

## God, the Angel, and the Jews

By Rav Ezra Bick

Generally speaking, when we come across a reference to angels in the Torah, we do not necessarily have to engage in an extensive "pshat" investigation. In most cases, the intention of the verse is to basically refer to God, perhaps with the added import that it is a relatively indirect action of God. The word "malakh" means "agent" and angels are heavenly agents for God, closely associated with Him. So, for instance, when an angel calls out to Hagar in the wilderness and tells her to return to Sarai ([Bereishit 15,7-12](#)), we understand it to refer to the voice of God. This impression is strengthened by the fact that the angel, in that case, uses first person singular case when he is clearly referring to an action of God. "He said to her: I shall greatly increase your seed; it shall not be numbered for multitude" (7,10). The same thing takes place with the angel who stops Avraham from slaughtering Yitzchak ("... for now I know that you are fearful of God, for you did not withhold your son, your only one, from ME" [Bereishit 22,12](#)), and in other places. This does not mean that "malakh" is just another name for God, which is clearly not true. My point is only that there is a close association of the angel with God, and the main point of the verse is to tell us that God has acted. Only after one understands that could an additional question be raised as to why in this particular case the action is attributed to an angel rather than to God directly.

In our parasha, however, we have a case where the immediate pshat of the reference to an angel is not to associate him with God, but to distinguish him from God. An action takes place with an angel, and because the angel is NOT God, certain consequences are in place. This forces us to pay much more attention to the pshat of what the angel is meant to signify, and why an action of an angel is different than one of God.

Behold, I am sending an angel before you to guard you on the way, and to bring you to the place that I have prepared.

Beware of him, and listen to his voice, and do not disobey him, for he will not pardon your sins, for My name is in his midst.

But if you will obey his voice, and do all that I shall speak, then I shall be the enemy of your enemies and the adversary of your adversaries.

For My angel shall go before you and bring you to the Emori, the Chitti, the Prizi, the Canaani, the Chivi, and the Yevusi, and wipe them out. ([Shemot 24,20-23](#)).

Since God is speaking here, and saying He will send an angel, we cannot simply view the angel as another way of God expressing Himself. It seems to be important that this role is being fulfilled by an angel and not by God, which is why God needs to stress that the people must obey the angel. The

contrast between the angel and God himself is highlighted in the third verse, "But if you will obey HIS voice, and do all that I shall speak...." The specific point of this section seems to be, not merely that God is promising to bring them to Canaan, but that He is choosing a particular method of doing so, through the agency of an angel. Our task is to understand what this particular method means and what it entails.

### A. Which Angel

My argument that in this section, we must distinguish between God and the angel in order to understand the basic pshat is based on the syntax. If a story mentions an angel, the basic pshat is that God has done something. In our case, where GOD says that He is sending an angel, the verse forces us to pay attention to two different actors, God on the one hand, and the angel on the other. Because of this, I am claiming that there is a difference, apparently, in the leadership of the angel, and that of God, were He to directly lead the Jews through the desert. This second point is, admittedly, debatable. There is no clear statement in our parasha that the leadership of the angel, as opposed to God, has practical ramifications. On the contrary, the only explicit reference to a ramification of the angel's leadership – "do not disobey him, for he shall not pardon your sins" – is explained because "My name is in his midst." One might be justified in understanding this as EQUATING the angel with God, rather than distinguishing between them. The angel bears God's name, so you should relate to him exactly as you would relate to me. This would lead to the interesting conclusion that God does not pardon sins. This conclusion will surely surprise anyone brought up on Jewish philosophy.

However, the argument that one must distinguish between God and the angel is based not only on syntax, but on direct inference as well – if we accept the claim of Rashi that the angel here is identical with that proposed by God in parashat Ki-Tisa.

After the sin of the golden calf, God agrees not to destroy the Jews, and tells Moshe:

Ascend from here, you and the people whom you have taken out of the land of Egypt, to the land which I have promised to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Yaakov, saying: I shall give it to your seed.

I shall send an angel before you, and I shall expel the Canaani, the Emori, the Chitti, the Prizi, the Chivi, and the Yevusi.

