



BO

THE SECRET OF JEWISH SURVIVAL

A Merger between Human Commitment and Divine Intervention

PARSHAH OVERVIEW

Bereshit

The last three of the Ten Plagues are visited on Egypt: a swarm of locusts devours all the crops and greenery; a thick, palpable darkness envelops the land; and all the firstborn of Egypt are killed at the stroke of midnight of the fifteenth day of the month of Nisan.

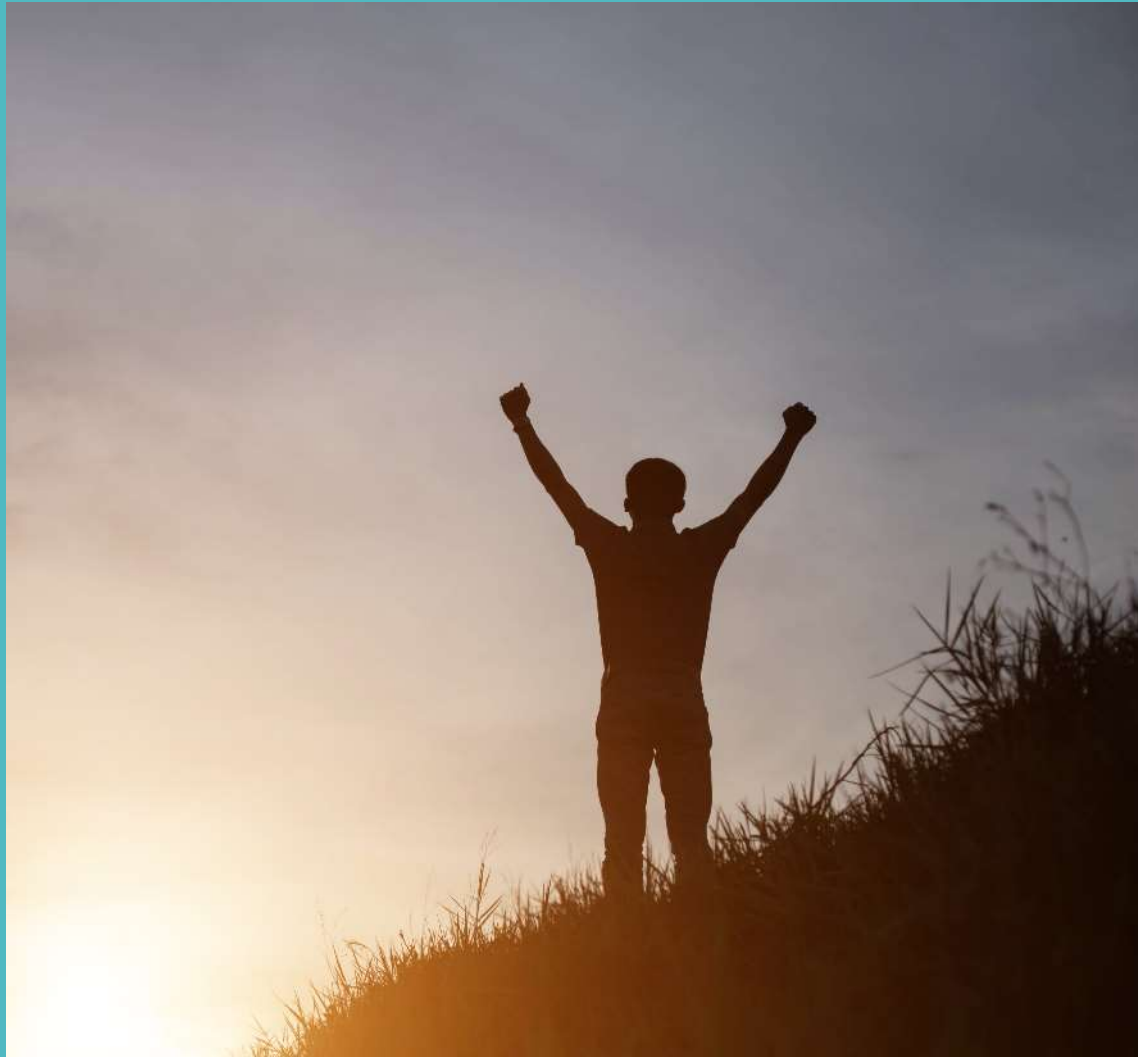
G-d commands the first mitzvah to be given to the people of Israel: to establish a calendar based on the monthly rebirth of the moon. The Israelites are also instructed to bring a “Passover offering” to G-d: A lamb or kid is to be slaughtered and its blood sprinkled on the doorposts and

lintels of every Israelite home so that G-d should pass over these homes when He comes to kill the Egyptian firstborn. The roasted meat of the offering is to be eaten that night together with matzah (unleavened bread) and bitter herbs.

