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Angels from Within

A stranger arrived to a small Jewish town in Romania. He went directly to the synagogue, washed his hands and sat down near the door. Each day he would sit there, speaking to no one and asking for nothing. Every once in a while, some kind-hearted person would bring him a piece of bread, a bowl of soup, even a slice of meat.

Sometime after the stranger arrived, the local water-carrier died and the elders of the community decided to give the water-carrier's job to the stranger. The stranger worked industriously, filling all the water barrels daily and receiving as payment a copper coin, sometimes a piece of bread.

There lived in this same town a well-to-do but selfish man. All his life he did nothing but amass wealth which he kept in cash in an iron chest. Sometimes he was not even above cheating the poor. When he found out that the water-carrier knew little about the value of money, he would wrap up a button in a piece of paper and hand it to the stranger everyday as payment for the water he brought.

Three days before Yom Kippur, the wealthy man ordered the eviction of a poor widow and her children from a house that he owned. Later that night, the water-carrier knocked on the wealthy man's door. "Who's there?" "The water-carrier." And before the man had time to open the door, the water-carrier was in his house. "I want to be paid now for bringing your water," he said. "I pay you everyday," said the man. "Yes, but all you have given me are these buttons." "I gave you copper coins," said the rich man. The water-carrier replied, "Perhaps they were once copper but now they are buttons. Perhaps all of your coins have become buttons." "That's impossible," said the man. "Go down into your cellar and see."

In his cellar, hands trembling, the man opened his iron chest and, to his utter dismay, saw only buttons. "Where is my gold?" he cried. "I don't know," said the water-carrier, "but give me the deed to the widow's house and perhaps you will find what you are missing."

The man understood. Without a word, he handed over the deed to the house. The next moment, the water-carrier was gone and the man found his chest was again filled with gold. No one ever saw the stranger again.

Was the water-carrier a messenger whose mission was to deliver conscience into the hands of the arrogant? Could he have been "an agent of God" sent from on high to reconcile an injustice? Might he have been an angel, the purpose of whose winged journey was to rescue that unfortunate widow?

Recent polls suggest that nearly three-quarters of all Americans believe angels exist. And although

angels have historically been thought of as being mysterious, distant, awesome, often terrifying, fierce and cold, today's angels of American flavor are thought to be more like celestial boy scouts or doting grandparents. They are givers, providers and facilitators.

Something like this: A devoted three-year old whose family lived in Los Angeles wanted to know what had happened to Grandpa (who'd recently died). The little girl's dad told her, "God saw that Grandpa was very sick and wanted to stop him from hurting anymore. So God sent the angels to carry him to heaven." To which the little girl, astonished and wide-eyed, replied, "The whole team?"

Harold Bloom of Yale University wrote, "Everything that makes angels interesting – their size, their otherness, their menace, their power and, above all, their ambivalence toward human beings – has been eliminated." One writer calls them "Allstate angels," appearing from nowhere, rescuing people from imminent disaster, and disappearing after performing their good deeds.

Knowing perhaps nothing else about angels except that at Christmas they are "heard on high" and that our Torah probably contains some references as well, you may be asking, "Do Jews believe in angels? And if so, are Jewish angels the boy scout type, or are they more fearsome and frightening?" The answer is yes and no. The Jewish world of angels spans our people's entire history, so there really can't be a single answer to this question.

My first exposure to Jewish angels was, of course, through a joke. It's a classic, concerning a rabbi who was such a compulsive golfer that once, on Yom Kippur morning, he left the house early to play a quick nine holes by himself. An angel who happened to be looking on immediately notified God that a grievous sin was being committed on earth. On the sixth hole, God caused a mighty wind to take the ball directly from the tee to the cup for a miraculous and dramatic hole-in-one. The angel, horrified, cried out, "God, You call this a punishment?" "Sure," God answered. "Who can he tell?"

