

More than 20 years ago, I could not have foreseen that I would be standing before you as your spiritual leader. I never considered the Rabbinate as a potential career. Instead, my goals were in the field of journalism or fashion or law, and I fantasized about ultimate fame in each profession. But the more I thought about those fields, I realized that they weren't where I belonged, and I returned to the world of teaching religious school. I should have prefaced this story by saying that my mother was director of education at our synagogue and my rabbi, Larry Kushner, kept forcefully encouraging me to learn more about the rabbinate. But each flyer from Hebrew Union College became scrap paper and phone calls from the director of admission, Rabbi Gary Zola, went unanswered. They were determined; I was more so. And then, one day, Rabbi Ronne Friedman called me into his office. I had been working at Temple Israel in Boston for a short time, and knew Rabbi Friedman basically by sight. This was to be a "get to know you better" meeting. After short conversation, Rabbi Friedman asked if I had ever thought about becoming a rabbi. Before I could even begin to spout forth my usual dissertation on why the rabbinate was not for me, Rabbi Friedman looked quickly at his watch and excused himself. Alone in his office, I looked at the wall hangings, the books on the shelf, counted the pencils on his desk. And still, he hadn't returned. So I began to think about the question I had summarily dismissed. Had I truly ever thought about becoming a rabbi? What would being a rabbi mean? How would it change my life? Did I even have the efficacy to lead people, to counsel people? By the time Rabbi Friedman returned to the office and asked the question again, I was ready to hear the words. Rabbi Friedman, not knowing it at the time, gave me one of the greatest gifts I have ever received. He led me on the path of self-discovery. Somewhere buried deep inside was this rabbi thing. Ronne created the space for it to come out. He led me to this life, which has made me more complete, and been my blessing. He was, for me at that moment, a messenger of God.

The Hebrew word for angel and messenger are the same, Malach. We are bombarded with images of angels. Often they are chubby-cheeked kids with curly hair carrying bows and arrows: the Valentine's Day cupid. Or we picture creatures with white robes- like this one, and wings, a halo hovering above flaxen hair. But in Judaism, angels, malachim, don't look any different from you or me. A malach may be short or tall, fat or thin. A malach may have thick flowing hair or be bald. Malachim look like us, because they are us. We are all, at some time or another, messengers sent from God on a holy errand. We are all, at some time or another, receivers of these messages,

There is a great difference between our concept of earthly messengers and malachim. Earthly messengers always know where and why they are being sent- an example: "honey, please pick up the dry cleaning on your way to work". The male honey knows that his wife is sending him to a specific place for a specific reason. He may not follow through on the errand, but he knows it's expected of him. On the other hand, people chosen to be messengers of God rarely know that they are chosen. Unaware, without knowing, they go about their lives, focusing on personal plans, establishing goals, deciding what movie to see. And then someday, they ask a question or make a comment or do something, and

without realizing it, change another's life. For that moment they are a Malach Adonai- a messenger of God.

Although we never know when or how, we all have potential to be malachai Adonai, because we are created in the image of God. When we learn to open our ears, eyes and hearts to others, we are present, able to do what we are meant to do. Asking the right question takes a moment of deep insight, performing a life-saving act takes risk. As we become more aware of those around us, we become more aware of our words and our actions.

We all have the potential to receive the message, if we but open our ears, eyes and hearts to others. Hearing the question takes a moment of deep insight, responding to the acts of others takes openness. When we become more aware of those around us, we learn more about ourselves.

There are four particular ways in which malachai Adonai function in our world. The message may come in different forms, at different times, through different messengers, but the result leads to one of the following:

First: Self-discovery

Second: Character transformation

Third: Reminders

Fourth: Life Savers

First: Self-Discovery

Pirke Avot 6:3 Whoever learns from another, one chapter or one law, one verse, one word or even one letter is bound to accord the teacher honor.

