

## THE ANGELS AMONG US

*Angels appear in moments of vulnerability and fear. They are sent on sacred missions at particular moments to offer moral strength, clarity and hope. This is a call to recognize the angels among us, and to hear when we, too, are called to step forward on a sacred mission of our own.*

### Kol Nidre 5782

Our car has a new safety feature: when in reverse, it blasts a high-pitched Choir of Angels to warn anyone who might be walking behind the car to *beware!* We tried to de-activate it, mostly on behalf of our neighbors whom we felt shouldn't have to hear a thunderous chorus of the Heavenly Hosts every time we back into our driveway, but the dealer said was designed to save lives, so we just have to get used to it.

Perhaps it's because I've been surrounded daily now by the sounds of the heavenly chorus that I have been, lately, particularly attuned to angels, which is I want to talk about tonight.

I know, Jews don't talk a lot about angels, though I have to tell you that they feature prominently throughout Tanakh and our Rabbinic tradition.<sup>1</sup> Let's explore a little tonight.

On Rosh Hashanah we read two different stories of Abraham from the Book of Genesis. In both stories, Abraham is called to do the unthinkable: to take the life of one of his beloved sons. And in both stories, the course of events is turned not by man or by God, but by an angel.

The first day of Rosh Hashanah we read about Abraham banishing his son Ishmael and wife Hagar into the barren desert. Hagar quickly falls into despair, certain she and her son about to die. She places the boy down, weeping, wailing, broken. It is מַלְאָךְ אֱלֹהִים, an angel of God who appears before Hagar. אַל־תִּירָאִי the angel says: don't be afraid. God has heard the boy's cries, and he will survive. Hagar's eyes are then opened, and-- miraculously!-- וַתִּרְאֵ בְאֵר מַיִם, she sees a well of water just before her. Was the well placed there in that moment by divine fiat? Our Rabbis suggest it had been there along, but in Hagar's grief, she was unable to see it. Strengthened by the angel's presence and promise, she finds the will to see. This angel is a quiet, lifesaving force giving hope and strength to the anguished in her darkest moments.

In the next Abraham narrative, the Akeidah—the binding of Isaac, which we read the second day of Rosh Hashanah, an angel again figures prominently. Abraham stands atop the mountain poised to slaughter Isaac, his beloved son, and it's not God but an angel that calls out to him (Gen 22:11):

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<sup>1</sup> Maimonides, Guide for the Perplexed 2 6:1-2.

וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו מִלְאָךְ! הֲלוֹה מִן־הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָהָם | אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הַנְּבִי:  
Then an angel of the LORD called to him from heaven: "Abraham! Abraham!"  
And he answered, "Here I am."

*Don't dare harm this child!* the angel says. Many Rabbinic commentators say that the repetition of Abraham's name is an indication of urgency: the angel needed to stop him before it's too late! But Rabbi Hiyya taught, in Bereishit Rabbah, that it was actually an expression of love. As in, "I love you too much to watch you do this terrible thing, to watch you hurt someone you love."

This angel, then-- comes to a person in his most desperate hour, lovingly holding him to a higher standard even than he has set for himself.

Abraham looks up and sees a ram, caught in the thicket, and it occurs to him that he can offer the ram to God as an offering in place of his son. It is an incredible act of *hutzpah*, to give God a ram when God asks for a child. And yet, the angel's love has awakened Abraham's imagination. Before, he thought there was no other way. Now, he suddenly sees what's possible.

These angels give Hagar and Abraham hope and help them find clarity. They awaken their moral imagination!

In the Torah, angels are called *malakhim*, messengers. It is said that each angel is sent on a specific mission, tasked with bringing a particular message to a particular person in a particular moment.

So the three men who visit Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 18 are seen as three angels with three distinct messages. Refael, the angel of healing, was sent to support and comfort Abraham after his circumcision. Michael, the protector and defender of Israel, came to tell Abraham and Sarah that they'd finally have a child. The mighty Gavriel, himself made of fire, came to overturn Sodom and Gemorrah.

