

Torah Talk—מאמרי תורה



The Parasha Letter of The Jewish Primary Day School of the Nation's Capital

Parashat Vayetze
November 21, 2015

פרשת ויצא
ט' בכסלו תשע"ו

Torah Reading: *Bereshit* (Genesis) 28:10-32:3

In this *parasha*, Yaakov flees to his uncle Lavan's household and lives there for several years, marrying Lavan's daughters, Leah and Rachel, and establishing a large family.

The *parasha* begins and ends with *malachim*. Yaakov, on his way to his Uncle Lavan's house, has a dream of *malachim* ascending and descending a ladder. He arrives at Lavan's, meets and falls in love with Rachel, marries Leah and then Rachel, and they, together with their maidservants, give birth to eleven sons. After a number of run-ins with his uncle/father-in-law (both!), Yaakov gathers his wives and children to return to his homestead and *malachei Elokim*—the *malachim* of God—meet him on the way.

Who or what are these *malachim*? Traditionally, the word in these contexts has been translated as "angels." But the opening verse of the next *parasha* states "Yaakov sent *malachim* before him to Eisav his brother." Clearly, in that context, they are not angels, but rather messengers. Perhaps these *malachim* are just that—messengers of God. We see them throughout the Torah. They appear to Hagar to tell her that Yishmael will live and develop into a nation; they appear to Avraham to tell him that Sarah will have a child; they go to save Lot from the destruction of

Sodom; they appear here in our *parasha*; they appear at the burning bush to tell Moshe that he will take the Bnei Yisrael out of Egypt; they appear to Bilam's donkey on his way to try to curse the Jewish people.

In the Prophets, these heavenly messengers are described differently. *Sefer Yeshayahu* (The Book of Isaiah) chapter 6 describes them as *seraphim*—burning creatures—with 6 wings, 2 of which cover their faces; 2 of which cover their legs; and 2 of which cause them to hover around Gods' throne of Glory. *Sefer Yechezkel* (The Book of Ezekiel) chapters 1-3 describes them as *ofanim*—wheeled creatures—and *chayot hakodesh*—holy living beings—with four faces (human, eagle, ox, lion), four wings, and one leg.

The names by which we refer to specific *malachim*—Gavriel, Refael, Michael, and others—are late appellations. They don't appear until after the return from the Babylonian exile, ca. 500 BCE.

Are there really angels here on earth? Do they have an earthly form? Is it true that an infinite amount can fit on the head of a pin? These are questions with no discernible answer. We do know that they are not the creatures that we see on Philadelphia Cream Cheese and other commercials, with a physical halo and two fluffy wings, dressed in white, and typically looking like bit actors. But most of us have heard or read stories about “guardian angels” that save humans from impending tragedies. Given that the one thing presented clearly in the Torah is that *malachim* are messengers of God, it is within the realm of possibility that *malachim* do, indeed, exist on earth.

The *malachim* at the end of this *parasha* welcome Yaakov and appear for his feeling of security. It is comforting to think that we, too, may be surrounded by God's messengers keeping us safe and secure.

Shabbat Shalom.

For discussion:

- What do you think angels look like? What do you think they do?
- Read the section on Yaakov's dream at the beginning of the *parasha*. What do you think is the meaning of this dream?
- Have you ever heard or read a story about a "guardian angel"? Do you believe such things exist? Why or why not?