

BLESSINGS AND OMENS - WRESTLING WITH ANGELS

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

And Yaakov sent angels before him to his brother, Eisav, to the land of Seir, the field of Edom. (32:4)

Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk zt"l notes that the word "lifanav - before him," seems unnecessary. From the context, it is obvious that Eisav lies somewhere ahead of Yaakov as he journeys from Charan, the home of his father-in-law Lavan, back home. He sends the angels to Eisav due to his concern over meeting his estranged brother after 34 years, and the anger he may still harbour towards him. Where else would he send the angels if not "ahead of him?"

The Kotzker's answer brings to mind a story. There once was a simple couple who had not been blessed with children. They were no longer young, and had more-or-less despaired at ever seeing an end to their loneliness. Then someone told them of a holy and pious Rebbe who lived in a distant village. The Rebbe was known to be a great miracle worker, and many other childless couples - along with the sick, poor, and destitute - swore by his blessings.

They gathered together a tidy sum of money, as is the custom when asking a Rebbe for a blessing (the money is usually distributed to the poor), and set out on their way. They had never before seen or met a Chassidic Rebbe, so they were quite surprised when told that it would likely be a few days before they could receive a private audience. Left with no choice, they made arrangements to stay in the village, and came every day to the Rebbe's house where they held a vigil outside his study in the hope of seeing him.

Finally, after almost a week, their turn came. They were admitted to the Rebbe's private chamber, and poured out their hearts to the Rebbe, beseeching him to confer his blessings upon them and promise them a child. "I can do it for you," the Rebbe said, "but it's not going to be cheap. I need 150 gold coins."

They had in fact prepared a handsome sum to present to the Rebbe, but this amount was way out of their ballpark. One hundred and fifty golden coins represented their entire life's savings - and then some. "But Rebbe," she protested, "if we give you everything we have, with what shall we raise our child? We will gladly donate generously, but we are not rich people that can afford such an exorbitant sum. Surely the Rebbe can bless us for a more reasonable amount."

"I told you it wouldn't be cheap," the Rebbe replied calmly. "If it is a child you desire, this is the price tag. I understand your quandary, but I remain firm; I can not bless you for even one coin less!"

Here the husband took up the plea. "Rebbe, please understand, we are simple people. No doubt you have many wealthy and powerful people that come for your blessings, but we are neither wealthy nor powerful. We would give anything for a child, but you're asking us to live a life of poverty in order to receive your blessings? It's not reasonable. What kind of blessing depends on extracting such an exorbitant sum from simple people such as us?!"

Fighting boredom, he allowed the husband to finish speaking. "Yes, yes - so is it going to be 150 coins or not?!"

That was enough. The husband was fed up with the Rebbe's unreasonable demands. He turned to his wife, "Come on - let's go. Who needs this Rebbe anyway? Hashem is great enough that He can give us His blessings without this 'Rebbe' and his golden coins."

As they stormed out, the Rebbe turned to a disciple. "They will be blessed with a child. At first, they put all their trust in me. A Rebbe can give a blessing, but a blessing is just a form of prayer. Before seeking blessings, one must recognize that Hashem is the source of all blessing; only then can the blessing have its effect. But if they put their trust in blessings and amulets and other types of segulos, they distance themselves from Hashem, and are further from being blessed than they were before. Now that they've put all their faith in the Almighty, I have no doubt they will be blessed with a child - and they saved themselves some money to boot."

It is written (Devarim/Deuteronomy 32:7), "Ask your father and he will tell you; your elders, and they will say it to you." Mefarshim (commentaries) explain that "your Father" refers to Hashem, Avinu she-ba'shamayim. Before going to "our elders" and asking for their advice and blessings, you must first beseech your Father from Whom all blessing and goodness flows.

The Kotzker says that the word "lifanav" is related to the term "mi- lifanav." This second word generally refers to sending someone away from one's presence, without any specific purpose other than to dismiss him. Although Yaakov charges his angels with a mission, his primary objective is just to get rid of them. In his words, Yaakov, "had no use for their assistance, being that Hashem can save without angels and without any justification."

This, by the way, was typical of the Kotzker's approach: Don't look for shortcuts and complicated segulos and omens; approach Hashem with simplicity and speak before Him like a child before his father. Yaakov had no desire to rely on anyone or anything when he was in danger - not even heavenly angels. He did what needed to be done, sending them and gracing Eisav with presents, but in his heart he knew his salvation lay with Hashem.

Later in the parsha, Yaakov (in contrast) wrestles with an angel, and after overcoming him, asks for his blessing. Perhaps metaphorically "wrestling the angel" represents our desire to "look towards the angels," in whatever form they take, for help, instead of relying on Hashem. Only after wrestling with the angel, and overcoming him, does he allow himself to accept a blessing. In the B'rich Shmei prayer that we recite when taking out the sefer Torah from the Ark, we say, "Not in any man do I put

my trust, nor on any angel do I rely - rather in G-d of Heaven, Who is the G-d of truth, Whose Torah is truth... In Him do I trust, and to His glorious and holy Name do I declare praises."

In our Friday night prayer, Shalom Aleichem, we greet the angels that accompany every Jew home from shul, and ask them for their blessings. But only after acknowledging that they are but messengers of, "the King Who reigns over all kings - the Holy One, Blessed be He."

Have a good Shabbos.

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