

“Do You Believe in Angels?”

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L'shana tova my dearest friends...What a year this has been! What complex and challenging times we live in! As I reflect on the year that has just come to an end there is one particular person...you all know him well; everyone knows him; he's known all over the world...who has made this past year especially difficult for me. I have struggled to make sense of him; I have alternated between anger, heartbreak, disillusionment with his decision-making, his incessant tweets, his constant craving for the spotlight. Besides his day job, he's been an actor, a celebrity. He's a multi-millionaire, though nobody really knows how many millions he has because no one has seen his tax returns. But he owns or invests in multiple properties all over the world, oversees a clothing line that has his name, his brand stamped all over it, and he that he thinks everyone should treat him like royalty. He might as well be royalty, he's got a private jet with a wood paneled bathroom, a fleet of luxury and sports cars; I heard he bought his wife a Ferrari Testarosa for her birthday. Oh and of course he thinks he's a much better golfer than he really is. And the worst part, the most maddening of all is that he's locked-in for four years! Four years, I'm just sick over it...and I've got all this apparel that I don't know what to do with...(show Cavaliers jersey)!

I don't know who you thought I was talking about, but obviously I'm referring to **LeBron James**, KING James, the greatest basketball player in the world, who decided this year that he's leaving my hometown of Cleveland, the city that adored him, that worshipped him, that adorned its streets and buildings with banners and murals of his face, and he jumped on that fancy jet of his to fly out to LA where he thinks he'll win more games and perhaps even a championship as a Laker rather than as a Cavalier. This is not the first time Clevelanders were jilted by LeBron. But we are a forgiving people. He did t'shuva, and we took him back with open arms and open hearts, only to have them broken yet again. But as much as LeBron James makes me want to pull out the few hairs I have left on my head, I also can't help but love him. Though he left northeastern Ohio, he has not abandoned it. LeBron James just opened an \$8 million school in Akron—not a charter school or a private school, but a public school for at-risk students. Everyday 240 3rd & 4th graders will not only get a terrific education, but nutritious meals and snacks, a fitness instructor, a free bicycle. They will have access to a 7 week STEM based summer camp, and there are even GED classes and job placement counseling services for their parents. If these kids work hard and do well, LeBron will pay their entire college tuition at the University of Akron. Even Steph Curry called LeBron's I Promise School “Freaking Amazing.” For those kids; for those parents who may despaired of every breaking the cycle of poverty or lack of opportunities for their kids, LeBron James is not a deserter, or a heartbreaker, or a disappointment...LeBron James is *an angel*.

Do you believe in angels? Surveys say that 75% of Americans do...and 73% of Jews don't! I'm guessing that many of you didn't hear much about angels in Hebrew School. This may be the

first time you've ever heard a rabbi talk about angels. Like so many classical Jewish ideas, when Christianity appropriated them, Jews tended to back away from them. But before you think I'm totally off my rocker, let me tell you that the Bible, the Talmud, the Midrash, the Zohar, the Dead Sea Scrolls, the siddur, the mahzor, Jewish literature and Jewish songs are filled to the brim with references to angels! In this morning's Torah reading it says: *Vayikra malach Elohim el Hagar*,¹ an angel of God called out to Hagar just as she had utterly lost hope and was convinced that she and her child would die in the wilderness. In tomorrow's Torah reading: *Vayikra eilav malach Hashem min hashamayim*,² An angel of God called out from the heavens just at the moment that Abraham's knife was about to descend upon the throat of his son Isaac. Every time we recite the *kedusha* in the Amidah, we mention the *sarfei kodosh*, an angelic choir, *ve'kara zeh el zeh ve'amar*, the members of which chant back and forth *kadosh, kadosh, kadosh*...Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of Hosts. In that quintessential High Holiday prayer *Unetaneh Tokef*, the hazzan chants: *U'malachim yeichafeizun*, the angels are alarmed, seized with awe and trembling by the sound of the shofar, and they can do nothing but proclaim: "*Hinei Yom Ha'Din*," this is the day of Judgment! In Genesis 18, angels announce the birth of Isaac, the destruction of S' dom, and the protection of Lot. In Exodus 3 *vayeira malach Hashem*, Moses sees the appearance of an angel in the burning bush; In Numbers 22 it is an angel of God that tries to dissuade Balaam from cursing the Jewish people. In Judges 13 an angel informs the mother of Samson that her son will grow up to be the one who delivers the Israelites from Philistine oppression, and instructs her to raise him accordingly. And every Friday night, when you make Shabbes, and stand around a beautiful table set with candles, and Kiddush, and challah, you sing with your family the words *Shalom aleichem malachei ha'shareit*, peace be upon you ministering angels, as they bring the blessing of Shabbat peace to you and your loved ones. These are but a handful of the numerous, explicit references to angels in our tradition. Do you believe in angels?

