

*Gut Yontiv,*

Like all professionals, there are aspects of my job that I come to know pretty well and can predict in playful ways. Here's a good example: I offer a sermon or *kavannah* that references the angels, or I spend an extra moment pointing out the meaning of the words from Shalom Aleichem, and the participation of angels and, without fail, a congregant will approach me after the service to say some version of, "Rabbi, you mentioned, 'angels...' I didn't know Jews believed in angels. I thought that was a Christian thing. If that is a part of Judaism, why have I never heard about them before?!?" I'm going to get back to that soon but rest assured, if you're one of the Jewish community who did not realize that angelology is alive and well in our tradition, you are in *very good* company.

I think when most people hear the word angel, there are some specific images that come to mind. Probably some combination of chubby cherubic flying babies (in fact the word, cherub is a Hebrew word, *k'ruv*). Or, some mysterious man dressed in a flowing white toga who surprises one with his presence, brings love and assistance and disappears as quickly as he appeared. In fact, the traditional Jewish teaching about angels are neither of these.

Christianity and Islam, were born from us. It's probably important to remind you at this point that Judaism was, itself, birthed from the religions that

predated it – in our case, the pagan cult practices of the day. They were surrounded by the regional gods of other tribes and eventually the pantheons of the Greeks and Romans. They knew the stories of the others and, as any group coalesces and seeks to define itself, they do so in contrast to others. Countries do it: The United States emerged 243 years ago and defined itself against the backdrop of European values. Groups do it: Reform Judaism introduced itself as a polemic against the traditions of observant Judaism. And Individuals do it: adolescents form their independence as they break with family expectations.

So, when Judaism (or more properly, Israelitism) chose monotheism as its innovation, it needed to deal with its members' well-known collection of Gods. The first stage was to take a play from Greece's playbook who elevated Zeus to the top of the pantheon and lowered all the other gods beneath him. The Israelite God, likewise was lifted to the top and the others were stripped of their god status but maintained a position somewhere between the One God and us mortals. One can see the remnants of this in some specific Torah verses like when God is creating the world and arrives at the moment to create Man and the language turns plural, "Let **Us** make man in **OUR** image."<sup>1</sup> Commentators have worked hard on this – sometimes employing the idea of the "Royal We" but usually indicating that there were other personalities involved who are in discussion with God. In many places, the text refers to God's Heavenly Host – language I never understood as a kid, these are the divine (yet not godly) characters hanging out with God.

They have names, they have personalities...so, what do these individuals do? In many cases, they advise God. There is the story of God deciding whether

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<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 1:26.

or not to create humans at all. Four angels offer both arguments in favor or opposed to the idea and God seems to value their insight.<sup>2</sup> The angels also serve as assistants to God. Two mortal-looking men arrive at the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to bring Lot and his family out of town before they are razed to the ground. The men possess magical powers which help them escape the dangers of the evil townspeople and they share instructions that are clearly divine.<sup>3</sup> Why God used angels in the first place and chose not to show up personally isn't clear – maybe it is because the experience of God directly would be too much for us? – but it is these individuals who are first referred to in the Torah as מלאכים *malachim* – or, assistants<sup>4</sup>. The word “malachah” means labor and so it's fair to see the angels as God's laborers.

The angels are also God's messengers as in the moment that Abraham, despondent of ever having a child, is reminded of the prophecy. The text reads, “Adonai appeared to [Abraham] by the terebinths of Mamre... Looking up, he saw three men standing near him.”<sup>5</sup> The insinuation is that, even though they appeared as men, there was more to them than met the eye. They reiterated the promise of God that the elderly Abraham and Sarah would have a child when the men next returned in one year's time. As with many Divine moments, we only realize their sacred nature in hindsight – once the prophecy has come true.

You might also have heard the names of the archangels – Michael, Gabriel, Raphael and Uriel are also Hebrew names – Michayel, Gavriel, R'fael and Uriel. All

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<sup>2</sup> Genesis Rabbah, 8:3-4.

<sup>3</sup> Gen 19.

<sup>4</sup> Gen. 19:1.

<sup>5</sup> Gen. 17:1.

of it comes from our tradition. So, in what ways have the Christians employed the angels in their teachings? Pretty similar to us:

In the Gospel of Luke, the angel, Gabriel, announces the birth of Jesus<sup>6</sup> to the nearby farmers. It is a specifically divine message and the mortals seem to understand it as such. The Christian teachings in the book of Revelations also name the serpent in the Garden of Eden as the fallen angel, Satan – posing a trap for Eve to walk right into.<sup>7</sup> The Jewish tradition doesn't speak of angels as "fallen." That feels like something mortals do – not divine beings. In this and other stories, Satan does become the name of the Devil but, as far as I know, we have no Prince of the Darkness in our tradition. Perhaps the angels' biggest role in Christian theology is in filling out the images of our experience after death.

