

## דבר אחר | A Different Perspective

### Final Blessings

Rabbi Mychal Springer, Director, Center for Pastoral Education at JTS and Helen Fried Kirshblum Goldstein Adjunct Lecturer in Professional and Pastoral Skills, JTS

“We often refer to aggressive high-tech treatments as ‘heroic’ measures, but the real heroics take place in the living room of a ranch house or the bedroom of a small apartment, when a family tends to the care and comfort of a dying loved one . . . . I talked with many people who mourned the loss of a parent, sibling, spouse, or dear friend, but felt grateful for and transformed by the experience of helping the person pass.”

—Fran Smith and Sheila Himmel, *Changing the Way We Die: Compassionate End-of-Life Care and the Hospice Movement*

This model of family caring for the dying is embodied powerfully in this week’s parashah. Jacob, aware that he is dying, speaks plain words to his sons: “I am about to die” (Gen. 48:21) . . . “I am about to be gathered to my kin” (49:29). By giving voice to the reality that his life is ending, Jacob opens up sacred opportunities with his family. He creates moments to put his blessings into words and communicates his wishes for what will happen to his body: that he be buried with his family in the family cave so that he can be gathered to his kin in all ways. The naming of this truth enables closure and peace.

As a chaplain, I have accompanied many people and their families as they’ve journeyed toward death. It is a holy process, and I feel honored to be part of it each time. In my personal life, I’ve entered into this process with my brother-in-law, Peter Cicchino, who died at 39, and my father, James Springer, who died at 89. Peter lived out Jacob’s model with inspiring intentionality. He sent word to all his family and friends, “Come for a blessing.” I sat with people who were waiting for their time alone with Peter, nervous about what they would find. And with those who had received his blessing, overcome with the gift of his kindness and wisdom. Peter was able to imagine their futures even as he embraced the knowledge that his time on earth was coming to an end. And then I had my moment. I do not remember the content so specifically, just the experience of abundant love that we shared. And that love stays with me and guides me in my life.

When it was time for my father to die, 12 years later, Peter’s blessings were still palpable. My dad had Alzheimer’s and could not articulate eloquent blessings. But his very presence was a blessing. So was the opportunity to be with him until the end, when, like Jacob “he drew his feet into the bed and, breathing his last, he was gathered to his people” (49:33).

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# TORAH FROM JTS

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## Parashat Vayehi 5775

## פרשת ויחי תשע"ה



### The Angel at the Window

Rabbi Lisa Gelber, Associate Dean, The Rabbinical School, JTS

“What’s an angel? It’s a star that comes down from the sky at night to peek in your window . . . to make sure you’re sleeping and give you a little kiss on the head.”

This is one of the many reflections of my almost five year old since we added the blessing for protection of the Divine to our *tekes laila* (bedtime ritual) following our recitation of the *Shema* every evening.

We use the melody and text of Debbie Friedman (z”l):

*Miyemini Mikha’el, u-mismoli Gavriel,  
u-milifanai Uri’el, u-mi’ahorai Refa’el,  
ve’al roshi Shekhinah.*

May the angel Michael be at my right hand, and on my left, the angel Gabriel.

In front of me, Uriel, and behind me, Raphael.

And above my head, the Divine presence of Shekhinah.

From the outset, I added some hand motions to help my daughter learn the different directions. Always one to speak what’s on her heart and mind, we’d move one hand to the right, and she’d exclaim, “That’s an angel!” We’d move the next hand to the left and she’d call out, “That’s an angel!” and so on. While the practice of right, left, forward, and back was important, it was my waving our intertwined hands above her head that made the biggest impression. She loved “spreading the love,” so to speak, at the head of her bed where many of her stuffed animals were already tucked in.

Even a young child can appreciate intentional embodied practice. This reminds me each night of the power of the body to express blessing as strongly as the word. A simple waving of the hands with brief moments of song and prayer is sufficient to welcome God and create sacred space. This week, that experience has me thinking about angels. In our parashah, Vayehi, the final portion of the book of Bereishit, Jacob blesses his grandsons (Joseph’s sons) Ephraim (the younger) and Manasseh (the older) saying, “God, before whom my ancestors Abraham and Isaac walked, God who

shepherds me from my birth until this day: May the angel who redeems me from all evil bless the lads, and may my name be declared upon them, and the names of my ancestors Abraham and Isaac; and may they proliferate with abundance like fish within the land” (Gen. 48:15–16).

