

Vayishlach, Rabbi David Mahler

One of the highlights of my family's trip to Israel during the summer of 2019 was a 3-hour walking tour of the *Nachlaot* neighborhood in *Yerushalayim* with Rabbi Benji Levine. Rabbi Levine regaled us with stories of *Yerushalmi* life in the middle of the 20th century and told countless tales of his grandfather, Rav Aryeh Levine, known as the *tzaddik* of *Yerushalayim*. My favorite story was of a young boy, about 8-9 years old, who approached the saintly rabbi and asked him – “Rabbi Levine – everyone says that you are one of the 36 hidden *tzaddikim* who hold up the world. Is that true? Are you?”

The *tzaddik* responded, “sometimes I am, and sometimes I'm not.” When I first heard the story, I felt that Rav Aryeh Levine's response was an example of him being humble. Perhaps he knew or felt that he was one of the mysterious and elite 36 *tzaddikim* but didn't want to announce that fact to others. However, his grandson explained the response differently.

Rav Aryeh Levine was telling the young boy that yes – sometimes he certainly is. There are times when he helps others and reaches out to those in need of support and at those moments, he is counted among the 36. However, there are other times where he is looked over in favor of others who perform extraordinary acts of love and kindness on behalf of others or do *mitzvos* in a way that catapults them into this exalted stratosphere.

The idea that the count of the 36 *tzaddikim* is fluid is an empowering, transformative idea! That means that, at some point, anyone of us has the potential to be a card-carrying member of this exclusive club.

In both this week's *parsha* and in next's, the *Torah* informs us of unnamed individuals who play important roles in the stories of the *Avos*. In both stories, the people are not given names yet *Rashi*, quoting different midrashim, identifies each by name.

In this week's *parsha*, as *Yaakov* and his family make their march towards the confrontation with *Esav*, *Yaakov* is alone on the other side of the *Yabok* River. In what has become one of the cosmic events in Jewish history, a man attacks and fights *Yaakov* throughout the night. The man injures *Yaakov* on his leg and they go their separate ways. *Rashi* informs us that this unnamed man was the guardian angel of *Esav* in the guise of a man. *Esav*'s guardian angel is different from all others: just as *Esav* epitomizes evil, so too does his angel.

Next week, we will meet another “man.” After *Yosef* informs his brothers of his two dreams, both of which portend to him ruling over them and being promoted to a position of authority in the future, *Yaakov* sends *Yosef* out to meet his brothers in a field. On his way, *Yosef* gets lost. As *Yosef* searches to find the path to his brothers, he meets a man who notices *Yosef*’s confusion and asks he can help. *Yosef* explains his predicament and the unnamed man points him in the right direction. Who is this man? *Rashi* tells us that he is the angel, *Gavriel*.

What made *Rashi* define one man as the *Sa’aro shel Esav* and the other the *Malach Gavriel*? Why is one an angel and the other an unmatched villain? What motivated *Rashi* to describe each as such?

The answer is clear. While the stories have similarities, the rabbis looked at the totality of the stories. . In both, there is a person who is lost, alone and vulnerable. They are both in need of help, care, concern, direction and support. However, in the case of this week’s *parsha*, the man decides to take advantage and injure the vulnerable *Yaakov*. Therefore, he is branded with an *Esav* typology. When *Yosef* is alone, and the man approaches to assist, he is branded an angel.

Life is about transforming ourselves into angels whenever the opportunity arises. In trying times, it’s easy to deride, injure, hurt and create divisiveness. When we do that, we are buying into the *Esav* vision and approach to the world. In contrast, when we come to “save the day” and put a smile on someone else’s face, we become angelic.

There is no “*chiddush*” to the words of *Rashi* and the rabbis. They are seeing the situation for what it is.

At the opening plenary at last year’s OU West Coast weekend that normally occurs around this time of year, Moshe Bane, the former president of the Orthodox Union, made a powerful statement I think of often:

During *mincha* on *Shabbat* afternoons, we recite the *pasuk* in which *Dovid HaMelech* says to *Hashem* (*Shmuel Bet* 7:23) - וּמִי כְעַמֶּךָ כִּישְׂרָאֵל גּוֹי אֶחָד בְּאֶרֶץ - and who is like Your people Israel, unique among the nations? Mr. Bane wondered, how is *Am Yisrael* so unique? Many nations are highly educated, successful, and have built wonderful families. Many nations care for others, are deeply religious, and committed to lofty values and ideals. While all that may be true of other nations, Mr. Bane questions whether any other nation who continuously suffered

tragedy after tragedy would have continued to care about others the way the Jewish people have. We have survived inquisitions, expulsions, holocausts and pogroms and nevertheless, we lead the world in a significant percentage of charity given. There are no statistics on this, but I bet we lead the world in the percentage of time devoted to others as well.

That is what makes us special. We lead the world in angelic acts. We often transform ourselves into angels. We have been persecuted our entire history and we are still benevolent, big-hearted, compassionate, empathetic, caring and philanthropic. That is the signature *middah* of *Am Yisrael* as *Chazal* state (*Yevamos* 89a) – The Jewish people are merciful, bashful and kind.