

Be a Human Being, Not an Angel – Parashat Behukotai 5781

Rabbi Michael Safra

“Be an angel.” That’s the subtitle of Ron Wolfson’s little book on doing good deeds: *God’s To-Do List: 103 Ways to Be an Angel and Do God’s Work on Earth*. Wolfson introduces his premise – that God needs partners to manage creation by staging a conversation with his readers. “God can’t do it alone,” Wolfson writes. “That’s why God created you.”

“Doesn’t God have angels to help out?” we ask in response.

“Yes, but ... God doesn’t depend on angels. God depends on you to be an angel. As unbelievable as it may sound, you are God’s agent on earth.”

I agree with the premise, except for one small quibble: I don’t want to be an angel. And, frankly, God doesn’t want me to be an angel either.

Angels are powerful; angels spend time with God in heaven; there are probably other perks. But being an angel is also limiting. Angels only have one leg. That’s why we stand with our feet together during the Amidah; so we can be like the angels. Angels stand still while human beings walk.

Angels are also limited by what they can do. Remember back in Genesis when three angels visited Abraham in his tent? The Rabbis ask why there were *three*; and they answer that there were three jobs to do. Angels can only do one thing; they are “single use,” disposable servants.

Angels only speak one language. We don’t have to pray in Hebrew; we know God understands our prayers in any language because God is God. But one of the reasons the medieval Rabbis give for their preference that we pray in Hebrew is that the *angels* only speak one language. Angels are perfect. Angels are powerful. But angels are limited.

God didn’t give the Torah to angels; God gave the Torah to us. It’s as if God had a choice. You can have these perfect but limited beings; or You can have these wise, intelligent, dexterous, calculating beings who also have the capacity to make lots and lots of tremendous mistakes. And God chose us. We are created *b’tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God; not in the image of angels.

That’s how our Rabbis read the opening words of the second of today’s portions: “*im b’hukotai te-lekhu*,” literally, “*If you walk with my laws; if you faithfully observe My commandments, I will grant you rains in their season*” and all manner of blessings and joy. Why does the Torah use that word “*telekhu/walk*”?

Rashi says it means “*she-yih’yu amelim ba-torah*, you must work hard at trying to ascertain the meaning of Torah.” The 18th-century preacher and “acknowledged genius”, Rabbi Yehonatan Eybeschutz, comments that angels don’t walk; human beings walk. Angels stand “because angels already understand the reasons for the commandments and have no need to work and struggle to understand; and so their reward is not so great either. But not human beings, *lo khen b’nai adam*. We work and struggle to understand Torah, and even though we don’t fully understand, we strive to fulfill the commandments as decreed by God; and therefore our reward is much greater.”

Our contemporary, Rabbi Harold Kushner adds in *Etz Hayim*: “Human beings, unlike angels, have the ability to grow and change.” Jewish law is known as *halakhah*, which literally means “the way to go.” Judaism is a process, as another medieval scholar puts it: “*ha-ikkar hu ha-halikhah*, the essence of Jewish life is the journey.” God doesn’t need us to be perfect. God needs us to use our abilities and talents to make things better; growth is more important than perfection. “*Im b’hukotai telekhu*, If you walk with my laws.”

It is telling that the Shulkhan Arukh, Judaism’s most famous law code, written in the 16th-century by Rabbi Joseph Karo, begins with a description of how to tie your shoes in the morning. I’m not sure God cares if you follow the prescription to put your right shoe on first without tying it, then the left shoe with tying it, and then to tie the right shoe. Karo doesn’t explain what to do if you are wearing loafers or pumps. But the point is that Halakha does not only concern itself with ritual. The Jewish way of law is all-encompassing. It has something to say about the totality of how we live our lives and engage in society. “*Im b’hukotai telekhu*, walk with my laws” in the synagogue *and* in the public sphere.

Last week, I watched a new production about Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, which – incidentally – is airing tonight on Maryland Public television if you want to set your DVR for 9 pm. I was struck by how Heschel’s entire life – growing up as a child protégé in a Hasidic dynasty, being plucked from the fires of the Holocaust while his family was left to perish, studying the Israelite prophets, teaching rabbinical students at the Jewish Theological Seminary, befriending Dr. Martin Luther King and fighting for Civil Rights, speaking out against the Vietnam War – Heschel’s life experiences led him to a simple, but inescapable conclusion: HUMAN BEINGS MATTER. Our actions matter. Human beings have an incredible capacity for evil, and also a signature role to play in the world’s redemption. “For accomplishing His grand design,” Heschel preached in 1963, “God needs the help of man. Man is and has the instrument of God. ...” And that **instrument** is the law. *Im b’hukotai telkhu*.

I harp on this because things have changed since Heschel spoke those words at a race conference attended by Dr. King and other Civil Rights leaders. The Civil Rights movement was largely a religious movement. Surely Dr. King was moved when he heard this older, white, European-born rabbi pronounce that “Faith in God is not simply an *afterlife insurance policy*. Racial or religious bigotry must be recognized for what it is: *satanism, blasphemy*.” Anti-racism was a *religious* idea. Heschel preached Judaism’s moral voice. But what about today? Does religion still have that moral voice?

There are those who feel it is inappropriate for preachers to speak about such issues. Preachers should stick to what they know best, what they learn in divinity school, in yeshiva: law, spirituality, community, history; make me feel good and connected. But the law was never intended to be an end in itself.

“If you walk with my law ... I will grant peace in the land. ... I will look with favor upon you. ... I will be ever present in your midst. ... I, the Lord your God who brought you out from Egypt to be their slaves no more, and broke the bones of your yoke and enabled you to **walk** erect.”

“The law” means the totality of the law; and its reach extends to all walks of life. And when it comes to the promise of perfection, we are not there yet. That is religion’s moral voice. But does it still matter?

One challenge is that the law is not always clear. Jewish law developed over thousands of years and there are lots of opinions. Society – and our community – is incredibly polarized. There is some truth to the criticism that religion’s “moral voice” sometimes sounds more like it was ripped from the pages of the New York Times than from the blots of the Babylonian Talmud. But that shouldn’t mean that *halakha* has nothing to say. The fact that politicians deal with moral issues cannot mean that preachers have no business doing so. Morality is not politics.

And the law is not meant to be simple. That’s the other meaning of *telekhu, halakha, walk with my laws*. The Torah doesn’t ask us to reach conclusions. The academy doesn’t expect we will always agree. Rashi wants us to **labor** with Torah, *she-yih’yu amelim batorah*. The 19th-century Hasid Dovid Morganstern of Kotzk interprets Rashi’s words in light of a Talmudic statement:

If someone tells you “*yagati v’lo matzati*, I struggled but did not find what I was looking for,” do not believe him. “*lo yagati v’matzati*, I didn’t struggle but I found it anyway,” do not believe him. Only if one says “*yagati umatzati*, I struggled and I found it;” only then can you believe.

God wants us to struggle honestly with the moral issues of our day. Or, as the 1st-century sage Rabbi Tarfon famously said, “It is not your duty to complete the task, but neither are you free to desist from it.”

Im b’hukotai telekhu. God doesn’t expect us to be angels. God doesn’t need us to be perfect. God doesn’t want us to stand still on the pedestal of success and accomplishment. No. God expects us only to walk with God’s law, to struggle with the challenges of the world, and to utilize the tools of our tradition to make a difference. God demands that we look in the mirror and see not the reflection of an angel, but the image of God, an imperfect being with great powers to learn and to teach and to create and to grow. Shabbat shalom.