

This month's study with
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Angels: God's Agents on Earth

One of the more famous scenes in the Bible is Jacob's dream about a ladder spanning heaven and earth with angels ascending and descending upon it. Jacob's glimpse into the spiritual world that surrounds us all surprised even him. As we read in Scripture: *"When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, 'Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it'"* (Genesis 28:16).

In that moment, Jacob understood that God sends His angels to all places, though we are not aware of them. Angels obviously don't need a ladder, but the ladder symbolizes and teaches us that a tangible bridge connects humanity and God, the physical world to the heavenly realms. The angels are God's unseen couriers on this bridge, His *"ministering spirits"* as the author of the book of Hebrews in the Christian Bible called them (Hebrews 1:14).

Yet, God wants us to know about angels – to know that they exist even if we cannot see them. Angels are mentioned throughout the Jewish and Christian Bibles – from the angel who stands guard at the Garden of Eden with a fiery sword, to the three angels who visited Abraham with good news about the pending birth of Isaac. It was an angel who stopped Abraham from sacrificing Isaac, and another angel who rescued Hagar and Ishmael in the desert. In the Christian Bible, it is angels who foretold the birth of John the Baptist and Jesus (Luke 1:11-20; 1:26-38). Later, as Luke recorded, a heavenly host of angels proclaimed the birth of the baby Jesus (Luke 2:13) to shepherds in the fields outside Bethlehem.

In Judaism, we mention angels every single day in our prayers. We speak of them every night before we go to sleep. On the Sabbath, our tradition is that angels accompany us home from the synagogue, and our Sabbath meal begins by welcoming God's angels into our households.

So why does God want us to know about these invisible celestial beings that we cannot speak to or recognize? The answer is simple: God wants us to know about angels because He wants us to know how much He loves us.

The most common Hebrew word for angels is the word *malach*, which also can mean "messenger." This is because the clearest definition of an angel is a messenger of God. Angels function as God's army of helpers, charged with guiding, protecting, challenging, and helping human beings. As it says in Psalms, *"For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways"* (91:11).

If you have ever felt alone, forgotten, or forsaken, learning about the angels who walk among us will fill you with hope, peace, and gratitude. We are not alone. And while God is our ultimate Savior, He sends legions of His angels to assist us every single day.

Join us in this month's *Limmud* as we explore the role of God's angels – God's agents on earth – and how they affect our lives in very profound ways. We will learn about how angels help us at times in unexpected ways and how they continually assist us.

Rabbi Eckstein

*For he will
command
his angels
concerning you
to guard you in
all your ways;
they will lift you
up in their hands,
so that you will
not strike your
foot against a
stone.*

—Psalm 91:11-12



Messengers in Our Midst

“Don’t be afraid,” the prophet answered. “Those who are with us are more than those who are with them.”

— 2 Kings 6:16

If you have ever had the suspicion that a person you encountered was an angel in disguise, you are not alone. We need not look any further than Genesis 18 to see that angels can disguise themselves as people and pay us a visit when we need it the most.

The author of the book of Hebrews in the Christian Bible put it this way: *“Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it”* (Hebrews 13:2).

No less than Father Abraham found himself entertaining angels without realizing it! In the beginning of Genesis 18, we find Abraham sitting at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. What makes this noteworthy is that Abraham had just undergone circumcision three days earlier at the age of 99. However, according to Jewish teachings, Abraham longed to bestow kindness on others, and so he sat at the entrance of his tent looking and hoping for visitors.

When God saw how much Abraham desired to be hospitable, He sent him three angels. Abraham had no idea that his visitors were actually angels. The Bible refers to them as men, and Abraham treated them as such. He joyfully welcomed them and showered them with kindness.

Yet, according to Jewish tradition, these angels had several missions besides providing Abraham with company. They were sent to heal Abraham from his circumcision, and to tell Abraham and Sarah the good news that, despite their old age, they would have a child. Although the angels looked like men, they were God’s divine messengers, making Abraham’s life a little more joyful and carrying out God’s plan.

