

Torah Talk – מאמרי תורה



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Parashat Vayera
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פרשת וירא
ט"ו בחשוון תשע"ח

Torah Reading: *Bereshit* (Genesis) 18:1-22:24

In this *parasha*, the Torah continues with the adventures of Avraham and Sarah, including the announcement of the impending birth of Yitzchak and his actual birth, the destruction of S'dom, the exile of Hagar and Yishmael from Avraham's house, and the famous episode of *Akeidat Yitzchak* (the Binding of Isaac).

The *parasha* begins with Avraham sitting at the door of his tent and welcoming in three strangers (18:1-4):

וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו ה', בְּאֵלֵי מַמְרֵא; וְהוּא יֹשֵׁב פֶּתַח-הָאֵהָל, כְּחֹם הַיּוֹם. וַיִּשָּׂא עֵינָיו, וַיֵּרָא, וְהִנֵּה שְׁלֹשָׁה אַנְשִׁים, נֹצְבִים עָלָיו; וַיֵּרָא, וַיֵּרָץ לְקִרְאתָם מִפֶּתַח הָאֵהָל, וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוֶה, אֲרָצָה. וַיֹּאמֶר: אֲדֹנָי, אִם-נָא מְצָאתִי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ--אֵל-נָא תַעֲבֹר, מֵעַל עַבְדְּךָ. יִקַּח-נָא מֵעֵט-מִיָּם, וְרַחֲצוּ רַגְלֵיכֶם; וְהִשְׁעֲנוּ, תַּחַת הָעֵץ.

And Hashem appeared to him by the terebinths of Mamre, as he sat in the tent door in the heat of the day; and he lifted up his eyes and looked, and, lo, three men stood over against him; and when he saw them, he ran to meet them from the tent door, and bowed down to the earth, and said: 'My lords, if now I have found favor in your sight, pass not away, please, from your servant. Let now a little water be fetched, and wash your feet, and recline yourselves under the tree.

The Rabbis universally agree that these individuals were *malachim* sent by Hashem. Indeed, Rashi [11th Century Franco-Germany] claims that the reason three of them were sent is that *malachim* may only do one job at a time. Thus one was sent to give Avraham the news of Yitzhak's impending birth; one was sent to destroy S'dom; and one was sent to save Avraham's nephew, Lot. But what exactly are *malachim*?

The word *malachim* means “angels,” but it also means “messengers.” In fact, the *malachim* mentioned in the Torah, whether human or divine, are no more and no less than Hashem’s messengers. We know that, in some cases, the word *malach* refers to a human, as in the thirteenth verse of the *Sefer Chagai* (The Book of Haggai): “Then spoke Chagai the *malach* of Hashem in Hashem’s message to the people, saying: ‘I am with you, says Hashem.’”

In other instances, the word refers to superhuman creatures. Daniel says the following in his book, chapter 10, verses 5-7:

I lifted up my eyes, and looked, and behold a man clothed in linen, whose loins were girded with fine gold of Uphaz; his body also was like the beryl, and his face as the appearance of lightning, and his eyes as torches of fire, and his arms and his feet like in color to burnished brass, and the voice of his words like the voice of a multitude. And I, Daniel, alone saw the vision; for the men that were with me did not see the vision; however a great trembling fell upon them, and they fled to hide themselves.

There are two more in-depth, clearly articulated descriptions of angels in the Torah. One is in *Sefer Yeshayahu* (The Book of Isaiah), chapter 6, verse 2: “Above Hashem stood the *seraphim* (fiery angels); each one had six wings: with two he covered his face and with two he covered his feet, and with two he hovered.”

The other description is in *Sefer Yechezkel* (The Book of Ezekiel), chapter 1, verses 5-11:

And out of the midst thereof came the likeness of four living creatures. And this was their appearance: they had the likeness of a person. And every one had four faces, and every one of them had four wings. And their feet were straight feet; and the sole of their feet was like the sole of a calf's foot; and they sparkled like the color of burnished brass. And they had the hands of a person under their wings on their four sides; and as for the faces and wings of them four, their wings were joined one to another; they turned not when they went; they went every one straight forward. As for the likeness of their faces, they had the face of a person; and they four had the face of a lion on the right side; and they four had the face of an ox on the left side; they four had also the face of an eagle. Thus were their faces; and their wings were stretched upward; two wings of every one were joined one to another, and two covered their bodies.

This is essentially all that we know about angels from our sacred texts. *Midrashim* about angels abound; there are probably more *midrashim* about angels than almost any other characters associated with the Torah. According to the *Midrash*, angels were created on either the second day or the fifth day; they were definitely created before the humans, and some of them argued with Hashem about creating humans in the first place. Angels are like humans in three ways: they have cognition, they walk upright, and they have the power of language (but only the Hebrew language). The authors of the *midrashim* maintain that if one is righteous, one perceives angels in the guise of ordinary humans, and if not, one sees angels as mystical creatures. Some of the *midrashim* about angels are mutually exclusive: some say angels have no free will, are bidden to do the work of Hashem, and if they falter are immediately destroyed – but there are also stories about fallen angels.

What we know for sure is that nowhere in Jewish texts are angels described as wearing white and having haloes. This is a Christian image which Renaissance art popularized. Nor does Jewish tradition link angels to humans who have passed on.

It is human nature to speculate about the unknowable. Perhaps that is the reason so many *midrashim* address the topic of angels. Whatever *malachim* are or are not, if we keep in mind that they are all messengers of God, we will grasp the core Jewish understanding of angels.

Shabbat Shalom.

For Discussion:

- What else have you heard about angels? What have you imagined that angels look like?
- Why might Hashem need messengers?
- How might you react if you saw an angel today?