

## ***You Can't Multi-Task Your Judaism***

Parashat Vayera

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For those of you who were here at Har Shalom over the recent High Holidays, you know that I am a big believer in angels! If you weren't here, you can read all about it on the Har Shalom website...Just search for High Holiday sermons, 5779! I made the case that angels show up all over Jewish tradition, the Bible the siddur, the Talmud, the midrash...but angels really make their debut, they really are more front and center than anywhere else, right here in parashat Vayera. Miriam already spoke so eloquently about the scene of the *Akeida*, the near sacrifice of Isaac where the Torah tells us: *Vayikra eilav malach Hashem min hashamayim vayomer, Avraham! Avraham!* Just as the knife was about to descend over the throat of Isaac, it is none other than an angel who called out from the heavens: Abraham! Abraham! Put down the knife...do not sacrifice your son. The crisis is averted at the last second, and both Abraham and Isaac walk away from the mountain...alive.

Long before that however, three angels appeared to Abraham shortly after his adult *brit milah*, as he sat in his tent healing and recovering. The question is why does God dispatch three angels to visit Abraham, rather than one? Rashi proposed what is now a very famous answer to that question: He said that each angel carried a different message for Abraham. One angel was *le'vasar et Sarah*, to announce Sarah's pregnancy, at the youthful age of 90 years old; *ve'echad la'hafoch et S'dom*, one was sent to inform Abraham of the impending destruction of the city of Sedom, this was of particular concern because Abraham's nephew Lot and his family lived in that city; *v'echad le'rafot et Avraham*, and the third had come to bring healing Abraham from his self-inflicted circumcision. And then Rashi tells us something intrinsic to the nature of angels: *She'ein malach echad oseh sh'tei shlichuyot*...Because angels perform one and only one task at a time. Angels are dispatched, according to Rashi, with a singular mission. A singular message. Their entire angelic being is focused on that one task at hand, and nothing else.

So that's all very nice...but why do you and I really need to know that? How does that little tidbit of angelology affect my life...after all I am not an angel. Just ask my wife! Why does Rashi think it is important for us to be aware of this?!

I think it has to do with the myth of multi-tasking. How many of you think you're pretty good at multi-tasking? You can answer the phone, text, and eat a banana all at once; you can cook dinner, pay your bills, and do your nails all at the same time...How many of you think you're pretty good at that?

Well it turns out you're not as good as you think you are! Research has shown that we don't actually do a whole lot of things at once, instead we quickly switch our focus from one thing to another. The human brain is amazingly good at that. An MIT neuroscientist who was

interviewed about this on NPR said: [our brains can] shift our focus from one thing to the next with astonishing speed.” But studies also show that we humans really overestimate our ability to multi-task, which often leads to increased stress, making all kinds of mistakes and errors; and if you’re multi-tasking, say, behind the wheel of a car, accidents, injury, and maybe even death.

And what happens if you attempt to multi-task in a relationship? Your spouse or your child is trying to talk to you, but you’ve got your face buried in your i-phone; they’re talking, and your texting. They’re trying to tell you about their day; they’re trying to have a conversation with you and you’re busy checking Facebook or scrolling through your Insta-feed. You may be saying uh-huh, and oh really, or yeah, or hmmm, but you are not really present. Here’s a pretty good rule to remember: You are where your mind is, much more than where your body is. That’s why the person trying to talk to you while you are distracted by your i-phone feels frustrated, impatient, and unimportant. And if they do that too much, people are going to give up trying to communicate with them altogether, because they know they can’t ever get that person’s undivided attention. It’s particularly tragic when those people are spouses, or parents, or children, or supposed friends.

This is also an issue in our religious lives...The Talmud extensively discusses the question of whether *mitzvot tzrichot kavannah*...in other words, do I need to have intent and focus when performing a mitzvah in order for that mitzvah to count? Can I say I’ve really done a mitzvah if while I was doing it I was thinking about something else? If I’m reciting the words of the Amidah, for example, but all I’m thinking about is whether or not the Goldels are going to have kugel at the Kiddush luncheon, then my head is not in the siddur, my head’s in an aluminum foil pan in the social hall. When I recite *berachot*, do I just say the words by rote, thinking about all kinds of other things, or do I focus on infusing that particular act with sanctity and gratitude? Abraham Joshua Heschel said that “It is not enough to serve God, you are asked to serve God with all your heart and with all your soul.” Do we put our heart and soul into our Judaism? There’s a saying that the most important mitzvah in the entire Torah is the mitzvah that you’re doing right now. Whatever that mitzvah may be. If you’re lighting shabbes candles right now then that is the most important mitzvah in the world. If you’re doing bikkur cholim, you’re visiting the sick then that’s the most important mitzvah at that moment—be there both in body and in soul. You see, you can’t multi-task with mitzvot. They require our effort, our concentration, our devotion to do them in the best possible way.

No we’re are not angels, and we don’t always get it right...I know I don’t. But we are, as the Psalmist said, *me’at meiElohim*, just a tiny bit less than angels. I think that means we should internalize deeply the lesson of the three angels at the beginning of our parasha. *Ein malach echad oseh sh’tai shlichuyot*: Angels don’t perform more than one task at a time. It’s a tall order for our fast paced world, but it’s an important one. When you’re in conversation with another person, try to be all there for them. When someone really needs you, respond to them with the fullness of your presence; put down your phone, look them in the eye, show them that they are important enough to you not to be distracted by some device. When you’re trying to work on

something important, don't get pulled in a million different directions...stay focused on the task at hand. And when you are being an *eved Hashem*, when you are performing something in the service of God...doing a mitzvah, davvening, doing a ritual of some kind, saying a blessing, try to be present both in body and in spirit, so that your religious life is not just saying words on a page or repeating the same thing over and over, but rather an experience that ignites your soul, and fills you with a sense of holiness, thanksgiving, and love.