

Vayishlach 5781
Kedusha, A Vort for a Tisch
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*“B’sheim Hashem Elokei Yisrael,
Mimini Michael umismoli Gavriel
Umil’fanai Uriel ume’achorai Rafael
V’al roshi Shechinat Kel.”*

*“In the name of the Lord, the God of Israel,
May [the angel] Michael be at my right hand; [the angel] Gabriel at my left;
And before me, [the angel] Uriel; behind me, [the angel] Raphael;
and above my head the Divine Presence”*

That song is a bedtime prayer. It asks that we not be alone as we close our eyes and go to sleep. It seeks the accompaniment of angels. We like to feel that we’re not alone and that there are many Divine forces supporting us, even if we cannot see them. Sometimes, I share this prayer with people as part of pastoral care.

In our Tanakh, angels are often mistaken for people, and people often are called angels. The line of distinction between the two feels thin, and I would suggest that is by design.

When Jacob wrestles with the angel in today’s parashah, he appears not to know until afterward that it’s an angel, and not just some random guy. It shouldn’t surprise us that the commentators have a great deal to say about the meanings and implications of their wrestling episode. The Gemara uses it as a springboard to teach that the angels’ main purpose is to praise God (Chulin 91b), and that we humans should emulate them. The interesting question is how we should emulate the angels in praising God. It’s not just by singing, or by praying. Another important way to praise God has to do with how we accompany other human beings in sacred ways. For example, the Gemara suggests, students should walk alongside their teachers, like angels, protecting them. In fact, the rabbis go so far as to say that when we emulate angels by doing good deeds, God actually creates new angels to accompany us (in Midrash Tanchuma). Thus, the more good we do in this world, the more good is produced, all of which serves as praise of the Divine. When we bring goodness into the world, we make God more manifest and glorified. And one way God’s glory increases, perhaps, is that more angels get created, to run around among us. Whether or not that is so, it can be instructive to suppose that we, and the people around us, could, possibly, be angels in disguise.

It has been suggested that I use some of our Zoom time together on Shabbat mornings to explore the prayers we say. I'd like us to consider the *Kedusha* prayer. You can find it in Siddur Sim Shalom on page 444, and 187 in the Lev Shalem.

Kedusha invites us to daven with angels. We sing what the angels sing, and we imitate their choreography when they praise God in the visions of Isaiah and Ezekiel.

"Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh," Isaiah hears them say, as they move up and down (Isaiah 6:3).

"Barukh k'vod Adonai mim'komo" - Ezekiel hears, as they turn from side to side to witness the glorification of God (Ezekiel 3:12).

And then we quote the psalmist, who also wants to reach up into the Heavens and bring down the angels, and sing with them:

"Adonai yimlokh l'olam va'ed" (Psalms 146:10).

Did you know that whenever we hear *Kedusha*, even if you're out in the hall, or outdoors, walking by an open window while *Kedusha* is being recited indoors, we are supposed to stand and join in? And, if we enter a room where *Kedusha* is being recited, we are supposed to stop in our tracks, put our feet together like the angel's fused feet, and join in from wherever we are. Angels are elusive. It is an act of will and fancy to remember that we walk among them.

When we pray with angels we raise our awareness that God's presence often appears to us, as it did to our biblical ancestors, in the form of other human beings who show up for us with their presence and attention. Praying with angels also reminds us that we, too, channel the Divine, bringing blessing to others through our presence and attention. **We don't need to be angels to act like them, because, like I wrote to you yesterday, when we bring our conscious presence to others, we do what angels cannot do: we use our own sacred intention to increase the blessing in our world. Angels do not have their own agency, but we do.**

An additional note: *Kedusha* varies slightly from service to service, but it always contains the verses from Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Psalms quoted about. The Shema line is added to the *Kedushah* in the Musaf for Shabbat. Rabbi Amram Gaon (9th century)

taught that it was inserted there during a time of persecution, when Jews were not allowed to declare their faith publicly. They snuck it in there so they could proclaim their faith surreptitiously.