

“*Vayyishlach*: Angelic men or human angels”

by Rabbi Dr Jeffrey M Cohen

Vayyishlach Ya'akov mal'achim – ‘And Jacob sent messengers.’ The root *l-a-ch* of the Hebrew word *mal'ach* is clearly related to the root *h-l-ch*, ‘to go.’ The *mal'ach* is the one who ‘goes’, or is ‘sent,’ on a mission. But the Torah’s employment of the term is vague, leaving it uncertain whether the messenger sent by God is an angelic being – in rabbinic parlance, a member of the *pamalia shel ma'alah*, ‘heavenly family’ or fraternity’¹ – in a human guise or a human who is divinely selected to perform God’s mission. This notion of two independent angelic facets is discussed by the distinguished Spanish commentator, Rabbeinu Bachya b. Asher (1255-1340) in his commentary to the opening verse of our sidrah.²

An example of the first of the above categories is the mysterious being who wrestled with Jacob the whole night before bestowing a blessing on him. He is described as ‘a man’ (32:25), whereas his quasi-identity as a heavenly messenger is beyond doubt, and was recognised as such by Jacob when he named the site of the struggle, Peniel, “For I have seen *Elohim*, yet my life was spared” (v.31).

Although there is no reference to the term *mal'ach* in this episode, the being’s angelic identity and authority is made clear by the name-change of Yisra’el that he gave to Jacob, and which was undoubtedly prophetic. If he had any doubt as to the man’s angelic credentials, these were dispelled by the significance of the new name’s play on words, *kiy sarita im Elohim* – “for you struggled *with a heavenly being*... and you prevailed” (v.29), which he

disclosed to Jacob. This explains the Midrashic identification of ‘the man’ as *Saro shel Eisav*, ‘Esau’s guardian angel.’³

An example of the second category seems to have been ‘the (random) man’ (37:15) that Joseph met when wandering, apparently lost, in a field, and who directed him to where his brothers might be located, in the pasturage area of Dothan (v.17). That man’s simple and practical advice set Joseph and the future Israelites on their path of destiny, though he had absolutely no inkling of the ramifications of his spontaneous response: that he was initiating thereby the divine plan as disclosed to Abraham, that

“your offspring will be strangers in a land not their own – and they will serve them, and they will oppress them – four hundred years. But also the nation that they will serve, I shall judge, and afterwards they will leave with great wealth (15:13-14).”

The latter category situation leads to the awesome and challenging thought that any one of us may be selected by God at any time as His *mal’ach*, or agent – akin to the man who Joseph encountered in the field - to facilitate a significant task or purpose in the life of another, or even a simple purpose, such as offering a piece of advice, that may, in turn, be a trigger for further positive and dramatic actions with wider ramifications in the furtherance of God’s plan for individuals, communities, society, even history.

So, the *mal’achim* sent out by Jacob to appease his brother, Esau, were not necessarily heavenly-based beings, just as the original Greek term, *angelos*, means no more than ‘a messenger.’ The Midrashic sages were, characteristically, divided, on this, with *Rashi* opting for the view that they were, indeed, heavenly-based.⁴ Significantly, although he had the highest regard for the renderings of the official 1st-cent. Aramaic *Targum Onkelos*, and

quotes them to support his own interpretation of words, here he passes over the Targumic rendering of *mal'achim* as *izgadin* in silence. This is because this term bears the exclusive meaning of a (mortal) 'messenger.'

R. Elijah Mizrahi (1455-1526), one of the leading authorities of the Ottoman Empire, who wrote an exhaustive super commentary on the works of *Rashi*, explains his view here on the basis that the final verses of our previous sidrah refer to Jacob encountering *machaneih Elohim* ('angels of God': 32:2), and immediately recognising them as such (v.3). Mizrahi notes the significance of the word *lefanav* ['Jacob sent angels] *from before him* to Esau, his brother' (v.4) which points to the fact that he employed those same 'divine beings' that had just appeared to him for his purpose of persuading Esau to make peace with him.

We have argued, however, that both the above categories of divine emissaries remain 'divine,' given that even the random man, once selected by God for His purpose, becomes elevated and entitled to be invested with that accolade. Furthermore, it would surely have been highly presumptuous of Jacob to enlist divine beings – even if it was within his power to do so – merely to fulfil his personal need: to present his case more effectively and forcefully to Esau, to flatter him verbally by use of the terms 'my lord Esau' and 'your servant Jacob' (vv.5, 6), and, finally, for the mundane tasks of transporting a vast amount of sheep and cattle to present as gifts on behalf of Jacob. After all, we have no other example in the Torah of anyone utilising a heavenly being for such a personal objective.

