

Vayeshev 5779 Angels Among Us

In October 1913, a young Jewish man in Berlin was preparing to convert to Christianity. He had done all the background work and study; his next step was to be baptized. But because he wanted to be certain that he was being converted into Christianity 'as a Jew,' he decided that he would go to synagogue on Yom Kippur for one last time.

The young man in question never spoke or wrote about his experience there. But we do know that he came away with a renewed devotion to Judaism and that he spent the rest of his life studying it, analyzing it, writing about it and - for the most part - practicing it.

The young man was Franz Rosenzweig, whose works mark him as one of the greatest modern Jewish philosophers.

What happened to him that Yom Kippur? We don't know. But perhaps it was not so much an encounter with the ceremony of the day as an encounter with a particular human being - a human being consigned to the anonymity of history - that changed the direction of Rosenzweig's life forever.

Anonymous characters are scattered throughout the stories of our tradition. In the Sisterhood class this week we were studying the passage that's going to show up as next week's Haftarah. It's the one in which Solomon passes his first wise judgment, and the antagonists are two women who, as one of the members of the class pointed out, we never get to know by name.

And perhaps the best example of such a character in the Torah is found in this morning's Torah portion:

One time, when his brothers had gone to pasture their father's flock at Shechem, Israel said to Joseph, "Your brothers are pasturing at Shechem. Come, I will send you to them." He answered, "I am ready." And he said to him, "Go and see how your brothers are and how the flocks are faring, and bring me back word." So he sent him from the valley of Hebron. When he reached Shechem, a man came upon him wandering in the fields.

- Bereishit 37:12-15

This nameless man - this *ish* - will send Joseph to find his brothers at Dothan, and from there the whole of Joseph's story - and the family's move to Egypt, giving rise to the Exodus, giving rise to all the rest of the Torah - will spring.

So while this man's identity may remain hidden, his role in the story is pivotal. Who can he be?

Our traditional commentators battle it out across the page. Rashbam (Rashi's son in law) and Ibn Ezra opt for him being just a passerby. But Rashi is clear and decisive in his comment - *he is the angel Gabriel*. I wrote in our brochure a couple of weeks ago that the word for angel in Hebrew - *malakh* - is grounded in a root that means 'to go' or 'to walk.' Here we have one of the angelic chieftains disguised as a human being, taking a stroll through a field to ensure that our story - our destiny - stays on track.

But my favorite commentator on this passage is Ramban - Nachmanides, the thirteenth-century doctor, commentator and mystic from Girona in Catalonia, Spain. Ramban writes:

The Holy One provided this unwitting guide in order to deliver Joseph into his brother's hands. This is what our Sages meant when they called such people "angels." They were saying that this was no coincidence: "Many designs are in a man's mind but it is the Lord's plan that is accomplished"

- Ramban on Bereishit 37:15, trans. Michael Carasik, *The Commentators' Bible*

Ramban is saying that in a way all the other commentators are correct. Rashbam and Ibn Ezra are right to say that this stranger was, indeed, a human being. But not just any human being. He was helping accomplish God's purpose for Joseph and his family - and in that sense, he's not a person, he's an angel.

And this makes me ask: was he the last of his kind? Or do other human angels continue to walk in the world with us?

My teacher Rabbi Ed Feinstein is a two-time survivor of colon cancer. He gave a sermon quite a while ago now in which he talked about his own encounter with angels - not hovering in thin air over his hospital bed but walking along the corridors, gently arranging pillows and folding laundry, ready with a reassuring hand or a smile or just a quiet presence. He spoke about how those angels felt like the true agents of his recovery. He's never forgotten them, though he doesn't know their names.

And each of us in this room might well have a memory of someone we might only have met very briefly, whose name we might not even remember, but who in some way redirected the course of our lives. A person next to us on a bus or in a line at the grocery store to whom we got chatting who taught us a profound lesson. Someone who paid us a compliment about a talent we never knew we had. Someone who gave us a piece of feedback that we didn't expect, that started a train of thought that led us to somewhere we never expected to be...and all out of an encounter that felt like a coincidence.

The lesson of this week's Torah portion is that those people are angels.

And - something else I learned from Rabbi Feinstein - this week we will meet another one of them. Rabbi Feinstein likes to ask - who is the true hero of the Hanukkah story? Is it Judah with his hammer? Is it his father Matityahu, who first stood up to the Syrian Greeks? Is it the band of brothers? No, Rabbi Feinstein teaches - the true hero of the story is the anonymous priest who, when the single vial of oil is found, suggests that it should be used to light the Menorah even though it will - seemingly - only burn for one day. The action is carried out under more dramatic surroundings and exigent circumstances than a field on the way to Dothan or a synagogue in Berlin in 1913, but the pattern is the same - an anonymous character changes the course of a life and by doing so changes the course of history. An angel.

The lights of Hanukkah feel especially meaningful this year. They shine as a beacon of freedom and dignity, hope and inspiration, piercing the darkness around us. But as we contemplate them we might also wish to contemplate the human angels who are light and who bear light - the nameless sparks that have directed our own destinies, the destiny of our people and the destiny of the world.

And who knows? Perhaps we ourselves have already been one of those sparks - one of those angels - for someone we don't even remember.

Shabbat shalom and happy Hanukkah.