Rabbi Ronne Friedman asked me a question. It was a simple question but one which changed my life because it led me straight to myself. We've all experienced moments like this, where we entered a room or sat beside someone on a bus, and began a conversation. And through the words, it was clear that this was not an ordinary event. There was something more-a deeper connection. Perhaps someone asked us a question and for the first time we knew the answer. Or a friend suggested a path we were thinking of taking, or shared with us something we had forgotten about ourselves. Beyond the typical cocktail party type conversation, lay this fertile intensity. At the time, we may not have been aware that the conversation was special. Only in hindsight did we realize that there was a reason for that particular person to be in our lives at that time. That they were sent to teach us something about ourselves. Our rabbis tell us in Pirke Avot, that there is no man who does not have his time; there is nothing that does not have its hour. When someone asks the question and we are finally willing to hear, they become a malach Adonai, God's messenger.

2 Character Transformation

Proverbs 8:1 Wisdom calls, understanding raises her voice.

One of the most important characters in the Book of Genesis has no name. The Torah only calls him "ish"- "man", but without the message of this "ish" we would not be known as the people Israel nor would Jacob experience his great turning. This unnamed man serves as a messenger of the Most High.

In Genesis 32, Parashah Vayishlach Jacob prepares to see his brother Esau. It has been twenty years since they last spoke, since Jacob stole his brother's

blessing and he is afraid. Jacob knows that he has done things which have hurt others and that he has not always been true to himself. And in the darkness of the night, lying by himself on the shore of the Jabbock River, Jacob is roused to wrestle with the unnamed “ish”. They strive against each other until the break of dawn, and the “ish” tears Jacob’s hip at the socket. Refusing to let go, Jacob asks the being for a blessing. Says the unnamed man, “You shall no longer be called Jacob but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human and have prevailed.” Jacob is no longer Jacob. He has wrestled with the “ish”, wrestled perhaps with himself and as result, has become Israel. A fighter. One who wrestles with God. This Biblical drama is life altering. Jacob returns to his family a new man, able to face his brother, able to lead the Israelite people. One event, only several hours, which affected the rest of Jacob’s life. We can imagine that the incident caused pools of ripples. Because Jacob had changed, Leah, Rachel, Zilpah and Bilhah changed. And because Leah, Rachel, Zilpah and Bilhah changed their children changed. I could continue listing the generations through today, but I think we get the idea. Holy moments have long reaching arms and touch even those unaware of their occurrence.

3 Reminder

Genesis 1:27 God created man in God’s image, in the image of God, God created them.

Coming up from the kotel after prayers, a rabbi was accosted by a woman begging on the steps. Her clothes ragged, brown skin heavily wrinkled, the woman spoke through a mouth with few teeth. Tired and frustrated by all the beggars surrounding the wall, the rabbi reached into his pocket angrily and put money into the woman’s cup. As he began to start up the steps again, he felt someone behind him, a man with ragged clothing, skin heavily wrinkled, obviously another beggar. Before the rabbi had time to reach into his pocket again, the woman took some coins out of her cup and with the words Shalom Alechem- peace be unto you, placed them in the man’s hand. The woman, who seemingly had nothing to give, willingly gave. She saw a person who was more destitute, perhaps more hungry than herself and she opened her heart to him, reminding the rabbi how to give Tzedakah.

The messenger may not be who we expect which makes the message that much more powerful. When we don’t see those people who we assume are marginal to our lives: the person who cleans our home, the man at the desk beside us at work, the woman begging on the steps, the kid driving the car next to ours- when we don’t see those people who we assume are less, we may miss the message. The potential that all people are malachai- Adonai elevates the experience of human relationship because we never know when transformative moments may occur and who will be our malach. When we understand this, we begin to treat those around us differently. We see that even the man without a home will be for someone a malach. We may not know his name, but we can still recognize the fact that he is holy and has the ability to change lives.

