

Parshas Vayishlach 5772

YOUR FAITHFUL COMPANIONS -- AND HOW TO PRODUCE THEM

וַיִּשְׁלַח יַעֲקֹב מַלְאָכִים לִפְנֵי אֶל עֲשָׂו אָחִיו אֲרֻצָּה שְׂעִיר שָׂדֶה אֲדוּם.

“And Ya’akov sent *malachim* before him to Esav, his brother, to the land of Se’ir” (*Bereishis* 32:4).

Such is the familiar passage that begins the episode of Ya’akov’s encounter with his (potentially dangerous) brother in this week’s *parshah*. The Torah informs us of the initial measures taken by Ya’akov to prepare for this potentially deadly meeting.

There is a question regarding the identity of these *malachim* of which the verse speaks. In its most literal sense, the term translates to “messengers,” which indeed is the way it is rendered by Targum Onkelos. Rashi, however, seems to favor the other connotation of the word: namely, angels. We hope to clarify the exact nature of these Heavenly emissaries in the course of this article.

First, however, let us focus on a simple detail of the text, which appears to contain a superfluous word. “And Ya’akov sent angels before him to Esav” could have been more simply stated as “And Ya’akov sent angels to Esav.” What is the intent of the extra word *l’fanav* (before him)?

As we shall soon see, this simple word actually reflects great depth and wisdom. In fact, it gives us a window into a sacred and mystical world, normally hidden from view...

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ACTIONS AND CONSEQUENCES

One of the most fundamental Torah principles is the notion of reward and punishment. A manifestation of this idea is found in the Mishnah in Avos (4:11), which states:

רבי אליעזר בן יעקב אומר, העושה מצוה אחת, קונה לו פרקליט אחד. והעובר עברה אחת, קונה לו קטיגור אחד.

“R’ Eliezer ben Ya’akov says: When one performs a mitzvah, he acquires a Heavenly advocate on his behalf. When one commits a transgression, he acquires an accuser for himself.”

The Mishnah reveals that the reward reserved for one’s deeds is not merely some amorphous account in a ledger. Through the performance of *mitzvos*, one creates actual beings who will advocate for his benefit and recompense; likewise, his misdeeds will lobby for retribution.

In a starkly vivid depiction, the Chafetz Chaim, quoting the Vilna Gaon, portrays the Heavenly scenario wherein these celestial creatures play out their roles:

“When a person passes away and his soul begins to ascend Heavenward, he beholds the likeness of a scale, which will be used to weigh his deeds (i.e., to facilitate a determination of whether the merits outweigh the sins, or -- G-d forbid -- the reverse). At that moment, he hears a Heavenly Voice, which summons all of the good deeds he performed during his entire life. This announcement reverberates throughout all of the worlds to which the root of his soul extends. In response to the call, all of the celestial advocates that were created from his *mitzvos* immediately assemble, taking their places on the right side of the scale.

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This is followed by another Heavenly announcement, which summons all of the iniquities perpetrated by this individual during his life. The call is answered by great hordes of angelic accusers, who begin to appear dressed and cloaked in black, as they assemble on the left side of the scale” (*Shem Olam, Sha’ar Shemiras Shabbos, ch. 3, third footnote*).

THE MISHNAH SPEAKS

But it is not just in the next world that these angels of our own making fulfill their charge. As R’ Eliyahu Lopian explains (*Lev Eliyahu, parshas Vayishlach*), even during a person’s lifetime, these angelic companions stand constantly in the vicinity of the individual who was responsible for their existence. The verses in Tehillim

(91:11-12) refer to the phenomenon of one’s personal angelic escorts: “For He will assign His angels to you, to guard you in all of your endeavors; they will lift you up on (their) hands, lest a stone strike your foot.”

One of the most well-known examples and manifestations of the reciprocal relationship existing between man and his “angels” involves the legendary R’ Yosef Karo, seventeenth-century author of the *Beis Yosef* and the *Shulchan Aruch*. In addition to these universally acclaimed and accepted *halachic* masterpieces, R’ Yosef Karo produced another work of a much different nature -- the *Maggid Meisharim*. The saintly and erudite author -- who was wont to recite and study the entirety of the Mishnah by heart -- merited to acquire a most desirable *chavrusa* (study-partner) in the form of a *maggid* (Heavenly voice that would provide encouragement and instruction). This angelic companion would identify itself at the beginning of the sessions in the following manner: “I am the Mishnah that emanates from your mouth,” a reference to the mitzvah (R’ Yosef’s mastery of the Mishnah) through whose fulfillment the *malach* came into being. R’ Yosef preserved the content of the teachings of these sessions in his *Maggid Meisharim*.

ANGELS BEFORE HIM

It was these types of angels, R’ Eliyahu explains, that Ya’akov employed to send to assuage his brother’s wrath. Ya’akov did not wish to utilize the ministering angels who dwell on High, standing before the Throne of the Almighty. Rather, he dispatched those angels who lingered in his own vicinity, those accompanying agents -- created by his own deeds -- who aim to protect their “master.”

It is to this group that the verse alludes with the inclusion of the extra term: “And Ya’akov sent angels ‘before him’ to Esav.” Ya’akov sent his personal companions, those angels who were “before him” and dwelled in his presence.