

# JewishTimes

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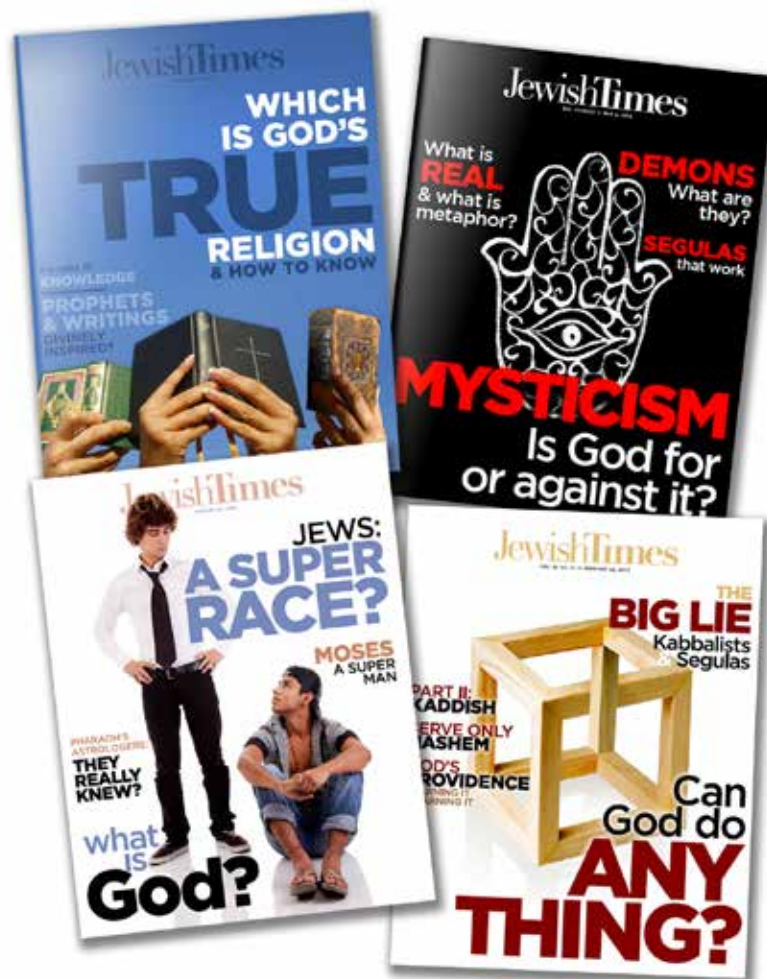


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## LETTERS

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

## Metatron the Angel: What is it?

**Jessie:** Would love for you to figure this out! My aunt asked me what a "pulsu denura" is. The ritual is kabbalistic and sounds like voodoo. So leave that aside. But it's based on a gemara (Chagiga 15a):

*Acher entered the Pardes and "cut down the plantings" (i.e. he became corrupt). He saw the angel "Metatron" who received permission to sit and write the merits of Israel. Acher said, "We have a tradition that there is no sitting, competition, no backside, and not tiredness (among the heavenly beings) — perhaps there are two gods!" (Since Metatron was in fact sitting) They took out Metatron and lashed him with 60 pulses of fire ("pulsu denura") and said to him, "You should have stood up when you saw him (an earthly being)!" They gave him permission to erase the merits of Acher (because of his blasphemy).* (CONT. ON NEXT PAGE)



My questions:

Of course, if Acher sees that it is a vision and [thus] metaphorical, why would he ask that question?

What is the metaphor and what does it mean?

Who is Metatron; what idea does he stand for?

What about Acher seeing Metatron "sit and write the merits of Israel" caused Acher's question?

What was Metatron's error; why should he have "stood?"

Does "60 pulses of fire" mean anything other than that Metatron did something wrong, or is there a deeper metaphor?

**Rabbi:** Metatron is an angel. As you know, an angel is a natural force, which God created to carry out His will in the universe. Thus, each angel controls a specific law, like Michael who controls snow and Gabriel who controls fire (Maharsha ibid). A prime example is found in Exodus just prior to the Jews' entrance into the Reed Sea: "And the angel of God that went before the Jewish camp traveled, and it went behind them; and the pillar of cloud that went before them traveled and stood behind them (Exod. 14:19)." There is no redundancy. This verse teaches a fundamental: there are two entities: 1) the metaphysical angel, and 2) the physical entity (here, a cloud) over which God places the angel as a supervisor. God controls nature through an angel, charging the angel over a specific sphere of nature; here, the specific task of repositioning the cloud to protect the Jews from the approaching Egyptian army. Thus, angels themselves are not physical, but they control physical phenomena. This explains why this verse describes the angel traveling, and

then again, the cloud traveling. We are taught that the angel controls the cloud. And angels only control the sphere of laws determined by God.

