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 Arlington Street Church
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Making a Miracle

In the years just before World War II, mountaineer W. H. Murray was slogging around the roadblocks to putting together a Scottish expedition in the Himalayas. He wrote, "... When I said that nothing had been done, I erred in one important matter. We had definitely committed ourselves, and were halfway out of our ruts. We had put down our passage money – booked a sailing to Bombay. This may sound too simple, but is great in consequence. Until one is committed, there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness. Concerning all acts of initiative (and creation), there is one elementary truth, the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: the moment one definitely commits oneself, then providence moves, too. A whole stream of events issues from the decision, raising in one's favor all manner of unforeseen incidents, meetings, and material assistance, which no [one] could have dreamt would have come [their] way.

"I learned," he concludes, "a deep respect for one of Goethe's couplets:

Whatever you can do or dream you can, begin it.
 Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it!"¹

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Chanukah – the eight-day celebration of a miracle – begins tonight. In 166 BCE, against all odds, the Maccabean guerrillas were victorious over the Hellenic army of Antiochus; recaptured Jerusalem; and set out to rededicate the Holy Temple. The rabbis taught, "... [The Maccabees searched the Temple] and found only one bottle of ... [pure] oil.... It contained only enough for one day's lighting. Yet a miracle was brought about with it, and [it burned] for eight days...."²

¹ W.H. Murray, *The Scottish Himalaya Expedition*, 1951

² [Shabbat 21b]

This week, as the moon wanes, the light from the candles on the hanukiah will increase. Rabbi Arthur Waskow writes, “And night after night, we make our way into, through, and out of the darkness of the sun and moon. We experience and feel the turn ... from the moment of darkness ... toward the light, the turn ... from the moment of despair ... toward salvation....”³

In his brilliant essay called *Trusting a New Beginning*, Rabbi David Hartman writes that the Maccabees’ insistence on [lighting the lamp] ... for the rededication of the Temple, even though the quantity [of oil] found appeared to be insufficient, is symbolic of the willingness to act, and as a directive to stop letting “uncertainty of success paralyze our initiatives.”

He continues, “The ‘miracle’ of Jewish spiritual survival throughout its history of wandering and oppression may best be described by our people’s strength to live without guarantees of success, and to focus on how to begin a process without knowledge of how it [will] end...”⁴ Rabbi Tarfon said, “It is not incumbent upon [us] to complete the work, but neither are [we] at liberty to desist from it.”⁵

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Miracle. Unitarian Universalists might define a miracle as “an unexpected event or revelation that brings an outcome one has hoped for, perhaps yearned for, perhaps despaired of, perhaps never even imagined.”⁶ I love Rabbi Hartman’s theology of an active faith: we are called to participate in making our own miracles – to make light in the darkness.

He continues, “Human capacities and achievements grow as a result of action, and not as a result of noble ideals and well-meaning intentions. The Chanukah lamp burned for eight days because of those who were prepared to have it burn for only one day.... Those who went ahead and kindled the lamp ignored [the] ‘voices of reason’ and they availed themselves of the precious opportunities at hand. And the miracle of Chanukah occurred....

³ Rabbi Arthur Waskow, *Seasons of Our Joy*, p. 87

⁴ Rabbi David Hartman, “Trusting in a New Beginning,” in Noam Zion and Barbara Spectre, *A Different Light*, p. 196

⁵ Avot 2:21

⁶ from *Miracles: A Multigenerational Tapestry of Faith Program*, by Adrienne Ross, Chris Jablonski, Miriam Smith, and Susan Lawrence. Please see uua.org/re/tapestry/multigenerational/miracles

“The Chanukah lights encourage [us] to trust human beginnings, and to focus [our] passions and efforts on whatever opportunities are available at the present moment.... The strength to ... persevere grows by virtue of the courage to initiate a process by lighting the first flame. Only lamps which are lit may continue to burn beyond their anticipated life span....” And this is beautiful; he says, “One ought to pour infinite yearnings even into small vessels.”⁷

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This is an old Hasidic teaching tale about how to make a miracle.

On the day before the Sabbath, the Baal Shem Tov – rabbi, mystic, and founder of Hasidic Judaism – left the city with some of his followers. They journeyed in a horse-drawn carriage through several smaller towns and beyond, finally stopping at a small, hardscrabble farm. Before they disembarked, the Baal Shem Tov said, “Promise me that no matter what happens here, you will not reveal by word or gesture who I am.” The Hasidim readily agreed.

Knocking at the door, they were greeted by Avi, the farmer. Behind him stood his wife, Sarah, and their four daughters.

“We are hungry,” said the Baal Shem Tov.

“Please come inside,” said Avi. “We are honored to serve you.”

Turning to his wife, he whispered, “We will have to kill the cow.”