This little scenario teaches us two Jewish notions about angels. First, angels work for God. They live in heaven and their presence on earth is only at God's behest. Second, their job while on earth is to fulfill God's word; they do not act of their own accord. They may report to God the goings-on down here, but angels, at least those in biblical times, say and do only what God tells them.

Angels appear almost immediately in the Torah, showing up as cherubs in the Garden of Eden. Lest you should be imagining a collection of pudgy, red-cheeked little baby-creatures flying around like sprites and fairies, allow me to disabuse you of that. Adam and Eve had eaten from the Tree of Knowledge and were subsequently ejected from Paradise. Placed at the east entrance to the Garden were those "cherubs," probably not so small and red-cheeked, but looking more like Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson or Dave Bautista, complete with fiery, eternally wielded swords that would forever guard the way back into the Garden. These cherubs had no independent powers to call upon, but those with which God had endowed them were plenty to keep humankind away.

In the Genesis story of Hagar, who, before Sarah conceived Isaac, parented Abraham's first child, Ishmael, the jealous and enraged Sarah *twice* banished Hagar from their desert home, forcing the servant to confront death when she became lost in those arid sands. Just as Hagar reached the point of exhaustion and utter despair, an angel appeared and spoke to her, encouraging her to help herself, to return home and to continue living. No miraculous intervention, even on the second occasion when her newborn Ishmael was dying of thirst. After hearing the angel's words, Hagar looked up and saw only what had been present all along – water in a nearby spring. In neither case did the angel do anything; it didn't remove Hagar and the baby from the present danger, nor did it provide any supernatural alteration of physical events. Rather, it was the angel's *spoken* message that restored Hagar's confidence and inspired her to go on with life. Angels are messengers (in Hebrew, *mal'akhim*). They themselves do not act. They give voice to God's actions.

That voice is especially clear in Akedat Yitzkhak, the Binding of Isaac, which we read on Rosh Hashanah and where Abraham raised the slaughtering knife to slay his son but was stopped by an angel crying out, "Abraham! Do not touch the boy!" Words alone stopped him. The angel was sent by God to deliver a message, to Abraham and to the people of that time who routinely sacrificed their children to whatever deity they happened to worship. The message: Do not kill your children.

Among the most familiar Jewish angels are those from the story of Jacob. An arrogant, self-righteous individual who was forced to flee after deceiving his father and stealing his brother's birthright, Jacob encountered angels when he stopped for the night and dreamt of a ladder reaching to the sky and, twenty years later, spent a night wrestling with one. Again, the angels were there to deliver Jacob a message: Defeat your greed and egocentricity, and become Israel, one who wrestles with the meaning of a relationship with God, one who earnestly grapples with questions of right and wrong.

Lastly, while tending his father-in-law's sheep in the desert, Moses encountered an angel who appeared in a burning bush. Its job? Simply to get Moses' attention. God then spoke to Moses, charging him with the task of freeing the enslaved Israelites.

Again and again throughout the biblical material, what at first glance appears to be the miraculous intervention of angels from on high, may also be understood as the dramatic, inner struggle of human beings grappling with the role each of them had to play in events unfolding around them. The angels which entered into their lives never altered physical events – except maybe the Burning Bush (although, the "miracle" of burning a dried-out bush in the middle of a desert doesn't seem like much of a miracle to me). Did the biblical writers believe in angels? It's not really clear. But what they made absolutely explicit is that God rules the world, and if angels do exist, they are completely subject to God's will, acting only on God's word and, almost always, simply to deliver that word. They have no names and, even when asked, refuse to provide one, always on guard to redirect any gratitude and awe toward the One power guiding the universe: God.

Until the Book of Daniel. A late addition to the Tanakh, the Jewish bible, Daniel was written around the

year 164 BCE, the time of Greco-Syrian rule in the Middle East, the time of Antiochus and the Maccabees. The book emerged during a period of severe repression and persecution unlike any ever before experienced by the Israelites. Judaism had been outlawed and religious leaders were being murdered. The people were looking for salvation because, this time, there was no Moses to rescue them. They couldn't help but imagine dramatic salvation through Divine intervention. In Daniel, we read of three Israelite leaders – Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego – thrown to their deaths into a raging fire, but rescued by an angel. Daniel himself is rescued from hungry lions. And then, for the first time, angels are named: Michael and Gabriel. They counteract a desperate reality – Israel in the vicious clutch of the mad Antiochus – with the awesome message that Israel will be extracted from its current, deadly predicament.

