

## Entertaining Messengers

by James Pyles

Although I didn't do the teaching for **Parashot Vayishlach** on November 24th, I nevertheless had it on my mind and as the Almighty seems to have constructed me to do, I started to see patterns and relationships between the Torah portion and larger Biblical and life issues. The result is the article that you are reading now. I'm posting this in both the Articles and the Weekly Teachings sections of the congregation's site since the topic seems appropriate to both. If you are unfamiliar with this particular Torah portion, you can review **Genesis 32:4-36:43** to get up to speed.

Hopefully the title of this article connects you to both the more familiar phrase "entertaining angels" and to the event that inspired that phrase which begins in **Genesis 18:1** when Abraham entertains angels that come to visit him just prior to the destruction of Sodom. Initially of course, Abraham believed that he was simply offering hospitality to human guests, unaware that he was "entertaining angels". This is often taken as a lesson that we too should entertain our guests with the same hospitality and graciousness, regardless of who we may think they are...humble, noble, or divine.

So how do the events that unfold in **Genesis 18** involving Abraham apply to his grandson Jacob as he is about to re-enter the future Land of Israel after a long sojourn in the household of his uncle Laban? I suppose we could make a connection between Abraham's angels and the angel that Jacob wrestled with. After all, this was a significant event in both Jacob's life and involved both a blessing and a new role for this patriarch, yet the real focus is elsewhere.

*Then Jacob sent angels ahead of him to Esau his brother to the land of Seir, the field of Edom.*

**-Genesis 32:4 (The Stone Edition Chumash)**

*Ya'akov sent messengers ahead of him to Esav his brother toward the land of Se'ir, the country of Edom.*

**-Genesis 32:4 (Complete Jewish Bible)**

*Jacob sent messengers ahead of him to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom.*

**-Genesis 32:3 (NIV Student Bible)**

I have no idea why the NIV has this as verse 3 and the other two sources as verse 4 (there are occasionally inconsistencies between the Jewish and Christian Bible numbering systems), but it is the same verse. As you can see, there are very few differences between these three translations but there is one glaring difference. The Stone Edition of the Chumash (a collection of the Torah, Haftarah and five Megillot from the "Jewish" Bible) says that Jacob sent "angels" ahead of him while the other two translations said he sent "messengers". The latter implies that Jacob sent human beings (probably his servants) ahead of him to deliver a message to Esau while the former suggests that he sent supernatural beings (servants of the Most High) ahead of him to deliver his message. Which translation is right?

Most traditional Jewish rabbinical sources have no problem saying that Jacob was commanding angel's (G-d's messengers) to perform this task and go to great lengths to describe the duty of these angels, why Jacob could command them and how the specific actions of these angels (such as returning to

Jacob and reporting what happened) applies to us in our responsibilities to the Almighty. However, as the other two translations seem to indicate, it makes more sense to believe, given the specific description of these events, that Jacob actually sent his human servants ahead of him to deliver his message and that it was his human servants that subsequently returned to Jacob with a report of what transpired.

The interesting linguistic twist is that the Biblical Hebrew word translated as either "angel" and "messenger" is the same word. This is also true of the Biblical Greek word translated as both "angel" and "messenger". That is to say, in **Genesis 32:4** (or verse 3 depending), you can properly translate the Hebrew word in question as either "angel" or "messenger" (Why I mention that the Greek word in the later writings we see translated as "angel" can also be translated as "messenger" will become apparent later on in this article). So in fact, we can't really know just from the word in that verse if Jacob sent angelic beings or human servants ahead of him as messengers to Esau. My opinion given the later verses in that chapter and the content in general is that it makes more sense that Jacob sent people. Of course, we can't really know for certain, but it seems the most likely interpretation.

It may be easy to dismiss the "angel" theory of **Genesis 32:4** but perhaps we do so at our own peril. There are some lessons to be learned from the ancient rabbinical sages in considering that they were indeed angels. My next source is from a collection of volumes together referred to as **A Daily Dose of Torah, The Kleinman Edition** published by Artscroll. For those of you unfamiliar with them, they could be thought of loosely as "Jewish devotionals" and each volume contains commentary on four of the Torah readings in the annual cycle to be read on a day-by-day basis. The commentary for **Parashot Vayishlach** for Sunday under the **Mussar Thought for the Day** pp 181-2 refers to the following:

*Let your trust remain with Hashem, I have made this known to you today, you also. Surely, I have written for you (in the Torah) extremely noble things, with counsel and knowledge, to teach you the veracity of true words, so that you may answer words of truth to those who send word to you.*

**-Proverbs 22:19-21**

The key phrase is "*so that you may answer words of truth to He who sent you*". In the commentary I mentioned above, Rabbeinu Yonah believes that these verses teach us that each person was placed on the Earth primarily to a representative (in Hebrew: "shiliach") of the Almighty. A representative according to the Rebbe, is more than just a servant who does the will of his or her master out of fear of punishment or desire for reward. A representative or shiliach of Hashem performs the mission on which he or she was sent simply because they were sent and that their entire purpose of being is to *be* a representative. This parallels the rabbinic understanding of an angel's purpose whenever they appear to people in that an angel is always sent on a single, specific mission and once that mission is concluded, they return to the Almighty whom they represent.