To a land flowing with milk and honey, FOR I WILL NOT ASCEND IN YOUR MIDST, for you are a stiff-necked people; lest I devour you on the way. (33,1-3)

Here there can be no question that the angel is an alternative to direct leadership of God. God explains that if He accompanies the Jews, they will be destroyed, and therefore He is sending an angel instead.

Rashi (23,20) states that the angel in our parasha is the same as in Ki-Tisa, and that our parasha is a prophecy of the outcome of the sin of the golden calf episode. What is more, Rashi (following Chazal) understands Moshe's demand, "if Your countenance not go with us, do not take us up from here" (33,15) to be a rejection of the angel's leadership. Moshe demands that God Himself lead the Jews to the promised land, and God acquiesces and agrees:

God said to Moshe: This thing as well, which you have demanded, shall I grant, for you have found favor in My eyes and I know you by name. (17)

This makes it clear that the leadership of the angel is an inferior form of leadership, which is why Moshe rejects it. Consequently, in order to explain why God is telling Moshe in parashat Mishpatim that He will send an angel INSTEAD OF HIMSELF, before the sin of the golden calf, Rashi states that it was a prophetic statement, justified only in light of the future events.

This understanding of our parasha raises obvious difficulties. One concerns the response of Moshe. If, after the sin of the golden calf, when it was justified, Moshe nonetheless objected to God's plan to send an angel, why was he silent now, when it appears to be totally unjustified? A second question relates to the content of the prophecy itself. If, in the end, God had indeed sent the angel in His place, it might make sense for the verse to here indicate that, since in fact it would be true. But in view of Rashi's assertion that God eventually relents and personally escorts the Jews to the land of Canaan, why would He state here that an angel will lead them? This is not a prophecy of what WILL happen, but only of what should have happened, in light of as-yet nonexistent events. What is the purpose of such a statement now? Or, to ask a somewhat different question, how was Moshe supposed to understand God's promise to send an angel?

An even more difficult question concerns the contradiction between the two parshiot. In our parasha, God states that the angel will NOT forgive the sins of the people. In Ki-Tisa, God states that He is sending an angel because the angel will not react to the sins of the "stiff-necked people" the way God Himself would, by "devouring" them. Is the angel more or less forgiving than God? How can this be the same angel? (See Ramban, for a discussion of these questions).

The Ran (Derashot HaRan 4) adds another, theological, question. The entire parasha we are discussing seems to be telling the Jews that God is sending an angel in His place, and that we should relate to the angel as THOUGH HE WERE GOD. "Beware of him and listen to his voice, and do not disobey him." And, even more shockingly, "for he will not pardon your sins." This sounds, says the Ran, "as though we have been delivered nearly to accepting him as a god, intermediate between God and us... but we should not receive any command or prohibition from anyone other than God alone." This question of the Ran will be especially troubling after last week's shiur, where I claimed that God Himself emphasizes the lesson of the giving of the Torah at Sinai as showing that there can be no intermediaries between God and Israel. Why does our parasha seem to be stating the opposite?

## **B. Natural and Supernatural Providence**

The Ran, as part of his answer to these questions, explains the metaphysical meaning of "angels" in the Torah. He explains that when God's actions in the world are in proportion to the causes in the world, this is described as being done by an angel, meaning by an agent who acts in accordance with rules. For instance, this would be true of any act of Divine Providence that took place within the laws of nature. For that reason, the Rambam states that the laws of nature are "angels," meaning agents of God's will. The same holds true of moral rules as well. The basic moral rule is reward and punishment; in other words, justice. By this rule, a man gets what he deserves. If a man gets only what he deserves, whether reward for virtue or punishment for sin, he is under the providence of an "angel." In other words, "angel" means the providence of rules, where the law of cause and effect holds. The effect cannot be greater than the causes. The angel does not diminish God's responsibility for the effect, but merely signifies that the effect is according to the rules of nature or of Divine Providence.