Over which sphere of natural law does Metatron control? What are the clues?

Sitting as opposed to standing<sup>[1]</sup> refers to one who is relaxed vs. one who must comply, showing respect by standing. So something about Metatron did not "comply" as do all other angels. Maharsha quotes the Navi, "God sat, the angels stood." But Metatron is the exception...he "sat" too, like God. What does non-compliance mean?

The Rabbis also teach that Metatron is named after God, meaning there is a "close tie" between this angel and God. Another explanation is not that he sat, but that he too wrote the merits of Israel.

What is meant by "Metatron should have stood before Acher?"

You are correct; what was Metatron's error expressed as it received 60 pulses of fire?" Why "fire"? (60 fire pulses seems to mean as you suggested, Metatron required correction.)

My understanding is that Acher "entering the garden" refers to his attempt to ponder metaphysics, i.e., how God runs human affairs. Remember, he is the same Acher who saw a son climb a ladder to send away the mother bird at his father's request; both acts (honoring a parent and sending the mother bird) are to result in longevity as the Torah states. Yet, the lad fell off the ladder and died. This distressed Acher, as in this case, he found a conflict between the Torah and reality.

In this case, Acher was confronted with one

of God's angels, Metatron. He was sitting, unlike all other angels who must stand before God. What does "standing before God" mean? It refers to unequivocal compliance with God's will. Angels control natural forces by their very design. They immediately execute God's will, as if they are standing at attention and in full compliance in all their missions. But these are "individual" forces of nature, like fire and snow. These elements, as all elements, have strict designs and laws to which they are eternally bound, as if standing before their Creator. However, aside from individual discreet laws...there is the whole of all natural laws we call "nature." In its myriad of laws and systems, man will at times become victim to unfortunate circumstance. Hurricane Sandy pummeled the eastern US 3 years back. Rain, high tides and wind, independently, do not typically cause problems. But the combination was devastating during that super-storm. Man will then accuse nature — the aggregate of these laws — like Acher accused Metatron. Man will cry of injustice.

I believe Metatron is "nature." Acher viewed nature as sitting, as if it were a second deity, a second force functioning outside of God's system of Reward & Punishment. It didn't "stand" before God means Acher didn't see nature as perfectly inline with the merits of the Jews. Just like the son died and should have been secure from harm, Acher viewed the current state of the Jews as unjustly afflicted by natural law...as if another power determined the Jews' fate. In this sense, Metatron too "writes" the merits of Israel. "Writing merits" can refer to that which "causes" one's merits/demerits. Thus, a faulty conclusion derived from natural order earns one his demerits in accepting a fallacy.

This is stressed by Metatron "not standing" for Acher. Meaning, Acher too sensed a chasm

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between his sense of personal justice, and what nature meted out to him. Nature should have stood for him, i.e., Acher should have experienced God's attentiveness, as if nature "stood" for him. Acher concluded: there must be another deity, as God cannot be unjust. Acher's error was his limited understanding. He viewed isolated verses and events, assuming he knew all considerations, and based on his knowledge, the world should comply with his views.

What is the idea that Metatron was punished? Why with fire? Well, fire is the one element that destroys nature. Now, the idea of nature (Metatron) requiring a punishment means nature was not inline with man's view of God's providence. Nature, at times, makes man question God's justice. That is, there are times that although one is just, he will suffer through natural order. An intelligent man will accept that a sudden downpour can ruin his expensive suit, but he won't suggest this is God's punishment. Rather, it is natural law, from which he did not take proper precaution to avoid. It was self-inflicted.

Maimonides says the misfortune of righteous people is also due to their interruption of contemplation on God (full text in note 2 below). To the onlooker, like Acher, this is unjust. Nature giving this "poor reflection" of God's justice is called "Metatron receiving 60 pulses of fire."

The medrash concludes that Metatron punished Acher by removing his merits. This means that Acher was subjected to natural laws that afflicted him, thereby reinforcing his false view of a second deity and eliminating his merits in the process. One's false views of God, such as Acher's ditheism (two deities) forfeit one's merits and the afterlife.

**Jessie:** If they gave him permission to erase Acher's merits because Acher had a distorted view, so now Acher is punished by being subject to the laws of nature. But wasn't Metatron wrong in giving Acher a false view of reality?

**Rabbi:** Yes, Metatron/nature gives an impression, but man is incorrect to jump to conclusions based on natural order alone. This is the very message of "tzaddik v'ra lo; the righteous who



suffer." Meaning, don't cry injustice, for there is more than meets the eye.

**Jessie:** If nature gave a false idea that it runs itself, contrary to justice, how do the pulses of fire correct that?