God does send us His angels. Sometimes we may have a feeling that we are dealing with a supernatural being, but more often than not, we are not aware. Most of the time we cannot see our angels at all.

In 2 Kings 6, the king of Aram had been waging war against Israel. However, somehow the king of Israel always seemed to know where the enemy army was located. Eventually, the king of Aram discovered that the prophet Elisha was able to see his whereabouts supernaturally and passed along that information to the king of Israel. The king of Aram decided to capture Elisha and put an end to this information funnel. When he learned where Elisha was staying, the king of Aram sent a mighty army, including hundreds of horses and chariots to surround the city and capture Elisha.

When Elisha and his servant noticed the siege surrounding the city, the servant began to panic, but Elisha told him, *“Don’t be afraid . . . Those who are with us are more than those who are with them.”*

Of course, the servant didn’t see anyone or anything coming to their aid. Whom was Elisha talking about? In the next verse, we read that Elisha prayed to God: *“Open his eyes, LORD, so that he may see.”* God answered his prayer: *“Then the LORD opened the servant’s eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha”* (2 Kings 6:17). What the servant saw were God’s angels surrounding Elisha, ready to protect and defend him.

We find a similar story in the Christian Bible when God sent an angel to rescue the apostle Peter from prison in Acts 12:7-10. The author Luke recorded that as the angel instructed Peter to grab his cloak and follow him: *“ . . . he [Peter] had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision.”*

While we cannot always see the angels that surround us, or recognize their identity when they are around us in human form, that does not mean that they are not there. Yes, seeing is believing, but equally as true: believing is seeing. While we might not physically see God’s angels in our midst, we can perceive the peace that comes with knowing they are here and that God can send His agents to help us when whenever we need them.

think about it

1. The Jewish sages teach that 99 percent of reality is actually hidden from our eyes, such as the work of angels or God’s miracles on our behalf. How does this perspective change your view on life?
2. Think of a time, or times, when the right person showed up at the right time to help you. Consider whether this person was an angel in disguise. How might that influence your thoughts about going through tough times in the future?
3. We have learned in our lesson that often God sends His angels to challenge us in order to help us grow. How does knowing this change your attitude or approach to the difficult people you encounter in your life?
4. Think of a time when someone or something was blocking you from getting what you wanted – such as a new job, a relationship, a move. In retrospect, how was not getting what you wanted a blessing in disguise?
5. God gives each of us the opportunity to be an angel whenever we do His bidding on earth. What mission do you think God has given to you? How might you fulfill that mission today?



Unexpected Encounters

So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak.

— Genesis 32:24

As we have previously discussed, angels can often show up in our lives as the kind acts of strangers, such as the mysterious man who showed up to help us at just the right time. But angels can also appear in the most unexpected forms. Angels might prevent us from doing what we want to do, or challenge us in ways that may manifest as extreme difficulties in our lives. But even if disguised as adversity, we must remember that angels are always God's agents sent to help us.

In Genesis 32, as Jacob prepared to meet his brother Esau for the first time since stealing his older brother's birthright and fleeing home, Jacob found himself alone. His family had crossed over the river ahead of him while he had gathered their remaining possessions. While Jacob was fully prepared for meeting Esau, he was not prepared for what happened next.

Scripture reads: *"So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak."* The Jewish sages teach that this nameless man was an angel. That angel's job was to give Jacob an opportunity to overcome his weaknesses. Before Jacob fought with the angel, he was just Jacob. After he overcame the angel, he was given a new name: Israel, as one who had struggled with both man and God and prevailed.

It is as though Jacob had become a new person through his trials and tribulations. This adversity and subsequent transformation was sent just when Jacob needed it most — just before the dangerous meeting with his brother. Perhaps it was this change in Jacob that transformed a potentially catastrophic encounter with his brother into an emotional reunion.

