egyptian oppressors.

The waters of the sea recognized the restraint, the self-discipline that was displayed when Joseph turned down the advances of the beautiful Mrs. Potiphar. And upon seeing Joseph's coffin raised high by the people, in a full display of respect to their patriarch, the sea divided itself into two walls allowing for easy passage for the Israelites.

Miracles happen. They happen as a result of our courage. They happen as a result of our righteousness. They happen as a result of our hope.

Those two heat-seeking missiles took one look inside the cabin of that Arkia jetliner. They saw the faces of 271 souls who have made the courageous decision to make the homeland of the Jewish people their home. To fight for the safety, for the security, of our nation. Those missiles took one hard look inside that airplane and made the miraculous change in flight plan. From hitting their target head-on as heat-seeking missiles are known to do and are supposed to do, these two miraculous missiles averted their mission. On Erev Hanukkah, these two missiles decided not to end the lives of 271 innocent lives, but rather to remind us at this time of year, what miracles are all about.

May we all live meaningful lives of righteousness and hope, sparking the occurrence of many bright miracles.

Shabbat Shalom.