

Angels In The Infield Rabbi Ariel Rackovsky

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The Scene¹: Yom Kippur, 1929. Kol Nidrei night.

The Location: Congregation B'nai David, at the time an Orthodox synagogue in Northwest Detroit.

The room was packed. A hushed silence descended upon the congregation as the Cantor began to chant the haunting words at the beginning of Kol Nidrei, allowing us to pray with egregious sinners in our midst (אנו מתירין (להתפלל עם העבריינים). The Chazzan must have intoned these words with great fervor, because there were, indeed, some serious *avaryanim* that night in Bnai David—at least three of them: Louis Fleisher, Harry Fleisher, and Henry Shorr, three of the most infamous underworld personalities in Detroit, members of the infamous Purple Gang, a crime syndicate that controlled everything illegal in the city and were considered by some to be even more ruthless than Chicago's Capone Gang. Present as well were three other men no one knew, dressed in traditional Chassidic garb. Knowing that these three gangsters would never miss Yom Kippur services, three G-men closed in on their whereabouts and showed up in synagogue, preparing to arrest

¹ <https://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-life-and-religion/176072/gangsters-on-yom-kippur>

these miscreants when services let out. In a classic case of what is known pejoratively as *goyishe kop*, one of the agents stepped outside (likely during the appeal) and lit a cigarette, not realizing that how out of character and prohibited such an action is on Yom Kippur. Even to a group of hardened mobsters, lighting a cigarette on Yom Kippur was just not done. The agents' cover had been blown, and the three *avaryanim* were able to escape.

Yom Kippur has a redemptive effect, for every Jew. On Yom Kippur, even the worst sinner has a sense of holiness and propriety on this sacred day. Why is that? It may be because all of us ascend today to the level of angels. In fact, many of the customs and rituals of Yom Kippur are evocative of the mannerisms and behaviors we ascribe to angels. We don white clothing, we stand with our feet together for long stretches and we refrain from physical indulgences like eating and wearing leather shoes. Even our liturgy is modeled on angelic prayer, as we declare in full voice-

ברוך שם כבוד מלכותו לעולם ועד

Why is this phrase normally recited silently? Rav Ovadia Yosef explained, based on a comment of the Tur, that this phrase is the special phrase vouchsafed to angels; it is not for puny mortals to utter as they please. To do so would arouse the jealousy of the angels, so to speak, because we are too similar to them. Yet there is one day when the angels are not jealous of us- Yom Kippur, because on that day, *we* are angels too.

ילקוט יוסף תפילה א הערות סימן צה - לכוין את רגליו בתפלה

שהרי לענין אמירת ברוך שם כבוד מלכותו אנו אומרים אותו בלחש שלא יתקנאו בנו המלאכים, שאנו דומין להם..דיש מפרשים דאין המלאכים מקנאים אחד מהשני, אבל קנאה מבני אדם איכא.

But why is it so important to act as angels on Yom Kippur? Why must we engage in this annual charade? There is a cryptic statement in the Talmud (Chagigah 16) that may shed some light on the significance of our angelic comparison. In fact, the Talmud records three ways that human beings are similar to angels at all times.

חגיגה דף טז

שלשה כמלאכי השרת: יש להם דעת כמלאכי השרת, ומהלכין בקומה זקופה כמלאכי השרת, ומספרים בלשון הקדש כמלאכי השרת;

How are we always similar to angels? We walk upright, we experience awareness like angels and we speak in *lashon hakodesh*- the holy language-like angels do. If we are to take full advantage of Yom Kippur, if we are truly to harness the special power of this day, it means we must understand what these qualities represent, and what they are meant to teach us.

An angel walks זקופה, an angel walks upright. “Walking upright” has many definitions, but the most literal may be one of the most powerful. In his recent book “12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos,” the sometimes controversial clinical psychologist and professor Jordan Peterson writes that

the very first rule for an orderly life is to adopt a straight posture. *“If your posture is poor, for example - if you slump, shoulders forward and rounded, chest tucked in, head down, looking small, defeated and ineffectual... then you will feel small, defeated and ineffectual. The reactions of others will amplify that. People ...size each other up, partly in consequence of stance. If you present yourself as defeated, then people will react to you as if you are losing. If you start to straighten up, then people will look at and treat you differently.”*

