

ANGELIC EXPRESS

by Nechama Stampler

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Yaakov sent malachim ahead of him to Esav in the land of Seir^[1]. Rashi: [He sent] actual angels.

A malach can be a messenger of flesh and blood, or it can be an angel. Indeed, two opinions in a medrash^[2] advocate each of these competing readings; Rashi adopts the view of the Rabbis.

People have offered different explanations for the view of the Rabbis. Some see it as a way of explaining the difference in the actions of the angels at the time of Yaakov's ladder-dream, and their behavior here. In Yaakov's vision^[3], he saw angels "ascending and descending." Rashi took this to mean that the angels of Israel who had accompanied Yaakov until that point now took leave from him as he prepared to move outside of the Land. They therefore ascended to their heavenly home base, before the angels assigned outside the Land descended to replace them. Here, however, Yaakov called the place machanayim/ two camps, noting the coexistence there of both groups of angels, those connected to the Land, and those which were not. Why didn't the latter angels absent themselves before the former arrived? To explain the difference, Rashi posits that the outside-of-the-Land angels remained to make themselves available for a mission to Esav.

Others explain very differently. They believe that Rashi was troubled by the arrival of the angels of the Land to this place, even though Yaakov was still a distance from the border of Israel. Why would they come - if not to make themselves available to Yaakov as intermediaries sent to Esav? (Because Esav sought to prevent Yaakov's return to the Land, the angels of the Land were charged with helping Yaakov overcome his brother's resistance, thereby providing him with safe conduct to their territory.)

Each approach is difficult. We can offer a simpler explanation than that given by the first approach as to why the "old" angels did not leave before the arrival of the new shift. In the vision of the ladder, Yaakov saw Hashem standing over it. He did not need angels to protect him when Hashem himself was close by, as it were. In our episode, Yaakov required constant protection; had one group departed before the arrival of the other, he would have been left vulnerable.

The second approach sees the angels of the Land making themselves available for a mission to Esav. This makes sense only if the mission was a good idea. Presumably, the angels acted with Divine consent. Chazal^[4], however, are critical of Yaakov reaching out to his brother, which could just as likely awakened in Esav a new resolve to settle old scores.

Rashi's source is quite different. Were this a conventional mission, its purpose would have been stated before its launch. Yet here we are told that Yaakov sent the malachim before we find out what he hoped to achieve. Rashi reasons that the sending of the malachim follows fast from the previous verse, where Yaakov notes the presence of two camps of angels. The Torah means to convey that Yaakov took his messengers from that angelic assembly.

R. Eliyahu Mizrachi (the Re'em) considers another bit of evidence prompting Rashi to explain that Yaakov sent actual angels. R Chanina in the medrash cited above states, "Hagar, who was only the maidservant of Soro, still merited seeing five angels sent to assist her. Should not Yaakov, beloved of Hashem, certainly merit angelic assistance? The Re'em questions the validity of this argument. If it was meant to explain why angels made themselves available to Yaakov, then angelic messengers should have been more common. Both Moshe[5] and Yehoshua[6] also sent malachim; both were greater than Hagar. Yet no one argues that they sent angels rather than people. (The Re'em provides an answer, but Maharal rejects it.)

Because none of these approaches work, we can only conclude that the availability of angels relates to the function and role of Yaakov. Specifically, angels assisted him because he was one of the Avos, and therefore treated very different from anyone else, no matter how great.

Chazal[7] react in wonder to the length of the Eliezer narrative, where a long story is repeated over the space of many pesukim, while so many important halachic details are crunched into brief hints and allusions. "The ordinary conversation of the servants of the Fathers is more precious than the Torah of the Children." Why should this be? However valuable Eliezer's words, why shouldn't the "Torah of the Children" be equally precious?

We must conclude that the position and standing of the Avos is unparalleled, by dint of being the beginning. Coming first, they were the foundation upon which rest all who came later. They were not simply great individuals who served in a unique capacity. They subsumed all that came after; they were the general principles under whose rubric all the particulars would fall. Moreover, because the Jewish people is crucial and central to Hashem's plan for human existence, the Avos can be said to be the *ikar*, the *sine qua non*, the form-givers to the entire world. (So critical were they, that Chazal teach[8] that the Avos existed within Hashem's Mind even before Creation.) They and they alone merited angelic accompaniment in everything they did. These angels were primarily charged with safeguarding and protecting the world. Practically speaking, that meant protecting the Avos.

As difficult as this might be to the ears, we see elsewhere that it is true. When Moshe ascended on high to receive the Torah, the heavenly angels sought to forcibly remove him[9]. Hashem solved the "problem" by giving Moshe the appearance of Avraham. Moshe himself could not find a place among the angels without riding the wave of the Avos.

We have arrived at the true intent of the Rabbis in the first medrash we cited. How do we know that Yaakov dispatched angels rather than human emissaries? Because the affairs of the Avos were not

reckoned as the affairs of individuals, even great ones. They concerned the whole, rather than the part, i.e. they shaped the entire Jewish people, and ultimately all of the world. They were too important to leave to messengers of flesh and blood. All the more so in our narrative, in which Yaakov endeavors to return to the holy land of Eretz Yisrael.

1. *Based on Gur Aryeh Bereishis 32:3*
 2. Bereishis Rabbah 75:4
 3. Bereishis 28:12
 4. Bereishis Rabbah 75:3
 5. Bamidbar 20:12
 6. Yehoshua 2:1
 7. Cited by Rashi, supra 24:42
 8. Bereishis Rabbah 1:4
 9. Shemos Rabbah 28:1
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