

CHAPTER 4, MISHNA 13(A): CREATING ANGELS

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

Rabbi Eliezer ben (son of) Yaakov said: One who fulfills one mitzvah (commandment) acquires himself a single defending angel. One who commits one transgression acquires one accusing angel. Repentance and good deeds serve as a shield before retribution.

This mishna provides us with a number of important insights regarding G-d's justice system -- both the system itself and how we may influence it. Though we typically think repentance during the High Holidays, the advice is certainly relevant year-round.

The first point is that our good and bad deeds create angels which will either defend or accuse us at the time of judgment. (According to Jewish tradition, there are three times at which a person stands judgment: every year at the High Holidays (reviewing the previous year and in judgment for the coming), at a person's death, and on the final Judgment Day at the end of world history to determine if he will be worthy of the Resurrection and his ultimate level of relationship with G-d.)

The concept of defending and accusing angels is significant for a number of reasons. When I grew up I was always taught a much more simplistic notion -- that after we die our good and evil deeds will be placed on some kind of giant heavenly scales -- our deeds would somehow be converted into black and white gravel, or whatever precisely it is, and the heavier side would determine our fate.

To be fair, there are Midrashic statements which employ this type of metaphor. In fact, the astrological sign of the month of Tishri (when the High Holidays fall) is a scale (Libra). Yet it is clear from our mishna that as little as we know about our fates after death -- and the Torah seems to intentionally preserve it as an enigma -- our judgment will be much more profound and exacting. Good and bad deeds cannot just cancel each other out on some giant scale. Every good act creates an angel -- a force of good -- both in this world and in the next. Likewise, every sin creates a reality of evil which can never be fully ignored. Good and evil exist on a plane and in a form unimaginable to us in our finite state. A prosecuting angel, once brought into existence, carries with it a voice of accusation -- one which cannot be stilled until some form of rectification is achieved -- whether through repentance, purgatory or a combination of the two.

There is further significance to the concept of defending and prosecuting angels. Angels -- again, based on the little we truly know of them -- are functioning spiritual beings, possessing features and characteristics in some way the spiritual equivalent of the human being. Now say a person performs

a good deed but of imperfect nature -- he recited prayers without emotion or he pledged charity for public recognition. The angel created will too be imperfect. It will not be able to testify before the Heavenly Tribunal in an ideal manner. Just as our prayers were hurried or mumbled, so too will our defending angels speak. Just as our worthy deeds contained petty or selfish motives, so too -- in ways we can only imagine -- will our angels be deficient.

Unfortunately, there are many ulterior motives which find their way into our deeds. We may treat others nicely for want of their business or some other return favor -- or simply for the honor we will receive in their eyes. We may perform a ritual -- such as eating matzah on Passover -- with little thought of its true significance. Deeds which are empty of meaning -- or full of ulterior motives -- will create angels which are little better. If we were lucky enough to be judged with a simple set of heavenly scales, perhaps a sincere deed would weigh ten pounds while an insincere one would weigh one. It would be better than nothing. As G-d's true justice dictates, however, an impure or wrongly motivated deed may literally be powerless to defend us.

For this reason, we mentioned once in the past that it is far more beneficial for our spiritual growth to focus on one or a few mitzvos (commandments) rather than grabbing out at a whole slew of superficial ones. (Anyone who can find the past class in which we wrote that is welcome to a no-prize. I couldn't come up with it in a quick search...) :-) We should make sure we do at least one thing well -- with forethought, reflection and devotion. It could mean taking a single prayer from the prayer book and reciting it with sincere devotion. Or it could be a matter of taking a single good quality -- say honesty -- and upholding it with uncompromising dedication. Or it could be some very small act of sacrifice -- ordering fish only at non-kosher restaurants -- so that while the person realizes he is far from perfect, what he does observe he does with unwavering dedication.

And such acts of sacrifice and commitment will serve us well when we one day stand before our Maker -- very possibly better than thousands of repetitive acts of empty ritual. Sometimes a single act of devotion and altruism may make an entire life worthwhile (and for that it's never too late). As the Talmud puts it, "Whether one does much or little, so long as he directs his heart towards Heaven" (Berachos 5b).

In an uncharacteristic bout of sympathy for my readers, I'm going to save the second half of this discussion for next week. (But if you sign up for [Maimonides](#), you'll have more to keep you busy!)

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