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## Chapter 4. Miracles

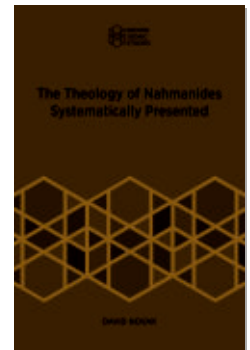
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## Chapter 4

### Miracles

[4.1] For Nahmanides the act of faith (*emunah*) is the human anticipation of providence. Without such faith, one would not recognize providential power when it is exercised. Providence manifests itself in what Nahmanides calls "secret miracles" (*nissim nistarim*):

‘God Almighty’ (*El Shaddai*)... this name expresses the attribute of power (*ha-Gevurah*) that governs the world here below... The reason it is mentioned now [at God’s covenantal promise to Abraham] is that it is through this name that secret miracles are performed for the righteous... like all the miracles performed for Abraham and the other patriarchs, and like... the blessings and curses [that attend Israel’s obedience or disobedience to the commandments], all of which are miracles. For it is not by nature that rain should fall in due season because of our service of God... So with all the designated occurrences (*ha-ye’udim*) in the Torah... the influence of the heavenly constellations (*ha-mazalot*) is overcome. Yet these miracles do not depart from the accustomed course of the world (*mi-minhago shel ‘olam*), as did the miracles performed by Moses. [CT: Gen. 17:1 - I, 98]

There is no real difference in kabbalistic theology between revelation and creation, so the words of the Torah are all efficacious. All are permutations of the divine names (see Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, trans R. Manheim [New York: Schocken, 1969], 36 ff.). This is clearest when an explicit name is used, as is the case here. Nahmanides stresses the power of God’s name to direct the course of nature favorably for the righteous.

[4.2] The secret miracles are hidden in that their ostensible causality is ordinary. It is natural that Judah should be attracted to Tamar. But the outcome of his attraction was fulfillment of God's plan. As in this case, secret miracles require a subsequent revelation to be appreciated. Public miracles (*nissim mefursamim*), by contrast, are evident immediately, since their overt causality is extraordinary.

The Rabbis say explicitly that R. Huna said in the name of R. Idi, 'One should not say that Tamar fornicated or that Judah desired to fornicate, but that these things were from Me [God]. That is to say (*kelomar*), this was one of the secret miracles constantly found in the Torah, as we have explained. For it was from the blessed Creator that the divine will and determinative decree (*gezerat ratson*) reached the powers proximate to the situation, the angel appointed over this matter [sexual attraction]. There was an emanation from God to the heavenly powers that act on earthly things both in general and in particular. [KR: *Commentary on Job*, intro. - I, 26]

The rabbinic source cited here is not found in any printed text. For a possible manuscript source, see M. M. Kasher, *Torah Shlemah* (New York: n.p., 1948) 6.1476, n. 114.

[4.3] What public and private miracles have in common to warrant each being called a miracle (*nes*) is that both are understood to be direct expressions of God's will. All other events belong to the natural order, epitomized by the regular movement of the constellations. Secret miracles do not obviously contradict this order. The same event can be interpreted by a nonbeliever as natural and by a believer as miraculous. The essential difference that makes for a miracle is a mere accident for the nonbeliever. Thus what is most important to the believer is least important to the nonbeliever. But public miracles do run counter to the natural order. They shatter normal expectations. Where there is a predisposition for faith, such stunning experiences can remove the impediment to its growth.

Nahmanides speaks of "the miraculous which is evident (*galui*) and public and contrary to nature" (CT: Gen. 46:15 - I, 254). With secret miracles, nothing unfamiliar is seen. What is unusual is the favorable position in the physical world of the person blessed with such a miracle. One can explain naturalistically how and when rain falls. But why it will rain on a particular spot to benefit particular people is not explicable by natural law. Only prior faith in God's power apprehends such a miracle. For God's power alone made the event occur just when and as it did. The combination of outward normality with inward uniqueness was known even to the patriarchs:

For he appeared to the patriarchs by this name [*El Shaddai*], which means that he subdued the heavenly constellations to perform great miracles through them, miracles that did not void the normal course of the world... But the rewards and punishments of the Torah are all secret miracles, which appear to those who see them as belonging to the normal course of the world, although the truth is that they are punishments and rewards for human beings. [CT: Exod. 6:2 - II, 303]

