

There are Angels Among Us

Delivered at Temple Emanu-El

Friday, November 27, 2020

Tonight, I want to tell you about an angel I once met on earth. I found him, or he found me, in the heart of one of Kansas City, Missouri's roughest neighborhoods— down at the Independence Boulevard Christian Church's Micah Ministries. I used to go to the Church on Mondays during my later high school and early college years. Throughout my years serving the hungry on those Monday nights, I met all kinds of people: Those who just lost their jobs, those who were working but just needed some relief from feeding four mouths one night a week, those in gangs, those who left gangs, and those experiencing homelessness.

But one night, I believe I encountered an angel. In many ways one could see the work of the Church as a 2000s version of Abraham and Sarah's tent. Though due to safety concerns volunteers couldn't exactly run out the door to bring in the guests, but once they made it to the door, they were treated like the angels who visited Abraham and Sarah just a few Torah portions back. The church is bustling with people seeking to serve the guests. Even the idea of bathing their feet isn't so far off, as the Church also provides guests with new clothes for everyday wear or for upcoming job interviews. The parallel continues as volunteers serve the guests restaurant-style, taking drink orders and bringing them their plates. No one waits in line once they enter the church. וְאֶקְחָה פֶּתִילֶחֶם וְסַעֲדוּ לַבָּכִם “And let me fetch a morsel of bread that you may refresh yourselves,”¹ says Abraham. Abraham and Sarah do all they can to prepare the best for their guests and on a Monday night in downtown KC, you see volunteers scurrying around the large hall to take orders, fill plates, and serve hundreds of people.

Now that the scene is set, let me tell you about that angel. He was a quiet man with the kindest eyes and a soft smile. His hair was scruffy and he wore a modest flannel shirt

¹ Gen. 18:5

and work pants. I approached him to take his food order, but he let me know he'd like to wait until everyone else had been served. He wanted to make sure there was enough food for everyone at his table. I reassured him, "There's plenty of food, we won't run out, what would you like?" "I'll wait," he responded. And so, respecting his wishes, I went around and my team served the whole table, and let me tell you, these were lonnnnnng tables. I re-approached the man, "Well, as you can see everyone has gotten their food, what would you like?" He placed his order, I brought him his food, and he scarfed it down in five minutes. I circled back, and shared that "the policy of the Church was that you eat until you're full, would you like another plate?" "I will wait, and I want to make sure everyone in this room gets food."

The man eventually had his second plate of food and told me he was happy. That was all, simply happy. A starving man with the kindest eyes I had ever seen...he had eaten his two plates of food, and he was happy. I don't know where he went after that night, but I've never forgotten that dinner service, and I've never forgotten how that man made me feel.

There was just something about him. Perhaps you've had the feeling before too. That there is just some sort of inexplicable energy surrounding a person you've just encountered for but a brief moment in time, and yet you'll never forget the way they looked at you or the world. You'll never forget the sparkle in their eye or the energy you felt from them.

Friends, there are angels among us, if only our eyes and spirits are open to experiencing the moment.

In our Torah portion this week, Vayeitzei, Jacob is on his journey from Beersheva to Haran. He comes upon a certain place to stop for the night, lays his head down and dreams his famous dream, the story of Jacob's ladder. In his dream he sees a *sulam*, a ladder or stairway of sorts that stretches from the ground of the earth to the heavens. And on the ladder, Jacob sees angels of God going up and going down. Throughout

Jewish history, those who study this text have been struck by the word order in this verse, that the angels are first going up the ladder and second going down, implying that the angels begin on earth, meaning, they dwell among us.

Jewish tradition shares that each angel has one mission to complete before they reascend. A story from Talmud² points out, that the guardian angels of Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael were the three visitors to Sarah and Abraham's tent. Michael's task was to tell Sarah that she would become pregnant, even in old age. Raphael was sent to help Abraham heal after his circumcision, and Gabriel was sent to overturn Sodom. The angels are to stick with their mission, whatever God tells them to do.

There's also the Hassidic and Yiddish tales about Elijah the prophet, coming to us as a beggar. Elijah, the prophet who has no death record, only a biblical story which ends with him disappearing into the night's sky in a chariot of fire. Elijah the prophet who is to herald the Messiah. This very Elijah is said to reappear on earth from time to time, disguised as a beggar, seeking kind deeds from those around him. The yiddish tales, however, typically tell of the misdeeds of the townsmen, who upon seeing the beggar disregard him for his unkempt appearance only to find out later that the beggar they turned away could have brought them the Messiah in that moment, if only they had treated him with kindness.

As for the angel I encountered, I'm not sure what his mission was. Perhaps I was just an outside observer who felt his presence as he journeyed to impact a particular person's life. Or perhaps it was something more, a moment that increased my faith and pushed me to pursue the rabbinate. I've never forgotten the face of that angel.

Maybe you've encountered someone who has changed your life for the better, in a brief and unexpected moment. You felt a change in yourself after being in their presence, and you just knew that there was something special about that individual. When we are

² Bava Metziah 28b20; Bereishit Rabbah 50:2

open to experiencing the Divine in those around us, even in the most unexpected places, we have the opportunity to bring a great holiness to the world.

On this Shabbat, the Friday following Thanksgiving, may we be thankful for the good in our life, and the fullness we felt at our Thanksgiving dinner tables. May we simultaneously be mindful that not everyone in our community has the chance to feel that way each day. Like the hundreds who gather on Monday nights down in Kansas City, parallel groups gather in downtown Atlanta, and even right here in Sandy Springs. Let us continue to feed the hungry, and be on the lookout for the angels in our midst.

Shabbat Shalom.