

NEPHESH HACHAIM 1:10

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

Nephesh Hachaim 1:10

1.

Given all of the above concerning our makeup and capacities, it's reasonable to wonder whether angels are loftier than we are or we're loftier than they. And while that had been debated by some of the greatest among us for a very long time ¹ R' Chaim surmises that in fact *both* conclusions are right for different reasons.

On one level, he argues, angels are indeed loftier than we are by their inherent makeup, great holiness and wondrous comprehension. For when it comes to those things, there's simply no comparison ².

2.

On another level, though, we're loftier than they, given our ability to elevate and link together the various celestial worlds, capacities, and lights, which no angel could ever do ³. And that's because each angel is a separate entity which thus can't link all of the worlds together while we -- with all of our soul elements -- incorporate all of them so we can⁴.

In fact, angels can't even elevate, connect, and link together one world with the one above it since they don't incorporate or combine with them. They can't even ascend or connect to the world above themselves, and they're thus said to be "stationary" while humans are depicted as being "in motion" ⁵.

Only human beings ⁶ can elevate, link together, and join all celestial worlds and lights by our deeds, given that we incorporate them all. In point of fact, angels themselves are only elevated and made holier by dint of human actions given that they, too, are incorporated in human beings ⁷.

3.

But our soul elements only enable us to elevate and connect the celestial worlds and ourselves after we'd have come into the material world ⁸. After all, it was only after G-d breathed life into Adam in this world that he became animated ⁹ and was also the animating force of all worlds ¹⁰.

This also touches on Jacob's vision of the ladder, incidentally ¹¹, which we'll explain in Ch. 19 below. For it was only the *bottom* of that ladder -- that animating force of life upon which "the angels of G-d were ascending and descending" -- that was set upon the earth and manifests itself in our bodies ¹².

Footnotes:

¹ Ramban, Ibn Ezra, Sa'adia Gaon and Rambam especially delved into this, based on conflicting Torah verses.

² R' Chaim cites *Zohar Chadash, Bereishit* (15b-16a) in reference to angels being transcendent and ethereal, and their enjoying a greater degree of comprehension than we do; and *Ibid.* 28b. Yet *Midrash Rabbah (Bereishit 17:4)* illustrates how man is *wiser* than the angels. But "wisdom" refers there to brilliant insight into applied, practical matters, while "comprehension" applies to insight into ethereal, G-dly matters (see *Hilchot Yesodei Hatorah* 3:8).

See the Gra's comments to *Sifra D'tsniusa* 37d [*Likut*] regarding Moses' exceptional degree of comprehension.

R' Chaim cites *Zohar* 2:129b in reference to their being holier than we are.

³ Yet see 1:5 above about the high source of our souls, which would also place us on a higher level than the angels. Apparently R' Chaim's aim here, though, is to accentuate our unique abilities to affect the worlds.

⁴ R' Chaim cites *Eitz Chaim* 40:10, which depicts angels as a single element of the world it dwells in, while we -- given our souls and all of its divisions -- incorporate *all* worlds.

What's interesting there, though, is the fact that the Ari refers to *righteous Jews (tzaddikim)* specifically as those who are higher than angels. This statement thus harkens us back to the point made in the two previous chapters about the unique powers of the select few rather than of all of us.

⁵ R' Chaim cites Isaiah 6:2 and Zechariah 3:7. See *Ma'amarim* 10 (end).

⁶ R' Chaim's language here indicates that *all* of us can do that, which would seem to contradict the point we made in note 4 above. But we contend that he's saying that while each one of us is *potentially* capable of such actions, only the select few actually bring such things about in the end.

⁷ R' Chaim cites *Eitz Chaim* 28:4. This citation also refers to *righteous Jews* alone being higher than angels (see note 4 above).

⁸ See 1:12 below.

⁹ See Genesis 2:7.

¹⁰ See 1:4, 6 (also see R' Chaim's final note to 1:6) above. And see *Sha'arei Kedusha* 3:2.

¹¹ See Genesis 28:2.

R' Chaim cites Zohar 3:123b here -- which refers to *all* Jewish souls. But his point once again seems to be the one we suggested in note 6.

¹² That's to say that only the lowest aspect of the animating force of life manifested itself in Jacob because humans can only do what we're capable of doing when we're in the material world. This also sets us apart from angels, who aren't ordinarily connected to the material world; for it's our very connection to the physical world as well as the spiritual worlds that enables us to unite all worlds.

As to the question whether non-righteous Jews are loftier than angels or vice versa, R' Chaim's opinion would seem to be that while non-righteous Jews are not as great as the select few who have actualized their potential, the former are still more exalted than angels all the same simply because they have the *potential* to be great given that they're forever "in motion" and can ascend (or descend, G-d forbid) while angels will always remain "stationary".