In Parashah Tezeveh, Exodus 28, God commands the High Priest Aaron to create a bejeweled costume for performing the Temple ritual. On the inside of

the golden breastplate, resting over Aaron's heart would be inscribed the names of the tribes of Israel. Every time that Aaron felt the weight of the breastplate, he would remember the heaviness of his responsibility for the Israelite people. And on the enormous headpiece of gold and colored jewels, the words "Kadosh L'Adonai", holy to God, were to be inscribed, a reminder for the people Aaron served. When they saw the words, the people Israel always remembered that Aaron too was holy. We also have the words inscribed in our hearts and between our eyes. But they're not as visible. We need to work to see them, to feel them and when we do, we remember that we are all here as malachai-Adonai, to serve each other and ultimately God. We are all Kadosh L'Adonai, tangled together in this process of living.

4 Life Saving:

Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5 A Single person was created in the world in order to teach that if one has caused a single soul to perish, it is as if one has thereby destroyed an entire world; and if one has saved a single life, it as if one has saved an entire world.

Two stories:

One: March 13, 1964, just after 3am, Kitty Genovese was stabbed to death in the middle of an apartment complex. Over 38 people heard her screams, looked out the window to see what was happening and then, horrified pulled the shades down and turned the television up. Hundreds of people listened silently to her murder. Not one called the police or yelled out the window to scare away the attacker. At one point the attacker thought that he heard someone coming and ran away. He realized there was no one there and went back to finish the murder. The first 911 call was logged in at 3:50am. Kitty Genovese died alone, in spite of hundreds of people around her. No one stepped forward to prevent her death. No one picked up the phone and called the police. No one took responsibility and a young woman was killed.

Two: When I was in rabbinic school, I took a class offered by Rabbi Larry Kushner. We studied Hasidic texts based on the weekly portion and wrote our own mini-Dvrai Torah based on our life experiences. And were asked to read particularly interesting ones aloud. My colleague Shifra Penzias told this true story, which silenced us all:

Munich in Nazi Germany. Great-Aunt Sussie was riding the city bus home from work when SS Storm Troopers stopped the vehicle and entered to check for identification papers. As they slowly made their way to the back of the bus, it was apparent that Jews being told to leave the bus for a transport vehicle around the corner. Sussie knew what this meant and as the storm troopers made their way back to her seat, she began to tremble, tears streaming down her face. The man sitting beside her noticed her distress and asked why she was so upset. Quietly Sussie explained, "I'm a Jew. I don't have papers. They will take me away." The man exploded with disgust and began to curse at her loudly. When the SS men came to see what the yelling was about the man, pointed towards Sussie and said, "My wife has forgotten her papers again. I am fed up with her!!" The soldiers laughed in understanding and moved on. Shifra said that her great-Aunt never saw the man again and never knew his name.

Two situations where life was at stake. A woman killed, a woman saved. A silent community, one messenger of God.

It happens sometimes, this call to take responsibility for another human being. To stand and speak out for justice regardless of convenience or time. It may require self-sacrifice or even risk. Or it may be stepping in to stop gossip or help a co-worker in need. We may not understand why we have reacted- but as human beings we were all given the ability to respond. It is this response, which makes us holy. Rabbi Larry Kushner determines that, “The more we comprehend our mutual interdependence, the more we fathom the implications of our most trivial acts. We find ourselves within a luminous organism of sacred responsibility.”

We are all tied together in the process of living. We can't escape it. Every step we take is somehow felt on the other side of the world, reverberating for generations. Step towards the holy, step towards each other. Know that there is a reason for each person's existence. That all people, no matter how marginal to our daily lives, are malachai-Adonai, messengers of God to someone, perhaps even ourselves. Take notice of those around us. Listen carefully. Speak carefully. Act carefully. We are all on this earth as messengers of the Most High. We have the potential to ask the right questions at the right time, to transform each other, to remind another of sacred tasks, to save a life. And when the opportunity presents itself, know that there is a reason for that time and that place coming together. We are all meant to be malachai Adonai- messengers, angels of God.

There is a blessing recited for seeing a person of special appearance. In this place, we are all of special appearance, by merit of our being created in the image of God. I would therefore, like us all to recite the blessing acknowledging the part of each other and ourselves that is malach Adonai. Recite after me:

Baruch Ata Adonai, Eloheinu Melech Ha'Olam M'Shaneh Ha'Briot. Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe, who creates uniquely.

May we remember to recite these words often and teach them. There are always angels among us.