This is true about sin as well. We accept the narrative of the inevitability of our sins, and create a vicious cycle of mistakes and despondency. All year long, we tell ourselves we are still the same Jews who worshipped the golden calf, we are the same people who lose our temper every night at home over the slightest provocation, we will never master a tractate of Talmud or study another book of Tanach, and we will never be more observant than we currently are, because it's hard to break out of a cycle when you don't believe you are capable of or need changing. On Yom Kippur, however, we believe we can improve, but the only way we can improve is by owning our foibles and shortcomings, and accepting our adversity. As such, we bend over on Yom Kippur, strike *al chet* and *ashamnu*, but then we stand up straight once again. A most profound illustration of this concept forms the basis of a recently published book titled “The Gift of Stuttering,” an autobiography of a remarkable young man named Moe Mernick. Mr. Mernick describes painfully the way in which “being a stutterer” had be

come the predominant force in his life. He even adopted the name “Moe”, a shortened version of his given name, Moshe, to reduce the chances of him stumbling over his own name. As many stutterers do, he developed strategies to avoid public humiliation and exposure of his condition, such as anticipating moments when he would be called upon, asking to use the restroom before he knew he would be asked to read, and learning to substitute words that were easier to pronounce. But then he had a breakthrough. He realized that avoiding his Achilles’ heel was futile, and was only sending him on an endless negative feedback loop of anxiety and misery, thereby inducing further stuttering. Instead, Moe adopted a קומה זקופה approach- he faced his fears and said with no compunctions, “*I am a stutterer!*” The moment he began to accept his condition, the opposite happened- he began to feel more confident and courageous. Social anxiety faded and he stuttered less. He even began to feel more comfortable in Hebrew, and eventually became an accomplished public speaker, entrepreneur and social media personality. He turned to God, and his prayers took on a new level of intensity. Rather than begging Him to remove the speech impediment, he would acknowledge that the Ribono Shel Olam had hand picked him for it². One touching event occurred when Moe received his aliyah on the Shabbat before his wedding, at his Aufruf. As he drew near to the Torah scroll, he saw the opening words of his aliyah,

² Jewish Action, Fall 5779/2018, Vol. 79. No. 1, pg. 109-110

words that seemed to be a special message from God personally broadcast to him: ויאמר ה' אל משה אל תירא - and God said to Moshe, do not fear.” While the context of that verse was the war against Sichon, not lost on Moe was that his namesake, Moshe, like him, suffered from a debilitating speech impediment, yet none of that stopped him from becoming God’s voice on earth.

יש להן דעת - How do we translate the word *da'as*? It is most easily rendered “knowledge,” describing the acquisition of data and information. This is simplistic and not inherently admirable; we don’t worship an encyclopedia. What is *da'as*? Perhaps a better translation might be “awareness,” or sense of purpose. When the angels visited Avraham Avinu, our sages (Bava Metzia 86b) inform us that three had to pay a visit, because each of them had their own unique mission to fulfill - Micha’el to inform Avraham about the impending birth of a child, Gavriel to warn him about the doom facing Sodom, and Raphael to visit Avraham after the painful surgical procedure he had just undergone. Later, when they went to Lot, only two went, because Raphael had already discharged his mission. So this means angels are all male, because they also can’t multitask...Even if angels have specialties, why indeed couldn’t the same angels visit Avraham *and* give him the good news?

Perhaps the lesson of the singular assignment of angels is also why we emulate them on Yom Kippur. The Spanish Talmudist Rav Yitzchak Abohav³ writes that we pray with our feet together to show that, like angels, we will not abandon our assignment mid-course.

דהיינו טעמא שצריך אדם לכיין את רגליו מפני שהוא רמז שנשתלק ממנו התנועה לברוח

In having a sense of purpose and a sense of awareness, angels possess what we are often sorely lacking: focus.

A report issued by Microsoft in 2015 indicated that the average American attention span is now shorter than that of a *goldfish*⁴. If you don't believe me, look around this room right now and tell me that's incorrect...As a result, marketing is catering to this new reality. Commercials used to be 30 seconds long; now they 6 seconds. Is there anything more annoying than waiting to watch a YouTube video, and you have to sit through a full *six seconds* of ads that you cannot skip? And advertisers have taken it one step further, adopting a tactic called "omnichannel marketing." The idea behind this is that you are likely unable to focus on one device, so most probably, you are using multiple devices at the same time. Wherever you are, and whatever device you are glued to, you will be shown the same ad. It's happening *to* us and tailored *for* us and we don't even realize it! The

