

AJ Erev RH 5779 — Sermon by Rabbi Barry A. Kenter

Before bedtime, it is traditional to say the “Bedtime Shema.” This prayer can be found in more traditional Siddurim. For some, the recital of the Shema immediately before retiring is seen as a protection against “the dangers of the night.” One section of this bedtime Shema invokes four archangels:

Beshem Hashem, in the name of God, God of Israel, may Michael be at my right, Gabriel at my left, Uriel before me, and Raphael behind me; and above my head the Shekhina.

Each of these angels has a specific purpose. The angel Michael, whose name means “Who is like God,” has the job of guarding the children of Israel. The angel Gabriel, whose name means “God is my strength,” has the job of lending us strength and courage, Uriel, whose name means “God is my light,” has the job of lighting our way through the darkness of night, and Raphael, whose name means “God is my healer,” is responsible for our physical and emotional well being. The Shekhina is God’s “female side,” God’s nurturing aspect.

During this past year, quite by accident I was introduced to a very human, if all too fictional Gabriel, Gabriel Allon, the protagonist in Daniel Silva’s remarkable espionage series.

According to Silva, Gabriel Allon is a sabra whose first language was German. Raised Jewish, albeit in a secular home in the Jezreel Valley, he was unfamiliar with Shabbat candles until he saw them as an adult. That his parents, specifically his mother, Irene, survived the Holocaust is a thread throughout the series; her unwillingness to discuss what happened to her is part of what makes Allon such a good spy and master of secrets. Not much is known about Allon’s father beyond his death in the Six-Day War, other than that he was a Holocaust survivor who was born and raised in Munich. Gabriel’s name was chosen for a reason, “Your mother named you Gabriel for a reason. Michael is the highest [angel], but you, Gabriel, are the mightiest. You’re the one who defends Israel against its accusers. You’re the angel of judgment — the Prince of Fire.”

Several books in the series make reference to Allon’s versatility with languages. He speaks fluent English, French, German, Hebrew, and Italian, as well as also passable Arabic and Spanish. Allon’s grandfather was a well-known Berlin-based German Expressionist painter who passed his talents on to his daughter (Gabriel’s mother) and subsequently Gabriel before he was killed at Auschwitz in January 1943. Gabriel was a student at the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design in Jerusalem when recruited for retaliation against Black September. Gabriel was the main assassin in that team. The three-year operation resulted in Gabriel's inability to paint. He returned to his studies and eventually became an art restorer in Italy, which continues to play a large role in Allon’s life and the series.

Restoration is a process that attempts to return the work of art to some previous state that the restorer imagines was the “original.” This was commonly done in the past. In the late 20th century a separate concept of conservation was developed. It is more concerned with preserving the work of art for the future, and less with making it look pristine. Restoration is controversial, since it often involves some irreversible change to the original material of the artwork with the goal of making it “look good.” Some believe that with the development of conservation one should attempt to make all restoration reversible. But then again...

The art of restoration is what these days are all about. Restoring us to a relationship with God, with our people, and with our own deeper spiritual being.

When you came in this evening, you were each given two pieces of string. Would you do me a favor and knot the two strings together? Thanks.

And now an oral story from the Jews of Libya as related by Esther Zagadon to Malka Cohen:

When a person is created, he or she is tied to God with a string. If one sins, the string breaks. But if one repents during the days of awe, the angel Gabriel comes down and makes a knot in the string and ties it. One once again is tied to God. Because every Jew sins once in a while, his or her string becomes full of knots. But a string with many knots is shorter than one without knots. Repentance brings a person closer to God.

Our link to heaven is like a string, which sin causes to snap. The act of making knots, of repairing, is an act of repentance and the restoration of a connection, a keshet, a knot between us and God. The more knots, the shorter the string, and the shorter the string, the closer to God.

As we begin the ten days of return and repentance, may the year we have begun this evening bring each of us closer to God.