

On Whom Do We Rely?

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Deep questions deserve more than one answer. Should we rely on God or on ourselves? In Exodus (14:15) as the Israelites approach the sea, Moses cries out to God. God answers, "Why do you cry out to Me? Tell the Israelites to move forward." So it seems a moment for self-reliance. But Rashi rereads the Hebrew to mean "Why do you cry out? It's on Me." In other words, God is saying — no need to cry out, I will save you.

Here is the same verse and two opposite answers. The contradiction threads throughout Judaism. The Psalmist writes that "all people are deceivers" (Psalm 116) suggesting reliance on God. Yet we are also told "don't rely on miracles" (Shabbat 32a), which implies the imperative of human initiative. What is a muddled believer to do?

Well, as we know from Talmudic study, when there are two verses that contradict one another, a third is found to reconcile them. So let us reconcile ourselves with Ecclesiastes, (ch.3) "there is a time for everything." No single principle can stand in all moods, for all moments. There are times that demand human efforts and times where it is more appropriate to turn to God. Now, if we could only figure out which is which...