## Hukkat 2021: Be an Angel

## Rabbi Daniel Pressman

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,

וַנִּצְעָק אֶל־ה' וַיִּשְׁמַע קֹבֵנוּ וַיִּשְׁלֵח מַלְאָָרְ וַיִּצָאֵנוּ מִמִּצְרָיִם וְהַנֵּה אֲנַחְנוּ בְקָדֵשׁ אָיר קְצֵה גְבוּלֶךְ: 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 humash 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 *tanhumah* 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

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to fulfill his or her calling." Note that he doesn't limit the role of messenger to Jews. All people are created in God's image and therefore have their calling.

Some people are fortunate. They feel their purpose in life, when they are young. Others take longer. I have read about a number of people who, during their pandemic sheltering in place, had time to ponder their lives and decided to change direction. Some decided to change careers, others to learn a new skill, or be better people, or try to better the world. They figured out *their* way of being God's messenger.

Luckily for us, we Jews have specific guidance for how to be God's messenger: "*You shall be holy, for I, Adonai your God, am holy.*" (Lev 19:18) That chapter of Leviticus enumerates many ways to be holy, including loving one's neighbor. But really, the entire Torah can be seen as a guide to serving as God's messengers, or perhaps "deputies" is a better word. Rabbi Jacob Milgrom writes, "The observance of the commandments will lead Israel…to acquire those ethical qualities, such as those indicated in the divine attributes enumerated to Moses."<sup>1</sup> He cites a rabbinic teaching, "As Adonai is gracious and compassionate, so *you* should be gracious and compassionate." (*Mekhilta Shirah* 3)

Another example of how we can enact God's qualities and desires is found in the Book of Deuteronomy. I will quote it first in Hebrew, because many of you will recognize some of its language from the Amidah:

ְּבֵּי ה' אֱלְקִיבֶּם הָוּא אֱלִקִי הֲאֱלֹקִים וַאֲדֹנֵי הָאֲדֹנֵים הָאֵֵׁ–ל הַגָּדָל הַגִּבּׂר וְהַנּוֹדָׂא אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יִשָּׂא פָנִים וְלָא יַקָּח שְׁחַד: עֹשֶׂה מִשְׁפֵּט יָתָוֹם וְאַלְמָנֶה וְאֹהַב גֵּר לָתֶת לָוֹ לֶחֶם וְשִׂמְלֵה: וַאֲהַבְתָּם אֶת־הַגֵּר בִּי־גֵרִים הֵיִיתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרֵיִם:

For the LORD your God is God supreme and Lord supreme, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who shows no favor and takes no bribe, but upholds the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the stranger, providing him with food and clothing.— You too must love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

Notice the contradiction in these words. If *God* upholds the cause of the orphan and widow, and clothes and feeds the stranger, why command *us* to love the stranger and help the poor?

Look at the world. Do you see Divine intervention anywhere to rescue the poor, the powerless, and the downtrodden? However, you *can* find individuals and organizations who are striving to relieve suffering. And what do we often say about such people? That they are doing God's work. That's what our tradition asks us to do: to be God's agents in bringing compassion, justice, and righteousness into the world. We can be God's angels, God's messengers, by leading a life guided by Torah and Mitzvot and Judaism's profound and humane wisdom.

One way to focus our attention on being God's angels is to think for a moment about someone who was *your* angel, who helped you when you needed it. And also recall a time when you were someone else's angel. Without all of these angelic acts, given and received, our lives would be impossible.

There are two wise stories that I often keep in mind. One masquerades as a well-known joke. The other comes to us from Hassidic tradition.

I imagine many of you know the story about the man sitting in his house as flood waters rise. Someone comes down the flooded street in a rowboat and shouts, "Jump in, I can save you." The stranded fellow shouts back, "No, it's OK, I'm praying to God and God will

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Leviticus: A Continental Commentary, p. 219.

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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."<sup>2</sup>

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.

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