I am one of the 27% of Jews who believes in angels, and I want to tell you why...

You know, there are many Hebrew words in our tradition for angel, but the one that is perhaps most common is *malach*. *Malach* does not mean a winged creature with a white halo atop its head. *Malach* does not mean a celestial being with flowing robes and a glowing countenance. *Malach* means a "messenger." And the purpose of any messenger is to convey some important bit of information that you need to hear. A messenger shows up at a critical moment when you have to make a decision, when you are at a fork in the road of your life, when you have an ethical dilemma, when you doubt your abilities, your talents, your wisdom, your kishkes...and you need a reminder, a *zetz*, a hint, a sign (!) of what you need to do in that particular moment. How is it that those messengers show up in our lives at just the right moments? How is it that those messengers know what to say to us to get us back on track, to remind us of our self-worth, to encourage us to do what we have talked ourselves out-of? As Rabbi Marc Gellman of the

¹ Genesis 21:17

² Genesis 22:11

God-Squad once said: “if God did speak to us somehow some way through the Torah it is just not reasonable that the Torah is God’s last word to us. God needs a way to speak to us, to chastise us, to direct us, and to nudge us. God has given each of us unique gifts and God needs, from time to time, to show us how to use those gifts to help the world. One of the ways God does this is by sending angels into our lives...”³

Surprisingly, in so many places where angels appear in our tradition, they look like you and me! So much so that the people who have an encounter with an angel don’t even realize it! That’s why angels in our sacred texts are often simply referred to by the term *ish*, which means, a man, or better, a person. When Joseph was wandering in the fields of Shechem,⁴ yearning for reconciliation with his brothers, behold! *Vayimatzeihu ish*...he encountered a person; nameless, faceless, but a person who asked him the powerfully existential question: *Mah t’vakeish*...What are you really searching for Joseph? Where did this guy come from? Why did he ask Joseph such a deep, penetrating question? When Jacob wrestles on that fateful night with his past, his future, also on the brink of an encounter with an estranged relative, it is an *ish*, a man who tells him that everything is going to be different from now on, including his name; An *ish*, a man who told him he was going to figure out how to live with a disability, and how to be a husband, and a father, and a leader of his people.⁵ And it was an *ish*, a person, who Daniel saw in the 10th chapter of that book, who tells a confused and terrified Jew living through what would be the first of many expulsions and diasporas, *al tira Daniel*, don’t be afraid Daniel, *bati la’havinha et asher yikra*...I have come to help you understand what’s going on around you.⁶

Messengers and messages come in many forms, often as people who wander into our lives at just the right moments, and change the course of our lives forever. As I have shared with you before, when I was three years old the steady presence of a male influence in my life was all but eclipsed. I saw my biological father only twice a month, never more, throughout the rest of my childhood. As a little boy, I didn’t have regular contact with a man; I didn’t have an image to emulate or look up to as a husband or a father. Although I was fiercely devoted to my mother, I was also acutely aware of a certain absence in my life and my development.

