

# Comments on Parashat Mishpatim: "Here I am Sending an Angel Before You" Exod. 23:20

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From Exod. 21:1 to 23:19 the Torah presents 52 laws dealing with all areas of life and community. But following that series of laws, the Torah takes us back to the journey that now lies ahead for the Children of Israel. God says to Moses:

הִנֵּה אֲנִי שֵׁלֵךְ מִלְאָךְ לִפְנֵיךְ לְשַׁמְרָךְ בַּדֶּרֶךְ וְלְהַבְיִאֲךָ אֶל הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר הִכְנַתִּי. שְׁמוֹת כג:כ	Here, ← <i>I am sending an <b>angel</b> before you to care for you on the way, to bring you to the place that I have prepared.</i> Exod. 23:20	This verse is both fascinating and confusing. In the Torah, angels guide and guard. For example: when Abraham sends his servant to get
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a wife for Isaac, he says this:

הוּא יִשְׁלַח מִלְאָכּוֹ לִפְנֵיךְ וְלִקְחָתָּ אִשָּׁה לְבָנִי מִשָּׁם. בְּרֵאשִׁית כד:ז	He (God) Himself will send <b>His angel</b> on before you, so that you take a wife for my son from there. Gen. 24:7
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The **angel** there acts as a guide. But God Himself also acts in that capacity. When God appears to Jacob in the ladder-dream He says to him:

וְהִנֵּה אֲנִי עִמָּךְ וְשָׁמְרָתִיךָ בְּכָל אֲשֶׁר תֵּלֵךְ וְהִשְׁבַּתִּיךָ אֶל הָאֲדָמָה הַזֹּאת. בְּרֵאשִׁית כח:טו	Here, I am with you; <b>I will guard over you</b> wherever you go and will bring you back to this ground; Gen. 28:15
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But now, let's

see what happens in Egypt. When God first appears to Moses, God wants to **send Moses** to lead Israel out of Egypt (ie. He wants Moses to act like an angel). But Moses objects:

וְעַתָּה לֵךְ וְאֶשְׁלַחְךָ אֶל פַּרְעֹה וְהוֹצֵא אֶת עַמִּי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרַיִם וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל הָאֱלֹהִים מִי אֲנִי כִי אֵלֶּךְ אֶל פַּרְעֹה וְכִי אוֹצִיא אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרַיִם? וַיֹּאמֶר כִּי אֲהִיָּה עִמָּךְ... שְׁמוֹת ג:יב.	So now, go, for I <b>send you</b> to Pharaoh— bring my people, the Children of Israel, out of Egypt! Moses said to God: Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, that I should bring the Children of Israel out of Egypt? He said: Indeed, <b>I will be with you,</b> Exod. 3:10-12
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We usually read this as an example of Moses' humility, or Moses playing the role of the reluctant prophet. But it is also compelling to read this *as if* Moses is being **sent like an angel** to lead and watch over the people on their journey. Moses knows he is not an angel, therefore, God reassures him: *I will be with you*, meaning, *I will guide you and protect you so that you can guide and watch over them as if you were an angel*. But to add to our confusion, as the Exodus gets underway, it's not Moses who leads the people, it's **God Himself** who leads the people in the form of a fire/cloud pillar:

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וְהָיָה הַלֵּךְ לִפְנֵיהֶם יוֹמָם בְּעַמּוּד עָנָן וְלַיְלָה בְּעַמּוּד אֵשׁ לְהָאִיר לָהֶם לְלֶכֶת יוֹמָם וְלַיְלָה. יג:כא	Now <b>God</b> was going before them, by day as a column of cloud, to lead them the way, by night as a column of fire, to give light to them, to [be able to] go by day and by night. 13:21
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But then, prior to the splitting of the sea, the Torah reverts back to an **angel** who leads them.

וַיֵּסַע מִלְאָךְ הָאֱלֹהִים הַהֵלֶךְ לִפְנֵי מַחֲנֵה יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֵּלֶךְ מֵאַחֲרֵיהֶם... יד:יט	The <b>angel of God</b> that was going before the camp of Israel moved on and went behind them... 14:19
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The **angel** that was leading and protecting them in the front, now leads and protects them from the back! Having oscillated between God and an angel, we now have our verse:

הִנֵּה אֲנִי שֵׁלֵךְ מִלְאָךְ לִפְנֵיךְ לְשַׁמְרָךְ בַּדֶּרֶךְ וְלְהַבְיִאֲךָ אֶל הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר הִכְנַתִּי. כג:כ	Here, <b>I am sending an angel</b> before you to care for you on the way, to bring you to the place that I have prepared. 23:20
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An **angel** not God. Fast forward to the Golden Calf incident, where God reiterates that it will be an **angel** that takes them forward, not **God Himself**.