How that applies to us according to Rabbeinu Yonah, is that our mission as representatives is to make teshuvah (repent of our sins) and to perform the mitzvot described in the Torah (good deeds...obeying the Word of the Almighty) for the sake of being His representatives, not just out of fear or because of an ultimate reward. In that sense, the existence of people and the existence of angels as representatives and "messengers" of the Most High is the same. A truly devoted shiliach (human or otherwise) is always focused on their purpose which is always to fulfill the mission they were assigned and not be distracted or swayed to other purposes including their own needs or desires.

A later section in the commentary (called **A Closer Look at the Siddur**) pp 183-4 suggests that part of

the mission of the shiliach is to return to the one who sent them and report that the mission was carried out successfully as Jacob's messengers (angelic or otherwise) did in **Genesis 32:7**. The commentator in this section further describes the shiliach as an extension of the person who sent them and the "actor" of the desires of the one who sent them to a particular place or realm. In terms of the "sender" being the Almighty, this then applies to both angels and to us. We are both "extensions" of the Almighty's will on Earth and we as believers represent Him and thus our actions are His actions.

The implications of this are truly awesome to the degree that we as shiliach are also human and with our sin nature, will at some point *not* behave as true representatives of the One who sent us and our actions will not be His actions. Therefore, for us to say we are believers and then to fail to act in obedience to our mission brings disgrace on ourselves, on our believing brethren and makes at least questionable, the validity of our Sender in Heaven. This is especially true when our flaws and errors become visible to the unbelieving community around us.

The counterbalance is to be found in the comments in **A Closer Look at the Siddur** for that day's reading (Sunday) for this Parashot as it references the traditional daily prayer **The Tefillah of Az Yashir** or the **Song of the Sea** which states in part, "*You sent forth your anger, and consumed (the Egyptians) like straw.*" Also to quote from the **Pesukei D' Zimrah** which itself quotes from **Psalm 147:15**, "*He who dispatches His utterance earthward; His word runs swiftly.*" We don't always equate ourselves with "His Word" or "His Anger" but in fact, to follow the rabbinical line of thought, our purpose as being "sent" is really no different than any other "messenger" of His Will. In fact, another translation of the word "shiliach" is "Sent One" so when He sends forth "His Anger", "His Word", or anything else that's "His", it's the same as Him sending **us**.

Pages 185-6 go on to further describe that our mission as "Sent Ones" isn't complete until we return to our sender and report as to how our mission went. Imagine doing this in your daily prayers (our praises to Him for enabling us to fulfill our "mission" and our prayers asking forgiveness and our repentance when we fail to carry out His Word) and ultimately during the Final Judgment when we will be held accountable for our every deed in this life.

Consider for a moment the phrase "*He who sends forth His utterance earthward*" and apply it to this verse.

*The Word became a human being and lived with us, and we saw his Sh'khinah (glory). The Sh'khinah of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth.*

**-John 1:14 (Complete Jewish Bible)**

Jesus (Yeshua) then is the "ultimate sent one" of the Almighty and is the only one who lived as a human being who ever perfectly carried out the mission on which he was sent by Him. I've mentioned in past articles that we as believers have a duty to be disciples of our Master the Messiah and to imitate him as closely as possible in our daily living. This merges with our role as shiliach to fulfill our duty as representatives and sent ones with the same perfect devotion and singleness of purpose as Jesus did with his life and with his death. He will return to us as a "sent one" as King of Righteousness and in righteousness must we continue our missions here in His name until that day.

I mentioned earlier that not only is the Biblical Hebrew word for "angel" and "messenger" the same but so is the Biblical Greek word. Here's one reason why this is important.

*To the **angel** of the church in Ephesus write...*

**-Revelation 2:1 (NIV Student Bible)**

To the *angel* of the Messianic community in Ephesus write...

**-Revelation 2:1 (Complete Jewish Bible)**

It always seemed a little confusing for me for Jesus to direct John to write seven letters to seven *angels* at seven churches or Messianic congregations but given what I've previously said, we can also understand that John wrote these letters addressed to the seven *messengers* or more accurately *representatives* of these seven congregations. I don't know if there is a Bible translation of this verse in any text that uses the word "messenger" instead of "angel" (I suspect not), but it is interesting that John *could* have been writing to people rather than angelic beings.

Consider a few things as you finish this article. The next time you read the word "angel" anywhere in the Bible, take a minute to consider the word in its context as meaning both "angel" in the supernatural sense and "messenger" in the more human sense. Granted, in most cases, the context will make it obvious who is really involved (such as the angel that wrestled with Jacob or the angel that announced the coming birth of John the Baptist to his father), but consider it anyway. Also, consider yourself within the context of being G-d's shiliach in this life who has the sole purpose of being sent by Him to perform His will here. Your every action...the only purpose of your actions is to serve Him. Remember those who entertain you are entertaining a "messenger" of Him and when you entertain others, you're doing the same.