

Angels

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Do you believe in angels? Of course it depends on what you think angels are. Are they supernatural beings in white shifts and sets of wings (usually with long blond hair) as much religious imagery imagines them? Or are they simply human beings who play a part in the Divine plan? Maimonides, the great philosopher and rationalist thought that angels were not literally magical beings altogether. But rather reflections of our own spiritual minds.

The Hebrew word for angel, Malah, is identical to the Hebrew word for a messenger. And the messengers who appeared to Avraham looked like human beings, like ordinary men. That was why he washed their feet, offered them food and suggested they rest and take a nap. But the Torah always allows for different ways of understanding things.

There are many cases in the Torah where human beings who play a part in the unfolding of the Divine Will and they are called both "men" and "messengers." There is the man who finds Josef lost and directs him towards his fate. Rashi says he was an angel but the Torah describes him as a man. Messengers, malachim, appear throughout the Bible and only afterwards does their appearance strike us as miraculous.

If a doctor predicts that someone will get better or conceive, he or she may be acting on the basis of expertise but also perhaps on intuition. If someone predicts a political catastrophe this may be guesswork, it may be based on special information. It may be what we call inspiration. But these are still human beings even if what they see happening is part of the Divine Will.

I believe we are all capable of being angels in one way or another if and when we carry out something that The Master of the Universe requires of us; either to help other human being or even sometimes to cause negative things to happen. Even the negative can be part of the Divine since everything is part of a much greater system and plan.

It is the message itself that is the essence, not the way it is communicated. As we are humans the message has to come to each of us in a way that we can make sense of.