

Parashat Vayishlach 5782, 2021:

Of Ya'akov and Angels

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, Shayndel bat Mordechai Yehudah, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Parashat Vayishlach begins with the well-known words, “Ya’akov sent messengers (*malachim*) ahead of him (*lifanuv*) to his brother Eisav, to the land of Seir, the field of Edom.” In his *Commentary on the Torah*, Rashi (1040-1105) champions the opinion of the *Rabbanan* in *Midrash Bereishit Rabbah* (75:4) and explains the word, “*malachim*,” as “actual angels.” (All Tanach translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) According to the *midrash*, if Hagar, the maidservant of Sarah, and Eliezer, the servant of Avraham, had visions of *malachim*, all the more so should Ya’akov have had intense contact with them. As such, we should not be surprised that the *malachim* went so far as to encounter Eisav on Ya’akov’s behalf.

As is often the case in Torah analysis, the near-universal acceptance of Rashi’s commentary sets the tone of future exegetical discussion. As such, if Rashi did not comment upon a word or a phrase, most *meforshim* will refrain from so doing as well. This is the case concerning the word in our *pasuk* “*lifanuv*,” even though it appears to be an unnecessary addition. The Torah could have written, “Ya’akov sent messengers to his brother Eisav, to the land of Seir, the field of Edom,” without changing the verse’s essential

meaning. Therefore, the presence of *lifanuv* should have generated a significant number of analyses by classical commentators; yet, as a result of Rashi's silence, this is not the case.

The Apter Rav *zatzal* (Rabbi Avraham Yehoshua Heschel, 1748-1825) is one of the few *meforshim* that spends significant time exploring the meaning of *lifanuv*. He begins by noting that its inclusion in our *pasuk* is “*aino muvan,*” in the sense that it is not easily understood. Subsequently, he presents a penetrating examination as to why *lifanuv* is found in our verse:

Ya'akov Avinu is the root and basis of *Kenesset Yisrael* (the entire Jewish people) and all generations that descend from him. [Consequently,] all his actions and endeavors that are written in the Torah, everything he said to Eisav, including his words of reconciliation and appeasement, the submissive stance he adopted toward him, the messengers that he sent, and the precise words he commanded them to say, without question, have ramifications far beyond Ya'akov's personal and immediate needs, and those of the Twelve Tribes: Ya'akov's intention was to establish [the correct way of responding to our adversaries] for all future generations to come, up to and including the arrival of the *Mashiach*. (Torat Emet, *Sefer Bereishit*, Parashat Vayishlach, this and the following translation my own)

At this juncture, the Apter Rav expands upon the essence of Ya'akov's objective:

The way he [Ya'akov] sent messengers to Eisav, and how he attempted to mollify and reconcile with him through his gift giving, is efficacious for all time — whenever nations will intensify their efforts against us and embitter our lives. During those periods, the messengers that Ya'akov sent will rise once again on our behalf. This refers to actual angels ... They will placate and silence Eisav and remove all accusers from upon us.

The Apter Rav explains that not only did *Ya'akov Avinu* model the exact behaviors we should follow to deal with the many Eisavs we would encounter throughout Jewish history, he guaranteed that we will never be alone, as “the messengers [he] sent will rise once again on our behalf:”

Ya'akov charged the angels with the permanent mission to encounter Eisav whenever “he” will desire to wreck misery upon the Jewish people. Ya'akov had this ability, as they [the Jewish people] are ever intertwined with his spiritual power, since all *Kenesset Yisrael* descends from him. This is the case even though the Jewish people were not yet extant and only existed in potential, nonetheless, he was able to [protect his future descendants through the agency of the *malachim*]. This, then, is why the Torah wrote, “*lifanuv,*” with

the connotation of *lifnei hadavar hahu* (before the matter had come to pass), for even though the Jewish people did not yet exist, Ya'akov provided the us with the *refuah* to respond, and put an end, to all accusers that would rise against us.

I believe that the Apter Rav's analysis of *lifanuv* is an exegetical tour de force that can provide hope and light during the dark moments when our enemies contrive against us. As Ya'akov's spiritual heirs, we are certain that he will ever watch over us and send forth *malachim* to protect us.

May the time come soon, and in our days, when we will no longer have to contend with those who seek our very destruction. For on that day, "Hashem will be one, and His Name one." (*Sefer Zechariah* 14:9) *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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*** My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd>

*** I have posted 164 of Rabbi Soloveitchik's English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link: [The Rav zatzal](#)