In perhaps the most well-known angel narrative in the Torah, Jacob—deeply vulnerable-- prepares to reunite with his estranged brother. In the night, he is attacked by an angel in the form of a stranger. The two wrestle all night long; it is the most intense struggle of Jacob's life. But at the break of dawn, Jacob grabs hold of the angel and insists: *I will not let you go until you bless me* (Genesis 32:27). The angel offers him a new name, a new identity. A new sense of self-understanding. *You will no longer be called Jacob, but instead: Yisrael*— כִּי־שָׁרִיתָ עִם־אֱלֹהִים וְעַם־  
כִּי־שָׁרִיתָ עִם־אֱלֹהִים וְעַם־:—*one who has wrestled with God and man and survived* (Genesis 32:29). With this blessing, Jacob finds the will and strength to approach his brother in a spirit of reconciliation.

These are all peak moments, when the angels' presence is obvious, unmistakable. But there are other stories, too, in which entire lives hinge on a person's far more subtle encounter with an angel. So subtle, you might even miss it if not paying careful attention.

Listen to what happened to Joseph one day, when his father, Jacob, sends him to check on his brothers, out pasturing their flocks in Shechem. This was a treacherous mission from the start, and I can't honestly figure out why Jacob risks sending his beloved son there in the first place. It was well known that the brothers hated Joseph—he had shared with them twice already his recurring dreams that they'd one day serve him. And Shechem was a dangerous place for any sons of Jacob, the very town where, not long before, two of the brothers had massacred many of the inhabitants, in revenge for the rape of their sister, Dina.

Nevertheless, Jacob sends Joseph to check on the welfare of his brothers. The only problem is that Joseph can't find them. He's about to return home, safely, when he bumps into a man (Gen 37:15-17). *Any chance you've seen my brothers?* Joseph asks the stranger. *I heard they went that way*, the man replies, *toward Dotan*. And that's it!

Joseph turns to head *that way*, toward Dotan. We rabbis love that the Torah includes that detail, because we can only infer that had he instead returned home, he would not have been thrown into the pit, sold by his brothers into slavery in Egypt. Years later, during the famine, his brothers may have sought food from Egypt, but they would not have found Joseph as Pharaoh's chief advisor. They wouldn't have been invited to stay in Egypt, would not have become enslaved when a new Pharaoh arose, wouldn't have suffered hundreds of years of oppression, degradation and cruelty. And they would not have ultimately been redeemed by God's strong hand and outstretched arm.

All this because this man, a stranger, points Joseph toward Dotan.

Who is this man? The Rabbis indicate that this was the angel Gavriel, sent by the Holy One to *ensure* that Joseph would fall into his brothers' hands, just as God intended,<sup>2</sup> so that our story as a people would ultimately unfold as it did. Trials and suffering, but also triumph and redemption.

The Rabbis take it even further. In the Midrash, Rabbi Simon goes so far as to proclaim that every single blade of grass has a constellation of angels coaxing it from the earth, whispering “גִּדְלֵ גִדְלֵ *Grow, grow!*”<sup>3</sup> I've thought a lot about that, as we now witness the scope and scale of climate devastation, brought about by an impetuous and insatiable human community. Every plant, every tree, put here with intention and love, and yet how reckless are we with God's creation?

And R' Yehoshua ben Levi says that every person is surrounded wherever he goes by a procession of angels, crying out: make way, for an image of the Holy One is approaching! And I've thought a lot about *that* after the murder of George Floyd last summer—how deeply racism lives in the white body, how deeply it lives in our culture that again and again the image of the

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<sup>2</sup> See Rashi and Ramban. The Midrash (Genesis Rabbah 84:14) hints that there were multiple angels in that field that day, all conspiring, knowingly or unknowingly, to convince Joseph to follow the path to his brothers in Dotan.

<sup>3</sup> Midrash Rabbah, Bereshit 10:6.

Holy One is trampled before us. How else could we keep missing all those angels, with their trumpets and proclamations, desperate to awaken us to the dignity of every human being?

There are so many more angel stories and teachings we could tell tonight from the Torah, the Prophets and the Rabbis. Angels are everywhere throughout our tradition, from sacred text to folklore to liturgy. I hope you're seeing the thru-line here: angels appear, often in moments of great vulnerability and fear, to give us moral strength, clarity and hope. They help us believe again. They challenge us to think creatively about what might be possible. They let us know that we are not alone. They offer protection. Connection. Inspiration.

It's Kol Nidre... why am I sharing this with you? Because tonight I want to ask you to consider two stirring possibilities:

First, that there are angels everywhere... not only back then, but now too.