**Rabbi:** I don't know. I must think further.

Related article: <http://www.mesora.org/angel-punished.html> ■

[1] Haftorah of Yisro; Isaiah 6

[2] "If man frees his thoughts from worldly matters, obtains a knowledge of God in the right way, and rejoices in that knowledge, it is impossible that any kind of evil should befall him while he is with God, and God with him. When he does not meditate on God, when he is separated from God, then God is also separated from him; then he is exposed to any evil that might befall him; for it is only that intellectual link with God that secures the presence of Providence and protection from evil accidents. Hence it may occur that the perfect man is at times not happy, whilst no evil befalls those who are imperfect; in these cases what happens to them is due to chance (Guide, book iii, chap. li)."

## Adam's Sin: Not Ours

**Saul:** Children are not punished for the sins of their parents. Then why are we — the sons of Adam — punished for the sin of the forbidden fruit? Adam was banished from the Garden of Eden and was punished to toil to earn his bread, and Eve was punished to bear children in pain. Why is it carried though today? Please explain.

Thanks and regards, Saul

**Rabbi:** Good question...especially since the Torah teaches, "Each man in his own sin will be punished (Deut. 24:16)." So we must distinguish between Adam's sin and all other sins.

Adam was the first and most perfect human. Yet, he violated God's command. Adam represented man's capacity to obey God. If he could not obey, no one else could, as all others would be replicas. Therefore, God "punished" Adam, meaning, God administered a corrective measure in man's state in order that he would not require annihilation. God's banishing man from Eden and making him work helped man engage his energies in matters other than sin. In his masterpiece, *Duties of the Heart*, Rabbi Joseph ibn Paquda states this very point. God also created the conscience, a new faculty that would generate guilt within man the next time he leaned towards sinning. This too is a blessing as it too will prevent man's future sins. As Eve initiated the sin, this expressed her influence on man. Her new preoccupation with pregnancy and child-rearing diverted her energies away from her husband. And in both punishments, we note the word "etzev" meaning pain or toil: both man and woman would experience a certain drain on their energies.

In creating man and woman, God shared with us His reasons for changing the human design. To preserve the human species, these changes were necessary, and necessary for all members of mankind.

In contrast, a person who sins today is not demonstrating the need for mankind to again be changed. For God has already made the necessary adjustments which Adam and Eve displayed required a change. From that change and on, mankind is capable of avoiding sin, and if a specific man or woman sins, it is his or her own issue. Their children are not punished. ■

# The Bible's Instruction on How to Pray

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

It has been stated: R. Jose son of R. Hanina said, "Prayer was instituted by the Patriarchs. Abraham instituted the morning prayer, as it says, 'And Abraham got up early in the morning to the place where he had stood[2],' and 'standing' means only prayer, as it says, 'Phineas then stood and prayed[3].'"

Isaac instituted the afternoon prayer, as it says, 'And Isaac went out to speak in the field at evening time[4],' and 'speak' means only prayer, as it says, 'A prayer of the afflicted when he faints and pours out his speech before the Lord[5].'"

Jacob instituted the evening prayer, as it says, 'And he approached the place[6],' and 'approached' means only prayer, as it says, 'Therefore, thou pray not for this people, neither lift up prayer nor cry for them, neither approach Me[7].'" (Talmud Berachos 26b)

Why are there 3 different terms to indicate prayer: "standing" before God, "speaking" to God, and "approaching" God? This must be due to 3 central themes found in prayer. Certainly, as we see these terms used by God not only in connection with the Patriarchs' prayers, but also in God's reference to prayer itself, R. Jose son of R. Hanina discovered 3 fundamental lessons through identifying identical word usages.

## STANDING

"And Abraham got up early in the morning to the place where he had stood."

Standing was Abraham's regular practice, for this verse teaches that Abraham had previously stood before God. What is the difference between sitting and standing? Standing indicates one's recognition of the importance of a matter. He precedes his engagement in prayer with the proper intent. His standing is a preparedness to embark upon a discussion with his Creator. You don't do this "sitting down" as the phrase goes. Thus, we learn from Abraham that prayer has a prerequisite state of mind. The Rabbis teach, "These are the matters that man enjoys the fruits in this world, but the principle awaits him in the next world." This means man benefits here, but the "principle awaiting him" in the next world

means these matters pertain to human perfection, the afterlife. One of these matters is proper intent in prayer[8]. One cannot effectively pray, if he views it as a burden: "If one makes his prayer a burden, it is not supplication.[9]" If man does not value his prayer and rushes through it as burdensome, why should God value his prayer?

## SPEAKING

"And Isaac went out to speak in the field at evening time."