Furthermore, as regards Elijah Mizrahi's inference from the word *lefanav* ('before him') - that the *mal'achim* that Jacob sent off were the 'divine beings' (*machaneh Elohim*) he had just encountered, we would argue that, to convey that sense, the Hebrew would have read

milfanav, ‘*from* [those]before him.’ Our phrase, [*Vayyishlach ya’akov mal’achim*] *lefanav*, on the other hand, frequently occurs in the *TaNach* in the sense of ‘under the eye or oversight of’ (see Gen. 17:18, Deut. 25:2, I Sam. 3:1, Hos.6:2, Is. 53:2 Ps. 61:8, *et al*)⁵ which accurately reflects Jacob’s carefully and detailed curating of the delegation he sent, even to the extent of instilling into them the precise words they should use in their approach to Esau.

The *Maharal* (R. Yehudah Loew b. Betzalel of Prague: 1525-1609) attempts to justify Jacob’s conduct on the basis that the saving of his life was not merely a personal need, but, more, a necessity for the very future destiny of the Israelite nation. For, since the divine establishment of the Abrahamic ‘Covenant Between the Pieces’ (Gen. ch.15), the patriarchal family had been uniquely conscious of its national destiny,⁶ and anything – including the employment of heavenly beings – would have been justifiable, therefore, in the cause of facilitating it.

However, it is worthy of note that when Jacob employed a technique of selective breeding, using Laban’s flock in the process, which enabled him to extend the size of his livestock dramatically and enrich himself thereby, the Torah indicates that advice in that matter was communicated to him by *mal’ach ha-Elohim ba-chalom*, ‘an angel of God in a dream’ (31:10-11). And, once again, when Laban pursues Jacob (31:20), God Himself appears to Laban in a dream and warns him against harming Jacob in any way (v.24).

The question arises, therefore, why Jacob was left to deal with the situation of a potentially hostile brother’s approach, with a battalion of four hundred armed men, and yet there was no help offered by way of a prior divine or angelic warning to Esau – of the kind given to Laban – not to harm Jacob in any way!

A possible answer is that God was not indifferent to the potential danger Jacob was in. He didn't need to give any instructions to Esau, however, since, behind the scenes, He was putting in place the scenario that would give Jacob the confidence and reassurance that all would be well with him and that would ultimately neutralise Esau. This was achieved through the night-long struggle that Jacob had to endure, wrestling with Esau's guardian angel, and ultimately defeating him and receiving confirmation of his right to the firstborn's blessing as mediated through Esau's heavenly protector.

However, Jacob knew – from that very experience and the dislocated thigh that he suffered – that emerging victorious did not necessarily mean that one avoided any battle wounds or that there were no incidental casualties among one's comrades. And, hence, he was 'fearful and distressed' (32:8) at the prospect of the looming conflict.

One of the more intriguing points to emerge from our brief excursion into the angelic phraseology of the sidrah is that the term *mal'achim*, in addition to its plain sense of 'human messengers,' may also be a reference to other humans – like the man 'wandering in the field' in the Joseph story – who are selected by God to have a role in a particular divine mission of whose significance they remain blissfully unaware, as well as of the part they are playing in His grand plan.

This leads us to question whether God would really choose any 'Tom, Dick or Harry' to be His co-partner, and we may suppose that it is difficult to respond affirmatively. The corollary of this is that we must assume that such people have some great merit for which they are being rewarded.

If we think that, even then, it is too much of a theological stretch to accept that, however righteous, kind, and charitable, a person might be, he or she would be so rewarded, the only answer that springs to mind is that the Psalmist, no less, would have disagreed. He it was who revealed just how superlative man can be and how deserving of heavenly ranking:

What is man that You have been mindful of him,
mortal man that You take note of him.

- *vat'chasreihu me'at mei'elohim* –

that you made him *little less than divine*
and adorned him with glory and majesty.

You have made him master
over Your handiwork,
laying the world at his feet...

(Ps. 8:6)

This notion of heavenly men inspired the Talmudic reference to the thirty-six righteous people who, in every generation, sustain the world and accordingly merit to greet the divine Presence.⁷ They are also referred to as ‘unhonoured people,’ namely unrecognised for their piety or learning, and who earn their livelihood by performing menial tasks.⁸ They are referred to in mystical and Hasidic literature as the ‘Lamed-vav Tzaddikim nistarim’ (Thirty-six hidden righteous ones) – and, more popularly as ‘Lamed-vavniks’ – a reference to the numerical value (gematria) of ‘thirty-six.’

Little did Father Jacob realise to where his simple act of sending out ‘messengers’ would lead!

NOTES

1. See Tal. *Ber.* 16b, *et al.*
2. See Rabbeinu Bachya on Gen. 32:4.
3. See Mid. *Ber. Rab.* 77 (3).
4. See *Rashi* on 32:4, s.v. *mal’achim mammash*.
5. See Brown, Driver, Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), p.817a.
6. The patriarchal family’s acute consciousness of its national destiny is reflected in the blessing Isaac gives to his son, Jacob, as he sends him off on the journey to the house of Laban: “May He grant the blessing of Abraham to you and your offspring, that you may possess the land where you are so Abraham” (28:4).
7. See Tal. *San.* 97b; *Sukk.* 45b.
8. Tal. *Hul.* 92a.

Shabbat shalom,

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