More and more scrolls were composed during the years between 200 BCE and 200 CE. But because they described fantastic “end of time” scenarios, attributed extraordinary physical attributes to God, and introduced more and more angels whose thousand years as messengers was being distorted into, quite nearly, a new form of idolatry, these scrolls were rejected by the ancient Rabbis. They survive in two collections – the Pseudepigrapha and the Apocrypha – but they were written out of Israelite heritage forever.

The Talmud, which emerged during that same period, also speaks of angels, but it restrains them from heroics and diminishes their stature. Rabban Gamliel, in his second century editing of the Passover Haggadah, has God saying, “I, and no angel, redeemed Israel.”

So during Talmudic times and in the centuries that followed, angels returned to serving as representatives of God. Satan, who appears in the Book of Job as a law-abiding angel whose job it is to observe the behavior of people and report to God, in the Pseudepigrapha and Apocrypha, is depicted as rebelling against God and striking out on his own to wreak evil throughout the world. Our Rabbis-of-old fought back against this dualistic idea of a good God and an evil Satan by focusing instead on the good and evil that exists within people, and our endless internal battle between *yetzer hara* (the impulse to do evil, to be hurtful) and *yetzer hatov* (the impulse to do good).

Rabbi Yose ben Yehuda is recorded in the Talmud [Shabbat 119a] as telling this familiar Sabbath tale: Two angels accompany us home each Friday at dusk, one good and one bad. If the angels find our house brimming with light, the aroma of fresh-baked challah wafting through the air, our family dressed and looking its Sabbath best, the good angel declares it should be like this each and every week to come, to which the bad angel has no recourse but to respond, “Amen.” If, however, our house is dim, with no aroma of challah detected and Shabbat nowhere to be found within, the bad angel declares it should be like this each and every week to come, to which the good angel has no recourse but to respond, “Amen.” When we sing Shalom Aleikhem, we welcome angels of peace, hoping that what they see in our lives is goodness and love, and that they will bless us with a wish that it be this way each and every week to come.

Hasidism, which developed in eighteenth-century Eastern Europe, continually underscored the notion that angels stem from our individual deeds. At a time of great darkness and evil in the world around them, with antisemitism prevalent and pogroms threatening their very lives, the followers of Hasidism sought refuge in the intense faith that God really did care and that each person has the power “to create angels” – to bring light into a dark world and restore God to a godless world – doing so through individual deeds of love and caring. Such acts of kindness, the hasidic rabbis taught, are so important and powerful, that they can literally reverse God’s judgement upon one who has sinned all his life.

The story is told of a man who died and was brought before the Heavenly Court. His sins and good deeds were placed upon the scales, the bad far outweighing the good. But suddenly, an angel appeared and placed a fur-coat on the scale holding the good deeds, heavy enough to tilt it in the man’s favor. Accordingly, he was sent to Paradise, but said to the angel escorting him, “I do not understand the matter of the fur-coat.” The angel responded, “One cold, winter night you traveled on a sleigh and picked up a poor man along the way. You noticed he was shivering and took off your fur-coat and gave it to him. That fur-coat weighed more than you thought.”

A single act of kindness, in a world that seemed no longer to value kindness, could create a guardian angel that might help one to gain entrance into Paradise itself.

Another hasidic story tells of a thief who, in his old age, was unable to ply his trade and was starving. A wealthy man, hearing of his distress, sent the thief some food. In time, both the wealthy man and the thief died on the very same day. The trial of the wealthy man in the Heavenly Court found him wanting and he was sentenced to punishment. But as the man was being led away, an angel came running to recall him. The sentence had been canceled. Why? Because the thief he had helped on earth had stolen the ledger of the wealthy man’s sins.