Speech exists only in dialogue. Isaac viewed his prayer as a literal discussion with God. If one does not speak as he or she prays, then one is unconvinced that God listens. And if one does not believe God hears, God will not answer, since if He does answer, the person will not attribute the answer to his prayer to God. An answer would be destructive for such a person, for he might believe something other than God answered him. Prophets like Elijah on Mount Carmel and elsewhere tell foolish people to pray to their imaginary gods and see if they respond. The point is this: as long as one thinks that aside from God there does exist other deities, God will not answer. This brings us to Jacob's prayer...

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**APPROACHING GOD**

"And he approached the place."

Jacob's "approach" is explained as "...neither lift up prayer nor cry for them, neither approach Me." This second verse teaches that one matter is prayer, another matter is "approaching" God, a perfection found in Jacob's prayer. Aside from prayer, there is a phenomenon of approaching God. The perfected person (Jacob) views God as the only being to approach with his needs. Nothing else can provide, for there is nothing else except God.

Therefore, prayer must include these 3 elements, if we are to truly pray and be answered:

- 1) we must stand, i.e., we must prepare ourselves and attain the proper attitude and value of prayer;
- 2) we must verbalize our prayer to demonstrate our conviction that we are truly in a dialogue with a hearing God, who can answer;
- 3) we must view God as the sole source of our blessings and goodness. Nothing else exists, and we need no intermediary, nor can an intermediary assist us, when God hears us all just fine. God will respond when we pray to Him alone, and when we have analyzed what we need to live a life following His Biblical laws, and request that alone as our prayer. Religions that create intermediaries, when God says not to, and certainly when religions deify

man, violating the 10 Commandments, these religions do not engage a method that can work, for praying to intermediaries cannot result in an answer. God alone created the universe, not intermediaries; God alone controls it, and God alone can deliver our needs and wants.

If one doesn't recognize that we can ask God for anything and that He can respond, his sense of reality is severely flawed. Prayer is the greatest opportunity for man, and thereby, must be viewed with the utmost importance. God recorded the Patriarchs' and Matriarch's actions and values in the Bible because they portrayed the highest level of human perfection. Their attitudes, acts and prayers are models for all mankind. God's inclusion of them in the Bible is precisely that we study their lives, realize their perfected values, and copy them. ■

[1] By the Men of the Great Synagogue.

[2] Gen. XIX, 27

[3] Ps. CVI, 30.

[4] Gen. XXIV, 63

[5] Ps. CII, 1

[6] Gen. XXVIII, 11

[7] Jer. VII, 16

[8] Rash on Mishna Peah, 1:1

[9] Tal. Berachos 28b, 29b



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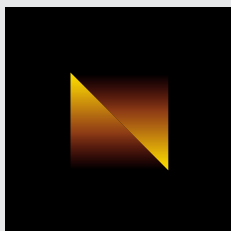
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# WHAT A DIFFERENCE A FRIEND MAKES

Korach's  
Rebellion



RABBI REUVEN MANN

This week's parsha, Korach, recounts the story of a rebellion orchestrated by a distinguished group of leaders against Moshe's authority and the legitimacy of the appointments he had made.

Korach and his cohorts argued that it was wrong for Moshe to select his brother, Aharon, and his descendants to be the Kohanim (Priests) who, alone, had the right to perform the Temple service. As one of Moshe's cousins, Korach was a Levite and thus eligible to assist the Kohanim and perform "secondary" services in the the Temple.

However, he did not find this to be satisfactory and took umbrage at being excluded from the primary activities of ministering before Hashem. Korach organized a group of 250 major Torah scholars who found

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common cause with his insurrection.

Most of these people were from the tribe of Reuven, who was Yaakov's bechor (firstborn male). Originally, the firstborn males were slated to do the Temple service, but this privilege was revoked when they participated in the sin of the Golden Calf.

Korach's uprising was the third major rebellion that occurred in the Wilderness. The first, which we read about in Beha'alotecha, was a protest against the manna and had tragic consequences. The second was the rebellion of the Spies, who instigated the people to disobey the command to "go up and conquer" the land of Israel.

This resulted in the Divine decree that the generation of the Exodus would not inherit the country that "flowed milk and honey." Instead, they would wander for 40 years until all of them passed away.

According to Nachmanides, the debacle of the Spies unleashed Korach's dispute. His anger and jealousy had been aroused some time before, when Aharon received his appointment. However, he did not act immediately but held his emotions in check because of the tremendous popularity that Moshe then enjoyed.

Moshe was extremely beloved by the people because he was

always there for them to perform great miracles of salvation in Egypt and in the Wilderness. After the Egyptian army was utterly destroyed, the people "believed in Hashem and His servant Moshe."