Even in this room, tonight.

There are those blessed souls who are tasked in this world with the holy work of transmitting sacred messages. Of planting the seed of hope and possibility in the darkest moments, like Hagar's angel. Of lovingly holding up a mirror and awakening us to the need to do better, to live in greater alignment with our values, to cherish the preciousness of life, like Abraham's angel. There are those tasked with wrestling with us, giving us strength and clarity, perseverance and resilience, especially when we're most vulnerable. There are those whose sacred task it is to gently, subtly point us in the right direction, so that our stories can unfold with grace. There are God's angels everywhere, who are tasked, as the Book of Psalms promises לְשֹׁמְרֵי בְּכָל־דְּרָכָיךָ – to protect you wherever you go (Psalms 91:11).

I know you've encountered angels. The quiet whisper, the mysterious presence. The person who gave you a loan when you were desperate, and then wouldn't let you repay it. The one who calls you every Friday for three years just to check in, after your son tragically died on a Friday. The one who sat with you in the darkness, not to cheer you up, just to be beside you. The one who said your loved one's name at kaddish when you couldn't make it to minyan that morning. The one who told you her husband also had Parkinson's, and she could help. The one who saw your beauty and your promise, when you could not.

Yes, there are angels here too.

And here's the second thing I'm asking you to consider: you may be one of them.

I know, that one could be much harder to believe.

A few years ago, our beloved Marta Kaufman gave an incredible speech when she received a lifetime achievement Humanitas Award. She spoke of Imposter Syndrome-- when someone

thinks they're a fraud, and lives in fear of being exposed as one. It's that paralyzing, debilitating feeling that leaves us thinking we don't deserve the position we have, and we've fooled everyone into thinking we do.<sup>4</sup>

Marta asked folks to raise their hands if they'd ever experienced Imposter Syndrome. And in that room of brilliant, high achieving TV and film writers (I was a +1), nearly every person raised their hands.

It was right around this time that Andrew Solomon, Psychology Professor at Columbia University, wrote about the treacherous "gap between public triumph and private despair... with the outer shell obscuring the real person even to those with whom [we have] professed intimacy."<sup>5</sup> We know that this gap can be not only painful, but deadly.

In Jewish parlance, Imposter Syndrome is the problem of Zusya: Zusya, it is said, though he was a great rabbi, was afraid to die because he was ashamed to stand before God in judgment, having failed to live as deeply and faithfully as Abraham or Moses. His rebbe tells him that he's got it wrong: God won't ask why you were not Abraham or Moses. God will only ask: *were you Zusya*. Becoming ourselves seems to be a spiritual imperative of the highest order—for our own sakes and for the sake of the world.

...Because our tradition insists that every person is unique. That of the billions of humans alive on this planet, there has never been, nor will there ever be, another just like you. And that, in the language of Rabbi Shlomi Wolbe (Volbay), the great 20th century master of *mussar*, Jewish spiritual development,<sup>6</sup> *I, with my unique combination of capabilities, born in this particular time and place, [am called to what is] undoubtedly a unique task before me. And all creation is waiting for me... because I can't trade my work (avodah) with anyone else in the world!*

This is an incredibly daring theology—the idea that not only every angel, but *every person* is brought into this world with some higher purpose, in the language of the Slonimer Rebbe: a *shlihut elyona*. Something only we can do. Yes, just like the angels. Each one, on its own unique mission. Each one, a messenger of the Holy One.

I only wish we could hear this. We inflict so much pain on ourselves: we don't believe that our voice will matter. We think someone else is better qualified. We're afraid. Distracted. Busy!

Perhaps that's the work of Yom Kippur. Peeling away the protective layers around the heart that keep us from seeing who we really are, and who we're called to be, so that when the moment arises, we're ready to step up.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://hbr.org/2021/02/stop-telling-women-they-have-imposter-syndrome>.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/preventable-tragedies>.

<sup>6</sup> R' Shlomo Wolbe (1914-2005) Alei Shur, vol 1. Grateful to R' Shai Held for sharing this text at Hadar.org – We Are Loved, Session One.