We don't expect angels to be adversarial, but often, it's those unexpected encounters with angels that help us most on our spiritual journey.

Consider the story of Balaam, who had set out to curse the Israelites, but God sent an angel to block him: *"... and the angel of the LORD stood in the road to oppose him"* (Numbers 22:22). This sword-wielding angel looked so frightening and threatening that Balaam's donkey, who could see the angel, refused to continue on his way. Balaam couldn't see the angel, and he could not understand why his donkey was being so troublesome.

The Jewish sages teach that although this supernatural being looked like the angel of death, God had actually sent the angel of mercy. In His infinite love and mercy, God was trying to stop Balaam from doing something that he shouldn't have been pursuing. God was trying to save Balaam from choosing the wrong path.

In the Christian Bible, we read about Joseph struggling

to do the right thing after discovering that his betrothed, Mary, was pregnant. He wanted to be faithful to the law, yet not publicly disgrace Mary, so he had decided to divorce her. That is, until *"an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream,"* and told Joseph to go ahead with plans to marry her (Matthew 1:18-21).

We may never know when we, like Jacob, are in the presence of angels sent to help us along our path, or, like Balaam, to send us on a different path altogether. We witness that in the Christian Bible when *"an angel of the Lord,"* directed Philip to leave his successful preaching ministry in Samaria and go into the desert where he had an amazing encounter with an official from Ethiopia (Acts 8:26-36).

Sometimes those we think have come to harm us are angles sent by God to help us. It might be the difficult stranger who challenges us to extend the limits of our patience or the street beggar who demands we grow our capacity for giving. Sometimes God's angels help us attain what our heart desires, but many times His angels protect us from what might have otherwise caused us harm, or help challenge us to become our very best.

Whatever an angel's role or message may be in our lives, we can be confident in this as well — God's angels are also here to protect us and guard us, as we read in the Psalms, *"The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them"* (34:7).

apply it...

- 1. CALL ON GOD'S ANGELS.** In Judaism, we mention God's angels surrounding us and protecting us as we go to sleep. When we go on a long journey, we ask that God's angels go before us and pave the way. We can, and should, ask for God's help through His messengers. (Psalm 91:11; Hebrews 1:14)
- 2. BE SOMEONE'S ANGEL.** Any time we do God's bidding, we are His messenger. Choose kindness, mercy, and love today. Help someone in need today. Be someone's angel by being the conduit through which God can answer his or her prayers. (Micah 6:8; Colossians 3:12-13)
- 3. CHOOSE FAITH OVER FEAR.** Often, when we feel called to make a change or try something new in our lives, the challenge seems daunting. We want to step out in faith, but our fear holds us back. Allow the knowledge that God will send His angels to encourage you to take your next step. (Joshua 1:9; Acts 18:9)
- 4. THANK GOD FOR ROADBLOCKS.** God's angels often are sent to stop us from doing something that might harm us or to prevent a situation that might be bad for us. We may think we know what is best for us, but only God knows. We can be confident that all He does is for our best. (Jeremiah 29:11; Ephesians 2:10)
- 5. LOVE YOUR ENEMY.** The people who challenge us most are often our greatest opportunities for growth. Our enemies can be our teachers; our adversaries, our trainers. Love those who challenge you; they are a catalyst for change and growth. (Proverbs 25:21-22; Luke 6:27)



Angels Among Us

“They have moved on from here,” the man answered. “I heard them say, ‘Let’s go to Dothan.’” So Joseph went after his brothers and found them near Dothan.
— Genesis 37:17

Perhaps you have experienced having the right person showing up at exactly the right time to help you out in unexpected ways. Or, maybe you have experienced meeting a stranger who said something or did something that changed the trajectory of your life. Many of us have experienced such occurrences, and we are left wondering if just maybe an angel has touched our lives.