Jacob calls upon an angel, representative of God, to bring blessings and place the boys within an established lineage, extending into the future. One could understand that Joseph was to be blessed along with his sons. What’s the significance of Joseph receiving blessing along with his sons? The Zohar comments, “Rabbi Yosei said: ‘He blessed Joseph’ (Gen. 48:15) . . . The blessing was for his sons, and when his sons were blessed he was blessed, for the blessing of a person’s sons is his own blessing” (vol. 1, 227b).

Whether we are parents or have mentored another person of any age, we know that the blessing and reward of the other comes to us as well. It is a privilege to watch that person grow into his or her most full, authentic self. Recognition and appreciation of the depth and beauty of that person by the world is a bonus blessing for us; a gift by association. Not minimal or merely proximate association, but a witnessing and affirmation of our presence, if only behind the scenes as, dare I say, an angel.

Invitations to serve as God’s messenger and make way for the holy abound. Bob Zimmerman (z”l), a former congregant, teacher, and friend, understood the role of the angel as a catalyst for helping another to become him or herself. While he would never have dubbed himself *malakh* (angel), he certainly lived as one. I recently came across a file Bob left for me after he taught a session on the siddur. It included all of his handouts (numbered), along with a detailed Post-it outlining the materials within, many of which were dedicated to the choreography of the *tefillah* (prayer). Flipping through the colored pages, I imagined the focused attention he gave each participant, the discernment in which he engaged in assessing each student, his acute ability to push each person from a place of strength to engage with their full selves, and the humility and love, real love, he extended to all of his students. Bob never strove to create more Bobs. He saw his job as offering support, encouragement and, yes, more than a little nudge, as people lived into their role as divine beings, created in God’s image.

The Rambam taught, “Everyone entrusted with a mission is an angel . . . All forces that reside in the body are angels” (*Guide for the Perplexed*, II, 6). Bob was mission driven. You could see it in the way he carried himself, or rather ran from place to place; the joy he experienced in taking out the Torah scroll and reviewing the week’s reading with a pre-bar/bat mitzvah student, (whether child or adult); the pleasure he took in honoring guests—and everyone who entered the shul was a “worthy guest” to Bob—the seriousness with which he arranged for the observance of

yarzheits at morning minyan; the pride he exuded in speaking of members of his family.

Bob lived into the *middah* (character trait) of *hesed* (loving-kindness). He internalized and externalized the maxim of Pirkei Avot (*vehevei mekabel et kol ha'adam besaver panim yafot*), to “Greet the entirety of a person with a warm smile” (M. Avot 1:15). Bob’s angelic nature shone through because he met people where they were. He understood *hesed* as a noticing and accompanying presence, not as a means to help oneself or be witnessed as a *gadol* (a towering figure) in the world of loving-kindness.

This month of January, we draw our attention to the *middah* of *hesed* within the context of JTS’s Tikkun Middot (Character Development) Project, sponsored by the Institute for Jewish Spirituality and funded by a grant from the John Templeton Foundation. Focusing on a set *middah* helps to infuse day-to-day experience with intention. Noticing what is happening within invites us to witness how we interact with the world.

As we conclude this first book of the Torah and move into the next portion of our narrative as a people, I encourage us to take on a *hesed* practice in the coming weeks. For five minutes each day, offer a warm smile and authentic attention to those whom you encounter. Notice how you feel being present to another in this way. Are you anxious? Does your face move easily into a smile? What discomfort arises in intentionally noticing another? How are you deciding whom to notice? Take care not to judge your feelings. When those judgments arise, nod to them and let them float away.

I note the final words on the Post-it in Bob’s folder: “*Thanx for the opportunity.*” Looking at the brief message scrawled in the bottom corner of the green paper while sitting at the foot of my sleeping child’s bed, I’m tempted to look out the window and greet a sparkling star. Instead, I smooth the hair of my angelic looking girl and smile bright and wide. Thank you my friend, teacher, and angel for engaging so fully and demonstrating so lovingly how to bring blessing with our hands, feet, and attention. May your lessons be as numerous as the stars shining down to illuminate the windows and sacred souls within.

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