

Terumah 5783
You're My Angel Baby
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Who knows what the following three phrases share in common?

Little elephant

My flea

Diving fish swooping geese

All are terms of endearment, from Thai, French, and Chinese languages, respectively. Here in America, we favor “baby,” or its shortened form, “babe” (because of course it makes much more sense to call an adult romantic partner an infant than an elephant, right?).

I'm conducting an unofficial poll. You are not required to participate, but I hope you will because I am genuinely curious. Please raise your hand if you have ever called a loved one “baby” or “babe,” or if you have been called “baby” or “babe” by a loved one...Okay, hands down.

How about “angel baby?” You don't have to raise your hands. I don't want to know! But there's something about angel babies, and ordinary ones, isn't there? We see them in chapel frescoes, paintings, and tacky little cards. Pop singers croon to their lovers, “You're my angel baby” (cf. Rosie & The Originals 1961 song “Angel Baby”; 2022 song “ by Troye Sivan).

Even the great sage Rashi is taken by the idea of babies with wings, in connection with today's parashah. I'm talking about the cherubim, or *k'ruvim* in Hebrew, those winged creatures that are to be sculpted above the Ark of the Covenant—the *Aron haBrit*. What are these mysterious beings and why does God need them there?

Here's what we know: Continuous with the gold overlaying the Aron, two *k'ruvim* are to be formed at the top, one on each side, positioned with their wings spread out facing each other, shielding the cover with their wings, each creature gazing toward the Ark (Exodus 25:16-20). The tapestries for the Mishkan, to be woven of fine twisted linen, also are to work in designs of *k'ruvim* Exodus 36:8, 35).

The sculptors and weavers know that these *k'ruvim* must have wings and faces. But what are these *k'ruvim* supposed to look like? The artists' compliance, with no

expressed confusion, suggests that they know what to create. Could “you’re my angel baby” have its roots in today’s Torah reading? Well, let’s see.

The Talmud attempts to describe the k’ruvim. Rabbi Abuhu spawns the tradition of k’ruvim as chubby babies, forming a throne for the Divine, (Chagigah 13; b. *Sukkah* 5b), by playing with the root of the word, reading it as ke - ravya, like - a child. This etymology actually makes no linguistic sense. And nowhere do our Biblical sources hint that the k’ruvim are baby-faced. In fact, no infantile, angel-like creatures can be found in all of Scripture. We must ask why this rabbi jumps through linguistic hoops to say that the k’ruvim are babies. What purpose is an image of God sitting on winged infants intended to serve?

Rav Katina offers a suggestion from another illogical word play. He imagines the k’ruvim as lovers who actually move and embrace, when Israelites bring festival offerings symbolizing God’s love for the People of Israel (*Yoma* 74a).

Clearly, whatever our ancestral artists in the desert knew about these creatures was not known to our sages, who wondered about them.

The medieval commentators weigh in with various interpretations. Rashi endorses the idea that the k’ruvim are baby-faced (*Sukkah* 5a). Others say they’re birds (Rashbam and Chizkuni), or study partners in a *beit midrash* (R. Jacob ben Asher—“*Ba’al haTurim*”), or representations of God’s attributes of mercy and justice (Rav Chaim Paltiel), or angels (Rav Bachya ben Asher). Some augment Rav Katina’s earlier idea of the k’ruvim as lovers, emphasizing the mitzvah of procreation. And some say that they are frightening, holy beasts, like the *k’ruvim* that God placed outside the Garden of Eden to block Adam and Eve from re-entering (Ibn Ezra, based on Gen. 3:24; also based on a reference in Ezekiel—see R. Joseph Bekhor Shor).

So we see that the angel baby idea is only one, farfetched idea among many. That’s what makes it fascinating that Rashi endorses it and that it becomes the most predominant image that sticks. We should wonder why.

Understanding how symbols like the k’ruvim were used in the ancient Near East can shed light on what they might have meant to our ancestors. The name *keruv* seems come from the Akkadian *karibu*, whose root *karābu*, which means “bless.” In the ancient Near East, *karibu* were believed to be genies or lower level divine beings.

It seems odd, then, that extensive evidence reveals *karibu* as frightening beasts guarding palaces or drawing chariots. Our TanNaKh also depicts k’ruvim in those ways, although not in today’s parashah. But there also is evidence, from the ancient Near

East, of *karibu* in other cultures that resemble our *k'ruvim* over the Aron. In those images, creatures spread their wings above or on either side of a king or deity, sometimes facing each other, like the *k'ruvim* over the Aron, protecting or glorifying their subject. Those images were especially popular in Egypt and the Levant. But were they baby-faced? Based on the evidence, no.

Later, in Greco-Roman culture, winged creatures with baby faces are depicted as physical manifestations of spirits with various influences on human lives. I could not find a source to explain the emergence of baby faces on those angelic creatures, but they would have been in the minds of our biblical commentators.

Let's regroup. We have learned that the *k'ruvim* fit a protective or glorifying motif that likely was familiar to our ancestors. We can be pretty sure that these *k'ruvim* were not of the scary sort, but we have not learned anything to help us know what their faces looked like.

