

## Pouring Ice Water on a False Prophet



While visiting a park with my children, a middle-aged man approached me and asked if I was a rabbi. He assumed that only rabbis cover their heads with a kippah or yarmulke. I answered yes, and explained that although I am a rabbi, many Jews cover their heads in reverence to God.

This reverence is alluded to in the word *yarmulke*, which, according to some

scholars, is a compound word derived from the Aramaic expression [ירא מלכא–*yerei malka*], which means “awe of the King.”

As our conversation continued, I discovered that my new acquaintance was an evangelical Christian. He asked me many questions, which I answered. Then, he challenged me to explain the miracles attributed to Jesus in the New Testament.

I politely responded that, in my opinion, the numerous contradictions in the New Testament call into question the authenticity of its claims about Jesus. Furthermore, although Jews believe in miracles, we do not rely on miracles as proof that someone is a prophet or the promised messiah.

A proof must be irrefutable, which is not the case with miracles, since they can be dismissed as sleight of hand, magic, or natural phenomena. The Torah also warns about false prophets who can give a “*sign or a wonder*” (Deuteronomy 13:1-3) to test our faith in God.

This explains why miracles are not mentioned in the comprehensive list of messianic proofs found in Ezekiel 37:24-28. Furthermore, when Maimonides (*Laws of Kings*, Chapter 14) reiterates this list of proofs, he emphatically states that the messiah does not have to perform miracles. Maimonides also points out that the Jewish people did not believe in Moses because of the miracles he performed (*Foundation of the Torah*, Chapter 8). Instead, they “*Believed in him forever*” (Exodus 19:9) because Moses brought the entire nation to Mt. Sinai, where they collectively experienced a revelation of God.

**The Torah also warns that a false prophet can give a “*sign or a wonder*” to test our faith.**

To highlight my point that miracles are not irrefutable proof, I told my new acquaintance that “Even I can perform a miracle” and had once walked on water.

In January 1990, while visiting the former Soviet Union to teach Torah to Jews thirsting for knowledge, I took a detour to see the frozen Baltic Sea. As I cautiously ventured onto the ice, I marveled at how I “walked on water.”

Although walking on ice isn't a miracle, the incident reminded me of something mentioned in this week's Torah portion, *Korach* (Numbers 16:1–18:32), when Korach challenges the authority of Moses and incites a rebellion against him.

How could Korach attempt to diminish the awe and enthusiasm the Jewish people had for Moses, our greatest Jewish leader and prophet?

An answer to this dilemma is found in the Hebrew spelling of Korach's name. The letters [קרח] also spell the word “kerach,” which means *ice*. To challenge Moses' leadership, Korach had to “cool down” the Jewish people by drawing attention to what he considered an unfair hierarchy. In the end, Korach's rebellion failed, and the Jewish people learned an important lesson—every individual plays a unique and valuable role in the community.

Millennia later, on a cold winter day, the holy Baal Shem Tov, the founder of the Chassidic movement, traveled into the forest with his students. They stopped beside a frozen lake and watched two Russian peasants go fishing by carving an opening through the ice in the form of a

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cross. Having learned from the Baal Shem Tov to always look for a lesson in whatever they saw or experienced, the Baal Shem Tov's students wondered what they should learn from witnessing a cross carved into the ice.

The Baal Shem Tov explained that the Torah is compared to water, which flows from a high place to a low place and gives life. However, if the Torah inside us is cold and indifferent, it can turn to ice; then even false theologies can be carved into it.

This “cooling off” to Torah happened in Korach's time, in the time of the Baal Shem Tov, and is still happening today.

The answer is to warm up our Torah by learning its deeper meaning and observing it with enthusiasm. This approach will enhance our spiritual sensitivity to God.

May this Shabbos provide us with many opportunities to tap into the spiritual wellspring of Judaism and experience the warmth and life it provides.

Shabbat Shalom,

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