

Do we have Angels in Judaism? Yes! – Yom Kippur 5782

Ever have someone smile at you or do or say something kind at just the moment you needed it? Perhaps delivered to you a message or gave you information, or challenged you in a way that ended up changing the whole direction of your life?

In Genesis, when Joseph is sent by his father Jacob to go to find his brothers who are shepherding the flocks, there is an “*ish*,” an unnamed man who points Joseph in the direction of his brothers. If Joseph had never found his brothers, they would never have thrown him in the pit, the caravan of traders would never have purchased him, he would never have ended up second only to Pharaoh in Egypt, and we would not have ended up in Egypt as slaves, and today, we would not have Passover! And all that, because an “*ish*,” a man pointed him in the right direction so he could find his brothers.

Was this all meant to be? According to our Torah, yes. Way before Jacob and all of his sons, including Joseph were even born, God says to Abraham, “Know well that your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs, and they shall be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years; but I will execute judgment on the nation they shall serve, and in the end they shall go free with great wealth....”¹

Apparently the directions the man gave to Joseph were *beskert*, meant to be. Maybe that man was an agent of God, maybe that man could be thought of as a messenger of God. It just so happens that the word for messenger in Hebrew is *malach*, which is also one of the words for angel.

There are different kinds and level of angels in the Bible. Maimonides, the Zohar, and others have lists of the names of the angels, and rank them highest to lowest, including *seraphim*, *ophanim*, *bene Elohim*, *cherubim*, *hashmalim*, *ishim*.

The first instance is alluded to when God, in the first creation story says, “Let us make man.” The rabbis through the centuries say hold on! What does this mean! Who is the “us” that God is referring to? Isn’t it just God that is doing all the creating? One answer is that God is speaking in the ‘royal “We”’, and it is just a way of speaking. Others say no, God is speaking to the royal court in which God has God’s angels, messengers who do God’s work.

¹ Genesis 15:13-14

The first mention of angels in our Torah are the two angels wielding fiery ever-turning swords stationed at the entrance to the garden of Eden to guard its entry after Adam and Eve are expelled from the garden so they cannot return. These are called cherubim in the Hebrew, and believe me, these are not the cute chubby cherub angels often seen in paintings, depicted in literature and our imaginations!

There are other angels too, angels who are: messengers, agents of God, protectors, and there is another that is fascinating. The challenger, the adversary.

The book of Job is a lengthy tome on the struggle of when something bad happens to a good person. The book's first two chapters are the necessary set up for the remainder of its 42 chapters. The rabbis comment that it is Rosh Hashana, and all of humankind is passing like sheep before the Divine. If that sounds familiar, that is the scene in the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer. Standing next to God is haSatan, which is not a name, but a noun, describing the role of this servant of God, part of God's angelic court. This noun is something like, the challenger, the adversary, or opposing council. Keep in mind, the rabbis say, that angels cannot do anything without God's instructions. Back to the scene. God looks upon the man Job, and says, "Have you considered Job, that there is none like him in the earth, a blameless and upright man, one who fears God, and turns away from evil?"² Then haSatan answered and said basically to God, Job has everything he could want, but if you take away all that Job has, he will curse You.

Now, this story and basic question of what happens when something bad happens to a good person is fascinating but let's focus on the absolutely stunning fact that haSatan has no power whatsoever to do anything without God's instruction. So why is haSatan there? HaSatan is put there by God to challenge God! God says hey, Job is so great, and haSatan responds, I think you might want to test that - God, are you sure? And God says, yes, let's do!

So I wonder, as we are simply flesh and blood, and not all-knowing or all powerful, how is it that we can formulate the things that we live by – hear someone say something on the news, the internet, or on Facebook – and believe it without questioning it or testing it?

² Job 1:8

We have become so fixed that families and friends are distancing themselves from one another, afraid to challenge each other, and become angry and offended at their ideas being challenged. And at the heart of it is our own reluctance to challenge our own ideas. If God can place haSatan at his side for the purpose of challenging God, why don't we?

We have old technology with us - it is the fight or flight part of our brain. God doesn't have this very human problem. It is human to want to avoid dealing with confrontation, or with difficult people. It doesn't us take long to label this person or that person as difficult, or crazy. You know the labels you use. We often have to deal with difficult people, and all we want to do is avoid the situation, but its really hard when it's at work, within a family, or with friends. They make that statement, or say that thing, and you want to tell them how wrong they are, how they should listen to this, but not that! The other person is now in our enemy, threat, the "them" category. We see them and our stress levels rise. We want to change them. But we all know or should know, that you can't change someone else's behaviors. We can only deal with our own response.