Here's what I think: Neither our ancestors nor we are meant to know what the faces of the *k'ruvim* look like, angled-down and wing-covered as they are. Imagining, but not seeing their faces, only knowing that they are turned toward Torah and toward one another, and that God speaks from the space between them and Torah, invites the viewer into a relational framework and space. Although we are unlikely to discover exactly how the *k'ruvim* would have resonated for our ancestors, we are invited into that same relational space now. It is a place where God makes room for us to open to the truths we need to hear, a space where we can engage spiritually as parts of a larger whole, where we feel seen, heard, known, and held. And in such a space, the winged baby idea turns out to be potentially very useful for us.

In a tantalizing song Zoomed out from her bedroom during the pandemic, the British singer-songwriter known as Dodie describes the object of her unrequited affection in these terms: "She smells like lemongrass and sleep. She tastes like apple juice...peach...birthday cake...storytime and Fall" —all childhood images bespeaking innocent pleasure, safety, sweetness, warmth, nostalgia, and joy. That's how this singer feels when she thinks about this other person. Her quirky song captures something profound.

The image of a baby is unique among terms and symbols of endearment because babies are real things, and their use as symbols connects us to how we feel when we relate to them in real life. There is some literature on why we associate the most fundamental aspects of our vitality—connection and commitment—with baby symbols. Babies inspire faith in the unbounded potential of humanity and the wonder of human unfolding. They connect us emotionally to our best selves, loving selflessly, duty-bound

and desiring wholeheartedly to care for and protect another. Babies awaken awe for the mystery of what lies outside of us and for relationship and attachment. They rekindle a sense of newness and the desire to discover and to develop. Babies remind us of our vulnerability and draw up feelings of trust, being loved, being cared for and being wished well.

Those are the feelings we should be bringing to the most important things in life. By tapping their purest and most uncomplicated experiences of love, safety, seeing, and knowing, symbolic babies could have signaled a space for our ancestors to bring the Divine presence close, and their wings likely reinforced the idea of God's indwelling presence. I like to think that's why Rashi directs us to read this text and picture the k'ruvim as baby-faced. He wants to invite us into that space of pure relationship, too.

He's not the only one. Contemporary rabbis write of the k'ruvim as bookends to the human experience of exile and return to home—home, meaning the experience of being spiritually and emotionally centered, open, filled with wonder, awe, curiosity, and a sense of abundance. That home is symbolized by Eden, a symbolic place to which we strive every day to return. The Mishkan with Torah at its center offer a spiritual return home, through Torah, flanked by k'ruvim that invite us into relationship with God. It's a lovely idea.

And yet I must admit that I'm not transformed by it. Imagining baby-faced k'ruvim over the Aron in the Mishkan may have worked for our ancestors but I suspect we need a different fix. We, too, yearn for home, that place where we feel attuned, connected, vibrant, and purposeful, joyful, and part of a meaningful whole in which we are significant and to which we are accountable. How might we build a space like that? Because really, that's our purpose here. We don't come here merely to turn the pages in the siddur, read Torah and eat Cynthia's kugel, which I'm sure will be delicious. We do those things *here*, because we yearn to feel our vitality in a place where we can open our hearts to engage in genuine relationship, where we can hope, care, sing, cry, rejoice, and grow.

The Divine voice is still calling to us (Exodus 25:8):

וְעָשׂוּ לִי מִקְדָּשׁ וְשִׁכְנֹתַי בְּתוֹכְכֶם:—Build for me a sanctuary, and I will dwell within you, in your midst. God asks for relationship with all of us, together, genuinely, purely, lifting each other up with compassion and trust.

We have no winged k'ruvim to grace the Holy Word. The feelings we need will not come from statues or furniture, however lovely our furniture may be. The feelings we need come from us, together, feeling our way through the things we do together from this

Mikdash on Mound Street. In one another and a sacred place, we have more than we need, if we can only let ourselves feel it.

About 15 minutes ago we held an actual baby between the עצי חיים, the tree of life poles on either side of our Torah scroll, and proclaimed the name by which he will be known to God and the Jewish People. His parents chose the biblical name Ichavod, from the First Book of Samuel. There, Ichovod was a priest who was born on the day when the very same Aron we've been talking about was captured by the Philistines. Ichavod means "Where is the glory?" Where *is* it? Look around. It's right here. And what a marvelous reflection of what we've been talking about—not imagined baby faces sculpted of gold, but a real, live, beautiful baby hovering over the Law, inviting us into relationship with the most loving parts of ourselves.

May we say yes to the invitation, and may the Presence we share move us all to extend connection and purpose out from this sacred place.

Rabbi Zev Farber of the Shalom Hartman Institute wrote a comprehensive review of both our commentators interpretations of the k'ruvim and comparative evidence from the ancient Near East to point toward an understanding of their function as symbols above the Ark in the desert ("The Cherubim: Their Role on the Ark in the Holy of Holies," February 6, 2014. This article proved helpful to me in organizing the various bits of material I had sources. Rabbi Farber's article can be accessed at <https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-cherubim-their-role-on-the-ark-in-the-holy-of-holies>).