More Than a Mission

Parashat Vayishlach

Rabbi Emily Aviva Kapor-Mater

emily@pdxopenbeitmidrash.org

2026-11-27

Angels show up in quite a few places in the Biblical narrative, particularly in the stories of the Patriarchs in Genesis. Abraham welcomes three angels to his tent, two angels visit Lot in Sodom, an angel speaks to Hagar in the wilderness and to Abraham on Mount Moriah, Jacob sees angels ascending and descending the ladder in his dream—and there are many other examples.

What exactly are "angels"? The English word comes from the Greek *angelos*, which simply means "messenger"; the same applies to the Hebrew word *mal'ach*. But the degree to which they are divine creatures distinct from humans, or simply humans deputized for a particular message-bearing purpose, or somewhere in between, has been debated for thousands of years. And, of course, there is no guarantee that the answer is the same everywhere: in some places, it seems clear that the Torah means to describe a non-human creature, but in others, the same word might be used to denote an ordinary human being.

In this week's *parashah*, the Torah describes several different incidents involving *mal'achim*. In the first verse, Jacob sends *mal'achim* ahead to Esau as advance heralds, with a message of greeting and gifts in the hope of brokering a reconciliation (Gen. 32:4–7, Revised JPS translation):

> וַיִּשְׁלַ֤ח יַעֲקֹב֙ מַלְאָכִ֣ים לְפָנָ֔יו אֶל־עֵשָׂ֖ו אָחִ֑יו אַ֥רְצָה שֵׂעִ֖יר שְׂדֵ֥ה אֱדֽוֹם: וַיְצַ֣ו אֹתָ֔ם לֵאמֹ֖ר כֹּ֣ה תֹאמְר֑וּן לַאדֹנִ֣י לְעֵשָׂ֗ו כֹּ֚ה אָמַ֣ר עַבְדְּךָ֣ יַעֲקֹ֔ב עִם־לָבָ֖ן גַּ֣רְתִּי וָאֵחַ֑ר עַד־עָֽתָּה: וַיְהִי־לִ֨י שׁ֤וֹר וַחֲמוֹר֙ צֹ֣אן וְעֶ֔בֶד וְשִׁפְחָ֖ה וָֽאֶשְׁלְחָ֣ה לְהַגִּ֔יד לַאדֹנִ֖י לִמְצֹא־חֵ֥ן בְּעֵינֶֽיךָ: וַיָּשֻׁ֙בוּ֙ הַמַּלְאָכִ֔ים אֶל־יַעֲקֹ֖ב לֵאמֹ֑ר בָּ֣אנוּ אֶל־אָחִ֗יךָ אֶל־עֵשָׂו֙ וְגַם֙ הֹלֵ֣ךְ לִקְרָאתְךָ֔ וְאַרְבַּע־מֵא֥וֹת אִ֖ישׁ עִמּֽוֹ׃

> Jacob sent messengers ahead to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom, and instructed them as follows, "Thus shall you say, 'To my lord Esau, thus says your servant Jacob: I stayed with Laban and remained until now; I have acquired cattle, donkeys, sheep, and male and female slaves; and I send this message to my lord in the hope of gaining your favor.'" The messengers returned to Jacob, saying, "We came to your brother Esau; he himself is coming to meet you, and there are four hundred men with him."

Seems pretty clear that these are human messengers, and not divine creatures, right? But

hold on a moment. The traditional division of *parshiyyot* in the annual cycle of Torah readings starts here, but the narrative itself doesn't start here; it actually picks up from a couple of verses earlier—which are the last verses of *Parashat Vayetzei*, which we read last week (Gen. 32:2–3, Revised JPS translation):

> וְיַעֲקֹב הָלַךְ לְדַרְכּוֹ וַיִּפְגְּעוּ־בוֹ מַלְאֲכֵי אֱלֹהִים: וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב כַּאֲשֶׁר רָאָם מַחֲנֵה אֱלֹהִים זֶה וַיִּקְרָא שֵׁם־הַמָּקוֹם הַהוּא מָחֳנָיִם:
>
> Jacob went on his way, and angels of God encountered him. When he saw them, Jacob said, "This is God's camp." So he named that place Mahanaim.

The JPS version helpfully puts a footnote beside the word "angels", saying "Heb. 'messengers.'" The Torah identifies these characters who encounter Jacob as "*mal'achei elohim*"—"angels (or messengers) of God", thus attributing an explicitly divine status to them. So our reading of verse 4 (the first verse of this week's *parashah*) is colored differently depending on whether we read it immediately after verses 2–3 or not. "Jacob sent *mal'achim* ahead to Esau" means something quite different in the two ways of reading!

