

## Jewish Texts on Angels

*The first instance of the word malach, messenger, in the Hebrew Bible is early in the story of Hagar the Egyptian, Genesis 19:5-10:*

ה וַתֹּאמֶר שָׂרַי אֶל-אַבְרָם חֲמָסִי עָלֶיךָ אֲנֹכִי נָתַתִּי שִׁפְחָתִי בְּחִיקֶךָ וַתֵּרָא כִּי הָרְתָה וְאָקֹל בְּעֵינַיִךָ יִשְׁפֹּט יְהוָה בֵּינִי וּבֵינֶיךָ: ו וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָם אֶל-שָׂרַי הֲנִה שִׁפְחָתְךָ בְּיָדְךָ עֲשִׂי-לָהּ הַטּוֹב בְּעֵינֶיךָ וַתַּעַנֶּה שָׂרַי וַתְּבָרַח מִפְּנֵיהָ: ז וַיִּמְצָאָהּ מִלְאָךְ: יְהוָה עַל-עֵינֵי הַמַּיִם בַּמְדְּבָר עַל-הָעֵין בְּדֶרֶךְ שׁוּר: ח וַיֹּאמֶר הָרָר שִׁפְחַת שָׂרַי אֵי-מִזָּה בָּאת וְאַנְהָ תִּלְכִּי וַתֹּאמֶר מִפְּנֵי שָׂרַי גְּבֵרְתִּי אֲנֹכִי בְּרַחַת: ט וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ מִלְאָךְ: יְהוָה שׁוּבִי אֶל-גְּבֵרְתְּךָ וְהִתְעַנִּי תַּחַת יָדֶיהָ: י וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ מִלְאָךְ: יְהוָה הֲרַבָּה אֲרַבָּה אֶת-זַרְעֶךָ וְלֹא יִסְפָּר מְרֹב: יא וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ מִלְאָךְ: יְהוָה הִנֵּךְ הָרָה וְיִלְדֶתָ בֵּן וְקָרָאת שְׁמוֹ יִשְׁמָעֵאל כִּי-שָׁמַע יְהוָה אֶל-עֲנִיֶךָ:

5. And Sarai said to Abram, My wrong be upon you; I have given my maid to your bosom; and when she saw that she had conceived, I was despised in her eyes; may the Eternal One judge between me and you.
6. But Abram said to Sarai, Behold, your maid is in your hand; do with her as it pleases you. And when Sarai dealt hardly with her, she fled from her face.
7. And the angel of the Eternal One found her by a fountain of water in the wilderness, by the fountain in the way to Shur.
8. And he said, Hagar, Sarai's maid, where did you come from? and where will you go? And she said, I flee from the face of my mistress Sarai.
9. And the angel of the Eternal One said to her, Return to your mistress, and submit yourself under her hands.
10. And the angel of the Eternal One said to her, I will multiply your seed exceedingly, that it shall not be counted for a multitude.
11. And the angel of the Eternal One said to her, Behold, you are with child, and shall bear a son, and shall call his name Ishmael; because the Eternal One has heard your affliction.

*And famously, of course, from Gen. 22:10-14, the Akeidat Yitzchak:*

י וַיִּשְׁלַח אַבְרָהָם אֶת-יְדֹו וַיִּקַּח אֶת-הַמֶּאֱכֹלֶת לְשַׁחֵט אֶת-בְּנוֹ: יא וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו מִלְאָךְ: יְהוָה מִן-הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָהָם | אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הֲנִנִּי: יב וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-יִצְחָק יִדְדֶךָ אֶל-הַנֶּזֶר וְאֶל-תַּעֲשׂ לֹו מְאוּמָה כִּי עַתָּה יָדַעְתִּי כִּי-יִרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶתָּה וְלֹא חֲשַׁכְתָּ אֶת-בְּנֶךָ אֶת-יִחִידְךָ מִמֶּנִּי: יג וַיִּשָּׂא אַבְרָהָם אֶת-עֵינָיו וַיִּרָא וְהִנֵּה-אֵיל אַחֵר נֹאֲחָז בְּסֹבֵב בְּקִרְנָיו וַיִּלְךְ אַבְרָהָם וַיִּקַּח אֶת-הָאֵיל וַיַּעֲלֵהוּ לְעֹלָה תַּחַת בְּנוֹ: יד וַיִּקְרָא אַבְרָהָם שֵׁם-הַמָּקוֹם הַהוּא יְהוָה יִרְאֵה אֲשֶׁר יֹאמַר הַיּוֹם בְּהָר יְהוָה יִרְאֵה:

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10. And Abraham stretched out his hand, and took the knife to slay his son.
11. And the angel of the Eternal One called to him from heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham; and he said, Here am I.
12. And he said, Lay not your hand upon the lad, nor do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, seeing that you did not withheld your son, your only son from me.
13. And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold behind him a ram caught in a thicket by his horns; and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering in place of his son.
14. And Abraham called the name of that place Adonai-Yireh; as it is said to this day, In the Mount of the Eternal One it shall be seen.

*But angels are not always benign; think of the angels at Sodom, striking dead the sinful even before the conflagration, and in the story of the Exodus, retold in the Psalms:*

מח ויסגר לברד בעירם ומקניהם לרשפים: מט ישלח־בם חרון אפו עברה  
וועם וצרה משלחת מלאכי רעים: נ יפלס נתיב לאפו לאחשד ממות נפשם  
וחיתם לדבר הסגיר: נא ונד כל־בכור במצרים ראשית אונים באהליהם:  
נב ויסע כצאן עמו וינהגם כעדר במדבר:

48. [God] gave over their cattle also to the hail, and their flocks to hot thunderbolts,
49. Casting upon them the fierceness of Divine anger, wrath, and indignation, and trouble, by sending evil angels among them.
50. [God] made a path for Divine anger; sparing not their soul from death, but giving their life over to the pestilence;
51. Striking all the firstborn in Egypt; the first of their strength in the tents of Ham;
52. But made God's own people to go forth like sheep, and guided them in the wilderness like a flock.

*The idea that there are both 'good' angels and 'bad' ones persists to this day, reflected in common rabbinic stories that are still quoted, like this from B. Talmud, Shabbat 119b:*

It was taught, R. Jose son of R. Judah said: Two ministering angels accompany a man on the eve of the Sabbath from the synagogue to his home, one a good [angel] and one an evil [one]. And when he arrives home and finds the lamp burning, the table laid and the couch [bed] covered with a spread, the good angel exclaims, 'May it be even thus on another Sabbath [too],' and the evil angel unwillingly responds 'amen'. But if not,<sup>2</sup> the evil angel exclaims, 'May it be even thus on another Sabbath [too],' and the good angel unwillingly responds, 'amen'.

*Despite what this implies about gender roles, it reflects an understanding that has been adopted in modern times by Rabbi Rami Shapiro:*

Angels are another name for feelings.  
When we love and act with kindness  
We create angels of love and kindness;  
When we hate and act with violence  
We create angels of hatred and violence.  
It is our job to fill our world with angels of love;  
Messengers of kindness  
That link people together as one family.