He was their champion in whom they had total confidence. They came to rely on him so much that when he was late in returning from the mountain, they prevailed on Aharon to build something which would serve as a substitute for their great leader.

Moshe's aura was enhanced when he successfully interceded with Hashem to save them from destruction after the sin of the Golden Calf. Moshe had reached the zenith of his popularity, and any attempt to challenge his legitimacy would have been firmly squashed. Korach knew this and patiently bided his time.

Finally, Moshe's popularity plummeted when he could not prevent the decree that, because of the sin of the Spies, the people would spend 40 years wandering in the Wilderness and die without entering the Promised Land. Korach realized that this was his moment to strike.

We can learn a great deal from Korach. When he felt affronted, he could not act immediately and thus had time to reconsider the action he was contemplating. At various points in our lives, we may find ourselves in

a similar situation. We have a powerful grievance but, for the moment, can't do anything about it. What should we do in the interim?

Many people have absolute confidence in the veracity of their feelings and are not inclined to challenge their beliefs. A wise person takes a different approach. He knows that emotions, especially very compelling ones, are deceptive. He doesn't blindly trust his innate sense of right and wrong, especially when his ego is involved.

He therefore uses the period of grace in which he cannot act to gain a greater insight into his position. He knows that he cannot do this by himself, but requires the help of an objective outsider. He needs a true friend.

There are two kinds of friends. We instinctively gravitate to someone who shares our outlook on things and is sympathetic to our attitude. This person is there to reassure us about the correctness of our outlook and the goodness of our character.

It's nice to have that kind of person in your life, because we all want our feelings to be validated. But is this always beneficial? What we really need is a true friend in whom we can confide and who will be absolutely honest about our words and behavior. Such a person is like a doctor who

does not withhold the truth from his patient because, to cure him, he must be brutally honest about his condition.

Pirkei Avot instructs us to "acquire for yourself a friend." Rambam explains the different kinds of friendship one can have. The most exalted is the relationship between two people who are absolutely committed to each other's spiritual perfection. This is the person we can turn to for moral guidance in vital matters when we may be blind to our own motivations.

The tragedy of Korach is that he didn't have a true friend. Our parsha begins with the words, "and Korach took...". Rashi explains that he took himself to one side to contend against Moshe. He was absolutely committed to his own position and did not leave open the possibility that he could be wrong. Korach did not have the capacity to transcend his hurt and view things in a different way.

There is so much we can learn from this story. We should assiduously seek to avoid machloket (unnecessary strife), especially against great teachers, and strive to cultivate true friends who can be a beacon of light in those moments when our vision is clouded.

Shabbat shalom. ■

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**PARSHA**

# Angel of Death: Part I

**METAPHOR**

**Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim**

**I**n Parshas Korach (Numbers, 17:13) Rashi states an amazing story of how Aaron “seized the Angel of Death against its will”. In order to understand this metaphor, we must first understand the events immediately prior.

God had wiped out Korach and his rebellion. On the morrow, the Jewish people said the following (Numbers, 17:6), “You (Moses and Aaron) have killed the people of God”, referring to Korach and his assembly. Evidently, the Jews could not make such a statement the same day as God’s destruction of the Korach assembly, perhaps because the Jews were too frightened at the moment. But as their terror waned, they mustered the courage to speak their true feelings on the next day.

What they said were actually two accusations: 1) Moses and Aaron are murderers, and 2) those who were murdered are God’s people. The Jews made two errors, and God addressed both.

The method God used to correct their second error was to demonstrate through a miracle that Aaron in fact was following God and Korach and his group were not: detached wood – the

staff – miraculously continued its growth, and blossomed almonds. By Aaron’s rod blossoming, this showed whom God favored, and to whom He related – even via a miracle. Now the Jew’s false opinion that Korach followed God was corrected, as it was Aaron’s staff, which God selected, and not Korach’s.

But how did Moses correct the people’s false opinion, that he and Aaron were murderers? How did the incense, which Moses instructed Aaron to bring correct the problem, and stay off the plague, which God sent to kill the Jews? What Moses commanded Aaron to do was to take the incense, and stand between the living and the dead during the plague, which only temporarily stopped the plague. It was not until Aaron returned back to Moses that God completely halted the plague. So what does Aaron standing there accomplish, that it stopped the plague temporarily? Additionally, what does his return to Moses and God at the Tent of Meeting do? This is where the Rashi comes in:

*“Aaron seized the angel of death against its will. The angel said, ‘Leave me to do*

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*my mission'. Aaron said, 'Moses commanded me to prevent you'. The angel said, 'I am the messenger of God, and you are (only) the messenger of Moses'. Aaron said, 'Moses says nothing on his own accord, rather, (he says matters only) through God. If you do not believe me, behold Moses and God are at the Tent of Meeting, come with me and ask'.*

Moses knew that the people accused him and Aaron of murder. The Jews saw Moses and God as two opposing sides, i.e., Moses was not working in sync with God, as he apparently killed the “people of God”, i.e., Korach and his congregation. The Jews’ accusation “You have killed the people of God” displays the people’s belief that God was correct to follow, but Moses opposed God’s will. Moses now attempted to correct the Jews, and show that in fact, he and Aaron were not murderers opposing God. Moses sent Aaron to make atonement for the Jews. What was this atonement, and how did it entitle the Jews to be saved from God’s current plague?

