

The Angels of our Nature
Rosh Hashanah 5781 - Rabbi David Z. Vaisberg - Temple B'nai Abraham

One high holy day evening coming out of a particularly difficult year, a tailor sat at his kitchen table and made a list with two columns. On one side, under the heading “My sins” he put items like “over-charged Goldman for a pair of pants,” “didn’t show up to make the minyan,” and “said unpleasant things about Moishe behind his back.” For the other heading, he wrote “God’s sins,” and listed, “some people lost their jobs and couldn’t find work,” “a child died from the flu this winter,” and “the shtetl was charged an unfair tax that we struggled to pay.” And it worked out that for every sin that the tailor put in his column, there were several in God’s. The tailor suggested to God that it might be better for everyone if they let each other off the hook. At services that Shabbat Shuvah, the tailor told his rabbi, Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev, of his lists. Levi Yitzhak responded, “You fool! You had God in your grips and you let God off easy!”

This past year is one for the records. We all certainly have our lists of things we could have done better, but God’s list is off the charts. Natural disasters across the globe too numerous to count. Cultural disasters taking us by force. Our nation more divided than any of us have ever seen. The racism whose tendrils still hold tight to the minds and actions of too many. And of course, COVID-19, the virus that brought society to its knees, from which we are all in mourning, and struggling in so many ways. We were hit so very hard, early on, with the death of our beloved congregational president and my dear friend, Dr. Bruce Greene, whose burial in isolation took place only a few hours after my burying Miriam’s grandmother who caught COVID in her nursing home. God’s list from 2020 is long.

We are reeling, running on empty, barely able to keep up with the safety precautions, losing the patience to stay at home on our own, or at home with kids, or at home working where days turn into nights and back into days. We are apart from all that we know and hitting our limits.

This is where Hagar found herself in today’s Torah reading. She’d suffered plenty as Sarah’s maidservant and Abraham’s concubine. Hagar was the one who gave Abraham his first son Ishmael, only to have that son rejected as Abraham’s heir by God’s command. After what must have been years of experiencing an emotionally painful

dynamic with Sarah, the unthinkable takes place. Abraham casts Hagar and Ishmael out with nothing but bread and a skin of water, which wasn't nearly enough for survival. The Torah tells us that Hagar wandered in the hot wilderness of Beer Sheva, and that when the water was gone, she placed her son under a bush and distanced herself, not for his safety, but so she wouldn't have to see him die. It was too much to bear. And she raised her voice and cried.

Then came the moment we were waiting for. The intervention. God heard the boy's voice, and a *malakh*— an angel, a messenger of God—called out from the skies above. It said, What is going on with you Hagar? Don't be afraid. All will be ok. Your son will survive, and he too will be the source of a great nation. And we're told that God then opened Hagar's eyes, and before her was a well of water.

Perhaps this *was* a divine miracle—God realized the tragedy of the situation and intervened. Or, perhaps this was simply a messenger, a passerby, someone who Hagar interpreted as God-sent, there at the perfect moment, with words of kindness and a calm approach, able to point out the water nearby. Perhaps Hagar just couldn't see out of her pain on her own—she needed help.

The key here is in the word *malakh*, often translated as angel. See, *malakh* doesn't technically mean angel; the word means messenger— someone who is there to communicate, to connect, to bring something to someone at that moment of need. And, one does not need to be a divine being to be a messenger on a mission from God. It is a role any of us can hold at any time. And we have.

While that list of things gone wrong has gotten longer, I have witnessed another list of things gone right, of people serving as those divine messengers for others: for our children and grandchildren, our friends, our communities, and people we've never even met.

I have seen in this crisis extraordinary *chesed* and *rachamim*—loving-kindness and compassion—in TBA members reaching out to others through volunteering to make phone calls, sending kind messages, and risking their own health to help others more

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vulnerable.

I have seen a remarkable commitment by our congregants and their families to Jewish learning and rituals over Zoom and Facebook, putting forth so much energy to keep our tradition alive.

I have seen a deep thirst for social justice, with many of us standing up for others with less power, or in danger, whether in person or from a distance.

I have seen people in their many professions put themselves at risk to support and care for the many who rely upon them.

I have seen hope, generosity, love, compassion, and empathy. I have seen a commitment to life and to each other. And I have seen grit— that against everything going on, we continue to take those next steps, not so much for ourselves, but for everyone else.

The Mussar tradition teaches us to emulate God, taking God's many attributes and behaviors described in the Torah and working to develop them in our own thoughts and deeds.

Friends, this year has demonstrated to me that we are doing exactly this— emulating and embodying those divine attributes. Pushed to the limits, we are still here. We are making it to the next day. We are engaged, and holding each other up.

Sometimes we may feel like Hagar, ready to give up. We must remember, however, that we are also *malakhim*. We are God's emissaries and actors in the world. We have the abilities and God-given mandate to be that difference for others, to raise up those suffering, to bring water to the thirsty, and to promote life, and love, and community.

While the column listing God's errors is particularly long, I believe that the list of divinely-inspired blessings is far longer, because of the blessings we bring as God's angels into the world. And in the greatest trial humanity has faced in most of our lifetimes, I have seen the best of humanity come through. That spark of the divine in

each of us is shining.

This 5781, let the sparks shine through. Let us dive into God's work. Let us double down in connecting with and encouraging each other as individuals and as part of our community. Let us double down in showing up whenever we are needed. Let us keep up the struggle, because everyone is counting on us, and because we are counting on everyone else. We will all have our moments of desperation, but we will also be those angels, bringing aid and blessing to those who need us now.

This new year, this Rosh Hashanah, may we recognize ourselves for who we are to each other, to this community, and to this world and behave accordingly. We are on a mission from God. We are the messengers, we are the *malakhim*, and may we be blessed with strength and renewal, so that we can keep up the good work.

L'shanah tovah. A good year to all.