Ve’esa et einai va’ayreh ve’hinei ish echad...But then, after some time, I lifted up my eyes, and behold, there was a man in my life. My mother, after years as a divorcee, discovered love again, and a man came into our family and into my life. This man, my step-father, immediately embraced me as his son, I knew it because that’s how he would always introduce me to everyone, and he enveloped me with love, attention, and devotion. He was the one who helped me with my homework, he was the one who bought me my bar mitzvah suit, who supported me through college. At every step of my life since he first became part of it, he has been a blessing to me in every way. He is a father to me in every sense of the word, and my kids know him and

³ <https://www.firstthings.com/article/1997/03/002-what-are-you-looking-for>

⁴ Genesis 37:15

⁵ Genesis 32:25

⁶ Daniel 10:12

love his as their Sabba. A number of years later, I was blessed again by another *ish*, another extraordinary male role model, who has showered love and wisdom upon me for over twenty years...and that is my beloved father-in-law. How did I, once deprived of the active presence of male role models in my life, become so blessed to have these two extraordinary men become a part of it? These men who taught me how to be a better husband, a better father, a better human being? Why did they just happen to enter the course of my life at just the right moments, and have just the right messages that I needed to hear? They are why I believe in angels. They are my angels. *Hinei anochi sholeiach malach lifanecha lishmor'cha ba'derech...* God says in Exodus 23, I am sending an angle to go before you and to watch over you along the way. Friends, I believe that we have all been assigned those angels, and that they show up in our lives to watch over us and, like in the *she'hechyanu* prayer: they are sometimes even there to keep us alive, to sustain us, and to enable us to reach this moment.

A few months ago, Sari and I went to see that movie about the life of Fred Rogers. In that movie, there is an excerpt of a commencement address he gave at Dartmouth College in 2002, a year before he died. He encouraged the graduates of this elite institution to call to mind in that moment "those who have helped you become the person you are." And then, in the magical way that only Mr. Rogers could evoke, he said:

"I'd like to give you all an invisible gift. A gift of a silent minute to think about those who have helped you become who you are today. Some of them may be here right now. Some may be far away. Some...may even be in Heaven. But wherever they are, if they've loved you, and encouraged you, and wanted what was best in life for you, they're right inside yourself. And I feel that you deserve quiet time, on this special occasion, to devote some thought to them. So, let's just take a minute, in honor of those that have cared about us all along the way. One silent minute."

On this Rosh Hashanah, I think we should also devote some time to thinking about our angels; To give thanks to God that they showed up in our lives when they did. To be grateful for what they taught us, and how they inspired us. I'd like to give you a little assignment for these days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Reach out to those angels...send them a letter, a card, an email, a text; and tell them how much they meant to you, and how they were there for you when you truly needed them. Give them the blessing of knowing what they did to make your life better.

We live in an increasingly cruel and crass world. You can almost count on leaders disappointing us, famous people letting us down, folks who are supposed to be our role models exposed for treachery and corruption, even sports heroes who too often turn out to be thugs and criminals. It seems like every day we are dragged through their mud, only to open the newspaper the next day and get dragged through it all over again. But then, every once in a while a *malach*, a messenger, an *ish*, an ordinary person with an extraordinary message passes through our world

and our lives, restoring our faith, reminding us of the essential goodness in people and in the world. Today, let us not only believe that those angels exist, but give heartfelt thanks for them.

When we chant those words of the *kedusha* that I mentioned earlier, about the angels singing back and forth to each other, there is a tradition, a choreography to those words. We turn our bodies from one side to the other when we sing the words *ve'kara veh el zeh*. We look to the right and to the left, because there are angels all around us. Maybe one of them is sitting next to you right now. By the way, if *anyone* can be a messenger that means you can be one too. Your name doesn't have to be LeBron James to make a life-changing difference for someone else. Let us give thanks for the angels in our world, and know that God may need one of you someday to be a messenger for someone else. You may not get a set of wings or a halo when God taps you for some special mission, but you will have something much more precious and powerful. You will be the one who wanders into someone else's life at just the right time and just the right place, and you will make all the difference for them. *Kadosh Kadosh Kadosh Adonai Tzevaot, melo chol ha'aretz kevodo...* Holy Holy Holy is our God, who fills the whole world with glorious angels!