The Jews saw Aaron with this incense offering, standing at the place where the last Jew dropped down in death; the plague progressed in a domino fashion. And the Jews now saw that no more Jews were dropping down dead, due to Aaron’s presence with the incense. They were now perplexed: they accused Aaron and Moses as murderers, but Aaron was now healing, and not killing as they previously assumed. This perplexity is what the Rashi described metaphorically as “Aaron seizing the Angel of Death”. Aaron was now correcting the “opinion” of the people, which made them deserving of death, as if he seized the cause of their death, i.e., the angel. The people’s opinion was in fact, their own “Angel of Death”. This means that the angel is not a real, separate “being”, but the cause of death is man’s own distance from God. And these Jews were distant from God when they imputed murder to Moses and Aaron.

As the Jews were now second guessing their accusation, but not completely abandoning this false view of Aaron and Moses, the plague stopped, but only temporarily, reflecting their temporal suspension of their accusation. So we may interpret Aaron as “seizing the angel of death” as his correction the false notions the Jews maintained that Moses and

Aaron were murderers of Korachian revolutionaries. “Seizing the Angel of Death” means Aaron retarded the cause of death in the remaining Jews; he corrected their false notions, for which, others perished at God’s hand in this plague.

The Jews were confused, and rightly so, when they saw Aaron standing between the living and the dead with incense, apparently causing a halt to the deaths: Aaron is Moses’ messenger, but the plague was clearly from God. So, how could Aaron and Moses overpower God? How could Aaron on Moses’ mission halt a plague from God? This is what Rashi means when metaphorically the Angel of Death tells Aaron, “I am the messenger of God, and you are (only) the messenger of Moses”. The Angel in this metaphor personifies the false opinions of the people, which caused death. But with a corrected opinion, God will not kill. So the Angel talking in this metaphor, really represents the Jewish people’s corrupt opinion, which in fact causes death. (Sometimes, false views can be so wrong that the follower of such a view deserves death.)

Returning to the Rashi, Aaron replies to the Angel one last time, “Moses says nothing on his own accord, rather, (he says matters only) through God. If you do not believe me, behold Moses and God are at the Tent of Meeting, come with me and ask”. At this point, the plague was temporarily stopped, as the Jews were entertaining the idea that Moses and Aaron were not murderers, as Aaron was atoning, trying to keep them alive. Their perplexity about whether Aaron and Moses were following God had to be removed if they were to live permanently. This is what is meant that when Aaron returned to the tent of meeting (Numbers , 17:15) the plague was terminated completely. As the Jews witnessed Aaron, Moses, and God “together”, they now understood that Moses and Aaron were in fact followers of God. The metaphor depicts Aaron as ‘seizing’ the corrupt views of the people which demanded their death, allegorized by seizing an “Angel of Death”.

This Rashi is yet another of literally thousands of examples where the Rabbis wrote in riddles, as King Solomon taught

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in Proverbs 1:6. We learn from King Solomon, to whom God gave knowledge miraculously (Kings I, 3:12) that riddles are a means of education. We must continue to look for the hidden meanings in the Rabbis' words, which at first seem bizarre. We must not take amazing stories literally. There are no demons roaming the Earth, no angels of death, no powers of segulas that protect. God is the only power, and He created the Earth and heavens and all they behold, with distinct, limited physical properties and laws. Physical creation cannot exceed its design: a piece of twined wool with a scarlet pigmentation does not suddenly get transformed into a device, which wards off God's punishments. It is unfortunate that we have become so backwards.

What is worse, is that children are taught to accept superstitions. They become prime candidates for missionaries. Superstitious rearing teaches children that Christianity is no different.

This new mystical, pop-kabbalistic Judaism blurs the lines between true Torah principles and all other religions. When Jews fail to see the difference between a superstitious Judaism and other religions, they more easily convert. And they are accurate in this equation: there is no difference between a Judaism that preaches segulas, and that parts of God are "inside man"...and between Christianity that makes identical claims.