וְשָׁלַחְתִּי לִפְנֵיךְ מִלְאָךְ וְגִרְשָׁתִי אֶת הַכְּנַעֲנִי הָאֲמֹרִי וְהַחִתִּי וְהַפְּרִזִּי וְהַחִוִּי וְהַיְבוּסִי. לג:ב	<b>I will send an angel</b> before you and will drive out the Canaanite, the Amorite and the Hittite and the Perizzite, the Hivvite and the Yevusite— 33:2
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Why? Because God knows how stubborn the people are and is afraid that He might destroy them if He is in their midst. Moses has great difficulty with this (but that's for another sheet).

**THIS IS SO CONFUSING!** Who is guiding Israel? God? Moses? An angel? The fire/cloud pillar? Perhaps the easiest answer is, all of the above. The people are being led and protected in one way or another. God protects them. An angel leads them. Moses instructs them. The fire/cloud pillar guides them. God Himself could perform all of these roles. But from the very first encounter with Moses, we have learned that God is too dangerous. That became abundantly clear at Mount Sinai, when:

וַיֵּרָא הָעָם וַיָּנֻעוּ וַיַּעֲמֵדוּ מֵרָחֵק. וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֶל מֹשֶׁה דַּבֵּר אִתָּנוּ עִמָּנוּ וְנִשְׁמָעָה וְאַל יְדַבֵּר עִמָּנוּ אֱלֹהִים כִּי נָמוּת. וַיַּעֲמֵד הָעָם מֵרָחֵק... כז:יח.	the people saw, and they faltered and stood far off. They said to Moses: You speak with us, and we will hearken, but let not God speak with us, lest we die! The people stood far off... 20:14, 15, 18
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God truly wants to be with the people, and the people also truly wants God to be with them. But both God and Israel know that this can be catastrophic because if they get too close to God, they could be destroyed. But if they get too far

from God, they might die. Therefore, in the biblical system, angels function as intermediaries. They mediate between the powerful God and the needy people. But most importantly they function as the **vessels of God's name**. They carry it:

הַשֹּׁמֵר מִפְּנֵי וְשָׁמַע בְּקוֹלוֹ אֵל תִּמְרָ בּוֹ כִּי לֹא יִשָּׂא לְפָשְׁעֵכֶם כִּי שְׁמִי בְּקִרְבּוֹ. כג:כא. 23:21	<i>Take care in his (the angel's) presence, and hearken to his voice; do not be rebellious against him, for he is not able to bear your transgressing, for My name is with him.</i>
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An angel has divine properties, so they are a little like God. But an angel is not God. Rather: **שְׁמִי בְּקִרְבּוֹ - My name is within him**. While the tradition is generally comfortable with angels, it also has some difficulty with them. Unsurprisingly, two broad trends emerge in Judaism: one which understands angels as actual beings, and another that understands them as allegorical attributes. In our verse, literalists actually identify the angel that is spoken of as, **מִיכָאֵל - Michael**, the guardian angel of Israel. Allegorists, like Maimonides, take this to be a reference to none other than Moses himself.

An excursion into the rabbinic tradition will help us here:

