

VAYECHI (GENESIS 47:28-50:26)

When Angels Came Early To Monsey

2002 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

Jacob was old. Jacob was very old. He had already made his funeral arrangements. He did not have much time left to live.

Now the message had come to Joseph that his father was ill. Joseph immediately took his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, and went to visit his father.

Jacob wanted to see his grandsons: *"Bring them to me and I will bless them,"* (Genesis, 49:9)

Protocol dictated that the older son should receive the primary blessing. This would be expressed by Jacob placing his right hand on the older son's head. In order to make it easier for Jacob, Joseph placed Manasseh, the Firstborn, to his left, which was Jacob's right. All Jacob needed to do was to reach out both hands. He could simply rest his right hand on Manasseh's head, and his left hand on Ephraim's.

It didn't work out that way. To Joseph's surprise and disappointment, his father crossed his hands and placed his right hand on Ephraim, and his left on Manasseh. Joseph thought that his father, who was nearly blind, had misidentified his grandchildren. Joseph sought to rectify his father's "error."

"Not so, Father," Joseph said. "This is the Firstborn. Place your right hand on his head."

Jacob was adamant*. "I know, my son, I know. He too will become a nation. He too will be great. However, his younger brother will become greater."* (Ibid, 18-19)

The Talmud tells us that Joseph was being reminded who Jacob REALLY was. He was a prophet! "Do you think you can move the hand that defeated an angel?!" ... (See "Name that Angel".) I know about things that haven't been revealed to you. I certainly know about things that have been revealed to you! ..."

As great as Joseph was, even he could not fathom the depth of Jacob's divine wisdom.

My Rebbe, Rav Moshe Chait, *Shlit"a*, **[Since the time that this article was written, my beloved teacher has passed away. (For information about my Rebbe, of Blessed Memory, click [here](#) and [here](#)]** explains that there is an important lesson we can learn about Torah. We may be tempted to think that the Torah really doesn't relate to modern situations. Perhaps Torah Judaism is out of touch. Perhaps the ancient rabbis of the Talmud wouldn't understand the current situation as we do.

Jacob reminds us: "*I know, my son, I know.* I know more than you think I know." Our Sages **do** have the complete picture. They know what we know, and they also know what we don't know.

I believe this lesson can be applied on a more "secular" level as well.

We all pray to live to a ripe old age. The question often is what happens when we get there? As people get older, and physical/mental capacities diminish, it becomes increasingly difficult for their family and friends to meet their needs.

It is especially frustrating to deal with dementia. When people get older, it is natural to expect them to slow down a bit and have some trouble getting around. But children are never quite prepared for the anguish of having a parent who doesn't recognize his family, or lives 50 years in the past.

Let me share with you two experiences that will hopefully put this into perspective.

Several years ago I walked into a hospital room in the intensive care unit. There I found a woman in her bed surrounded by relatives. Her daughter was sitting next to her, and crying. She looked up at me, and said, "My mother is going to die soon. She is in a coma. She has no idea what's going on."

I walked up to the bed and saw a woman staring blankly at the ceiling. I addressed her by name and told her that I am a rabbi and that I am praying for her. "But you need to pray, too," I said. "G-d listens to the patient's prayers even more closely than He listens to the prayers of others. So you pray any way you can. G-d can hear your prayers."

I looked at this woman who, by her daughter's assessment, had no idea what was going on. I watched with amazement as tears welled up in her eyes and rolled down onto her pillow.

A coma? No idea what's going on? "*I know, my son, I know.* I know more than you think I know."

Every Friday, I conduct a Shabbos program at a local nursing home. We have grape juice and *challah*. We sing Shabbos songs and talk about the weekly Torah Portion.

To be frank, I have, at times, been ambivalent about the program. Some of the residents are very involved. But for others, I have often felt that either they have no idea what is happening, or they think that Friday morning is Shabbos! (Actually, I do always tell them that we are getting in the mood for Shabbos that begins TONIGHT.)

There is one particular resident whom I shall call "Miriam." Miriam spends most of her time looking at the ceiling and mumbling incoherently in a mix of English and Yiddish. It is impossible to have any type of real conversation with her.

One Friday I said to the group, "Tonight it's going to be Shabbos. The angels are going to come to our Shabbos tables. We have to greet them with "*Shalom Aleichem*." Do you want to sing "*Shalom Aleichem*" with me?"

"Oh, yes!" said Miriam.

As I sang "*Shalom Aleichem*," I looked across the room at Miriam. She was mouthing the words as I sang. She was singing "*Shalom Aleichem*!" She was welcoming the angels!

I finished the song. It was time for grape juice and *challah*. Instead, I sang "*Shalom Aleichem*" again! Again, Miriam mouthed the words as I sang. I sang it again. She sang along again. I felt like crying. Could it be, I wondered, that the angels came early today?!

"*I know, my son, I know. I know more than you think I know.*"

We must be very careful with our elders. We dare not underestimate their needs and their ability to understand. One never knows what is really going on in the "confused" minds of the elderly.

I have seen people with whom it is impossible to converse, reciting prayers. Who knows what wisdom and holiness emanates from these people*? "I know, my son, I know.* I know more than you think I know."

At the conclusion of my Friday program, I said to the group, as I always do, "Thank you for your time. Have a Good Shabbos."

Miriam, still looking up at the ceiling, said, "Good Shabbos! You're wonderful! I love you!"

No, Miriam, YOU are wonderful. Have a good Shabbos... Oh,... and Miriam, ...I love you too!

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