To help others is a seminal doctrine in Judaism, and this hasidic tale emphasizes that even in helping a thief, one builds credentials toward eternal reward. As the great Talmudic scholar Adin Steinsaltz taught: There are two kinds of angels. Those who are created by God, and those who are constantly being created from a person’s thoughts, deeds and actions.

And herein lies the Jewish message of our angels. Perhaps there are celestial beings who, living on a separate plane of existence, observe our lives and possibly play some role in them. But more importantly, Judaism teaches again and again and again that the demons and the angels who hover about us are those we create ourselves. When we bring goodness into our world, we create webs of support and protection. When we introduce arrogance and pain into our world, we create webs of indifference and destruction. Whether those webs are natural or supernatural, we can only guess. But to live our lives with the sense that it is we ourselves who retain the power – to relieve or oppress, to soothe or to plague, to heal or to kill – the task entrusted to us is inescapably clear: the world awaits our choices. And while we can theorize and fantasize all we like as to the presence or absence of celestial beings who cause things to happen, Judaism teaches us – and has taught us for some four

thousand years – not to look to angels or demons *without* but, rather, to angels and demons *within*.

Rabbi Morris Margolies writes that, when he was eight years old, a teacher of his, commenting on the story of Adam and Eve eating the Forbidden Fruit, taught that every one of our sins creates a devil or demon who will hound us at every turn. The serpents who frighten us are serpents of our own making and they poison our lives. But each of our good deeds creates a guardian angel at our sides to take us through fires and storms and sickness and heartache.

The more good deeds, the more guardian angels. We create our own company.

Was the water-carrier an agent of God, sent from on high to reconcile an injustice? Or was he just a water-carrier, whose fundamental decency and outrage inspired him to confront a selfish and arrogant human being? Is there any difference between an angel and a mensch?

Once someone came upon a sculptor chipping away with her chisel at a huge, shapeless piece of rock. Upon being asked what she was doing, the sculptor replied, “I am releasing the angel within.”

It is Kol Nidre. Our Ten Days of Turning approach their conclusion. As the gates of Neilah begin to close, may we understand that blessing comes into our world when each one of us has the faith and confidence to affect people’s lives in ways that change them for the better. There are indeed angels in our world, but rather than looking for them above, we should be looking for them within. Whatever our beliefs, may we be inspired to live our lives as Albert Einstein once wrote, not as if nothing is a miracle, but as if everything is a miracle. And in living just so, may we release the angel within ... and inscribe ourselves for a blessing in the Book of Life.

Ken y’hee ratzon ... may these words be worthy of coming true.

Closing words

In the 1980s, when I was performing with Begeg Kefet, one of us would frequently share the following. Rabbi Moshe of Kobryn wrote: “Angel, angel, it takes no special effort to live in heaven. You need not worry about earning a living. You require neither food nor drink. You have no children to raise. You have no husband or wife. You suffer not from temptation. But come down to earth for a while – try earning a living, try food and drink, try bringing up children, try keeping a marriage. Then we’ll see if you can be an angel!”

That is our challenge, isn’t it? To see if we can be an angel. Not at all like God’s angels, not just “in the room” to observe and report. But taking a stand, whether it is to make sure our children are respectful and kind, lobbying Congress to make sure they are respectful and kind, and everywhere in between.

It is Kol Nidrei. All vows. All promises. All clear.

Not a time to absolve ourselves of our promises, but to REsolve to make good on them.

“The more good deeds, the more guardian angels. We create our own company.”

I do not wish you an easy fast. May this year’s Yom Kippur observance bring you face-to-face with every failing, every flaw, and may you take the hardest path forward, the straight one, the one that follows the high road and leads to moral clarity, action, and blessing.

The clock is ticking. Will this be the year that Yom Kippur ends with something more than a break fast?

Tzom kahl. May we hunger for justice and peace.