The death of the firstborn finally breaks Pharaoh’s resistance, and he literally drives the Children of Israel from his land. So hastily do they depart that there is no time for their dough to rise, and the only provisions they take along are unleavened. Before they go, they ask their Egyptian neighbors for gold,

silver, and garments—fulfilling the promise made to Abraham that his descendants would leave Egypt with great wealth.

The Children of Israel are commanded to consecrate all firstborn and to observe the anniversary of the Exodus each year by removing all leaven from their possession for seven days, eating matzah, and telling the story of their redemption to their children. They are also commanded to wear *tefilin* on the arm and head as a reminder of the Exodus and their resultant commitment to G-d.



To what do you attribute the amazing phenomenon of Jewish survival over so many years despite the upheavals, expulsions, genocides, tragedies, and persecutions we have suffered?

TEXT 1

Exodus 11:4

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה, כֹּה אָמַר ה': כִּתְּצֵת
הַלַּיְלָה אֲנִי יוֹצֵא בְּתוֹךְ מִצְרַיִם.

And Moses said, “So said
G-d: ‘At midnight, I will go
out into Egypt.’”

QUESTION 1

Why does this warning provide a precise starting time for the plague? The other warnings (except for one, highlighted in the following slides) do not give a time of the occurrence of the impending plague.

TEXT 2A

Exodus 9:18

הַנִּגְנִי מִמְטִיר כַּעֲת מִחֹר בְּרֹד
כָּבֵד מְאֹד.

At this time tomorrow, I will
rain down a very heavy hail.

TEXT 2B

*Midrash, Shemot Rabah,
Exodus 12:2*

סָרַט לֹו סְרִיטָה עַל הַכֶּתֶל. אָמַר לֹו:
כִּשְׁתִּגִּיעַ הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ לְכָאן, יֵרֵד מִן הַבְּרָד.

He etched a line on the wall and said,
“Tomorrow, when the sunlight reaches
this point, hail will begin to fall.”

TEXT 2C

Exodus 9:19

וְעַתָּה שְׁלַח הָעֵז אֶת מִקְנֶךָ וְאֵת כָּל אֲשֶׁר לְךָ בַּשָּׂדֶה. כָּל
הָאָדָם וְהַבְּהֵמָה אֲשֶׁר יִמָּצֵא בַּשָּׂדֶה וְלֹא יֵאָסֵף הַבַּיְתָה,
וַיָּרֶד עֲלֵהֶם הַבָּרָד וַיָּמָתוּ.

Now, send for and gather your livestock and all you have in the field. Any person or beast found in the field and not brought into the house will perish in the falling hail.

STRENGTHENING QUESTION 1

Unlike with the plague of hail, providing the Egyptians with the time of the plague of the firstborns was useless because A) they couldn't protect themselves anyway, and B) most Egyptians could not accurately pinpoint when midnight was.

Moreover, even if the Egyptians needed to know the time, it would have been useless to them without knowing the date.

TEXT 3

*Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra,
Exodus 11:4*

וידוע, כי אין יכולת בחכם לידע רגע חצי היום, כי אם
בטורח גדול בכלים גדולים של נחושת. ואף כי חצי
הלילה, שהוא יותר קשה.

It is well-known that even an expert requires sophisticated timepieces to pinpoint midday precisely. Midnight is even more difficult to pinpoint.

G-d executed the final plague Himself, and not through a messenger. The plague being exactly at midnight highlighted this because only G-d can accurately pinpoint the moment of midnight.



TEXT 4

Passover Haggadah

"וְעָבַרְתִּי בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם בַּלַּיְלָה הַזֶּה"
(שמות יב, יב), אֲנִי וְלֹא מַלְאָךְ.

“And I will pass through the land of Egypt on this night” (Exodus 12:12)—I, and not an angel.