³ ילקוט יוסף תפילה א הערות סימן צה - לכיין את רגליו בתפלה

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https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/as-attention-spans-get-shorter-content-gets-shorter_us_5a57ae42e4b00a8c909f7fle

shortening of the American attention span and the pressure in our society to succeed, particularly academically, has led to a dramatic increase in Ritalin and Adderall prescriptions, particularly for young boys, whose rambunctious nature frequently interferes with concentration and may be misdiagnosed as an attention deficit disorder. And while it is sometimes necessary, in many cases, these prescriptions are unwarranted, or prescribed in unhealthy doses. Americans are distracted or drugged, and we lack focus- and if this is a challenge in our daily lives, it is especially challenging in our spiritual lives. Rabbeinu Yonah of Geronah writes about a trait called “*Pizur hanefesh*,” or the “scattering of the soul.” It refers to an inability to initiate a spiritual project, or to see through ones we have started. Do you know who had focus? It was Ari Fuld, who was murdered this past week in Gush Etzion, dying while fending off his evil assailant and saving many others in the process. Ari visited our community several times, and everyone who met him here- or anywhere- commented on how *intense* Ari was. He trained his incredible focus on his family, the Jewish people and the Jewish state, and on Torah values- as a father, as a soldier, as an assistant director of an organization that serves soldiers and as a personality on TV and social media. He engaged his ideological opposites on an intellectual level, and never let it get personal, because *nothing* deterred him from his mission. While he was popular, he was often outspoken and had no need to be liked because he was deeply principled. As he liked to say on

his Facebook page, “I’m *always* on call.” With God’s help, we will never be called upon to pay the price Ari did, but now that he is with the angels, his example challenges us as well. On Yom Kippur, we are angels because we know that it is within us to commit to our mission and our purpose- whatever that may be- and see it to its conclusion.

On Yom Kippur, we act like angels, who speak *belashon hakodesh*. Literally, this is translated “the holy tongue,” idiomatically referring to biblical Hebrew. Sadly, many Jews are not conversant in Hebrew, biblical or otherwise. It should be noted though, that speaking בלשון הקודש does not only refer to one's spoken tongue. It goes without saying that an angel doesn't use profanity. In fact, the Rambam writes that biblical Hebrew is called *lashon ha'kodesh* because it contains no foul language, and speaks in euphemism about indelicate things. Nonetheless, the absence of profane words does not indicate the presence of holy ones. So what is *Lashon Hakodesh*? The Ramban⁵ comments that the mere fact that God communicates with prophets in Hebrew teaches us that the language is itself holy. In other words, *lashon ha'kodesh* is more than just the language you speak, it is the subject matter you discuss and the phrases you employ. Language has the ability to paint a vivid image of a vibrant cultural life simply through the expression used. It is for this reason that the *posek* Rav

⁵ Bereishit 45:12 - Ramban notes on the words “כי פי המדבר אליכם” that the fact that Yosef spoke in Hebrew would not have been proof of his relationship since, in all likelihood, many people spoke the language of the כנענים. Rather, they spoke a common tongue in that they all spoke about matters of קדושה.

Dovid Cohen of Brooklyn published a *Sefer*⁶ called *Hasafah Hakedoshah* in which he contends that Yiddish is actually a holy tongue, because many of the common expressions are based on Jewish concepts and even passages in the Talmud. For example, by the end of Yom Kippur, a Jew who has been fasting all day looks like an *oysgehakte hoshayneh*, an expression connoting complete depletion, derived from the look of the *aravos* we will strike on Hoshana Rabba after being mercilessly beaten. What happens to a Jew on Yom Kippur? He takes on the speech of the מלאכים. Angels use a vernacular based on holy concepts. In their vocabulary are holy ideals, conveyed with sanctity and reverence. It is the difference between “*the holy language*” and the “*language of holiness*”. When Yitzchak called his children forward to deliver the blessings, he was able to discern between Yaakov and Esav based upon the voice “הקול קול יעקב”. Rashi there notes that Yaakov was clearly pretending to be Esav, and gave it away not in his voice but in the devout expressions he used. We must go one step further to actively incorporate holy concepts into our vernacular. Phrases like “Yirat Shamayim”, fear of God, “Hasmada”, diligence in Torah study and “ben” or “bas Torah”. When have you last heard Modern Orthodox Jews use these words in daily conversation, comfortably, unabashedly? If speak about holy things, and use holy concepts as part of our regular discourse, we will be holy as well. But *Lashon Hakodesh* is not just about using the Hebrew language, avoiding