The Masoretes—the scholars and scribes who standardized the text of Jewish scripture—put a large paragraph break (a "*petuḥa*") before verse 4, semantically (and visually) setting off the *mal'achim* of verse 4 from those of verses 2–3. We have inherited this text and the divisions of the *parshiyyot*; in this reading, these *mal'achim* are completely contextually divorced from the *mal'achim* who encounter Jacob "on his way". But a reader who reads the text not divided by *parashah* but by chapter[1] intuits a much more explicit connection between the (different?) groups of *mal'achim*.

There are two main camps among the classical commentators on this topic. One school holds that these are not divine angels, but rather ordinary human emissaries. Ibn Ezra, for example, maintains that the *mal'achim* that Jacob sends to Esau are the latter: his commentary simply says וְאֵלֶּה הַמַּלְאָכִים הֵם מֵעֲבָדָיו, "These *mal'achim* were from among his servants". Ḥizkuni points to the Targum's translation of the word *mal'achim* into the Aramaic *iz'gadin*, meaning "messengers", as evidence that these are not supernatural beings. This translation is found not only in Targum Onkelos, but even in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, which is often much more influenced by midrashic readings. Radak, in his discussion on this verse, adds the qualifier "from his men" to the noun *mal'achim*: they were simply people in Jacob's retinue.

The other school holds that the *mal'achim* that Jacob sent to Esau were not ordinary mortal humans but actual divine angels. Rashi calls them *mal'achim mammash*, "literal angels", quoting Midrash Rabbah.[2] The Kli Yakar explains that Rashi derives this from the juxtaposition of these angels with the end of the last *parashah*, as we pointed out earlier—the connection that the section break obscures. The Or HaḤayyim asks: why would Jacob use

[1]The division of the Biblical text into chapters is a Christian innovation, dating from the Middle Ages. Despite their ubiquity in printed Bibles, the chapter divisions were (and are) almost never used for any practical purpose in Jewish contexts, either in textual study or in liturgical use. The Masoretic division of the text into *parshiyyot* and smaller sections (viz. *petuḥot* and *setumot*) always had much more purchase than the chapter divisions, which are used only for citing specific lines of text and not for any interpretive reason.

[2]The Midrash in *Bereishit Rabbah* 75:4 actually seems to support both interpretations: it says אֵלּוּ שְׁלוּחֵי בָּשָׂר וָדָם, רַבָּנָן אָמְרֵי מַלְאָכִים מַמָּשׁ, "These are emissaries of flesh and blood; but the Sages say: actual angels."

angelic messengers when human ones would have sufficed? He gives several reasons: Esau might ignore or kill human messengers; only angels could tell whether they were facing "Esau" the enemy or "his brother", since humans can be fooled; and angels can do their job without actually leaving, כִּי כָל הָעוֹלָם כְּאַרְבַּע אַמּוֹתָם, "for the whole world is like four cubits" to them. This explains why the text, which the JPS translates as "Jacob sent messengers ahead to Esau", literally says "Jacob sent messengers before him (*lefanav*) to Esau"; in the Or HaḤayyim's reading, the angels stay "before him" and deliver their message from where they stand.

Some commentators try to address both interpretations at once. Rabbeinu Baḥya notes explicitly that the word can mean both human and divine messengers, and he links these *mal'achim* to the angel who will wrestle with Jacob later—an encounter human messengers couldn't have known about or foreseen. And Abravanel turns this on its head: he notes that even the *mal'achei elohim* of the end of last week's *parashah* might have been passing travelers who told Jacob that Esau was nearby, thus fulfilling a divine mission (my translation):

> לָכֵן קְרָאָם הַכָּתוּב "מַלְאֲכֵי אֱלֹהִים" כִּי הָיוּ בְּעִנְיָנוֹ כְּמַלְאֲכֵי אֱלֹהִים, מוֹדִיעִים הַדְּבָרִים הַצְּרִיכִים לוֹ בְּשָׁמְרָתוֹ.
>
> Therefore, Scripture called them "messengers of God" since they were like messengers of God, informing [Jacob] of what would be needed for his protection.

He notes a parallel with an incident that happens later, in which an *ish* ("man") finds Joseph wandering in the field (Gen. 37:15). Rabbinic interpretation identifies this man with an angel, whose task was to guide Joseph on his way: in this interpretation, he is a divine emissary, defined by his errand, even though there may not necessarily be anything supernatural *per se* about the man himself. Just conveying the message is enough to impute some level of divine involvement.

