

## From Our President Making Our Own Miracles

By Carol Kaufman Newman

I just returned from Israel, my third trip in as many months. I went to celebrate the Bar Mitzvahs of three of my great-nephews. They were all quite amazing. One of the Bar Mitzvah boys is the youngest of five children and was born with Down syndrome. Yaakov *davened Shabbat*, read from the Torah, and made a short speech. My niece, an incredible young woman, spoke movingly about not relying on miracles.



That theme resonated with me as I sat in Jerusalem with my extended family at the *seder*, and we retold the story of the Exodus and our deliverance from Egypt.

When the Children of Israel reached the Red Sea, they were afraid and wanted to return to Egypt.

And the Lord said unto Moses, “Why do you cry out to me, speak unto the children of Israel that they move forward” (Exodus 14:15).

Rashi interprets this sentence in the following way: “We learn that Moses stood and prayed, and God said to him: It is not the time for lengthy prayers, while Israel is in trouble.”

According to classic rabbinic midrash, one of the princes of the people, Nachshon ben Aminadav, plunged into the sea. When the water was up to his neck, the sea parted. The Israelites were able to go forward to safety (*Mekhilta BeShalah* 5).

Nehama Leibowitz also speaks of this in her book, *New Studies in Shemot*:

There was no change in Israelite behavior even after the Almighty divided the sea for them. Their pettiness and grumblings persisted. They still hankered after creature comforts instead of appreciating the lovingkindness of the Creator who had borne them aloft on eagles’ wings. Some of them were more concerned with the mud on their shoes. Miracles do not, necessarily, change

human nature and cannot by themselves make man fear and love God. If such was their state of mind both before and after deliverance, what, we may ask, had they done to deserve the miracle in the first place? The answer is that God performed miracles for the sake of the meritorious few, for those like Nachshon who took the plunge. Such individuals exist in every generation. By their unselfish behavior and their willingness to go forward in time of emergency rather than place the burden on others do they merit the “dividing of the waters.”

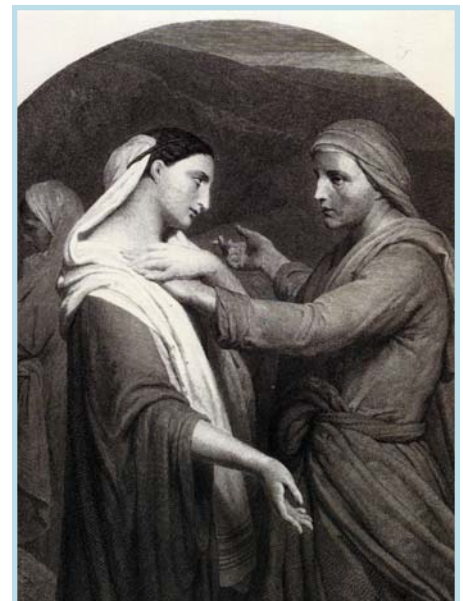
These commentaries illustrate the principle that Jews are enjoined not to rely on miracles—*אין סומכין על הנס*. When we are faced with adversity we should be prepared to act.

This same principle of action permeates the Book of Ruth, which we read on Shavuot. Naomi leaves Bethlehem to follow her husband to Moab. When he and her two sons die, she takes her first action by leaving with her two daughters-in-law to return to Bethlehem. When she tells them to return to their mother’s house, Orpah leaves but Ruth clings to Naomi saying, “Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people are my people, and your God is my God” (1:16). Once in Bethlehem they take further action. Ruth says to Naomi: “Let me go out to the field, and glean among the ears of grain behind someone in whose eyes I shall find favor...So off she went. She came and gleaned in the field behind the harvesters, and her fate made her happen upon a parcel of land belonging to Boaz” (2:2).

We can compare Ruth’s story in the *Megilla* to the story of Nachshon in the Exodus narrative. She did not passively sit at home waiting for God’s miracles,

but took action, and just as the sea opened for Nachshon “fate” stepped in for Ruth only after she had the courage to move forward on her own. And further on in Chapter 3 when Naomi sees that Boaz is not taking the action that he ought to, she seeks out a way to expedite matters and sends Ruth to the threshing floor—to Boaz. *אין סומכין על הנס*—We do not rely on miracles.

And so it is with JOFA. We too are proactive. There are inequities that need to be addressed. There is the awful shame of the *agunah*. We do not sit idly by and wait for miracles. We continue to push forward, to call for action and not rely solely on God and miracles. It is not exclusively in the hands of heaven but also in our own hands.



**NAOMI URGING RUTH TO DEPART**

Photogravure by Jules Gabriel Levasseur  
After painting by Ary Scheffer  
New York, late 19th century

Courtesy of the Library of  
the Jewish Theological Seminary.