Theodicy, or the explanation of God's role in Evil in the world, includes the angels in beautiful ways. Good people who suffer and bad people who thrive in this world will get what's coming to them after they die. While Heaven and Hell are, again, Jewish concepts, the Christians used them far more enthusiastically. The pious and dedicated human will exist in eternal bliss with the angels in heaven and, thanks to the work of Dante Alighieri, I now possess the nightmarish images of those who sinned in this world suffering the punishments of an eternity in the fiery pits of hell with the demonic looking Satan.<sup>8</sup> But, now, let's turn our attention to the ways that Judaism *has* developed and used the idea of angels among us.

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<sup>6</sup> Gospel of Luke.

<sup>7</sup> Revelations, 12:9.

<sup>8</sup> As described in the section, *Inferno*, of the Divine Comedy. c.1300 CE

The Talmud used biblical material to suggest that each individual has a personal guardian angel. You've perhaps heard the story of the two ministering angels who accompany a man home from synagogue on Shabbat evening: one a good angel, the other bad (or evil). If the house has been prepared properly for the Sabbath, with "a lamp lit, the table set, and the couch or bed covered with a spread," all done presumably by his pious wife, the good angel exclaims: "May it be just like this on another Sabbath." Grudgingly, the bad angel is forced to respond, "amen" to the blessing. But if none of these things has been done, the evil angel is the one who excitedly offers a prayer for another imperfect shabbat the following week, with the good angel "unwillingly" responding "Amen".<sup>9</sup> Forgive the text its misogynistic gender roles from another time, the notion that we have angels riding on our shoulders, whispering in our ear, was readily picked up and added to cartoon characters like Homer Simpson and other pop culture memes.



When we read the story of Jacob running away from his brother Esau's murderous anger, he stops for the night at the border between Israel and Haran. He dreams of angels descending and ascending a ladder with its feet on the ground and its top in the heavens.<sup>10</sup> This was explained by the later rabbis as the angels who were watching over him while he was in the holy land changing shifts with those who would accompany him abroad. And, one more example from the Torah: the non-Israelite prophet, Bilaam. He's on his way to curse us when, in the midst of his journey, his donkey begins to act strangely because, to the donkey's

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<sup>9</sup>b. Shabbat 119b

<sup>10</sup> Gen. 28:10-12.

eyes, there is clearly an angel blocking the path with a fiery sword. Robert Alter sets the stage: the great "seer" (Bilaam) is effectively "blind, "while a dumb animal... can see that his mission is contrary to God's plan. The question," Alter continues, "now quickly becomes: Can the seer raise himself to the level of a donkey? (And can we?) The story, in other words, is about the folly of a human ego self-destructively preoccupied with its own agenda instead of discerning God's."<sup>11</sup>

After an emotional exchange between the man and beast of burden, Bilaam's eyes *are* opened fully so that he can see this celestial being standing in front of him.<sup>12</sup> I love these two stories because of the translucency of these presences. They're there – we just can't see them most of the time.

Think about your seder table – that moment when you open the door for Elijah. Angelic in behavior, our Jewish tradition is teeming with stories about this character, moving amongst us in disguise, like the Angels who visited Abraham. Those of us who are keyed in to the possibility, are the only ones who have any chance of understanding them. Everyone else misses the opportunity. It's a test – are you too focused on the smallness of your needs or is your awareness expansive enough to include these divine presences? Often, Elijah presents as the needy stranger or the annoying guest in the story... representing the kinds of people that most of us have little patience for. He comes to test the responses of the other characters in the story just as we are tested daily.

My dear friend and mentor, Rabbi Hal Greenwald, met Elijah once. It was before his time in seminary and he was working as a Program Director at the Hillel

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<sup>11</sup> Alter, Robert. [The Art of Biblical Narrative](#). New York: Basic Books. 1981, pp. 104–107.

<sup>12</sup> Num. 22:31.

House on the campus of UNC. He was in the kitchen frantically preparing for the evening's Passover seder when a knock on the back door to the alley brought him into conversation with a beggar asking for a handout. To his credit, Rabbi Greenwald gave the man food but, then quickly sent him packing to get back to the preparation. He missed the chance to fulfill the words of the seder, "let all who are hungry come and eat [at our seder table]."<sup>13</sup> Any of us could have and likely would have done something similar but Hal has internalized that moment as one of the missed opportunities of his life and is pretty darn sure that the beggar was the prophet Elijah in disguise.

In our prayer book, Rabbi Larry Kushner writes that these messengers of God "go about in holy anonymity, often, even unknown to themselves."<sup>14</sup> Kushner's goal is to increase our mindfulness and the likelihood that you and I will change the way we experience the others around us. Kushner is reminding us that, just like the characters we

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*"Never forget that you, too, yourself may be a Messenger. Perhaps even one whose errand extends over several lifetimes."*

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have recalled in the Bible, you and I might very well meet angels along the way and would not know it – like Michael Landon's character in the old TV show, Highway to Heaven – so, we had best treat everyone as though they *are* an angel, sent by God to test us. Even if you don't believe in God or in a word I've said tonight, it wouldn't be a wasted practice, would it?

