

SHABBAT VAYERA

There are many disturbing tales in this week's Parasha. Perhaps this is the most disturbing sedra in the whole Torah. Hagar and Ishmael are sent away by Sarah, the cities of Sodom and Gomorra are dealt a violent blow for the sin of..what? And the Akedah also features here. But the thread that struck me the most is the presence of Angels in each one of these stories. The Angels are sometimes referred to simply as 'Anashim', men, such as the visitors to Abraham's tent who tell him his aged wife will have a son.

The Talmud identifies three of the four Angels who surround the heavenly throne, that is Michael, Gavriel and Raphael. THEY are in fact the visitors to Abraham with the news that Sarah will bear a son. The Angels who arrive at Sodom to see Lot are referred to as 'Malakhim', messengers, and it's not apparent to the citizens of Sodom that they are not men. When Hagar and Ishmael are sent away by Abraham at Sarah's insistence, Hagar leaves Ishmael in the wilderness and an Angel – Malakh Elohim- comes to tell Hagar her son will father a great nation. During the binding of Izhak, the Malakh HaShem intervenes to stop the attempted sacrifice of Abraham's only son, the one he loves. What confuses me in this parasha is sometimes news is delivered by Angels, sometimes by G-d, such as in Avimelekh's dream, telling him not to touch Sarah, who is in fact not Abraham's sister but his wife, and sometimes it's visitors. Nothing is consistent here.

The RaMBaM in his Mishneh Torah writes about there being 10 ranks of Angels in the Jewish Angelic Hierarchy. The Angels we reference in the Kedushah blessings, the Chayot, Seraphim and Ophanim, are high up in this list; these Angels have many wings and are associated with fire. The Angels referenced in this Sedra - the Anashim, Malakh Elohim and Malakh Hashem - are found lower down in the RaMBaM's Angelic Hierarchy; these are more human in appearance.

It's worth a look on the web to get an idea of what these beings are supposed to look like. Some examples are:

- ❖ The Seraphim are six-winged Angels associated with fire.
- ❖ The Ophanim are Angelic wheels with wings; they are the wheels of G-d's heavenly chariot.
- ❖ The Chayot are four-headed creatures with wings. In the Zohar, they hold up the firmament and are listed first in RaMBaM's Hierarchy of Angels.
- ❖ The Malakhim are ministering Angels who come down to Earth.
- ❖ The Archangels are Chief Angels, who surround the four directions of G-d's heavenly throne,
- ❖ And famously, the Satan - the adversary or accuser - whose raison d'être is to challenge and oppose.

Of course, being Shabbat, we cannot fail to mention the Shabbat Angels, the good and evil that accompany us on Shabbat and are acknowledged in our welcoming song, 'Shalom Aleichem, Malachei HaSharet, Malachei Elyon.'

These ponderings make me evaluate my own thoughts about Angels. They clearly feature quite prominently in Judaism but they are a mystery to us. We only know snippets of information about them in our tradition - they can fly, speak Hebrew, drive chariots, climb ladders and wrestle. We also know they have no Yetzer HaRa.

Do I believe in Angels? Well, I've never seen one but if one did appear to me, I'm not sure I'd welcome them. They often bring life-changing news and a stick-in-the-mud like me doesn't want that. The old ABBA song goes "I believe in Angels, something good in everything I see." It's a sweet message but please count me out!