"וְהִכִּיתִי כָּל בְּכוֹר בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם"
(שם), אֲנִי וְלֹא שָׂרָף.

“I will strike every firstborn in the land of Egypt” (ibid.)—I, and not a seraph.

"וּבְכָל אֱלֹהֵי מִצְרַיִם אֶעֱשֶׂה שְׂפָטִים"
(שם), אֲנִי וְלֹא הַשָּׁלִיחַ.

“I will strike all the idols of Egypt” (ibid.)—I, and not a messenger.

"אֲנִי ה' " (שם), אֲנִי הוּא, וְלֹא אֲחֵר.

“I am G-d” (ibid.)—it will be I, and none other.

TEXT 5

*Midrash, Mechilta,
Exodus 12:22*

מִשְׁנֵתָנָה רְשׁוֹת לַמַּשְׁחִית לְחַבֵּל, אֵינוֹ מִבְּחִין
בֵּין צַדִּיק לְרָשָׁע.

Once the destroyer is given license to destroy, it doesn't discriminate between good and bad.

TEXT 6

Zohar, vol. 2, p. 170b

בְּזַמְנָא דְיִשְׂרָאֵל אֶעְבְּרוּ לְגַבֵּי יַמָּא, וּבָעָא קוּדְשָׁא בְּרִיךְ הוּא לְמַקְרַע לוֹן יַמָּא דְסוּף,
אֲתָא רַהַב הַהוּא מְמַנָּא דְעַל מִצְרַיִם, וּבָעָא דִּינָא מִקְמִי קוּדְשָׁא בְּרִיךְ הוּא.

אָמַר קַמִּיה: מָאֲרִיָּה דְעֵלְמָא! אֲמַאי אַתְּ בְּעֵי לְמַעַבְדֵּי דִּינָא עַל מִצְרַיִם וְלְמַקְרַע יַמָּא
לְיִשְׂרָאֵל? הָא בְּלָהוּ סִיבִין קַמָּךְ, וְכָל אֲרַסְךָ בְּדִינָא וּקְשׁוּט. אֵלִין פְּלַחֵי כּוֹכְבִים
וּמַזְלוֹת וְאֵלִין פְּלַחֵי כּוֹכְבִים וּמַזְלוֹת.

When the Israelites neared the sea, and G-d intended to split the Reed Sea for them, Rahav, Egypt's guardian angel, complained to G-d.

He said, "Master of the universe, whose ways are all just and proper, why do You intend to punish the Egyptians and split the sea for the Israelites? Both nations are guilty; these worshipped stars and planets, and those worshipped stars and planets!"



Despite their foray into paganism, the Jews never abandoned their faith in G-d. Thus, they were not required to experience the first nine plagues.

TEXT 7

*Rabbi Shneur Zalman of
Liadi, Torah Or, Va'era,
p. 57a*

אבל ישראל עצמן לא היו צריכים למופתים כלל, כי
הם מאמינים בני מאמינים. וכמו שכתוב: "ויאמן העם
וישמעו כי פקד ה'" (שמות ד, לא).

The Jews did not require proof, for they were believers, children of believers, as the verse states, “And the nation believed, and heard that G-d had remembered” (Exodus 4:31).

QUESTION 2

Why was it so critical that G-d do this plague on His own?

ANSWER 2A

G-d executed the final plague because if He had given the angels the authority to kill, they would have done so indiscriminately, resulting in the deaths of many Jews, as Jews and Egyptians were equally deserving of punishment.

QUESTION 2

Why was it so critical that G-d do this plague on His own?

ANSWER 2B

G-d pardoned the Jews from the tenth plague out of love. Since only G-d has the power to pardon, He had to be the one to administer the final plague.

Due to His
intense love for
the Jews, G-d
went against all
logic and
pardoned them.



ANSWER 1

Moses revealed the timing of the final plague, midnight, to convey that G-d Himself would be executing this plague, as only G-d can precisely determine the moment of midnight.

TEXT 8A

*Midrash, Mechilta,
Exodus 12:29*

וכי אפשר לבשר ודם לעמוד על חציו של
לילה? אלא . . . היודע שעותיו ועיתותיו,
הוא חלקו.

Can any human determine the precise midpoint of the night? Only . . . He Who knows His times and moments can split the night.

