

Hukkat 2021: Be an Angel

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Today's Torah reading, Hukkat, along with some significant deaths, presents us with: the mysterious ritual of the red heifer; the confounding story of Moses being banned from entering Canaan because he hit a rock; and Edom's perverse refusal to let the Israelites pass through its territory.

The ritual of the red heifer is so baffling that even Maimonides said he couldn't explain it. And what *was* Moses's offense? Well, that's another puzzle.

Clearly, if I tried to deal with these notorious conundrums, I would far exceed my allotted time, and probably your patience. So, rather than climb either of those mountains, I'm going to talk about just one verse: Numbers 20:16. The context is that Moses sends a message to the king of Edom requesting passage through his territory. In telling the king the story of how the Israelites got to Edom's border, Moses writes,

וַיִּצְעַק אֶל־ה' וַיִּשְׁמַע קוֹלֵנוּ וַיִּשְׁלַח מַלְאָךְ וַיִּצְאֵנוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם וְהָיָה אֲנַחְנוּ בְּקִדְשׁ עֵיר קַדְשָׁה גְבוּלְךָ:

We cried to the LORD and He heard our plea, and He sent a malakh who freed us from Egypt. Now we are in Kadesh, the town on the border of your territory.

Our ḥumash translates *malakh* as “messenger”, even though the word usually means “angel.” But that would be a problem here. You may remember that the Haggadah emphatically states that God alone redeemed Israel from Egypt, “*And I will pass through the Land of Egypt — I and not an angel. And I will smite every firstborn — I and not a seraph. And with all the gods of Egypt, I will make judgments — I and not a messenger. I am the Lord — I am God and there is no other.*”

Malakh can also mean a human messenger, as it does just two verses before ours, so Rashi follows Midrash Tanḥumah in saying that Moses is the messenger, implicitly because God was the liberator. Moses is just too modest to say that he was the messenger.

Midrash *tanḥumah* gives another opinion about the word *malakh*: the prophets were also God's messengers, which makes sense because the prophets often begin their words with *ko amar Adonai*, “this says the Lord — also known as the messenger formula. But then the midrash adds something unexpected: “R. Huna said in the name of R. Aha, These [meaning *malakhim*] are Israel, since it says (in Ps. 103:20), *Bless the LORD, O His malakhim, mighty ones who do His bidding, who listen to his words.*

The midrash understands, “Who listen to his words” as referring to the moment at Mount Sinai when the people of Israel said, *naaseh vnishmah*, “we will do and we will hear.” Likewise, the verse in Psalms puts doing ahead of hearing — thus *we*, the Jewish people, are God's messengers.

As Rashi might say, this demands further explanation. What does it mean for us to be God's messengers?

The great Orthodox theologian, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, gives one answer. He asks, what does it mean to be created in God's image. He connects it with a teaching in Mishnah Berachot about the *shaliach tzibbur*, the prayer leader: “a person's messenger must be [just] like himself.” (M Ber. 5:5) Being in God's image means that we have a purpose in this world — to be like God. How do we accomplish that? Soloveitchik writes, “The fact that someone lives in a certain time, in a specific era in a defined place...we can only understand this if we accept the essential concept that every human is a messenger.”

He continues, “The human being is always an angel, a messenger. The difference between the human who is sent and a transcendental angel is only in one detail. The heavenly angel/messenger has no choice; he must fulfill his mission, even if he does not want to, whereas the human being is a free person. The human can fulfill the mission or can choose not

save me." So the rowboat went on. Then a motorboat came by. The fellow in the motorboat shouted, "Jump in, I can save you." Once again, the man says, "I have faith. God will save me" So the motorboat went on. The waters continue to rise and now the man is sitting on his roof. A helicopter comes by and the pilot shouts down, "Grab this rope and I will lift you to safety." Once again, the man shouts back, "No thanks. God will save me." So the helicopter flies away. The waters keep rising, and the man drowns. When he gets to heaven, he demands to speak to God. Brought into the Divine presence, he complains, "God, I believed in you. I prayed to you, and yet you let me drown." To which God replies, "I sent you a rowboat and a motorboat and a helicopter, what more did you expect?"

This venerable joke is actually a profound theological treatise. We can't — in fact we *shouldn't* — rely on divine intervention, but we *can* accept help when we need it, and we *can* be God's agents helping the needy on God's behalf.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks told a story from the Hassidic tradition that makes a similar point:

"Do you believe," the student asked the rabbi, "that God created everything for a purpose?"

"I do," replied the rabbi.

"Well," asked the student, "why did God create atheists?"

The rabbi answered. "Sometimes we who believe, believe too much. We see the cruelty, the suffering, the injustice in the world and we say: This is the will of God. We accept what we should not accept. That is when God sends us atheists to remind us that what passes for religion is not always religion. Sometimes what we accept in the name of God is what we should be fighting against in the name of God."²

We have seen recently the perils of trusting in God when we should act. Some religious folks, including some of our fellow Jews, thought prayer would save them from Covid. So they ignored God's angels, doctors with their science-based medical advice, and those who developed vaccines in record time. And those of us who wore our masks to protect ourselves and others, and social distanced and got vaccinated were also God's angels, helping stop the spread of the disease.

So as we emerge from our pandemic caves, blinking in the light, trying to discern the path forward, let's think about how we can be more conscious about our role as *malakhim*, God's angels, messengers, and deputies in the world. It needn't be grand ambitions or earth-shaking plans. It could be joining with people and organizations already doing mitzvah work. It can also just be modest acts of kindness and assistance. The more people act with compassion and concern, the better life gets, especially in these angry and callous times. With the wisdom of our tradition, and the foundation of the mitzvot, we can find our way as God's angels. God needs angels. The world needs angels. Be an angel.

Shabbat shalom.

² <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/8290969-do-you-believe-the-disciple-asked-the-rabbi-that-god>