By contrast, a direct action of God signifies a PERSONAL response of God to the human condition. Here, there is no necessity for proportion between cause and effect, as the law of cause and effect does not bind God. Causes are, in fact, irrelevant, since God Himself and His will are the only, and the direct, cause. The action could be attributed to God's love, or to His anger, but in any event it is attributed to the personal care of God.

In this way the Ran explains the apparent contradiction between the two angels we have examined. If one sins, the rule says that one will be punished. The rules do not allow for pardon, since that violates justice. How could one's condition be different than what one deserves? Pardon for sin, in the eyes of an "angel," is like a match deciding to burn without friction, "pardoning" one who neglected to strike it. Hence, "he will not pardon your sins." On the other hand, the punishment will always "fit the crime," and therefore will probably not lead to total destruction. But if God is directly leading the Jews, and they, a stiff-necked people, rebel and not follow His ways, the possibility that "I devour you on the way" exists. Personal attention is a wonderful – but potentially exceedingly dangerous – thing.

But, it is important to remember, there is no necessary contradiction between the two. God can transfer the providence over the Jews to natural and proportional cause without abandoning them. The two can exist at the same time. If there is no fear of "lest I devour you on the way," God has no reason to remove His personal attention from the Jews, even while subjecting them to a set of rules whereby the results are dependent on the preparation of the proportional causes.

## **C. From Egypt to Eretz Yisrael**

We can now understand the message in our parasha. The exodus from Egypt was totally "non-angelic." As Chazal put it (in the famous passage found in the Pesach Haggada), "I, and not an angel; I, and not a seraph; I, and not a messenger." The miracles were neither in proportion to the spiritual state of the Jews, nor did they work through the forces of nature. But the goal of the exodus is to reach the Land of Israel, to settle in it, work the land, be responsible for developing it, and in general to lead a natural life under God's providence according to the Torah. God, in our parasha, is not

threatening to leave the Jews, but to relate, on a day-to-day basis, according to the rules of the Torah itself. This change is inherent in the giving of the Torah, a set of rules, and the entering into a covenant between the Jews and God, a contract which defines behavior. Moshe has no objection to this "angel;" on the contrary, it is the fulfillment of the Torah he is helping to bring and a necessary condition of life in the promised land, his goal.

This is emphasized in the verses themselves .

"Behold, I am sending an angel before you to guard you on the way, and to bring you to the PLACE THAT I HAVE PREPARED." The purpose of the angel, the agent, is to bring you to the place that God HAS PREPARED. A place prepared is one where the conditions of life are present and you have to utilize them, not a place where God will immediately provide what you need. If God is personally reacting, there is no need for any preparation whatsoever.

The quid pro quo of the "angelic" relationship is made explicit in the third verse. "But if you will obey his voice, and do all that I shall speak, then I shall be the enemy of your enemies and the adversary of your adversaries." If you will obey the Torah, there is no limit to what will result. One does not have to fear that the results will be less momentous than the victory over Egypt. The verses continue to describe how total will be the victory in Canaan, and how wonderful can be the life in Eretz Yisrael.

There will be no miscarriage or barren in your land, the number of your days I will fulfill.

I shall send My terror before you, and kill all the people to whom you shall come....

I shall send hornets before you, and they will drive out the Chivi, the Canaani, and the Chitti from before you. (23,26-28)

All of these verses describe agents – My terror, the hornets – which will produce a result which to us appears miraculous. Even miracles are "angelic," if they are deserved. Angelic providence, then, is not a negative form of providence; on the contrary, it is the goal of living a life according to Torah in a world with laws and rules. This is the first thing God explains after giving the "rules," the mishpatim, which follow the decalogue itself.

The sin of the golden calf changed this, mandating not only angelic providence but the removal of direct personal providence which might have overridden the first at a time of great sin, especially a sin like the calf which was a personal rejection of God. God proposes therefore not only to send an angel, but to remove Himself from direct contact with the people. This Moshe rejects, for without the personal presence of God, he feels, there is no point in going to Eretz Yisrael and living under angelic providence. To this claim of Moshe God accedes.

Visit our website: <http://etzion.org.il/en>