TEXT 8B

*The Rebbe, Rabbi
Menachem Mendel
Schneerson, Likutei
Sichot 21, p. 59*

"כהחלק הלילה", ווען משך הלילה צעטיילט זיך אויף צווייען, איז מתאר (ניט זמן, נאר) א פעולה. ובהוספה, אז די דאזיקע פעולה טוט זיך אויף ניט אין א המשך זמן, נאר אין א נקודה פון "זמן".

די נקודה וואס צעטיילט די צוויי חצאי הלילה איז ניט קיין שהות (המשך) זמן וואס מען קען עס מעסטן (אויב מען קען עס מעסטן - דארף זי אויך נתחלק ווערן - האלב צו דעם ערשטן חצי הלילה, און די צווייטע האלב - צו דעם צווייטען).

און דאס איז דער אויפטו פון "כחצות הלילה אני יוצא גו'" (שמות יא, ד) - דער אויבערשטער וועט "ארויסגיין" פונקט אין דער נקודה פון "כהחלק לילה" ווארעם ער איז "יודע עיתיו ורגעיו".

Splitting the night is not a time; it is an action. Moreover, this action does not occur over a span of time. It happens at a precise point in time.

The point that splits the two halves of the night is not a measurable unit of time. If it were measurable, it too would have been divisible; the first half would belong to the first part of the night, and the second half would belong to the second part of the night.

This is the message inherent in the words, "As the night splits [at midnight], I will go out" (Exodus 11:4). G-d would go out at the precise [indivisible] point when the night would split because only G-d knows His times and moments.

QUESTION 3

Why did this time have to be midnight?

It had to be an infinitesimal indivisible point of time, but these points occur at every moment of the day.

QUESTION 4

Why didn't Moses just come out and tell Pharaoh that G-d would deliver the plague Himself?

Why did he intimate it by informing Pharaoh that the plague would occur precisely at midnight?



G-d was firm and just with the Egyptians, and merciful and protective of the Jews simultaneously.

TEXT 9A

Isaiah 19:22

וְנִגַּף ה' אֶת מִצְרַיִם נֶגֶף וְרִפּוּא, וְשָׁבוּ עַד ה'
וְנִעְתָּר לָהֶם וּרְפָאֵם.

G-d shall plague Egypt, plaguing and healing, and they shall return to the L-rd, and He shall accept their prayer and heal them.

TEXT 9B

Zohar, vol. 2, p. 36a

אמר רבי יוסי: בהוא ממש דאשתכח דינא
למצראי, בהוא ממש אשתכח רחמי לישראל,
נגוף למצרים ורפוא לישראל.

Rabbi Yosi said, “The very act that struck the Egyptians brought mercy upon the Jews. It was a plague for the Egyptians and a healing for the Jews.”

The plague of the death of the firstborn came from a transcendental point from which opposites emerge—kindness and severity.

TEXT 10

*Rabbi Menachem
Mendel of Lubavitch, Or
HaTorah, Genesis, p. 75a*

זה שיתחלק לחסד וגבורה ממש, שיהיה גילוי חסד
וצדקה לישראל ודין ומשפט למצרים . . . לזה צריך
לבא הכח ממקום עליון יותר.

This single act consisted of kindness and severity simultaneously: revealed kindness and generosity toward the Jews, and stricture and justice toward the Egyptians. . . . Only a power that transcends both poles can accomplish this.

TEXT 11

*The Rebbe, Rabbi
Menachem Mendel
Schneerson, Likutei
Sichot 3, p. 866*

און דאס איז דער ביאור אויף דעם וואס מכת
בכורות איז געווען בחצות הלילה דוקא . . .

די ערשטער האלבע נאכט איז דער זמן פון
מדת הגבורה. וואס דערפאר זעען מיר, אז
דאן ווערט וואס ווייטער אלץ פינסטערער.
די צוויטע האלבע נאכט איז מאיר מדת
החסד. און דעריבער הויבט דאן אן ווערן
אלץ ליכטיקער און ליכטיקער.

און די רגע פון חצות פאראייניקט ביידע
קעגנזאצן פון חסד און גבורה, ווייל אין איר
איז מאיר דער אור וואס איז העכער פון
השתלשלות. וכידוע, אז דאס וואס איז מחבר
צוויי ענינים הפכיים, מוז ער אליין זיין
העכער פון ביידע הגבלות.