The ambiguity about the word *mal'achim* is part of a larger point: the whole concept of angels blurs the apparently sharp distinction between human and divine. Supernatural beings like angels do not fit neatly into this binary. They seem "above" human beings in that their nature is closer to God's—and yet it is *humans* who are described as being made in the divine image. Indeed, some strains of classical Jewish thought hold that human beings are, in certain ways, superior to angels. One such way is free will: a human being can choose, while an angel is bound to the single, specific task for which it was sent, and has no identity apart from that task.[3] If so, what makes a *mal'ach* divine may have less to do with what it is than with what it was sent to do—a question that comes up again when Jacob meets a mysterious stranger in the night.

Later in the narrative, we read the famous story of Jacob's nighttime wrestling match with an enigmatic figure (Gen. 32:25–33). Even though the Torah does not explicitly call the figure with whom Jacob wrestles a *mal'ach*—he is simply called an *ish*, a "man"—later texts in the Hebrew Bible (e.g. Hosea 12:4–5) and Jewish classical interpretation treat him as a

[3]See, for example, Saʿadia Gaon, *Kitāb al-amānāt wal-iʿtiqādāt*, translated into Hebrew as *Ha-Emunot ve-ha-De'ot*, "Book of Beliefs and Opinions", treatise 4 ("On Free Will"). Link to the Hebrew translation of R' Kapach and link to the English translation of Samuel Rosenblatt (gigantic PDF).

divine emissary. And his task seems to have been to engage in this contest with Jacob. When Jacob asks his name, he says (Gen. 32:30), לָמָּה זֶּה תִּשְׁאַל לִשְׁמִי, "Why is it that you ask me my name?" or perhaps, more loosely, "You must not ask me my name!" Rashi (*ad loc.*) explains that this question is basically meaningless for this individual:

> אֵין לָנוּ שֵׁם קָבוּעַ, מִשְׁתַּנִּים שְׁמוֹתֵינוּ הַכֹּל לְפִי מִצְוַת עֲבוֹדַת הַשְּׁלִיחוּת שֶׁאָנוּ מִשְׁתַּלְּחִים.
>
> We have no fixed names; our names change according to the mandate of the task for which we are sent.

In other words, the name of an angel *is* its task: a new task equals a new identity.[4] By contrast, when the angel blesses Jacob after their contest by changing his name to Israel, "for you have striven (*sarita*) with God and with men, and prevailed" (Gen. 32:29), this change is permanent, but it adds to the sum of his existence, rather than obliterating his past. The reader, of course, knows that Jacob's descendants will be known primarily as the "children of Israel". This change of name has a twofold meaning: one is the resonance with Jacob *qua* brother and son-in-law, who has "striven with men"—he has just completed his decades of service with Laban and is now preparing to meet Esau again—and the other resonance is the "striving with God": wrestling with the angel, which subtly heralds the transformation of the family of Jacob from clan to nation.

But where an angel *is* its task, a *person* is more than a task. Jacob gets a new name, but he does not lose the old one. This contrasts with Abraham, whose new name completely supplants his old one, to the point that the Talmud (*Berachot* 13a) records a teaching that whoever calls Abraham by his former name commits a transgression! The Talmud goes on to say that this argument cannot be extended to Jacob, who is referred to as both "Jacob" and "Israel" many times later, for example when God calls him "Jacob, Jacob" (Gen. 46:2).

The Torah starts off the *parashah* with Jacob sending *mal'achim*, blurring the distinction between divine and human. Then, after Jacob wrestles with the "man"—again blurring the distinction—he himself is given a new name that plays into that very same distinction. His new theophoric name, "Israel", encodes within it this dichotomy. Jacob calls the place where he wrestled with the angel "Peniel"—"face of God"—and says, "I have seen God face to face" (Gen. 32:31). Later, when Jacob finally meets Esau, he declares that seeing his brother's face "is like seeing the face of God" (Gen. 33:10). Esau—unquestionably purely human—possesses a face that Jacob, after his wrestling contest and renaming, now recognizes as divine.

Before the angel blesses Jacob and changes his name, the angel asks him, "What is your name?" (Gen. 32:28). The last time someone asked Jacob for his name, it was his father Isaac—"Who are you, my son?" (Gen. 27:18)—and Jacob deceived him with a lie. Here, he gets a blessing under his own name, one that is fully earned and deserved. Jacob, unlike the angels, can fulfill a dual role. He can be both deceiver and striver; he can carry his past into the future and change.

[4] Apropos the three angels who visit Abraham in his tent (Gen. 18:2), the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabbah* 50:2) says, "A single angel does not perform two missions, and two angels do not perform one mission"—therefore the three angels sent to Abraham must all have been on individual missions.