In Aristotelian physics every species has its own nature or essence, an indelible "form," by which members of the species behave as they must. This behavior expresses each being's inclination toward its own natural end (*inclinatio naturalis*). Once one understands the proper nature of any being, one can predict how it will behave. Gross deviations are impossible. Only nonessential, "accidental" deviations are admitted. These are ascribed to chance factors (Aristotle, *Physics*, 193b 22 ff.; 197b 14 ff.), which are always less significant than the "essential" pattern. For Nahmanides, however, nothing is impossible for the Creator, since he transcends nature. What is impossible to an Aristotelian is miraculous for Nahmanides, as for Halevi. The "impossible" in this sense is not only possible but real, and visible in public miracles.

In modern science, as developed since the times of Copernicus, Galileo and Newton, entities are no longer treated as having innate natures or essences or as parts of unalterable species. Rather, all entities are actual or potential data. Their interrelations in space-time are subject to mathematical quantification, from which causal patterns are abstracted. Since things are no longer seen as having inherent essential properties, the idea of intrinsic impossibility has lost its standing. The only impossibility still universally recognized is logical impossibility, and even that has developed in new ways at the hands of logicians like Alfred North Whitehead and Bertrand Russell, who were heavily influenced by the great developments in modern science. Phenomena not now explainable within an intelligible paradigm may be explainable once an appropriate paradigm is constituted, with the expansion of our experience. The greatest example of such an expansion in this century is Einstein's constituting a new paradigm – the Theory of Special Relativity – to explain phenomena not explained by Newtonian Mechanics. See T. S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962] 43 ff.; and for the indefinite expansibility of experience, David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* I 3.14, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1888] 170-72.)

Given the expansion of the idea of possibility in natural science, Nahmanides' distinction between secret and public miracles becomes implausible in the context of the reigning paradigms in natural science today. But his theory of secret miracles remains plausible. For here a miracle is an event in historical time-space rather than an occurrence in physical

space-time. Its significance lies in *when* the event happened, to *whom* it happened, and *who* now appreciates it. Only then is *where* it happened of significance. (For the primacy of time-space over space-time in classical Jewish thought, see my late revered teacher, Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath*, exp. ed. [New York: Farrar, Straus, 1963], Appendix: "Space, Time and Reality: The Centrality of Time in the Biblical World View." I thank Fritz Rothschild for this reference.)

Historical time-space cannot be understood in nearly as deterministic a way as physical space-time, even for philosophers who see natural patterns in history. Besides, Evolutionary Theory in biology and Quantum Theory in physics address statistical probabilities rather than strict causal laws (see Bernard Lonergan, *Insight*, 3rd ed. [New York: Philosophical Library, 1970], 97 ff.). So most of contemporary natural science does not contradict the possibility of unique events, not predetermined systemically. But a miracle needs only *one lone* event which is not systemically predetermined. Thus there is no longer an unbridgable gap between natural science and spiritual insight. Nahmanides' theory of secret miracles – expanded and adapted to be sure – allows us to develop a theology in which God can be appreciated as both the Creator of the physical universe and the Lord of history.

One can even maintain Nahmanides' distinction between secret and public miracles, if one takes secret miracles as individual experiences of God's special care and public miracles as collective experiences of that same care. Since language is public, the language used by the community in transmitting the memory of its collective experience of God's care can enable individuals to perceive and express their own private miracles in the context of the community in which people speak a shared language of faith (see Max Kadushin, *The Rabbinic Mind* [New York: JTS, 1952] 216-17). For Nahmanides public miracles presuppose secret miracles. But in the view I have just proposed, individual miracles presuppose collective miracles. For the recollection of the latter provides the language for the intelligibility of the former.