What do we do? It's called behavioral intelligence.³ Jay Johnson teaches in his Ted Talk that behavioral intelligence has four quadrants: to be able to explain existing behaviors; predict future behaviors; influence other people's behaviors; and control our own behaviors.

He says we label to be able to explain existing behaviors. But we can question these! We label someone as stubborn, but Jay suggests, we could also see that person as headstrong. Aggressive could instead be seen as dedicated, motivated, passionate. Labels have a lot to say about how we see others and affect how we see the world. Unfortunately, we can label too fast. We don't ask questions; we don't see the other person's perspective. We just label them.

We like to explain behaviors because doing so can give us a sense of reducing uncertainty. We want to predict future behaviors. I once had an uncle who thought that everyone from California was a certain way, and when I, at the tender age of 7, said, well, I'll put a little vitamin E on that scratch, he scoffed at me. I was terribly insulted at his comment but got to realize he was that way with anyone from California, it wasn't just me. I got used to that. If we know a person

³ This and the following comments are based on the Ted Talk by Jay Johnson, How to Deal with Difficult People.

typically says something, we can then feel less anxious, we just know that's how that person is. We can forgive or be prepared so we don't get stressed over it.

Another thing we can do is find something to recognize the other person for, comment positively on, and then, as Jay Johnson teaches, we start to move ourselves out of the enemy zone and into being a friend.

As I look back over the years to the things that I thought I knew, to what I now know, or realize I really don't know, I am humbled. I have been challenged by people from time to time and realized after some stress that I appreciated what I learned from that challenge. It never occurred to me that someone challenging me (in a friendly way) can be an angel, a messenger for me. But I have learned it is helpful to cope by taking a time out, counting to ten, or just taking a few deep breaths to lower my fight or flight response. Most things don't need to be addressed right that moment. When we do, we can begin to separate out the issue from the person. I realized that my uncle had opinions about Californians, but he absolutely loved me. I found that his opinions were not as rock solid as he thought they were, and if he had lived longer, we may have been able to talk about them. But I am glad that we always had our uncle-niece relationship, even though I'm a Californian.

We all have a tendency to develop biased opinions, like my uncle did, and as I have, we all do. We label and may not see the messenger, the angel in disguise, as someone we may learn from. At other times, we label, we categorize, we hear or read things and tend to believe them without checking their veracity, as who has time or bandwidth to check everything we hear? Some things are not so important to check, and other things we really do need to check their veracity, lives may depend on it.

There is a poem that has been misattributed to Charlie Chaplin on the internet, yet when you search under the listing The Charlie Chaplin Self Love Poem, you can now find nearly 2 million search results on it. Why has this happened? Repetition of this myth, this popular belief that there is a Charlie Chaplin Self Love Poem. The myth of its origin began around 2007. The poem is actually a variation on the work of Kim and Alison McMillen in their book, *When I Love Myself Enough*.⁴

⁴ With thanks to Author Joanne Reed, and her blog on this. Source: www.authorjoannereed.net.

But this myth is a window into a deeper insidious part of life that we encounter all too often. In psychology it is called the illusory truth effect, or reiteration effect. It is the tendency to believe information to be correct, even if it is not, after repeated exposure to that same information. We repeat something, or hear something over and over, and that tends to take on a certain reality through acceptance in people's minds and is accepted eventually as truth. We have heard, don't swim until 30 minutes after you've eaten. Take vitamin C for a cold. These are not true! Studies have been conducted on the illusory truth effect that conclude that familiarity overcomes rationality, and truth does not matter. Science doesn't matter. Repetition does. Hitler wrote in Mein Kampf, 'Slogans should be persistently repeated until the very last individual has come to grasp the idea.'⁵ We hear slogans, even when untrue, repeated again and again, and we can come to believe them. It wears us down, even those who do not believe them, get used to them, and knowing that others believe the slogans become the norm.

We live in a world with cognitive bias, we are manipulatable, and other things that affect us, our decisions, our moods, and how we think from minute to minute. Our decisions and judgment at the end of the day may be harsher or fraught with error than at the beginning of the day when we are fresh and rested.⁶ If we can be aware that we have biases, that we are not infallible, then we can take a step into humility, and perhaps be more willing to be open and guard ourselves from doing wrong to others.

Regarding the myth that Charlie Chaplin wrote a Self Love poem, it is benign, and I find the follow version of the poem meaningful, and I hope you do too:

As I began to love myself
I found that anguish and emotional suffering
are only warning signs that I was living
against my own truth.
Today, I know, this is Authenticity.

