

The Angels Among Us - Vayetzeh

Our Torah portion begins with Jacob leaving the Holy Land, as he is fleeing from his brother Esau, who has vowed to kill him for usurping his birthright and blessing. It opens with Jacob's dream of angels ascending and descending a ladder that reaches heaven and concludes with another dream with angles as he leaves Haran, the place where he had lived for 20 years. We read, *vayifgeu bo malachei Elohim*: that he encountered angels of God.

It is as if angels serve to bracket the 20 year period covered by this parasha. And in fact, next week's Torah portion opens with the story of him wrestling with an angel. To say that angels figure prominently in Jacob's life is an understatement.

Although they appear in other passages in the Bible and Jewish literature, they and their nature, as well as our current and our tradition's attitude towards them is rather ambiguous, reflecting a wide range of opinions. By way of example, the Talmud claims that they are beings that can have human form, while Rambam rejects this notion and says they are only discernible in prophetic visions and dreams.

Rabbi Shmuel Goldin summarizes the various disparate and sometimes conflicting opinions and finds where there is a consensus, "Our tradition presents a picture of entities created by God for the sole purpose of affecting His will in the physical world...(and who are).. manifestations and extensions of God's resolve." Without any will of their own, their purpose is to fulfill divinely ordained missions.

This is why the Hebrew word for angel, *malach*, means messenger, as in Messenger from God. While most angels are created to deliver a single message or to execute a single function, there are those, in the eyes of the rabbis and later rabbinic writings, such as Rafael, the angel of healing who is eternal, along with others who serve in the Heavenly court. In the Passover song of *Chad Gadya*, it is the *Malach HaMavet*, the angel of death who intervenes at the end of the song. Michael is portrayed in one account as made entirely of snow, whereas Gabriel is made of fire. Although they are near each other, they do not harm each other, which our sages teach is a symbol of God's power to make peace in the heavens above, and a model for us to seek to emulate.

Our rabbis imagined the angels forming a divine choral group, singing hymns in praise of God every day. Significantly, although there are references to them in our liturgy, there is no trace of any worship of angels in our tradition.

I want to share two interesting debates among the angels recorded in midrashic tellings.

When God decides to create the world, prior to creating human life, He consults the angels for their advice. This is why we read in Genesis, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness."

The midrash imagines, Moses asking God as he writes that passage, "What do you mean by this? Who are you talking to, who did you consult?"

And so according to the story, a debate breaks out among the angels, with some of them lining up in favor, and some opposed to the creation of human beings. The angel of kindness said, 'create them, for they will do acts of loving kindness.' But the angel of truth countered, 'do not create them, for they will be full of lies.' The angel of righteousness weighed in and said, 'create them, for they will establish justice.' The angel of peace said, 'do not create them, for they will be in constant strife!'

It was a tie, 2 – 2. So what did the Holy Blessed one do? Based on a verse in the Book of Psalms, we are told that He took truth and hurled it to the ground. By doing this, He broke the tie in the heavenly sphere. The vote was now 2 – 1 in favor, allowing Him to create the first person.

When the ministering angels saw that truth had been hurled to the earth, they challenged God, 'Ruler of all worlds, what have You done? Why have You so chastised Truth, who is the chief of your court?'

God seeks to reassure them and says truth will arise from the earth, which is why the Book of Psalms says - Let truth arise again from the earth''' (Bereshit Rabba, 8:8).

What is the meaning of this perplexing story?

Our sages use this Midrash to show that they recognize the complexity of human life. On the one hand, we have the capacity to be righteous and kind, to do justice and act mercifully, but on the other, we have the capacity to lie and to fight, to hurt and to destroy.

A similar debate ensues among the angels when it is time to give the Torah to the people of Israel. While Moses is on Mt. Sinai, about to receive the torah, the angels object and raise their concern with God.

They say, "How can you give this treasure, your Torah, which has been hidden and reserved for countless generations to flesh and blood?" They want it to stay in heaven with them. So what does God do? How does He respond? He asks Moses to answer them, to plead his case as it were. And so Moses quotes verses in the Torah to convince God to give the Torah to humans.

Moses begins by quoting the passage, "I am the Lord your God who took you out of Egypt." And then he asks -- Were the angels enslaved by Pharaoh in Egypt? Answering his own question he says, Of course not, so why should the Torah be given to them?

He goes on, "The Torah says – You shall have no other gods. Do the angels live among the nations of the world, among others who practice idolatry, and who are therefore commanded to resist that way of life? He continues, Your Torah says – Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Do angels work and need a day of rest? He raises his next point, One of the commandments is not to take God's name in vain. Are the angels involved in business affairs and other matters where there is a concern that they would swear falsely by Your name? Now Moses is on a roll.

He says – And what about the commandment to Honor your Father and mother?! Do angels have parents?

And just for final measure, he throws out his last justification as to why we humans need the Torah and it should be brought to earth and not kept as the private domain of the angels. He says – What about the commandments not to murder, commit adultery or to steal? Do angels possess an evil inclination?

With that, God rules in Moses' favor and gives the Torah, and the rest is history.

What are we to make of the two stories?

The two stories show that more precious to God than absolute truth or perfection is the pursuit of perfection. And Torah is what helps to guide our path.

Extensions of God, angels by their very nature are perfect. But we, with free will, must struggle and work to achieve perfection. It is why a beautiful image and passage teaches that we are little lower than the angels.

Our lives are defined however, not so much by reaching a goal, but by our quest, our intent and how we go about pursuing those goals.

Yitzhak Luria, expounded upon the story and said it teaches that truth splits into many shards dispersed throughout the world. These sparks of truth are embedded in each and every human being. It tells us that no one person has the ultimate and complete truth. It is our responsibility to collect these sparks of truth and connect them, so that truth will indeed arise from the earth – but only if we search for it. And that is why we need the Torah – to help us realize our mission and purpose in life is to increase goodness and truth in our world.

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