[4.4] Hidden miracles mark the distinction between God's general providence, evident in the natural order as a whole, and his special providence, seen only in the lives of the righteous and those who share their faith:

The Lord's knowledge, which is his providence in the world here below (*ba-'olam ha-shafal*), serves to protect the species. And for that reason even humans can fall victim to particular vicissitudes (*miqrim*)... but with his saints (*hasidav*), he directs conscious attention to them individually, making his care for them continual. His knowledge and mindfulness never depart from them. [CT: Gen. 18:19 - I, 111]

[4.5] For Nahmanides, providence is what explains the commandments and the rewards and punishments in the Torah. Thus, in his reading of the book of Job, Elihu, not Job, is the hero, since his affirmation of providence is the most forceful and consistent of all the positions presented. Nahmanides calls Elihu "the greatest of Job's friends in wisdom" (KR: *Commentary on Job* 22:1 - I, 76). His teaching is cogent, but "not because Elihu has any compelling proof (*r'ayah mukhrahat*). For no one can resolve this issue except by way of tradition (*be-derekh qabbalah*)." [KR: *Commentary on Job* 38:1 - I, 115]

Nahmanides continually makes this point:

Belief in the omniscience of God, exalted be he, is something clear and evident... [God's knowledge] of the classes of things and of particular individuals is a cornerstone of the Torah of Moses our master... Given this affirmation, the Torah and the commandments endure. For once we believe that God knows and is provident, our faith will extend to prophecy, and we will believe that He, exalted be he, knows and cares, commands and admonishes: He commands us to do what is good and right, admonishes us about what is evil; he will watch over us and maintain for us all the goods promised in the Torah, and will bring all the retributions on those who transgress against what he decreed for them. [KR: *Commentary on Job*, intro. - I, 17-18]

[4.6] Nahmanides speaks of God's de novo creation of the world, knowledge of the world, and providence over it as the three foundations (*mosdot*) of the Torah. [KR: *Torat ha-Shem Temimah* - I, 155].

[4.7] He asserts that nature cannot explain why certain things happen to people because of their merit or fault. The moral significance of such happenings can be explained only in the context of direct divine causality in miracles:

There is no difference between what the prayers of David son of Jesse accomplish and what our own prayers or any miracles accomplish. For if one said, it is by nature that God nourishes all, then no one would die or live because of merit or fault... On the contrary, all these things are enduring miracles that change the course of natural coming-to-be and alter the power of the exalted constellations in heaven and on earth... all these things are continuous miraculous portents (*moftim qayyamim*). [KR: *Commentary on Job*, intro. - I, 18-19]

[4.8] The patriarch Jacob is assured of the crucial distinction between individual and general providence in his vision:

God showed him in a dream that everything done on earth is done by means of the angels and at the decree of the Most High in their regard... Yet he assured Jacob with a mighty assurance that he would not be in the hands of the angels, but would be the Lord's own portion. [CT: Gen. 28:12 - I, 157]

[4.9] Hidden miracles are not recorded in the Torah like the miracles publicly anticipated by the prophets. For these continuous miracles are the very foundation of the Torah. They show that keeping the Torah has consequences far beyond the confines of the natural world. For the Torah is founded on the principle that all events belong to the purposeful plan of God. There is no blind chance. If the Torah were simply part of nature, there would be nothing unique or desirable about the relationship of Israel with God. It would be a relationship limited to worldly possibilities, but it would not and could not be a relationship with a loving Father. Thus, for Nahmanides, nature remains in the background. What is vital is Israel's awareness of the presence of God, which is fostered only by the Torah:

The miracles performed by a prophet who foretold it, or by an angel who appeared on a mission from the Lord, are recorded by Scripture. But those performed to help a righteous person or to destroy a wicked person are not recorded in the Torah or the Prophets... All the foundations (*yesodot*) of the Torah are found in secret miracles, not in nature or the realm of the customary (*ha-minhag*). For the events foretold (*ye'udei*) by the Torah do not manifest any change in the nature of the world. [CT: Gen. 46:15 - I, 254]

[4.10] The supernatural foundation of the Torah is a constant theme:

When we carefully inquire, we see that no one has a portion in the Torah of Moses our master, peace be upon him, until he believes that all our words and deeds, *all of them*, are miracles. Nothing of nature or the ordinary pertains to them. For all the requitals of the Torah (*ye'udei ha-Torah*) are absolute portents (*moftim gemurim*) [of divine power]. [KR: *Torat ha-Shem Temimah* - I, 153]

[4.11] The "events designated to happen by the Torah" are the promised rewards and punishments of obedience or disobedience to its commandments. The requital demands the operation of secret miracles in the world:

For all of the events designated in the Torah by promises and warnings are demonstrable from the secret miracles... Thus the Torah warns here about *karet* ["excision"], a miraculous subject (*inyan nissi*). But it does not assure us here about ordinary survival (*qiyyum*), which is something expected (*ra'uy*). [CT: Lev. 18:29 - II, 114]

The exact meaning of *karet* is much debated (B. Mo'ed Qatan 28a re Deut. 31:14 and Tos. s.v. *mitah*), but it seems to involve a miraculous incursion of God's power into the world, perhaps involving an untimely death.