As I began to love myself
I understood how much it can offend somebody

⁵ Cited in her blog, and thanks to Author Joanne Reed. Source: www.authorjoannereed.net.

⁶ From Noise by Daniel Kahneman, Cass Sunstein and Olivier Sibony.

if I try to force my desires on this person,
even though I knew the time was not right
and the person was not ready for it,
and even though this person was me.
Today I call this Respect.

As I began to love myself
I stopped craving for a different life,
and I could see that everything
that surrounded me
was inviting me to grow.
Today I call this Maturity.

As I began to love myself
I understood that at any circumstance,
I am in the right place at the right time,
and everything happens at the exactly right moment.
So I could be calm.
Today I call this Self-Confidence.

As I began to love myself
I quit stealing my own time,
and I stopped designing huge projects
for the future.
Today, I only do what brings me joy and happiness,
things I love to do and that make my heart cheer,
and I do them in my own way
and in my own rhythm.
Today I call this Simplicity.

As I began to love myself
I freed myself of anything
that is no good for my health –
food, people, things, situations,
and everything that drew me down
and away from myself.
At first I called this attitude a healthy egoism.

Today I know it is Love of Oneself.

As I began to love myself
I quit trying to always be right,
and ever since
I was wrong less of the time.
Today I discovered that is Modesty.

As I began to love myself
I refused to go on living in the past
and worrying about the future.
Now, I only live for the moment,
where everything is happening.
Today I live each day, day by day,
and I call it Fulfillment.

As I began to love myself
I recognized
that my mind can disturb me
and it can make me sick.
But as I connected it to my heart,
my mind became a valuable ally.
Today I call this connection Wisdom of the Heart.

We no longer need to fear arguments,
confrontations or any kind of problems
with ourselves or others.
Even stars collide,
and out of their crashing, new worlds are born.⁷

We should check on the truth of things more often. Please, before you forward something in an email, please check it out. Snopes has been a good resource for this for decades. Just because we see something on the internet or heard it from a friend, or even from the news (unfortunately) does not make it true.

⁷ Misattributed to Charlie Chaplin; this is a variation on the work of Kim and Alison McMillen in their book, When I Love Myself Enough.

In Genesis it says, “And the Lord said, Because the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grave; I will go down now and see whether they have done altogether according to the cry which has come to me; and if not, I will know.”⁸ God does not just hear the cry from Sodom and Gomorrah and then deal with Sodom and Gomorrah – God goes down there to see for God’s self. Not on rumor or some cries...life was at stake.

If God is willing to question what God has heard, and places haSatan next to Him to challenge Him, then perhaps we mere mortals can question what we hear and think, and allow, and even invite challenge. We must look for and recognize the angels, the messengers that can challenge and even help us grow. We need one another.

Jewish thought has depended on challenging dialogue. Hillel and Shammai, the famous scholars, had vigorous debates on matters of ritual practice, ethics, and theology. They had students and schools – the school of Hillel and the School of Shammai, and they would argue their positions, bring proof texts, Hillel more generous in his rulings, and Shammai more stringent. Their debates have lasting value and impact on Jewish life to this day, and it says in the Talmud that their arguments were for the sake of heaven!

May we be reminded of the words inspired by the work of Kim and Alison McMillen:

As I began to love myself
I recognized that my mind can disturb me
and it can make me sick.
But as I connected it to my heart,
my mind became a valuable ally.
Today I call this connection Wisdom of the Heart.
We no longer need to fear arguments,
confrontations or any kind of problems
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Even stars collide, and out of their crashing, new worlds are born.

⁸ Genesis 18:20-21

The author Stephen Pressfield speaks of angels:

Angels are the agents of evolution. The Kabbalah describes angels as bundles of light, meaning intelligence, consciousness. Kabbalists believe that above every blade of grass is an angel crying “Grow! Grow!” I’ll go further. I believe that above the entire human race is one super-angel, crying “Evolve! Evolve!”

Angels are like muses. They know stuff we don’t. They want to help us. They’re on the other side of a pane of glass, shouting to get our attention. But we can’t hear them. We’re too distracted by our own nonsense. ... [when] we get out of our own way and allow the angels to come in and do their job. They can speak to us now and it makes them happy. It makes God happy.”⁹

May we hear and see the angels that grace our lives and bring us goodness and inspiration. May we choose life and choose to live it with openness, grace, wisdom, and love in this year of 5782.

G’mar Chatima Tovah,
Rabbi Lisa Bock

⁹ The War of Art, by Stephen Pressfield, pp 123-124.