In the Bible, we see this phenomenon most clearly in Joseph’s story. In Genesis 37, Jacob had sent Joseph to check on his brothers who had gone to Shechem with the family flock of sheep. Joseph traveled to Shechem, but when he got there, his brothers were nowhere to be found. Now, what should have happened was for Joseph to return home and tell his father that he couldn’t find his brothers. But that’s not what happened, and it’s all because of a person whom the Bible only identifies as *“the man.”*

This mysterious man asked Joseph for whom he was looking. When Joseph told the man that he was looking for his brothers who were out grazing their sheep, the man then told Joseph that they had moved on to Dothan. This seemingly insignificant piece of information offered by *“the man”* changes history.

We all know what happened next. Joseph went to Dothan, where his brothers ultimately sold him to a caravan of traders who took Joseph to Egypt. Joseph went through some extremely difficult times — including being thrown into prison — but eventually, he became the Prime Minister of Egypt. When the brothers faced famine years later, Joseph was able to provide for his family.

This is how the children of Israel ended up in Egypt, where they became slaves to the Egyptian Pharaoh, were ultimately redeemed, and so on and so forth. All because of *“the man”*!

There are other places in the Bible where *“a man”* or *“a man of God”* appears with an important message for the recipient. In Genesis 32:24, we read about Jacob’s wrestling match with *“a man”* that left him with an injured hip and a new name, Israel. In Joshua 5:13-14, as Joshua was preparing for battle against Jericho, he was met by a man with a *“sword in his hand,”* who announced that he was *“a commander of the army of the LORD,”* letting Joshua know he was on holy ground. In Judges 13:6, the birth of Samson was revealed to his mother by *“A man of God . . . He looked like one of God’s angels, terrifying to see”* (Judges 13:6, NLT).

As some have suggested, it’s possible these mystery men were really angels. Some also suggest that the man

mentioned in Genesis 37, who helped Joseph find his brothers, was a person functioning like an angel of God. On the simplest level, an angel is simply a messenger of God, and as we discussed earlier, the Hebrew word for “angel,” *malach*, can also mean messenger.

But just as God can send an angel to do His bidding (Psalm 103:20), He can also send a person to be His messenger as well. It stands to reason that a person who chooses to do God’s bidding can be considered an “angel” of God. Sometimes angels come disguised as people, but other times people can become one of God’s angels. For example, when David was about to avenge Nabal’s ill-treatment of his men by refusing them food in 1 Samuel 25, Nabal’s wife, Abigail, took it upon herself to stop David from acting rashly. In response, David said, *“Praise be to the LORD, the God of Israel, who has sent you today to meet me . . . if you had not come quickly to meet me, not one male belonging to Nabal would have been left alive by daybreak”* (1 Samuel 25:32-34).

We further read in the book of Esther, when the Jewish people were facing imminent annihilation, Mordecai said to Esther, the Jewish queen, *“And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?”* (Esther 4:14). Mordecai was suggesting to his cousin — and to us — God may have placed Esther in her position so that she may serve as His messenger in saving His people.

Yes, there are angels all around us. Some of them are spiritual beings, but others are flesh-and-blood like you and me. When someone makes a positive difference in your life, he or she is serving as God’s angel. And when we choose to serve God by being His messenger, we, too, can be one of His angels. In their 2016 book, *Angels on Earth*, bestselling authors Laura Schroff and Alex Tresniowski wrote about the incredible impact we can have in the lives of others when we look for opportunities to bless others, when we perceive the needs of others, and when we use our own unique gifts to help others.

Yes, every time we give charity to one of God’s children in need, we are acting as His agent on earth. When we speak words of encouragement to someone who needs them desperately, we can be an angel in someone else’s life. Every time we clothe the naked, feed the hungry, or give shelter to those with nowhere else to go, we are acting as God’s messenger. Our days are full with opportunities to be an angel to our family, friends, coworkers, and strangers. There are many angels among us — and we can be one of them, too.