[4.12] All public miracles serve ultimately to call our attention to God's act of creation. But the secret miracles, being consequences of our observing God's commandments, mark our sharing in God's life:

It has already been made clear that public miracles teach the creation of the world *de novo*, God's knowledge of particulars, and his providence. But the secret miracles teach what every believer should know about the punishment of sins and the reward for keeping the commandments. [KR: *Torat ha-Shem Temimah* - I, 155]

[4.13] The linkage between the pious and God's unseen miracles is merit. These miracles are performed by God for the pious because they deserve them. By their meritorious deeds, then, the pious share with God in his creative and providential activity. The lives of the patriarchs are archetypes of this process:

God appeared to the patriarchs by this name which indicates that he is the One who vanquishes the heavenly configurations and performs great miracles for them... but the full reward for keeping the Torah and punishment for transgressing it are miracles that are secret. One who sees them might think them part of the familiar world order, although in truth they are punishments or rewards for an individual. [CT: Exod. 6:2 - I, 303]

[4.14] The term *sod* has two senses: It refers to what God reveals to the prophets of his plans, or to God's caring for those who are faithful to him:

"As I was in the days of my vigor when God was an intimate (*be-sod*) in my tent" (Job 29:4) means roughly the same as "the Lord's *sod* is made known to those who fear him." (Psalms 25:14)... He says that the divine mystery is known in his tent, as if he were prophesying future events... or... it could



mean that the heavenly angels and hosts were abiding over his tent to protect him from all harm. [KR: *Commentary on Job 29:4* - I, 90]

*Sod* pertains to the secret miracles in both senses. The miracles protect the righteous, and the righteous have prophet-like knowledge of their true significance.

[4.15] Human beings seem wholly dependent on physical nature because they have lost the grace to transcend it – most pointedly, to transcend death:

According to the opinion of the naturalists (*anshei ha-teva*), man is subject (*me'uttar*) to death from the beginning of his formation (*ha-yetsirah*) because he is composite... But the determination of death is in the hands of God... [and it is that human beings] must die because of their sin before their time. [CT: Gen. 2:17 - I, 37]

For further discussion, see KR: *Torat ha-'Adam*: Sha'ar ha-Gemul - II, 274, where Nahmanides elaborates on the rabbinic doctrine that human death is not the inevitable result of general biological nature, but of specifically human sin (B. Shabbat 55a-b). It is sin that makes us mortal like the rest of creation. Thus neither before nor after the expulsion from Eden is the human lifespan natural. Before the expulsion, humans were to live forever. Their immortality was a chief distinction from the animals. After the expulsion, our lifespan was diminished further. For virtually all human beings die because of their individual sins, not because of their biological constitution. For the difference between general and individual mortality, the first being inherited from Adam and Eve, the second acquired by the desert of each individual, see KR: *Disputation*, no. 45 - I, 310.

[4.16] Obedience to the commandments does not require the secret miracles as a precondition. One is not to wait for such a miracle before performing a commandment of the Torah. Nahmanides here applies the rabbinic dictum that "one is not to rely on miracles" (B. Shabbat 32a; B. Pesahim 64b; B. Ta'anit 20b) in any specific case. As he puts it, "Torah does not depend on miracles, for example, that one will pursue a thousand" [CT: Num. 1:45 - II, 199]. Rather, the secret miracles are the promised general consequence of keeping the commandments properly. Without such observance, these miracles would not be performed at all. Indeed, one can say that the very purpose of the commandments is to ensure that the secret miracles are deserved. For their occurrence is not just for the gratification of the keeper of the commandments but, more crucially, to make us aware of the presence and power of God:

