

Angels in Judaism

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Just the other day, long after I had planned tonight's sermon topic, a friend emailed me after having found something curious in some old family records. She uncovered a eulogy, given by Rabbi Rossinger of Beaumont, Texas, after the tragic death of a sixteen year old girl in a 1930s car accident. The rabbi's words made reference to angels, and to meeting loved ones again. My friend asked: "Do Jews believe in Angels?"

Angels appear regularly in the Bible, in tonight's portion and elsewhere. Those angels are not described, which likely means that the earliest biblical readers didn't question their existence. More elaborate images of angels were constructed by our ancient rabbis and medieval mystics. On the other hand, strict rationalists have rejected the existence of angels, beginning as early as the twelfth century with Maimonides and continuing with the founders of Reform Judaism. One modern rabbi concludes that today's "Reform Judaism is open to both views, as long as each is embraced after serious study and diligent investigation."

Anyone remember a television show, some years back, called "Touched by an Angel?" I never watched the show until a congregant asked me about the Jewish view of it. The depiction of angels on the Sunday night T.V. of those days was neither Jewish nor believable. Della Reese played the chief angel, with two young assistant angels. They came to Earth in human form to intervene directly in lives gone astray. When they revealed themselves as angels, they were surrounded by a special effect, bathing them in bright light. With apologies to anyone here who loved the show, I couldn't keep from laughing out loud.

That televised depiction of angels was too literal to be taken seriously. If we are waiting for the actual human appearance of a heavenly being, then surely we shall never experience the true touch of an angel. Only in Hollywood are angels lit with special effects. To see the true angels that Judaism offers us, we will have to search and discover for ourselves.

Tonight, let us examine four angelic encounters in the Torah, and consider how they may help us to recognize the angels in our own lives. The first is tonight's, with Abraham and Sarah; another is with Moses; and perhaps the two most important are with Jacob.

My dad is a great reader, but I gave him a very short assignment this evening, because it's an explicit reference to angels – "divine beings" in the modern translation, *malachim* in Hebrew. The rabbis muse that, in this encounter, Lot must not realize he's greeting angels, otherwise he wouldn't cook a meal for them. In the rabbinic mind, angels, not being human, neither eat nor drink.

The rabbis argue about whether these angels are two of the three "men" who appear more famously to Abraham and Sarah at the beginning of tonight's portion, to tell them that they will be blessed with a child in their old age. The majority opinion is that each angel has one mission. The first announced the forthcoming birth, which is why we are now down to two.

More important than the controversy is the rabbinic faith that angels deliver messages. The Hebrew term, *malach*, means "messenger," after all. Like Abraham and Sarah before us, let us be open to the possibility that God's word can reach us. Studying Torah may be our "angel." Worship may be our method of hearing God's message. A smile and a loving touch may convey God's intention.

Most of us are familiar with Moses' encounter with God at the burning bush. The bush is aflame, but it isn't burning up. Moses sees an angel in the midst of the fire. And then, God speaks.

The angel doesn't speak. What, then, is it doing there? Perhaps Moses isn't ready for a direct relationship with God. If God speaks to Moses right away, Moses may be shocked into paralysis. God provides the angel as a transitional step for Moses, an entree to the presence of the Almighty.

We're talking about Moses, the greatest prophet who ever lived. If he needs an angel to get to God, then we may, too. Jewish spiritual seekers often offer guided meditations to help practitioners to visualize angels as conduits to God and the Divine Presence of healing. Such is the intent of the beautiful song our musicians will offer after the sermon.

Perhaps, more broadly, an angel is whatever moves us closer to an experience of God. Words of a poem or notes of inspiring music may metaphorically lift us to heaven on an angel's wings. Thoughts of a departed loved one can elevate us to new spirituality. The first cries of a newborn child may transport us into the celestial court. Whatever prepares us to experience God may be called an angel.

Our next angelic encounter is equally familiar. Jacob wrestles. With whom does he struggle? “A man,” the text tells us, but we’re not convinced. God is involved, and we increasingly conclude that the adversary is an angel. Ultimately, Jacob’s name is changed to Israel, which means: one who struggles with God.

Can an adversary be an angel? Do our struggles make us holy? If we will see them that way, perhaps even the people who cause us the most pain may be our angels.

Serious illness may awaken a spirituality that we never knew we possessed. When we look into the eyes of a person we dislike, one who is a thorn in our side, and we see the image of God, then surely we rise to the gates of heaven. The onset of a disability may actually be regarded as an angel, if it moves us to greater appreciation of life and of our Creator. Whatever brings us closer to God, then even if it is painful, it is an angel.

Our final example also involves another familiar Jacob narrative. Jacob dreams of a ladder, standing on the ground but reaching the heavens. The angels are going up the ladder, and then coming down. The angels go up first, meaning that they start out here on Earth. We may conclude that angels are all around us, if only we will see them. And if angels are all around us, any of us may qualify. You and I can be angels, too.

When we have a spiritual experience, and share it with others, elevating them to heavenly spheres, then we are the angels. When we feed the hungry, we are the angels, causing the will of heaven to reign on Earth. When we lavish unconditional love on a spouse, a child, or a parent, we are the angels. God’s eternal love for humanity comes alive in this world through us. When we make Earth a little more like the Garden of Eden, then we are the angels.

Angels are not Hollywood actors, shining like the sun. They are heavenly and earthbound servants of God, inspiring us to holiness. Sometimes, our angel may look very ordinary. As our biblical examples illustrate, an angel is whatever brings us closer to God, even if it seems to be negative. She may even be you. He may even be me.

God does send us angels. Let our eyes, our hands, our hearts, our minds and our spirits be open to receive them. Then, may we beckon them, with song and thanksgiving.

Amen.