⁶ <http://hebrewbooks.org/52065>

profanity or *lashon hara* and it is not even limited to speaking about holy concepts. It is about using your tongue, your words, to generate holiness. The late Mr. Rogers was a staple in many of our homes growing up; I was always reassured every day that “It’s a beautiful day in the neighborhood,” and that he would be back when the day was new, and would have new ideas for me. He was one of the few pure and wholesome contributions to enter our lives through the television, truly an angel from among the nations of the world. Mr. Rogers is having a cultural moment now, as a book and a documentary titled *Won’t You Be My Neighbor* have been published of late that should be required reading for all educators, clergy and parents, and probably anyone who wants to be a decent human being. People just can’t believe that Mr. Rogers was in private the moral, courageous, decent and compassionate person he was on TV. A recent article about him in the *Atlantic*⁷ described a nine-stage process by which he filtered his language for the maximal understanding of children.

Arthur Greenwald, a former producer of the show, mentioned a scene in a hospital in which a nurse inflating a blood-pressure cuff originally said “I’m going to blow this up.” Greenwald recalls: “Fred made us redub the line, saying, ‘I’m going to puff this up with some air,’ because ‘blow it up’ might sound like there’s an explosion, and he didn’t want the kids to cover their ears and miss what would happen next.”

⁷ <https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2018/06/mr-rogers-neighborhood-talking-to-kids/562352/>

You never know how an innocuous phrase can be taken the wrong way, especially by children who are inclined toward the literal. Imagine what it would be like if we similarly filtered our language. How wonderful it is when we visit someone who is sick, or on a shiva visit, or are wishing someone a mazal tov- and we calibrate our words, tone and volume for maximal precision, compassion and authenticity. That's what happens when people act like angels; when every word is designed to avoid unnecessary offense and misinterpretation, when every expression inspires and uplifts. We know people like this- when we speak with them, they make us feel confident and encouraged. Rabbi Avraham Yaakov Pam⁸, the late Rosh Yeshiva of Mesivta Torah Vodaath in Brooklyn, regularly prayed at a synagogue in his neighborhood in Flatbush. In that synagogue, there was an old man who could be found day after day in his customary seat. One day he was missing, and Rav Pam asked after him, noticing his absence. His inquiries revealed that the man was sick in the hospital. Rav Pam wished to visit the man, but as a Kohen, he felt he could not enter this particular hospital. While that could have been excuse enough, Rav Pam felt compelled to write the man a letter saying that his presence in synagogue was missed, that he prayed for his recovery every day, and that he would love to visit, but was unable to on account of his priestly lineage. The older gentleman was ecstatic with his mail, and placed lovingly under his pillow,

⁸ Rabbi Fishel Shachter, Chofetz Chaim: Loving Kindness, ArtScroll Publications, p. 314

as if he were guarding his prize possession. He showed the letter to anyone who entered his room, and it lifted his spirits during what proved to be his final hospitalization. Unfortunately, he succumbed to his illness, and at his funeral, several of the eulogizers waxed eloquent about how this seemingly simple Jew received a letter from the great Rav Avraham Pam, a letter he cherished until his final breath. With that quick gesture, he restored life to a person, even for just a little while. Rav Pam heard of the impact his letter had made, and he began to weep. "It took me a mere two minutes to write that letter! I just jotted a few lines on a pen and paper and sent it over. If I could do that in two minutes, what could I have done if I had spent more time carefully thinking about what to write?" I ask you- does this sound like the actions of a man, or the transcendent deeds of a *malach*?

[Yizkor- We all have memories of kind words or good advice that changed our lives for the better, from people who are no longer with us that we remember at Yizkor. But when we remember those people and what they said and did for us, let us not relegate it to the realm of remembrance. Let us remember that we can reach that level, in this life too.] A human being can reach the level of angels, in this life too. Today [tonight] we each channel our inner angel - **stand tall and confident** as we acknowledge, confront and embrace our greatest challenges. And today [tonight], we resolve to remain **focused and on course**, with our feet together, until our

mission is complete. And lastly, we will use a language that speaks of *kedushah* and a language that creates *kedushah* - just like a malach. And when we are done, may we return not as pure angels, but as better people.