הִנֵּה אֲנִי שׁוֹלֵחַ מַלְאָךְ. (שמות כג:ל)	<i>Behold, I am sending an <b>angel</b>.</i> (Exodus 23:30) –
הַדָּא הוּא דְּקָתִיב: חֲנִיָּה מַלְאָךְ ה' <b>ה'</b> סָבִיב לִירְאָיו וְיַחְלִצֵם. (תהלים לד:ח)	<i>that (brings to mind) what is written: The <b>angel</b> of the Lord encamps around those who fear Him, and rescues them. (Psalms 34:8).</i>
עוֹשֶׂה אֶדָּם מִצְוָה אַחַת הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא נוֹתֵן לוֹ מַלְאָךְ אֶחָד לְשָׁמְרוֹ שְׁנֵאמַר: חֲנִיָּה מַלְאָךְ ה'.	<i>If a person performs one mitzvah, the Holy One blessed be He provides him with <b>one angel</b> to protect him, as it is stated: The <b>angel</b> of the Lord encamps.</i>
עוֹשֶׂה שְׁתֵּי מִצְוֹת הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא נוֹתֵן לוֹ שְׁנֵי מַלְאָכִים לְשָׁמְרוֹ שְׁנֵאמַר: כִּי מַלְאָכָיו יִצְוֶה לְךָ לְשָׁמְרְךָ בְּכָל דְּרָכֶיךָ. (תהלים צא:יא)	<i>If a person performs two mitzvot, the Holy One blessed be He provides him with <b>two angels</b> to protect him, as it is stated: <i>For He will command His angels on your behalf to protect you in all your ways.</i> (Psalms 91:11)</i>
עוֹשֶׂה הַרְבֵּה מִצְוֹת נוֹתֵן לוֹ הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא חֲצִי מִחֲנֵהוּ שְׁנֵאמַר: יִפֹּל מִצִּדְּךָ אֶלֶף וְיִרְבֶּה מִיְמִינְךָ (תהלים צא:ז) וְהוּא חֲצִי מִחֲנֵהוּ שְׁנֵאמַר: רֶכֶב אֱלֹהִים רַבְתִּים אֵלָּפִי שְׁנָאָן. (תהלים סח:יח)	<i>If he performs many mitzvot, the Holy One blessed be He will provide him with half His camp, as it is stated: <i>A thousand may fall at your side, and ten thousand at your right hand</i> (Psalms 91:7), and that is half His camp, as it is stated: <i>The chariots of God are myriad thousands of companies.</i> (Psalms 68:18).</i>

When the rabbis read our verse, Exod. 23:20, they immediately think of other verses in Psalms 34 and 91 that mention angels. Here is the key:

DO A MITZVAH

GET AN ANGEL

People who **fear God** (Psalm 34:8) perform mitzvot. If an **angel encamps around those who fear God**, then every time we do a mitzvah, we get an angel. Likewise, if we do two mitzvot, we get two angels; many mitzvot, many angels. What does all of that mean? Some would say that we indeed get an actual "being" to accompany us whenever we do a mitzvah. The more mitzvot we, the more angels we get, the more divine protection we have. While others would say that the midrash is speaking metaphorically: when we do a mitzvah, we glow. We gain an added spiritual dimension in our lives. Something about us changes in a way that cannot be expressed in normal day-to-day terms. We become holy; or more godly; closer to God. That may not give us actual physical protection from demons and the like, but it certainly gives us the spiritual fortitude to withstand life's challenges.

**A note on: הִנֵּה אֲנִי שׁוֹלֵחַ - Here, I am sending.** This phrase occurs in exactly one other place in the entire Tanakh: the second last verse in Malachi, the last of the prophets:

Exod. 23:20	Malachi 3:23	מלאכי ג:כג	שמות כג:כ
Here,	Here,	הִנֵּה	הִנֵּה
I am sending	I am sending	אֲנִי שׁוֹלֵחַ	אֲנִי שׁוֹלֵחַ
an angel	to you	לָכֶם	מַלְאָךְ
	the prophet Elijah	את אליה הנביא	
before you	before	לפני	לפניך
to care for you on the way, to bring you to the place that I have prepared.	the coming of the awesome, fearful day of GOD.	בוא יום ה' הגדול והנורא. Fun fact: מלאך is an anagram of לָכֶם.	לשמרך בדרך ולנהיגך אל המקום אשר הכנת.

Malachi (whose name incidentally means, *my angel*) must have had Exodus 23 in mind when he uttered his final message. (The fact that the word **לָכֶם** is an anagram of **מַלְאָךְ** is just another playful connection between the two verses). Just as God sent an angel to bring Israel from the dessert to the promised land, God will send a prophet, Elijah, to redeem Israel **on the awesome fearful day of God**.

**Why do these texts matter? Because they are, themselves, angelic!** They guide us and shelter us in times of duress, during which we pray for God to guide us and shelter us.

**Today is Day 127. For 127 days we have been praying to God to protect our hostages, bring them home, and guide our soldiers.** We trust in God's protection despite the tragic reality of suffering and death. Whether we believe that that protection emanates from actual angels or the performance of mitzvot, is, in the end, up to us. **Shabbat Shalom!**

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Shabbat Shalom! Am Yisrael Hay!