

Angel Spotting

Vayeira, Genesis 18:1–22:24

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I sat by the water, moving from sun to shadow, listening to the sound of the slight breeze creating a ripple effect. In the sky, an occasional seagull, butterfly of cinnamon color, or airplane would fly by. The world was in constant motion, and yet I sensed a stillness. And then, at the heat of the day, upon the highest branch of the tallest tree I saw a glint, no bigger than a flicker of blue and crimson, maybe a bit of orange. It was a great distraction. I wondered what it was. I expected it to disappear, go away, untangle itself from the leaves and fly like a deflated mylar balloon that escaped the hand of a child and got caught in the arms of the great oak. As I watched the light sparkle, I felt a presence, a calm come over me. *Shalom aleichem*, welcome, you angel of peace.

The angels of the Tanach are metaphors of our highest desires. Raphael, God is my healer; Michael, who is like you O God; Gavriel, God is my strength; Uziel, God is the source of my power; Oriel, God is my light. How we long to have a divine sense of strength, healing, light, power surround us with a sense of protection. Sometimes the angels of the Tanach are messengers. Often these messengers are in the guise of people, strangers that appear to communicate a divine truth.

This Torah portion is abundant with eternal messages. It begins: *God appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day* (18:1). According to the rabbis of the Talmud (*bava metzia* 86b), it is the third day after Abraham's circumcision and he is sitting in the heat of the day in a great deal of pain. He is in need of comfort and healing. Suddenly, by the oaks of Mamre, the angel of healing, Raphael, appears. Abraham is healed from his agony and we, the generations that follow, are taught that visiting the sick is a powerful commandment. Raphael, *God is the healing power*.

Then, in that same verse, three men approach the tent. *He lifted up his eyes and looked, and, lo, three men were standing over against him; and when he saw them, he ran to meet them from the tent entrance, and bowed down to the earth* (18:1-2). To Abraham and Sarah they look like strangers in need of respite from a long journey, so they extend to them a haven of safety from the brutal reality of desert life. The strangers sit down in the shade of a grove of trees and they are offered water, nourishment, safety.

Abraham and Sarah do not know that the strangers are the angels of blessing and destiny who have come with a divine message: A child shall be born to Abraham and Sarah. God's promise will now manifest through Isaac: *I will bestow My*

blessing upon you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sands on the seashore (22:17). The destiny of the Jewish people will unfold and the course of history is set. Michael, who is like you O God?

Healing, blessing, and now justice. The Torah turns its attention to Sodom and Gomorrah, two cities that are lawless, where evil is the norm and cruelty common place. God tells Abraham that these cities must be destroyed. *And angels appear to Lot. And the two angels came to Sodom in the evening, and Lot sat by the city gates. When he saw them, he rose to meet them and bowing low, he said, "I pray you now, Adonai, turn aside to your servant's house and tarry all night and bathe your feet and you shall rise up early and go on your way (19:1-2).*

It is evening. The angels are at the city gates. Lot, who like Abraham and Sarah see them as strangers on a dusty journey, offers to wash their feet. But it is the city that is in need of cleansing. The metaphor is clear: God will not allow evil to flourish. Gavriel, God is my strength.

And now the angel of Hagar. Hagar, at the request of Sarah serves as a surrogate. Abraham's first born is of Sarah's maidservant. But now there is Isaac. Sarah demands that Hagar and Ishmael be banished to the wilderness. Hagar is frightened and cries out from the wilderness *"I am in utter despair, do not let me see my son die." God heard the cry of the boy, and an angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heeded the cry of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him by the hand, for I will make a great nation of him" (21:17).* An angel of mercy and compassion appears as a voice from heaven. Mother and son are comforted. Ishmael will be the father of a great nation. Uziel, God is the source of my power.

Sometime afterward, God put Abraham to the test. He said to him, "Abraham," and he answered, "Here I am." And God said, "Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you" (22:2). Abraham is tested. He must take his son Isaac and sacrifice him to God. Obedient, he walks silently three days with Isaac, lays him upon the alter, raises a knife and suddenly: an angel of the LORD called to him from heaven: *"Abraham! Abraham!" And he answered, "Here I am." And he said, "Do not raise your hand against the boy, or do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your favored one, from Me" (22:11-12.)* We are to be a different society, honoring our children and teaching them, not sacrificing them as is the custom of the time. Oriel, God is my light, I shall not fear.

Our narrative has woven a tale through the angels, metaphors of healing, blessing, promise, justice, mercy, compassion, and enlightenment. I returned to that tree the next day and I was not surprised that the flicker of light was gone. But as I closed my eyes, the birds returned -- and the wind, and the sound of the water, and a sense of presence. And peace.

