

Miracles and "Upgrades"

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The Mediterranean Sea was a dangerous place for sailors as so many finds of ancient wrecks attest. But sometimes, things work out for the best. Such was the case of Nikanor's "three hour tour" from Alexandria, Egypt to the port of Jaffa:

Miracles occurred to Nikanor's doors and he was remembered with praise. Once they were coming on a ship to Israel and a great storm came upon them on the Mediterranean Sea.

They threw one of his doors overboard, then they sought to throw the second door overboard, too. But Nikanor hugged the door and said to them: If you throw this door into the sea, you will have to throw me overboard with it. The storm subsided but Nikanor continued crying and mourning for the door that was lost until they landed in Jaffa. And some say a giant sea creature swallowed the door and spit it up onto the land at Jaffa port.

Once they docked in Jaffa, the door popped up from under the boat. And this is what we learn (in M. Middot 2:3):

All the gates were changed from copper to gold except for Nikanor's gates because a miracle occurred with them.

And some say that their copper shone so brightly that they looked like gold.

And it was taught in Rabbi Eliezer's name that their copper shone and was more beautiful than gold [so there was no need to change the doors to gold]. (T. Yoma 2:4//Y. Yoma 3:8, 25a2)

Nikanor's gates in the Second Temple were in a central place, figuratively and literally. They were the central gates through which worshippers passed from the waiting area to the place where they offered their sacrifices so, depending on how busy the day was, people would spend quite a bit of time looking at these doors.

Discussion Questions:

1. All the other doors were eventually upgraded from copper to gold except these doors. The texts dance around this issue, some saying that they were bronze, not copper, and looked as good as gold doors. Have you ever been in a setting (congregation, family, organization) in which some members wanted to keep things as they were and some wanted to give things an "upgrade"? What happened? Were there any parts that were not "upgraded" as the Nikanor Gates were not? Why did those parts survive?
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of constantly upgrading? Likewise what is lost if we never "upgrade"?
3. In some historical accounts, Nikanor is an enemy of Judah Macabee and the day of his death is a holiday (Adar 13th) and was the original Purim. Could this conceivably be the same Nikanor? Do you have any midrash that could resolve the mystery?

As always, looking forward to your insights!