The revelation of God's presence (*gilui Shekhinah*) here and elsewhere was not to issue a commandment or any communication at all, but as a reward for the performance of the commandment already fulfilled. [CT: Gen. 18:1 - I, 106]

[4.17] Only in rare cases is there any overt entailment of a miracle. Such a case is the punishment the Torah mentions for the woman publicly accused of adultery (*sotah*) without eyewitnesses to the act. If she manifests physical affliction after undergoing the Ordeal of the Bitter Waters, this is considered miraculous:

Indeed, there is nothing in any of the humanly applicable laws (*mishpetei*) of the Torah that is contingent on a miracle except this one. It is a marvel (*pele*), a permanent miracle. It is a miracle wrought in the Land of Israel in times when most of the people are doing the will of God... The general principle is that this is a miracle performed as a signal honor in behalf of Israel. [CT: Num. 5:20 - II, 214-15]

There is also direct supernatural involvement in the commandment pertaining to the infection of houses in the Land of Israel (see CT: Lev. 13:47 - II, 75).

[4.18] The patriarchs were the first recipients of secret miracles, as a result of keeping those commandments that were given to them. In the case of Moses greater miracles were called for, since the Torah was to be given through him:

What came to the patriarchs was a revelation of God's presence (*gilui Shekhinah*). God's speech with them was by means of the weak attribute of justice... But with Moses, God acted and made himself known through the attribute of mercy, which is his Great Name... and the Torah was given through his Great Name. [CT: Exod. 6:2 - I, 304]

[4.19] The commandments which occasion the secret miracles presuppose nothing miraculous in itself. They prescribe actions to be performed in the natural world in an ordinary way. What is miraculous is that the outcomes of these actions benefit particular human beings in particular ways:

For the Torah commands naturalistically (*be-derekh erets*) and God performs miracles in secret for those who fear him. For it is not his wish to change the nature of the world, except where there is no other way to save. [CT: Deut. 20:9 - II, 435]

[4.20] Human beings in general must accomplish as much as they can by ordinary means. Only when these reach their inherent limits does supernatural action take over:

So it is with all the miracles in the Torah or the Prophets:  
What can be done by man is done by man and the rest is in the  
hand of God. [CT: Gen. 6:9 - I, 54]

For "man is not exalted and saved by his own power, but only because the Most High watches over him" [CT: Gen. 4:13 - I, 45].

[4.21] It follows from the idea of a miraculous reward that one must not see any ordinary humanly attainable goals as the *raison d'être* of the commandments. These are only the most immediate results of following the commandments. The ultimate rewards promised by the Torah are far beyond ordinary expectation:

It is not the Lord's will to perform miracles for everyone at all times... But you must keep His statutes even though you do not know their reason. For in fact, God will benefit you in the end. [CT: Deut. 6:16 - II, 376]

[4.22] Secret miracles are performed for extraordinary people; ordinary people live mostly within the realm of ordinary nature.

For the Lord will not continually perform miracles... and you must know that miracles are performed, whether for good or for harm, only for the altogether righteous or the altogether wicked. For ordinary people (*ha-beinonim*), things proceed according to the normal course of events in the world (*minhago shel 'olam*) [CT: Deut. 11:13 - II, 393]

[4.23] There are two ways of coming to appreciate secret miracles: from above and from below. From above, faith in the efficacy of God's power and providence can enable one to see them at work in the world. But such faith is attained only by a few gifted individuals. Most people have to learn the significance of secret miracles from below. That is, they have to be startled out of complacent acceptance of the world's running according to its accustomed ways. This jolting experience is the purpose of public miracles (*nissim mefursamim*):

Out of the experience of the great public miracles a person will come to acknowledge the secret miracles, which are the foundation (*yesod*) of the entire Torah. For no one has a portion in the Torah of Moses our master unless he believes

that everything that happens to us (*khol devareinu u-miqreinu*), everything, is a miracle. There is nothing natural or ordinary about it, whether it pertains to many people or only to one individual... And thus will the [reality of] secret miracles become publicized in the eyes of many people as their occurrence is predicted by the Torah (*be-yi'udei ha-Torah*) in its blessings and curses... So will it become published to all the nations that what befalls them is their punishment from the Lord. [CT: Exod. 13:16 - I, 346-47]

[4.24] Although the secret miracles underlie the public miracles in reality, it is because of the public miracles that we can appreciate the constant possibility of the secret miracles.