Sarah was disbelieving. “But the cow’s milk is all our children have to eat.”

“We have guests,” said her husband. “It is an honor to have guests. We must kill the cow.”

And so the cow was sacrificed and prepared for dinner. Knowing how precious the cow was to the family, the Hasidim were horrified. They couldn’t bear to eat. But the Baal Shem Tov sat up all night, eating the cow.

⁷ Rabbi David Hartman, *op cit*, p. 196

The next morning, he announced what he wanted to eat for the Sabbath: six loaves of challah, six kinds of vegetables, two kinds of meat, two kinds of fish, ten desserts, and three kinds of wine.

The Hasidim were appalled by their rabbi, the very heart of whose teaching was kindness and respect. Over and over again, he had told them that kindness and respect to all people were more important than study and learning. *Had he gone mad?* But every time one of them began to speak, the rebbe would look at him, and he would remember his promise.

If the Hasidim were mortified, imagine how Sarah felt! Avi tried to comfort her, imploring her not to worry. But she was anguished. “What about our children?” she asked. “What will become of us?”

“We have guests,” he replied. “It is an honor to have guests. There is nothing to be done but to go to town and sell the farm to the bank for money to buy food.” And so he did, asking only that his family be allowed to stay in the house until Monday. And he returned home with a cartload of food.

Sarah prepared the food, and once again, the Baal Shem Tov sat up all night, eating. He ate and ate and ate. His followers were so distraught, they barely touched the feast. It seemed to them that all they did for that entire Sabbath was to sit in the little hut and listen to the rebbe’s chewing. Time passed very slowly.

At last it was over. The sun set, the first stars appeared, and the Sabbath ended with songs and prayers. As the guests climbed back into their carriage and made for home, the great teacher leaned out the window and called back to Avi, “I am the Baal Shem Tov. I bless you to ask for whatever you need.”

Avi was astounded. The Holy One had been a guest in his home! He had dreamed of going to see him someday, of sitting near him and listening to him speak. To think that he had been honored to share the Sabbath with him in his own home! He turned to his wife, whose face was alight with joy. But the joy was quickly replaced with terrible worry. That night, the four children and their parents went to bed without food.

On Sunday, unable to sleep, Avi arose very early and walked aimlessly in the direction of town. The next day, the banker would be coming. He

began to pray. “Creator of the Universe,” he began, “I have never asked you for anything. But today, I must ask for food for my family and a house where we can live. Please,” he prayed, “make a miracle for me. And may my purse be large enough to provide for others in need.” He began to weep, and then to sob. He sat down on a stone wall beside the road, crying and praying, praying and crying. He sat there for a long time.

Eventually, Ivan, the old town fool, came hobbling along. “O, Avi, please don’t cry. Whatever it is, don’t worry. Maybe I can help. What is it?” When Avi told him, Ivan said, “O, Avi, everyone else in the village makes fun of me. You alone have been kind to me. I am an old man, now, and soon I will die. I want you to have my fortune. Come, I will show you where it’s hidden.” And with that, he led him to a rock that had fallen from the stone wall, and showed him the box hidden beneath.

On Monday, two things happened. The banker came and took Avi’s farm; and Ivan, the old town fool, died.

Avi went to the stone and, without much hope, removed the box. It was full of coins. Gold coins.

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One year later, an elegant carriage drew up before the house of the Baal Shem Tov. The rebbe’s followers didn’t recognize Avi and Sarah in all their finery. “We’ve come to see the master,” Avi said.

They were led inside, and everyone gathered around to hear about their great reversal of fortune. “Now we have a house in town,” Avi concluded; “and dowries for our daughters,” added Sarah.

“We have also heard,” said the Baal Shem Tov, “that you are truly a friend to those in need. Those who come to you for help are treated with kindness and respect. There is joy in heaven because of this.”

“It is due to your blessing that our good fortune came to us,” said Sarah. “We have come to thank you.”

The Baal Shem Tov replied, “It was not I. It was decreed in heaven that you were to become rich. But you were so humble you would never ask for anything. I had to come and eat you out of house and home so that you would ask for the blessings that awaited you.

If a miracle is to come,” he concluded, “we must ask; if a miracle is to come, it will come through our kindness and respect, and through hands.”⁸

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Beloved spiritual companions,

Whatever you can do or dream you can, begin it.
Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it!”⁹

May we cultivate the courage and the strength
to begin without knowing the end:
Only lamps which are lit may continue to burn
beyond their anticipated life span.

May we pour infinite yearnings even into small vessels,
and so participate in making miracles.

May we make light in the darkness.

⁸ Adapted from the old Hasidic tale *A Small Miracle*, as told by Kathleen Mavournin.
Please see hasidicstories.com/Stories/The_Baal_Shem_Tov/miracle.html

⁹ W.H. Murray, *op cit*, 1951