There's a Mishnah (Middot 2:2) that I have shared with you many times, a text that years ago changed my understanding of love, human suffering and the power of community. The Mishnah teaches that in Temple times, thousands of people would approach the Temple Mount on pilgrimage, all entering the Courtyard in one seamless mass, circling to the right around the perimeter. But someone suffering, the broken hearted, the lonely, the grieving, the sick-- מְיָי שְׂאֵרְעוּ דְּבָר-- *someone to whom something awful happened*—that person would enter through the same doorway, but circle in the opposite direction. Think of what this means! When we're suffering, when our loved one hovers between life and death, when our lives are encased in darkness, when every instinct we have is to isolate—because who would understand anyway?—we are called to show up. And then to walk against the grain.

And now imagine this: you're on pilgrimage. You've saved and planned and waited for this holy moment when you'll go up to Jerusalem—maybe the spiritual highpoint of your life! And then here's this broken person walking toward you. But as much as you want to, you're not allowed to avert your eyes. Every single person who passes, as they walk in the opposite direction, is obligated to stop and ask two simple words: מַה לָּךְ (*ma lakh*)—what's going on with you? Where is your pain? Tell me of your heartache? And this person, in her suffering, would answer: I am afraid. I am bereft. I am shattered.

Words of comfort are offered. Consolation, presence, love. I see you, each would say. You are not alone.

Why am I again sharing this text that you've heard me speak about for years? Because this year I saw in it something I never noticed before: the question we're called to ask one another: מַה לָּךְ (*ma lakh*)... that's precisely the question the angel asked Hagar that day she was found weeping and wailing in the desert sun. מַה לָּךְ הַגָּר (*ma lakh Hagar*)—tell me about your pain, Hagar. The message is clear: now it is we—each of us—called to step into the role of angel and ask: מַה לָּךְ (*ma lakh*)? And in so doing, we *become* the *malakh*, the angel, ourselves.

You heard a bit about Allie's story tonight—how she was out for a run before shabbat in the spring when she was struck and nearly killed by a drunk driver. Thank God she lives to stand before us and tell the story herself. She is healing, and she'll recover because she's one of the strongest, most willful people I know.

But there's another part of the story that I want to tell you tonight, with Allie and Jeremy's permission.

Allie might not be here tonight, had it not been for a team of angels that saved her life.

When Allie was hit, a woman named Angie was out for a walk with her two-year-old child, the same age as Allie's youngest daughter. While holding her little one in her arms, she ran into the middle of the intersection and blocked oncoming traffic with her body while calling 911.

At just that moment, a man named James was waiting at a red light in the other direction. He, too, witnessed as Allie was struck, and he instinctively jumped out of his car to block traffic from the other direction. Like Angie, James protected Allie's body with his own.

Also at that intersection, at that moment, was a man named Andrew, who—like Allie—was out for a run in the neighborhood that afternoon. Witnessing the impact, he ran after the car that struck her, shouting for the driver to stop. He then raced back to where Allie lay on the ground. This stranger, Andrew, held her limp body in his arms. He told her his name, spoke gently to her, and told her that she would not be alone, that he would stay with her until help came. He may not have known that he was the help, himself.

I don't know these three people. I don't know why they converged at this corner at precisely this moment on this day, or how they knew exactly what to do. I know that their presence there feels unquestionably holy. It's impossible for me to believe that this wasn't part of their *shlichut*—their higher purpose in this world.

I understand that this raises a profound theological dilemma. Why do angels sometimes appear, just precisely when we need them, and yet sometimes they do not? I thank God that Allie was saved. I don't know why other people we love were not. The only thing I can come to is that since we don't understand the inner workings of who is sent and when, all the more so we must make sure that we step forward when we're called.

Toni Morrison ends her eulogy for James Baldwin quoting his own words: "Our crown has already been bought and paid for. All we have to do is wear it."<sup>7</sup>

I'm asking us tonight to train our eyes, in this time of so much suffering and such hard edges, to see the angels before us. And to know in our hearts that we, too, are called to wear our own crown. To be those ministering angels. *Malakhei hasharet*-- messengers of the Holy One.

May we learn, this year, how to see the broken heart, and rather than turn away, ask *ma lakh*—tell me about your pain. May we attune our hearts to the call, so that we step into the intersection just when we're needed. May we learn to wear our own crown. A crown of humility, of presence, of love. Just like angels do.

*G'mar hatimah tovah and shanah tovah--*

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<sup>7</sup> Toni Morrison, *The Source of Self-Regard*, 232.