For the public miracles teach of God's creation of the world (*ha-hiddush*) and his omniscience as to individuals in the world – thus about providence. But the secret miracles serve to make known to every believer the punishment of sins and the reward for keeping the commandments, so that everyone who prays and lifts up his eyes to heaven will sincerely acknowledge God's act of creation, omniscience and providence. [KR: *Torat ha-Shem Temimah* - I, 155]

In *Sefer ha'Emunah ve-ha-Bitahon*, thought to be by a theologian of Nahmanides' school (see Chavel's introduction, KR, II, 341 ff.), a critical distinction is made between belief (*emunah*) and trust (*bitahon*) as types of faith. Belief is cognitive, acceptance of the doctrines of Judaism, especially individual providence. Trust is practical, attitudinal, a certitude as to God's providence over oneself. The difference reflects Nahmanides' distinction between secret and public miracles: Belief is engendered by public miracles; trust, by the secret miracles. And belief is for the sake of trust (*ibid.*, 355-56), just as the public miracles are for the sake of the secret miracles.

[4.25] Wonder and surprise open the way to the experience of God's presence. This fact is underscored by Nahmanides in a charged etymology:

'Demonstration' (*mofet*) is the term designating something new done before us by changing the nature of the world... This word is a contraction of 'wonderous' (*mufla'et*)... The Hebrew language adapted its meaning to designate something extraordinary (*huts min ha-minhag*)... for all its events are wonderous (*pele*) in the eyes of those who behold them. [CT: Deut. 13:2 - II, 404-05]

[4.26] The continuum between secret and public miracles is seen in Nahmanides' use of the rabbinic expression 'miracle within a miracle' (*nes be-tokh nes* - B. Shabbat 97a and parallels).

It is the assumption of the Torah that all its events (*ma'aseiha*) are miracles within miracles... the idea is that the Lord commanded that they be healed with what would normally harm them... to let them know that it is the Lord who kills and who restores to life. [CT: Num. 21:9 - II, 283-84]

Nahmanides sees an "inner miracle" in God's healing of the rebellious people who were bitten by snakes. The "outer miracle" is that their cure was brought about in a way totally at variance with ordinary human experience and expectations. The accepted medical opinion, as the Talmud indicates (B. Yoma 84a), Nahmanides argues, would lead one to expect that a victim of snakebite would be traumatized by having to gaze at the image of the very creature that caused the suffering. Yet that was the vehicle of the cure. Encapsulated in this public miracle, was the inner, unseen miracle, God's secret healing of those who obeyed his commandment.

Nahmanides' account may seem to endorse the idea that there were magical properties in the brazen serpent Moses made and held up in front of the people (Num. 21:9). But his closing words, that it is God who "kills and restores to life" (echoing Deut. 32:39) are clearly meant to dispel such a reading. Nahmanides' concern to dispel any suggestion here of the efficacy of magic follows both Scriptural (II Kings 18:4) and rabbinic traditions (M. Rosh Hashanah 3.8; cf. B. Yevamot 6a-b re Lev. 19:30; Maimonides, *Hilkhot Shehitah*, 14.16).

[4.27] Public miracles are evidence of the greatest miracle, that of creation. Bringing being from absolute non-being is unthinkable without the direct action of God. But once the act of creation is over, the familiar order of nature seems to take over, and the natural world appears to be self-contained and self-sufficient. Public miracles shatter this illusion and point beyond themselves to the ever present power of the Creator. The paradigm of all such miracles is the Exodus. In explaining why the Exodus is mentioned in the prologue to the Ten Commandments, Nahmanides writes:

It also teaches about the creation of the world *de novo* (*ha-hiddush*). For if the world were eternal (*qadmut ha-'olam*), nothing could alter its nature. [CT: Exod. 20:2 - I, 388]

[4.28] Participation in the Exodus is a more immediate foundation for keeping the commandments than any abstract reason drawn from ordinary experience.

