

Be Like An Angel
Vayechi Dec. 21, 2018
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I am going to let you in on a little secret. When I was in high school, I acted in my senior class play, *Grease*. The play was based on the 1978 movie musical about a group of high school students and their social struggles. Truth be told, in addition to blending in the general chorus, I was also selected for a special role. I was cast as a teen angel, in the song *Beauty School Dropout*, made famous by singer Frankie Avalon. The song was based on the dream of one teenage girl to have a guardian angel who would guide her in important life decisions. As I floated across the stage, I did not think very much about the theology or spiritual meaning of my role.

To be honest, I have not given much thought to my belief in angels. For years, I thought only Christians believed in angels. I was surprised to learn about the extensive Jewish thinking about angels, or in Hebrew, *malach* (or *malachim*). Perhaps you are surprised as well.

For example, there is a beautiful image of angels in this week's Torah portion, *Vayechi*. *Vayechi*, meaning "and he lived," is the last portion in the book of Genesis. The *parasha* begins with the end of Jacob's life. As he nears death, he calls his children around his bedside to bless them. He also blesses his grandchildren, the sons of Joseph, Ephraim and Menashe. This blessing became the origin of blessing children on Shabbat, a ritual that Micah and I have personally enjoyed over the years going back to the first Shabbat of our sons' lives.

In his blessing Jacob invokes these words, "The angel who has rescued me from all harm, bless these young boys. Through them let my name and the name of my fathers Abraham and Isaac ever be recalled, and let them greatly multiply within the land." (Gen. 48:16) There is a moving melody to these words, which I will share a little later.

Perhaps you are wondering, who or what is this angel? Gunther Plaut, the editor of our Reform Torah commentary, imagines that the verse may be a poetic substitute for God, who has protected Jacob in the past, and will do so in the future. Angels are part of Jacob's religious imagination, as he recalls his dream when angels were going up and down a ladder. Plaut writes, "Jewish tradition developed the belief that each person had a protecting angel." It appears that Jacob believed in his own guardian angel. By Talmudic times, this blessing became part of the Shema recited before going to bed.

Judaism affirms the belief in angels, from the time of Abraham when an angel intervened so that he would not sacrifice his son. *Malach* in Hebrew literally means messenger. Judaism embraces multiple guardian angels or messengers. Some are named – Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, and Uriel. And others are nameless.

For example, the author of a 17th century Yiddish collection of *tkhines*, petitionary prayers said by women, created a prayer for when a woman puts the Shabbat challah into

the oven. She would ask God to “send an angel to guard the baking, so that all will be well baked, will rise nicely, and will not burn.” (Ellen M. Umansky and Dianne Aston, *Four Centuries of Jewish Women’s Spirituality: A Sourcebook*) This angel is seen not as an “angel of baking” but more of a personal guardian of the woman baking the challah.

Or, there is the prayer we sang earlier in our service, *Shalom Aleichem*, composed by Jewish mystics in the late 16th century in Tzefat. It begins with the words: “*Shalom Aleichem malachei ha’sharet, malachei elyon* – May peace be upon you, O angels of service, angels of the most high.” (*siddur*) These angels are divine beings, or divine presence, watching over and caring for the Jewish people, especially on Shabbat.

According to the Talmudic story, two ministering angels accompany a person home from synagogue on Shabbat evening: a good angel and a bad angel. If the house has been prepared for the Sabbath, with a lamp lit and the table set, the good angel proclaims, “May it be like this next Shabbat!” And the bad angel says “Amen.” But if none of these preparations have been done, the evil angel declares, “May it be like this next Shabbat,” and the good angel reluctantly responds, “Amen”. (Talmud Shabbat 119b)

Malachim appear especially in the later parts of the bible, and throughout our liturgy. Many people, however, have also struggled with this not so rational idea, especially the early leaders of the Reform movement, who removed much of the so-called angelology from our prayer books. The idea of some kind of divine intermediary is hard for many of us to wrap our heads around.

The rabbis struggled with this idea as well, even going so far as to say that righteous people are greater than the holiness of angels. (Talmud Sanhedrin 93a) Yes, they believed, angels are divine messengers, but people can be as well. When we raise ourselves up on our toes during the *Kedusha* prayer, saying, “*Kadosh, kadosh, kadosh*” (holy, holy, holy), we are stretching and striving to unite with the ministering angels on high.

According to a more radical kabbalistic view, Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz writes in his book, *The Thirteen Petalled Rose*, that human behavior can create angels. “In a counterpart to the way biblical angels bear messages from the divine realm down to humanity, the angels created by human actions carry the energies of humankind upwards in the higher spiritual realms.” This is a beautiful image.

And what about today? No, I don’t believe in individual angels floating around in the universe. But I do believe in the idea of divine messengers and what they represent – comfort, protection, healing, strength, wisdom, and compassion. “The angels in our tradition are messengers, not problem solvers; they appear not in place of God, but in service to God” writes Rabbi Daniel Geffen. (ReformJudaism.org) They are a reminder of holiness in this world, and our responsibility to be holy. Perhaps we all need a teen angel or guardian angel in our lives. Not to act for us, but as a divine motivator to help lift ourselves up and do good.

I will again share with you the words from our biblical ancestor Jacob, found in this week's Torah portion, *Vayechi*, to a melody that sounds a little like a lullaby.

Ha'Malach - The Angel
(Genesis 48:16)

טז המלאך הגאֵל אֶתִי מִכָּל־רָע יְבָרֵךְ אֶת־הַנְּעָרִים וַיִּקְרָא בָהֶם שְׁמִי
וַיִּשֶׂם אֲבֹתָי אַבְרָהָם וַיִּצְחָק וַיְדַגּוּ לָרֹב בְּקֶרֶב הָאָרֶץ:

Ha'malach ha'goel oti mikol ra yevareich et han'arim v'yikarei vahem sh'mi, v'shem avotai Avraham v'Yitzchak v'yidgu larov b'kerev ha'arets.

May the angel who has rescued me from all harm, bless these lads. Through them let my name and the name of my fathers Abraham and Isaac ever be recalled, and let them greatly multiply within the land.

And with these words, we now conclude the book of Genesis: “*Chazak, chazak, v'nitchazeik* – Be strong, be strong, and let us be strengthened.”