

Better Angels

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Abraham Lincoln at Gettysburg said that “We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory will swell when again touched, as surely they will be, by **the better angels of our nature.**”

Steven Pinker, not known for his religious faith wrote a well-received book “The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence has Declined.” But I wonder, what did they or do we mean, when we talk about angels? Do they or did they ever exist?

When Jacob wrestled with an angel, described in the Bible as a man, what was it? The Torah says, “And a man wrestled with him until dawn.” And then whoever or whatever it was that he was fighting with goes on to say that Jacob will henceforth be called *Yisrael*, because “he struggled *Sarita* with God and man and survived.” What does that mean? Literally fighting with God as if God had a body to grapple with?

There is no word for angels in the Torah. It simply talks about messengers. Using the word *malachim*. The great rationalist Maimonides thought that what we call angels were simply manifestations in human terms of the will of God. And in his *Guide to the Perplexed*, he said that Jacob’s encounter was a dream. In the popular description of the universe in his code of Jewish Law, the *Mishne Torah*, he gave ten different levels of angels as being the ten emanations or manifestations of God. But they had absolutely no human form or identity.

What this amounts to is that each one of us could be an angel in the sense that we might be playing a role in the unfolding of human destiny or the Divine Will. And many other commentators regarded angelic communication as no more than an imaginary encounter that could have just been in the mind’s eyes. A form of prophecy.

Yet for a thousand years European, Christian art, depicted angels as white-cloaked, fair-headed angelic beings, with magnificent feathered wings and halos. Or as chubby little puttees, baby faced naked babies with mini wings. You can see them in their thousands in galleries and churches all around the world.

The portrayal of human and animal forms with wings goes back long, long before Christianity. In the Ancient Middle East winged humans and animals stood guard outside temples and palaces. They were symbols of power rising above and controlling human affairs. Or bestowing supernatural powers. Wings typically were ways of conveying something up there, in space, the heavens beyond the reach of humankind. In the way that to this very day, people speak about God being up there on in the Heavens. When logically God is just as much down there and in Australia!

Moses's Tabernacle and Solomon's Temple had golden cherubs, with baby faces and wings spread out across the Ark. They too were symbols of a higher power without giving it a specific human form. The Prophets used words such as Chayot, Serafim, Cherubim and Ofanim in their dream visions of God's court, to conjure up different intensities of the Divine. Angels with specific names, Gabriel, Raphael, Michael, and Uriel don't appear until biblical books written in Babylon or later.

By the time we get to the Talmud not only are angels given persona with specific tasks, but they seem to be everywhere. Satan, spirits, shades and all kinds of benevolent and malevolent forces shadowing our every move, pulling at our clothes, walking around our beds at night and infecting water and our bodies. Sometimes protecting us and sometimes causing havoc and destruction. God controlled everything in the world indeed. But seemed to use used different agents to act. In a way, it was very pagan. Different gods for different things.

This preoccupation with spirits increased during the Medieval Period. All kinds of things we now know are part of our normal life, like diseases, gravity, static electricity, tides, things that humans could not explain then, were all attributed to spirits. And the Kabbalah, because so much of it was rooted in magic, gave such theories greater significance. Angelology together with astrology played a very powerful part in daily life. Books such *The Book of Raziel the Angel* offered complex permutations and categories of different angels and spirits and became prophylactics in themselves. Just carrying one in your pocket was said to ward off evil spirits.

If we expected psychology, science, and modernity to dispense with irrationality, we see that on the contrary, people nowadays seem even more inclined to hang on to such primitive, neopagan forces to explain the ups and downs of their lives. Rationality always caused an irrational backlash. The challenge of trying to cope with the unknown is probably wired into our brains. So that we often use both the cognitive and intuitive parts of our brains to survive.

But if you ask your average religious Jew nowadays, he or she or they will certainly tell you there are angels. So what do they mean? Some literalists still cling to the idea that there are actual angels, just as they cling to the idea of evil spirits, evil eyes, and magic spells. One cannot prevent people from finding solace in whatever way their minds feel satisfied. And yet it does seem strange in this enlightened world to think of angels as substantial. And I am prepared to admit that some people might say the same thing about God itself, although I would argue that one is anti-rational while the other is non-rational.

To Steven Pinker and Abraham Lincoln, the term better angels referred to the fact that even if we humans have the capacity to be selfish, evil and dangerous and cause horrific wars, oppress and dehumanize each other. Nevertheless, we can also try to do better and be kinder. Progress rarely advances in a straight line. There are constant setbacks.

But it is the struggle to fight with our own nature that brings out the best in ourselves. Jacob was frightened of Esau. What the Torah describes is a psychological battle that was playing out in his own mind. He wanted to run away. He wanted to stand and fight. His subconscious fought with him. He was pulled in both directions by good and bad. And sometimes this struggle can actually affect our physical bodies too. That is the struggle of human nature. But we can overcome the negative and focus on the positive. We can run. Or we can stand and fight.

I fancy we should imagine God as the boss sitting in a private office at the top of the company headquarters. We can go in past the doorman and check in with security and they will connect to the director's office and a private secretary will filter the calls until finally, one gets an appointment. Whereas I prefer to think that we can all walk straight in, go up in the elevator and into the Holy of Holies without any intervening secretaries.

The rabbis always emphasized that whether it was through saying *Shema Yisrael* or just through prayer, we can all have a direct hotline, if we only learn how to make use of it. We can pour out our hearts directly, without angels, spirits or any hocus pocus or magic to establish a connection and a Divine Support Line.