For the Lord is the Creator, the Will and the Power (*ha-yekholet*), as was made clear to us at the Exodus from Egypt. This is the reason (*ta'am*) present before our eyes. [CT: Deut. 6:20 - II, 377]

Nahmanides is heavily indebted here to Halevi (*Kuzari*, 1.25). Tradition, as the record of God's mighty acts in history, supplies the most complete information about God available to human beings.

[4.29] Writing about the miracle of the earth opening to swallow Korah and his rebellious band, Nahmanides asserts:

The earth's splitting open is not literally a new creation. But the opening of its mouth to swallow is an unprecedented novum (*hiddush*)... that event was made anew that very day as if (*ke'ilu*) created from nothing. [CT: Num. 16:30 - II, 263]

Elsewhere Nahmanides states: "great miracle is like a new creation" (CT: Num. 22:23 - II, 291).

[4.30] The Exodus, as the paradigm of all public miracles, is the vital link between the creation of the world and the revelation of the Torah at Mount Sinai. For according to the laws about prophecy, miracles are to be accepted as valid signs only when the message that accompanies them is consistent with the commandments of the Torah. Otherwise, the that message is invalid, regardless how impressive the event:

Scripture commanded us not to listen to anyone who prophesies in the name of the Lord to worship idols. We should pay no attention to the signs and portents he produces. It gives the reason: We know by the Exodus from Egypt, which is a real event (*ma'aseh mamash*), not a vision or a spectre, that the earth is his and he is the Creator, the Will and the Power – there is no God but he. And we know from the revelation at Mount Sinai, which was face to face, that he commanded us to walk in this way and serve none but him. [CT: Deut. 13:2 - II, 405-06]

Maimonides too emphasizes the uniqueness of God's self-revelation at Sinai as the basis for the commandment to listen to no prophet who orders the people of Israel to practice idolatry, even temporarily (*Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah*, 8.2-3; 9.5; cf. *Hilkhot Mamrim*, 2.4). But in Maimonides the prohibition of idolatry is not grounded in historical experience, not even in Sinai. For him Sinai is the strongest confirmation of the falsity of idolatry, which he insists is self-evident (*muskal*) to any rational person (*Moreh*, 2.33).

Its prohibition is a matter of natural law, essentially transhistorical. But for Nahmanides the historical experience is the foundation.

[4.31] Public miracles awaken people from disbelief, less through direct experience than through reenactment:

The great miracles serve to silence those of little faith. They are not performed in every generation, either because the generations do not deserve them or because there is no need for them. So God commanded us to establish a perpetual reminder of these miracles, and was very insistent about it... For you have been a witness to a divine creative act (*ha-hiddush*), make a perpetual memorial of it, to remember always and make known publicly that he is the Creator of the world, who watches over his creatures providently, benefitting those who perform his will, and punishing those who transgress it. [KR: *Torat ha-Shem Temimah* - I, 151]

[4.32] Sinai is central. Miracles experienced by individuals are for its sake. The Exodus and the revelation at Sinai were experienced by the whole people of Israel. No other miracle before or since was so absolutely public:

And in the manner of deeper truth, the words "this is for you a sign"... say: I will be with you; and the sign for you is indeed the sign of the covenant, attesting that I will be with you forever... For I send you [Moses] that they shall serve God on this mountain and then I shall ascend in the midst of this people to the place I have prepared [for them]. [CT: Exod. 3:12 - I, 290]

[4.33] The public miracles, epitomized by Exodus-Sinai, break down resistance to God's commandments. For when the customary order of the world is publicly upset, the order of the commandments stands as the sole alternative to give structure to our lives. Referring to the dictum that God tested Israel at Sinai, Nahmanides writes:

This is literally a trial, in that God wanted to test whether we would keep his commandments, so he removed from our hearts every doubt. Henceforth he will see whether we desire him and his commandments. [CT: Exod. 20:20 - I, 407]

[4.34] Those most likely to be affected by public miracles are those who have no more reason to trust in political powers than to trust in natural powers:

"For I see the tears of the oppressed who have no comforter and no strength to be released from the hand of their oppressors" [Ecclesiastes 4:1]... For I will hear their cry, since these poor people have no confidence (*'einam boi'him*) in their own lives, but can trust only me. [CT: Exod. 22:20 - I, 435]