What parents, teachers, and leaders must do is teach our fundamentals. If Jewish children were taught the "What's" and "Whys" about God's unity; that He is not physical since He created all physical things; that He created everything and nothing possesses powers but He alone; that we cannot know what He is; that His Torah is correct – and why; that He rewards and punishes...and if students were taught the proofs behind these ideas – then far less students would abandon their observance. Far more students would find profound reasons to remain observant, and continue their studies. For they found reasonable explanations. However, the fundamentals are not being taught. Although important, classes in Hebrew language, grammar and electives, are given priority to Torah Fundamentals, and Comparative Religion.

Maimonides formulated his 13 Principles for a reason. Let's ensure we teach them before anything else. ■

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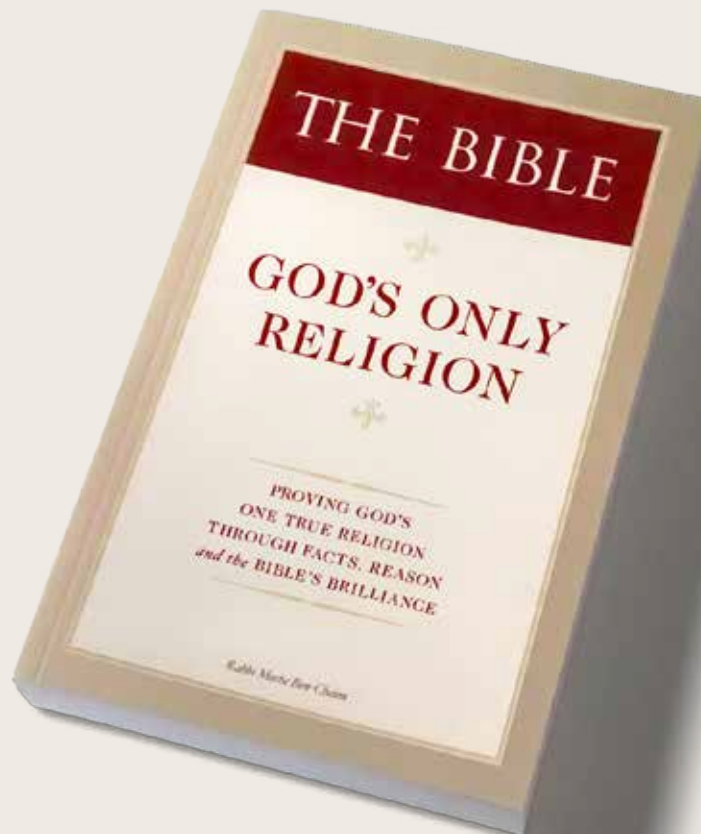
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# Angel of Death: Part II

**Jessie:** In Parshas Chukas, (Numbers, 20:29) it says the entire congregation saw that Aaron had died. Rashi comments: “When they saw Moses and Elazar came down and Aaron didn’t come down they said, “Where is he?” He said, “He died.” The Jews said, “Is it possible that he who stood against the Angel of Death and stopped the plague (in Korach) can be defeated by the Angel of Death?” Immediately Moshe asked for mercy and the ministering angels showed them Aaron lying dead in a bed. They saw and they believed.”

Questions: What is this Medrash trying to teach us? Why would they not believe that Aaron had died? Why did this sort of vision demonstrate that he did die? Why did Moshe need mercy for this demonstration?

**Rabbi:** As always, good questions, and succinct Jess. I believe the first thing we must posit is this: when Aaron stayed the plague, it was necessary to teach the Jews that Aaron and Moses were not murderers. However, this miracle of Aaron standing between the dead and the living during that plague was in part, incorrectly interpreted: that Aaron “the man” possessed some greater power over death. (The Jews saw Aaron standing between the living and dead, and no more people died) Nonetheless, God enacted this miraculous feat were Aaron stayed the plague, so as to correct the false notion harbored by the Jews that Aaron and Moses were murderers, as the Jews formerly accused. So God thereby corrected the false notion of the Jews, that Aaron and Moses killed the “just” congregation of

Korach. In fact, Korach’s congregation was evil. So Aaron and Moses were not killers of “innocents”. Aaron demonstrated their innocence by saving the Jews with the incense. However, this act to which you refer, was perceived as Aaron being “above death”, since he stayed the plague of death.

