

Parshat Vayera: When angels come for supper

By DAVID G. ROSKIES

When angels come for lunch, you should roll out the red carpet and prepare the best food in the house. Then miracles will surely happen. You will discover hidden wellsprings of youthfulness though you may be pushing a hundred; though you've been menopausal for almost half a century, you'll experience renewed vigor. You may in fact feel so rejuvenated that you'll be ready to take on anything and anyone — even God himself. You may fancy yourself becoming something of an angel . . .

When angels come for supper, offering them food is not enough. You must insist that they stay the night. But this, in turn, is very risky — it may incur the wrath of the entire city. Why, they may ask, have you been chosen to be visited by wondrous guests. And before you know it, the angels will have eaten you out of house and home. You'll be lucky to get out with the shirt on your back! When angels come for supper, you sometimes discover what's really important in your life and who, of family and friends, is truly loyal.

When angels come for supper, a royal household may be stricken, for that is the

way angels have of protecting third parties whom they love. Angels make the barren fecund and the fecund barren. They protect those whom they love both directly and through the (unwilling and unknowing) agency of others. They throw their protective mantle over you not only in your house, not only on your travels, but even when you're all alone in the wilderness and no one else can see you. When you think all is lost, in the moment you are about to lose that which is most precious — your beloved son — the angel will come and guide you.

Recognizing Angels

But how do you know an angel when you see one? Is everyone who comes for lunch or supper an angel in disguise? Angels can best be recognized by the function they fulfill, that of mediating in times of stress.

Abraham and Sarah need the angels in order to overcome their advanced age and finally beget offspring together. Abraham, rendered bold by the recent angelic visitation, tries to mediate between God and the city of Sodom. (He fails because the presence of angels actually brings out the worst in the Sodomites — madness and aggression against the strangers in their midst.) And later, when Sodom is already destroyed, the absence of any mediating presence whatsoever is precisely what drives the daughters of Lot to lie with their father.

Thus, in the first four episodes in this

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parasha, we have already been taken from the interpersonal mediation of Abraham and Sarah, to the moral mediation of Abraham and Lot vis-a-vis the people of Sodom, and back to the interpersonal procreative realm of Lot and his daughters. The symmetry is important because it highlights what happens when mediation fails: then, even procreation becomes an act of total desperation; the union of man and woman becomes the sign of apocalypse.

In the geopolitical realm, the mediation of God is absolutely essential. Imagine what would have happened between Abraham and Avimelekh were it not for God's intervention. In the domestic realm too, divine intervention is the only thing that can keep matters from blowing apart. Hagar cannot protect her own son from death, until an angelic voice is heard to guide her fortunes.

Now the stage is set for the most

climactic mediation in the whole Torah: the binding of Isaac on Mount Moriah. But not to fear. The terror of this episode has already been greatly mitigated by the fate of Hagar and Ishmael. Here, as there, the angel will call out at the very moment when all seems lost.

Laughter: Sign of Angels

There is another sign by which to recognize when it is that angels, and not mere mortals, have come for supper: laughter. Notice how Abraham laughs on hearing the angels' prophecy, then Sarah does the same, for which the angels reproach her; how Lot's sons-in-law laugh at his warning; how Sarah's jubilation and embarrassment are expressed through laughter, which then turns to anger when she sees (or thinks she sees) Hagar's mocking laughter. When angels visit the family circle, it is a deadly serious matter: your city and your sons-in-law can be wiped out before your very eyes, and even the son-of-your-laughter may almost be sacrificed on the altar.

When angels come for supper, anything can happen: the barren become fecund, mortals become God-like, citizens become enemies, daughters become concubines, servants become masters, sons become sacrifices, lovers become strangers and strangers become lovers. So when an angel comes for supper, the thing to do is to throw open the door for her as wide as possible and take whatever comes. □