Q. What is the significance of the Yiddish expression "Nit yedn purim tref t zikh a nes"?

This was a telephone query, received shortly before Purim 5748 (1988). The literal meaning of the saying is "A miracle doesn't happen every Purim," and superficially, it seems to refer to the rescue of the Jews of Persia from the murderous intentions of that Biblical arch-villain, Haman. But as in the case of so many reference questions, there is more here than meets the eye.

Collections of Proverbs

The first task was to verify the existence of such a Yiddish saying. The basic sourcebook for Yiddish proverbs is Ignaz Bernstein's collection, Yudische Sprichwörter und Redensarten [Yiddish proverbs and sayings]. Bernstein lists ten sayings under the heading "Purim treft zikh a nes." The story does not end there, however.

Bernstein cites a Talmudic saying as the source for this Yiddish proverb: Lav be-khol sha'ata ve-sha'ata mitrahesh nisa (Megillah 7b, p. 38). In the original, the fact that Rabban's prayers helped to revive R. Zera when Purim is no guarantee of their success the following Purim, should R. Zera again find himself in the uncomfortable situation of having his throat slit by Rabban. There are miracles, and then there are "miracles."

This saying is also recorded (under the heading "Miracles") in A Treasury of Jewish Quotations, where it is rendered, "Miracles do not happen each day" (Baron, 1956, p. 312). Two Talmudic sources for the saying are given: Megillah 7b and Pesahim 50b. The context for the latter citation is quite different from the passage in Tractate Megillah given above:

Our Rabban taught: Four perutot [small coins used in Talmudic times] never contain a sign of blessing: the wages of clerks, the wages of interpreters, the profits of orphans, and money that came from overseas countries. As for money which comes from overseas, because a miracle does not occur every day. (Talmud, 1961, Mo'ed vol. II, Pesahim 50b, pp. 245-246)

In an effort to clarify this Talmudic "short-hand," H. Freedman, the translator of this tractate, comments: "Considerable danger attended the transport of freights at sea, and one might very easily suffer loss." In other words, money coming from overseas regularly ended up at the bottom of the sea instead of at its intended destination—hence, its receipt could never be taken for granted. The Aramaic original reads slightly differently from the saying in Tractate Megillah: Lav kol yoma mitrahesh nisa.

Reuben Alcalay's Basic Encyclopedia of Jewish Proverbs, Quotations and Folk Wisdom (1973) is an excellent source of Hebrew proverbs in English translation, and it also includes the Talmudic saying cited by Bernstein as the source for the Yiddish proverb that was the subject of our initial inquiry. Here, under the heading "Miracle," the saying from Tractate Megillah is translated, "A miracle does not happen every hour." Directly underneath this proverb is another popular Talmudic saying, En somkhim 'al ha-nes (Pesahim 64b), rendered here as, "One must not rely on miracles happening." Freedman translates this saying as "We do not rely on a miracle" (Talmud, 1961, Mo'ed vol. II, Pesahim 64b, p. 325).

Dictionaries

Alcalay, in his Complete Hebrew-English Dictionary (1974, col. 1648), records slightly different versions of these two proverbs—Lo be-khol yom mitrahesh nes and En somkhim 'al ha-nes—without, however, offering sources for them.

Hebrew dictionaries are, in general, a good source for tracking down Biblical sayings and traditional Hebrew and Aramaic proverbs. Avraham Even-Shoshan, in his Milon hadash, includes the Hebrew versions of the two sayings that are recorded in Alcalay's Dictionary, along with citations for Talmudic tractates and brief explanations. Lo be-khol yom mitrahesh nes is explained by Even-Shoshan as follows: "Miraculous events do not happen every day; accordingly, one cannot rely on them." In addition, he cites the Aramaic version of this proverb, as given in Tractate Pesahim 50b, but does not mention the variant in Megillah 7b, noted by Ignaz Bernstein as the inspiration for the Yiddish saying Nit ale Purim tref t zikh a nes.

Even-Shoshan explains the saying En somkhim 'al ha-nes accordingly: "A person must not neglect making every effort out of the hope that a miracle will happen to him, just as [a miracle] occurred to someone else under similar conditions at a different time" (Even-Shoshan, 1957-8, v. 2, p. 1013, translation mine). In other words, because a miracle happened under similar circumstances in the past, that doesn't mean that a miracle will happen today.

Concordances

Another "keyword approach" to tracing Talmudic proverbs is to consult a concordance. In 1982, a 31-volume concordance to the Yiddish Dictionary, by Zachary M. Baker.
The saying "Lo be-khol sha'ata ve-sha'ata mitraheesh nisa (Megillah 7b) appears in Kasowski's concordance under the sub-heading Nisa, together with all other Talmudic expressions using that word. (Kasowski cites this saying as beginning with the word lo [lamed-alef] and not lav [lamed-alef-vav]; vol. 26, p. 1427.) While Bernstein refers from a Yiddish proverb to its Talmudic source, Kasowski unfortunately does not return the favor!

The density of Talmudic text can sometimes make it difficult to track down a quote, even when one has a page reference in hand. The English translation of Megillah 7b, for example, ranges from the end of p. 37 to the middle of p. 41 of the Soncino edition, which means that it is necessary to comb through almost four pages of text in order to locate the passage that reads, "A miracle does not take place on every occasion." There may be an easier way: After locating the pages in the Soncino translation that correspond to leaf 7b of Tractate Megillah in printed versions of the original Talmud, one can then turn to the index to that tractate, which follows the text. (There may be several tractate indexes within a single volume of the Soncino Talmud.) Under the keyword "Miracle," there are six separate page references, only one of which (p. 38) falls within the range of pages covering Megillah 7b. That is where the story about Rabbah and R. Zera is to be found. (This technique works well with unambiguous keywords, but not with vague concepts.)

A citation that reads "Megillah 7b" refers to the verso of the seventh leaf of standard printed versions of Tractate Megillah from the Babylonian Talmud. Megillah belongs to the Order Mo'ed, a section of both the Mishnah and Gemara (elaborations on the Mishnah, which together with the Mishnah comprise the Talmud) dealing with the Sabbath and other Jewish holidays and fasts. There are six orders to the Mishnah, and one common way of referring to the entire Talmud is to call it the Shas, the Hebrew acronym for Shishah Sidre Mishnah [the six orders of the Mishnah]. (According to the Encyclopaedia Judaica, the Gemara of the Babylonian Talmud comments on only 36 of the 63 tractates of the Mishnah ("Talmud, Babylonian," EJ, vol. 15, col. 768).)

The volumes of the Soncino English translation of the Talmud are not numbered sequentially. Each spine displays only the name of the order and the volume number within that order. Therefore, to select the appropriate volume, one must know that tractate Megillah is part of order Mo'ed. (At YIVO we have affixed labels to each volume, listing the tractates contained in it.)

The saying Nit ale Purim iz (treft zikh) a nes is recorded in Nahum Stuchkoff's thesaurus, Der oytser fun de yidishe shprakh (Stuchkoff, 1950, p. 728), along with a number of other sayings pertaining to the Feast of Esther. Both Stuchkoff and Bernstein include a second saying that refers specifically to the miracle of Purim: Ven alef tog zol zayn der nes fun Purim, vos voln yidn gehat tsu zorgn mit zeyere tekhter? This proverb can be translated as follows: "If the miracle of Purim happened every day, would there be any reason for Jews to worry about their daughters?" Bernstein interprets this proverb accordingly: "Since Ahasuerus would have their daughters brought into his harem, parents would be relieved of the burden of raising a dowry." I'm not sure that today's parents would consider that to be such a "miracle."

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