Have you ever met an angel? You might be likely to say that today's roster of angels includes names like Martin Luther King, Mother Theresa, Mahatma Ghandi and others who have been world-changers. And, you're right. However, I

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<sup>13</sup> Haggadah

<sup>14</sup> Mishkan Tefillah, Shabbat and Holidays, CCAR Press, NY, 2007. pg. 143, note 1.

would add lesser-known but equally significant souls. For instance, the anesthesiologist who entered Julie’s pre-op room a few months ago moments before a procedure that would help us know what type and severity of cancer we were facing. When I was struggling to hold it together, she moved in gently, said a few words and exited but her energy was safe, comforting and other-worldly. I could not tell you her name and probably could not pick her out of a lineup today but I felt that God’s presence entered in a strengthened way when she entered that room.

But, remember above all, the heroes I mentioned were mortals like you – who exhibited angelic behaviors but who were imperfect. When I was discussing this with Rabbi Greenwald, his response to me was that: “MLK is a hero to [him], but in 2019 we know that he was also a serial adulterer whose philandering caused his loved ones immense grief. Ghandi urged the Jews of Europe to surrender peacefully to the will of the Nazis. They were humans through and through – but our lives were changed because of the angelic functions which they performed of their own will. And, “ he went on, “that anesthesiologist, who was such a blessing to me in Julie’s hospital room probably slurps her soup in a way that drives her kids absolutely insane – not an actual angel, but one who performed an act of gentle mercy for another human being.” Being in the presence of such remarkable example lifts my awareness of human potential and begs an important response.

Returning to Rabbi Kushner’s provocative teaching, he takes it one step further: “never forget that you, too, yourself may be a Messenger of God. Perhaps even one whose errand extends over several lifetimes.”<sup>15</sup> In these

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*



words, his intent is to lift us out of our small-minded concerns and to see our roles and impacts as far more significant than what we see when we glance in the mirror. When Joseph was sent on a mission by his father to see how his shepherd brothers were faring, he arrived at the place he expected to find the herds and was distraught to realize they'd already gone and he had no idea where. The unnamed man he encountered who said, "your brothers have gone on to the town of Dotan,"<sup>16</sup> had an impact on history he could not have known. Instead of returning home to his father with no news, Joseph found his brothers. But, they sold him into slavery and set in motion the descent of our ancestors into Egypt and our eventual exodus. All of which led to that glorious moment at Mt. Sinai in which we receive the gift of Torah – all because that guy was in a kibbitzing sort of mood that afternoon. I'm going to suggest (beyond the power of the text to tell us) that not only was that man an angel – he was also unaware of it. He was a power-player in the Butterfly Effect. Small personal actions may have an impact on events far beyond what we can imagine. What is, perhaps, most important here is not the hope or fear that they will, but rather the awareness that it is possible. If we lived with that sort of ever-present mindfulness that we were irreversibly altering the course of events, wouldn't you think we'd be a little more concerted in our efforts to make our impact positive?

IF – and I'll allow you that **big** "IF" – you had been transformed into a messenger for God, what would it have felt like? Maybe it would have been like when Patrick Swayze's character takes over the body of Whoopie Goldberg's character in the old movie, Ghost. We saw her clothing rustle, despite the absence of a breeze and her facial expression communicated something weird

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<sup>16</sup> Gen. 37:17.

taking place. Then, she'd eventually push the spirit out and retake control of her body. To my experience, that is not the way it works. When we are living our moments as angels, there is no indication. In fact, it is often only in the clarity of hindsight, that we might admit that we were operating beyond our usual, mortal capacities.

Here's one way to help you identify them: Think about it from the view of others. If I were talking with someone *about* you, what are the gestures or actions you've been a part of that *others* would tell me were angelic? These last few months, my family has been the recipient of an awful lot of angelic gifts from those of you who have reached out in sundry ways to demonstrate your support of me and my family as we have addressed Julie's cancer diagnosis. And, the paradox is that, some of those I see as my angels, would probably tell you that I have played that role for them at another point in *their* lives.

I have yet to meet the person who tells me that they are not hopeful that their life will mean something. We all want to make positive impacts on the people around us and to be remembered as good. Those times when the Divine Spirit is allowed to show itself in the world through our actions are when we are living to our highest and best potential. That day in the kitchen, who was the heavenly character? Rabbi Hal or the beggar? The other day when you went out of your way to be kind, is it possible that it was your guardian angel choosing that moment to act? There are plenty of ways to express your Jewish New Year's Resolution but perhaps, expressing your inner angel more often wouldn't be a bad addition to the list.