This explains why the plague of the
firstborn had to be at the point of
midnight. . . .

The first half of the night is dominated
by stricture. This is why the darkness
grows stronger as the moments pass.
The second half of the night is
dominated by lenience. This is why the
night begins to grow lighter each
moment. [In other words, the paradigm
of night is the interplay of opposites.]

The point of midnight combines the
opposite poles of lenience and stricture
because this point transcends the
entire paradigm of the night. One who
merges opposites must transcend the
limitations of both.

ANSWER 3

The point of midnight is transcendental. It combines severity and leniency. It is a generic point from which both emerge.

The plague of the firstborn was a transcendental miracle. It makes sense that a transcendental G-d would perform a transcendental miracle at a transcendental point in time.

ANSWER 4

Informing Pharaoh that the plague would take place at midnight not only guaranteed that G-d would deliver the plague but also revealed G-d's intention to achieve the seemingly impossible—using His transcendental midnight power to ensure the survival of the Jews and the Egyptians' demise.

TEXT 12

*Rabbi Moshe Alshich,
Torat Moshe, Exodus 12:1*

נתן להם שתי מצות: דם פסח ודם מילה.

והוא כי חוייבו להיות שתיהן בהכרח, כי הלא היו עובדים את הטלה כנודע. והעובד עבודת גילולים, שתיים הוא צריך לתקן. אחד - הסיר הטומאה. ואחר כך - הכנס תחת הקדושה. שהוא מעין סור מרע ועשה טוב . . .

והסיר עצמם מהטומאה הוא על ידי דם פסח, שהוא שחיטת השה שהיו עובדים, כמו שכתוב: "משכו וקחו" (שמות יב, כא) - משכו ידיכם מעבודת גילולים, וקחו.

ואין זה מספיק, אלא שאחר גיעול הטומאה צריך ליכנס תחת שעבוד אלוקי אמת, שהוא לחתום בחותמו - הוא חותם ברית קודש להיות עבד לה'.

G-d gave our ancestors two commandments: the blood of the paschal lamb and the blood of circumcision.

They were equally in need of both, for they had worshipped the Egyptian sheep, as is well-known. A person who worships idolatry must self-rectify in two ways. One is to purge impurities; the other is to enter the sphere of holiness. This is the idea of avoiding wickedness and embracing goodness. . .

Their impurities were purged by the paschal lamb because they slaughtered the very sheep that they had once worshipped. As the Torah says, "Draw and take" (Exodus 12:21): withdraw your hands from idolatry, and take the paschal lamb.

Yet, more was needed. After purging the impurities, they needed to accept the yoke of the true G-d. This was accomplished by the mark of circumcision, the sacred signature of G-d, which is our initiation into servitude to G-d.

The Jews' logic-defying faith in, and devotion to, G-d, even to the point of self-sacrifice, elicited G-d's reciprocal love.

TEXT 13

*Midrash, Yalkut
Shimoni, Hoshea 519*

אתה מוצא שלא נגאלו אבותינו ממצרים
אלא בזכות האמונה, שנאמר: "ויאמן העם"
(שמות ד, לא).

The only merit by which our ancestors were redeemed from Egypt was their faith. As it is written, "And the nation believed" (Exodus 4:31).

TEXT 14A

*Rabbi Yaakov Emden,
Siddur, Introduction*

אֲנַחְנוּ הָאוּמָה הַגּוֹלָה, שָׁה פְּזוּרָה, אַחַר כָּל מָה
נְשַׁעֲבַר עָלֵינוּ מִהַצָּרוֹת וְהַתְּמוּרוֹת אֲלֵפִים
מִהַשָּׁנִים. וְאִין אוּמָה בְּעוֹלָם גִּרְדָּפֶת כְּמוֹנוּ. מָה
רַבִּים הָיוּ צָרֵינוּ, מָה עֲצָמוּ וְנִשְׂאוּ רֹאשׁ הַקָּמִים
עָלֵינוּ מִנְעוּרֵינוּ, לְהַשְׁמִידֵנוּ לְעַקְרֵנוּ לְשָׂרְשָׁנוּ,
מִפְּנֵי הַשִּׁנְאָה וְשִׂסְבָּתָה הַקְּנֵאָה רַבַּת צָרְרוֹנוּ. גַּם
לֹא יָכְלוּ לָנוּ לְאַבְדֵנוּ וּלְכַלּוֹתֵנוּ. כָּל הָאוּמוֹת
הַקְּדוּמוֹת הָעֲצוּמוֹת אָבַד זְכָרָם, בָּטַל סִבְרָם, סָר
צֵלָם - וְאָנוּ הַדְּבָקִים בֵּה' כּוֹלְנוּ חַיִּים הַיּוֹם . . .