Now, as Moses and Elazar descended the mountain, without Aaron, the Jews were confused and thought, “Aaron beat death in the previous plague, how can he possibly die?” Moses too realized the problem, and saw a solution: beseeching God to intervene, through prayer, but not as you may think. God agreed and responded. The only solution, as Moses anticipated, was that Moses help demonstrate that Aaron had no power over life and death. Perhaps, since Aaron himself was not the cause of the corrupted, immortal reputation maintained by the Jews, hence, he could not be the one who might correct this reputation. Meaning, in order that the Jews realize that Aaron was not immortal, the very Source of life – God – must step in to teach that man is not inherently immortal, and man (Aaron) possesses no power over life at all. When the Jews realized that Moses was praying to God to correct their false, immortal view of Aaron, they now realized from where their wrong assumption of Aaron’s immortality originated: it was from “God’s” miracle of staying the plague, Aaron was a bystander simply following orders. The Jews either see Moses pray to God, or better, they see God somehow unveil Aaron’s true mortality, which results in the Jews’ realization that it was not Aaron who had any power whatsoever over the lives of the saved Jews, but it was God all along. Thus, this

Midrash teaches that Moses’ prayed to God, conveying that Moses knew that God was the cause of the Jews’ salvation, and not Aaron. The Jews, by witnessing Moses’ prayer, or God’s intervention, were enabled to rid themselves of their false assumption and accept Aaron’s mortality, as if the “ministering angels showed them Aaron dead on a bed.”

Nonetheless, the Jews still required Divine assistance to return to the correct view. God intervened and somehow allowed this concept of Aaron’s mortality to penetrate these misled Jews. I don’t believe they actually “saw a bed with Aaron lying in it”. This means they were somehow relieved of their previous, erroneous notion of Aaron’s immortality. Somehow, God addressed this: God’s “ministering angels” conveys this. It means that something other than the actions of the Jews themselves was required to correct the false notion of Aaron’s immortality. In contrast to other cases where prayer is an act of ultimate desperation and beseeching God to intercede, perhaps here, Moses prayer may very well have been a demonstration that God is the source of life, not Aaron. The very “act” of Moses praying to God was what was required to dispel the false idea of Aaron’s immortality, and not so much performed for the need of a response from God.

A similar case is as follows. One angel is “punished” as he ascribed the miraculous phenomena of overturning Sodom to himself, and not to God. The Rabbis wrote that statement to teach a problem with ascribing miracles to anything but God. I would explain the two Rashis (Gen. 19:22) as teaching us exactly that:

*“(The angel said to Lot) Hurry, escape there, for cannot do anything (destroy Sodom) until you come there (Gen. 19:22).”*

Rashi 1: *“This is the punishment of the angels, on account that they said ‘for we are destroying (Sodom)’, and they ascribed the matter (destroying Sodom) to themselves. Therefore, they did not move from there until they righted, and they said the matter was not under their control.”*

Rashi 2: *“Two angles are not sent for one mission.”*

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What does Rashi 1 teach? The angels didn't truly talk, ascribing phenomena to themselves. However, the Rabbis have license to write these Midrashim – stories – teaching us fundamentals. Perhaps here, the Rabbis desired to teach a new lesson; that God alone caused the destruction of Sodom. Somehow, there was room for misunderstanding the cause of Sodom's destruction. An angel – a "force of nature" like fire – will sometimes appear as a purely natural event. But as Rashi said, the punishment of that angel was that "it didn't move from that place until it admitted that it had no ability of its own to perform the destruction". The angel – the destructive force that overturned Sodom – didn't necessarily talk. When the angels said, "we are destroying Sodom", this means that the force of nature causing the destruction, seemed natural, and not due to God. But this idea would forfeit the entire lesson, that God punishes the wicked! Nature (angels) appeared to

"claim sole responsibility" for Sodom's destruction, with no will of God. Therefore, its appearance required correction, in some manner. There was something about what took place in Sodom, that onlookers might ascribe a natural disaster to Sodom, thereby forfeiting the lesson that it was in reality, a Godly punishment. Hence, no deterrent for future generations would exist. Angels, or natural forces, can only function by the will of God, and not independently.

The "natural" appearance of Sodom's destruction had to somehow be corrected so a warning to others and subsequent generations would exist. The fact that the angels "remained until they corrected themselves", means that within this disaster ordained by God, there was some element which clearly indicated that it was of Divine origin. What that was, I do not know, but it was part of the disastrous process, as it was the angels – these forces

– which also corrected the previous error.

Through these Midrashim, the Rabbis teach that although a false idea could be perceived in both – Sodom's destruction, and Aaron's salvation – God insured that both false ideas were corrected.

I would add that regarding Aaron, the people had to first see Moses praying to God, thereby priming their minds to accept a subsequent, metaphysical lesson (Aaron on the bed). Without the first step of the Jews entertaining the idea that Aaron was in fact mortal, perhaps the Jews would not have related to the subsequent, metaphysical lesson.

In turn this teaches that when God educates man, as effectuated via the vision of Aaron dead on the bed, God works within the confines of man's mind, and does not force upon man that which he is yet unready to accept. ■

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