

Vayetze 5780

The Angels Ascending

In my former job in Los Angeles I noticed early on that whenever my senior Rabbi mentioned Rashi in a sermon, the community would dutifully chorus, “that great medieval commentator.” While that’s not a habit I feel we need to acquire here, it’s 100% true. Rashi, Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki, who lived in Alsace from 1035-1105 or thereabouts and whose students’ notes have provided us with his commentary on the Hebrew Bible and also on the Babylonian Talmud, truly was a magnificent teacher.

As just one example, let’s look at his comment on one tiny detail of this morning’s Torah portion. We need some background first.

Jacob, fleeing his home, has found a place to stay for the night. He takes one of the stones lying nearby, puts it beneath his head, and falls asleep. And he dreams of a ladder with its foot on the ground and its top in the sky, with angels going up and down on it.

Wait a minute, says Rashi. Up and down? Surely that can’t be right. First the angels ascend and then they descend? Angels are heavenly beings - surely they have to come down first?! And Rashi answers his own question: no, this is correct.

The angels that accompanied him in the Holy Land do not go outside of it; therefore they ascended back up to the firmament, and the angels for outside the Holy Land came down to accompany him.

In other words, Rashi is teaching that the exchange of angels is something that is happening because Jacob is on a journey - in a state of transition and change.

What makes this a great teaching, I suggest, is that it applies just as well to us and the changes that we ourselves navigate in our lives.

If we think of these ascending angels as symbols of the way we understand and organize our reality, then one of the meanings of Jacob's dream for us is that when there is a profound change in our lives, our old understandings won't work any more.

Maybe we went through an actual change in status: we got married, or became a parent, or changed jobs, or divorced, or retired. Maybe we lost someone close to us - someone who helped give our life meaning and us a sense of ourselves. Or perhaps the change was an internal one - an inner sense of not being the same as we had previously been, a sense of something being vaguely off or out of kilter.

Human beings are constantly changing; I often share the Midrashic idea that *teshuvah* was created before the world and you know that I understand *teshuvah* most of all to mean change. Change is a constant of human existence, and one of the arts of living well as a human being is to be able to navigate our changes.

Rashi is teaching us that when there's a change in our lives, our angels - our understanding of ourselves and our reality - have to change as well.

It turns out it's not only Rashi who notices this truth.

According to the author and change consultant William Bridges (1991, "Managing Transitions") - change has 3 phases - endings, a neutral zone and beginnings.

The emotions and states associated with endings are feeling shocked, angry, fearful, sad. In the neutral zone, these feelings shift to feeling frustrated, confused or disoriented. But every change brings about new beginnings that make us feel excited, energized and committed. Provided, of course, that we accept that the change is happening and allow the angels that have accompanied us so far to leave, so that we can work through the neutral zone and get to know the new angels who will now be our companions.

I'm left with 2 questions about Jacob himself.

Did he himself notice the change of angels? I think perhaps he did. I mentioned that this parashah is the only one in the Torah comprised of a single paragrah, which suggests that he was moving through it very fast; but we certainly see him wait out that neutral zone. And next week we will once again see him encounter a new, life-changing angel. And on his return to the land of Canaan, after 20 years in exile, (and as the very last sentence of the parashah) he encounters angels once again:

Jacob went on his way and angels of God met him. And when he saw them, he said, "This is the camp of God!" And he named the place Mahanaim. (Bereishit 32:2-3)

My second question is: what happened after Jacob got back? Did the Holy Land angels simply pick up where they'd left off? Was it as if those 20 years hadn't happened?

We know the answer, of course: but in case we needed a hint, it's right there in the name. Mahanaim - the comparatively rare dual form that is used in Hebrew for things that come in groups of two. One reality and mindset for Jacob before he left: and one for after he comes back. Because his 20 years changed him.

And it's the same for us. Even when we go back home, we never stop changing.

Shabbat shalom.