מָה יַעֲנֶה בְּזֶה פִּילוֹסוֹף חָרִיף? הִיךְ הַמְּקַרָּה
עֲשֵׂתָה כָּל אֵלֶּה? חַי נַפְשִׁי, כִּי בְּהַתְּבוּנָתִי
בְּנִפְלְאוֹת אֵלֶּה גָּדְלוּ אֲצָלִי יוֹתֵר מִכָּל גּוֹסִים
וְנִפְלְאוֹת נְשַׁעֲשָׂה ה' יִתְבָּרֵךְ לְאַבּוֹתֵינוּ בְּמִצְרַיִם
וּבַמִּדְבָּר וּבְאֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל. וְכֹל מֵה נְשַׁאֲרָה הַגְּלוּת
יוֹתֵר, נִתְאַמַּת הַנֶּס יוֹתֵר, וְנוֹדַע מִעֲשֵׂה תִקְפוֹ
וּגְבוּרָתוֹ.

We are the exiled nation, the lost sheep. With all the troubles that have passed over us through the millennia, no nation in the world has been persecuted as we have been. How numerous our enemies have been! From our earliest days, how mightily have they lifted their heads, seeking to destroy and uproot us because of hatred caused by envy! But they have been unable to destroy us. All the mighty ancient nations—their memory is gone, their hope is naught, their protection has been removed. But we who cling to G-d are all alive today.

How can a sharp skeptic rebut this? Could it have been the work of chance that caused all this? By my living soul, when I contemplate these wonders, they seem greater to me than all the wonders and miracles that G-d did for our ancestors in Egypt, in the wilderness, and in the Land of Israel. And the longer the Exile continues, the more this miracle is verified, and the more we know its power and might.

TEXT 14B

*Maimonides, Guide for
the Perplexed 2:29*

"כי כאשר השמים החדשים והארץ החדשה אשר אני עושה עומדים לפני נאום ה', כן יעמוד זרעכם ושמכם" (ישעיה סו, כב).

כי פעמים ישאר הזרע ולא ישאר השם. כמו שתמצא אומות רבות, אין ספק שהם מזרע פרס או יון, אלא שלא יודעו בשם מיוחד. אבל כללה אותם אומה אחרת.

וזה גם כן אצלי הערה על נצחיות התורה, אשר בעבורה יש לנו שם מיוחד.

“For as the new heavens and the new earth, which I will make, remain before me,’ says G-d, ‘so will your seed and your name remain’” (Isaiah 66:22).

In some instances, the seed remains, but the name perishes. Many people are undoubtedly the seed of the Persians or Greeks, but are no longer known by that name. They were assimilated into other nations.

I believe this is a prophecy that our Torah, which gives us our unique identity, will remain forever.

The secret of Jewish survival is a partnership between G-d and the Jews. G-d provides the survival of our seed, and we provide the survival of our creed.



KEY POINTS

1. The plague of the firstborn was a combination of opposites. The very act that punished the Egyptians pardoned the Jews—simultaneous severity and kindness.
2. Midnight is an infinitesimal, indivisible point in time that contains both halves of the night: the half that is dominated by severity and darkness and the half that is dominated by kindness and light: simultaneous severity and kindness.
3. To merge opposites, you must transcend both. Only G-d can accomplish this, and only He can pinpoint the precise point of midnight. This is why the plague of the firstborn occurred precisely at midnight.

KEY POINTS

4. Had G-d not delivered this plague Himself, many Jews would have died that night. This is because many Jews dabbled in paganism and idol worship while in Egypt.
5. Though Jews did not deserve to be saved that night, they did elicit their salvation. Their logic-defying faith in and devotion to G-d, even to the point of self-sacrifice, elicited G-d's reciprocal love.
6. The secret of Jewish survival is a partnership between G-d and the Jewish people. The survival of our seed is G-d's miracle. The survival of our creed is our contribution, and it elicits G-d's miracle.

