

MULTITASKING ANGELS

by Nechama Stampler

Multitasking Angels¹

Behold! Three men were standing over him.

Rashi: One angel to inform Soro; one to overturn Sedom; one to cure Avrohom. Three were required, because one malach cannot perform two missions....Refael (who cured Avrohom) travelled from there to save Lot...

Any way you look at it, this seems to add up to four jobs, apportioned to three angels. One way or another, some angel had to have pulled a double assignment! This violates the well-known rule mentioned by Rashi that limits a malach to a single task.

Some^[2] wish to argue that malachim cannot work on two missions at the same time. A malach who has concluded one mission, however, can be reassigned to a second. The fourth assignment is therefore not a problem. We need only assume that one of the malachim went out the revolving door and then immediately reentered.

This answer, however, seems unsatisfactory. If it were true, we have one too many malachim arriving at Avrohom's tent. Two malachim could have concluded their business there (by healing Avrohom and announcing Soro's imminent pregnancy), and turned to Sedom to take on the remaining two jobs of overturning the city and saving Lot.

Another approach suggests that two of the missions are actually identical, namely healing Avrohom and saving Lot. Thus, both could have been entrusted to Refael. The gemara^[3], however, doesn't allow for this. Unlike our Rashi, it has Michael saving Lot, after first bringing the wonderful news to Soro. Those two tasks do not seem identical at all. Why, then, was Michael able to accomplish both?

We can answer the question by modifying our understanding of the work load of a malach. Malachim can be charged with multiple tasks simultaneously, contrary to what we all thought. They cannot, however, take on tasks from different major task groups at the same time. What is impermissible for them is to be engaged in different types of tasks simultaneously

Those major types of tasks number no more than three. One type is performing some act of chesed, providing good where it did not exist before. Another type is its opposite: an act of din, which we experience as bad. Between these two poles is an act that neither supplies the world with some new kindness nor deprives it of something that used to exist. This type simply upholds and maintains

what already functions. Much of the continued functioning of the world falls in this category. Malachim are not barred from multitasking. They cannot, however, cross over between categories at the same time.

We can now easily account for the four tasks. One malach brought news of the future birth of Yitzchok. This shlichus was pure chesed, bringing into existence a gift that was not available before. The city of Sedom was eradicated through the exercise of din. It was assigned to a second angel. Healing Avraham - restoring him to a state of health - and saving Lot's life - securing his safety - both served to maintain a preexisting state. They both fall between chesed and din, and could be assigned to Refael. (It has been observed^[4] that Rashi's listing of the three angels does not follow chronological order, as we would expect. Avrohom was healed prior to the overturning of Sedom. Rashi's list does follow, however, the order of the midos, going from chesed to din to the point between them.)

Rashi's approach is based on Bereishis Rabbah^[5]. The gemara, however, assigns the double load to Michael, rather than Refael, but this position can also be explained quite well according to our approach. Michael is linked to pure chesed, and thus was the one to announce that Yitzchok would be born to Soro. Lot was not spared because of his own merit, but as a chesed to his uncle Avrohom. Saving Lot's life, therefore, is more properly the task of the malach of chesed than of the malach of maintaining the status quo. Moreover, given the fact that the entire region was going to suffer complete and utter devastation, and that Lot lacked the merit to be treated any differently, Lot's survival cannot be seen as maintaining a preexisting life. In effect, he was granted a new life, i.e., complete chesed. The gemara sees this as belonging to the general function of Michael.

1. Based on Gur Aryeh, Bereishis 18:2

2. See Tosafos Bava Metzia 86B

3. Ibid.

4. Be'er BaSadeh

5. 50:11
