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Congregation B'nai Israel

When No One Else is Looking

Do you believe in angels?
A man asked me in Starbucks, one day.

I'll always remember that moment,
because it happened on the day that I had officially
commenced my journey to rabbinical school.
I had cozied up in a large, plush red armchair,
with my latte in one hand,
and my crisp, new, unopened GRE textbook, in the other.
The dreaded GRE – the Graduate Record Examination –
was still a prerequisite for applying to the Hebrew Union College,
and that was the day that I said,
I'm going to do it.
I'm going to open that damn study guide,
and I'm going to take that dreaded test,
and I am going to finally start my application.

I hadn't made it very far into the book,
when a man about a decade or two older
sat down at the table next to me.
Out of the corner of my eye,
I saw him glance at the massive, unmistakable "GRE"
on the cover of the book.
When I looked up,
he signaled to my book
and asked me what graduate program I was applying to.
It was my first day on my new path,
and I was so eager and proud to tell the world
that I was going to be a rabbi.
And so I told him.
"Wow – he said.
"That's really neat."
Seeming genuinely curious,
he started asking me questions
about God, and my theology.

Now, ordinarily, I might not have engaged so much
with a strange man in a coffee shop,
but I couldn't help but think that all of it was a sign,
indicating that all of it was meant to be.

Here I was, starting the process
to rabbinical school –
and all of a sudden,
someone is asking *me* about God?!
Plus, I figured it was good practice –
for all the future theological related questions
that I would someday, be answering, as a rabbi.

We chatted for a bit, and then he said –
Well, what about angels?
Do Jews believe in angels?
Do *you* believe in angels?
I paused.
Angels?

This was beyond the scope
of my still limited rabbinic knowledge.
I wasn't even sure if I believed in them, myself.

Today, if I were to ever meet that man again,
I would say yes – yes indeed.
I do, in fact, believe in angels.

By early 1938,
when Inge Maerowitz was 7 years old,
her father knew that he had to get his family out of Germany.

Inge Maerowitz is the mother of our congregant, Shawn Maerowitz-Detroy.

Inge tells me that she owes her life to her father,
Bernard Heineman,
and his Herculean efforts
to bring her family to America.

And Inge tells me that she owes her life
to another man,
who coincidentally,
also went by the name Bernard Heineman.
Completely unrelated to the family,
so far as everyone knows.

In almost fantastical, fairy-tale-like fashion,
the German Bernard Heineman
found a NYC-based Bernard Heineman -
and then the Germany Bernard Heineman
convinced this *other* Bernard Heineman,

who lived thousands and thousands of miles away,
to sponsor his family's journey
to the United States.

Inge knows that she is here today,
and she knows that her children,
and their children,
are all here today,
because of the way that a father would do anything
to save his family.
And she knows that she is here today,
because of the human capacity
for compassion, empathy, and mercy.
She attributes everything that she has
to these two men of the exact same name –
whose heroic actions ultimately saved her life.
She is alive today because of them.

But how the two Bernard Heinemans found one another,
in the first place –
well, that, perhaps,
is the most serendipitous part, of all.

It all started in a rather ordinary way –
during supremely unordinary time.
Nazi terror over Germany's Jewish population was rising
with each passing day.
As the story goes,
Inge's father was walking down the street in Wurzburg, one day,
when he bumped into a casual acquaintance
by chance.
Inge doesn't know who this man was.
He was a stranger to her.
His name and his identity have been lost
with the passage of time.

But this anonymous man was the key –
he was the missing puzzle piece –
who ensured that Bernard Heineman's heroic persistence
would link up with the other Bernard's
heartwarming altruism.

"I heard there is a man in NYC
by the name of Bernard Heineman,"
the acquaintance said to Inge's father
on the side of that fateful road,

on that fateful day.
“He will help you and your family.”

From there,
the intercontinental correspondence began.
Bernard Heineman poured open his heart
to another Bernard,
on another side of the world.
“Can you save my family?
Please help me.
Please help me save my family.”

And the rest is history.
On March 31, 1939,
Inge and her mother Sophie arrived in America,
and they began their new life
in a lovely little town called New Milford, CT.
Eventually, Inge married and created a beautiful family -
two daughters, two sons,
seven grandchildren, and four great-grandchildren.

Was it fate?
Was it chance?
Where the two Bernard’s destined to find each other,
one way or another?
Would Inge’s family have made it to America,
had her father not bumped into that casual acquaintance
during that casual walk in Wurzburg?

What we do know, for sure,
is that the anonymous man
on the side of the road
helped to erase what might have been.
Inge and her family got on a boat to America.

Her life and her story continued,
with many new and rich and wonderful chapters.

Sometimes,
our lives become permanently changed for the better,
because of the actions of one, ordinary person –
or because of one, ordinary moment, in time.
We might call it luck, coincidence or chance –
or, we might call it fortune, fate, or destiny...

But in Judaism, we call it the stuff, of angels.

And if we look closely, we see that the Torah, is full of them.

It was several days into their journey up the mountain
called Moriah,
when young Isaac starting asking questions.
“Where are we going, Father?”

You say that there will be an altar,
and that we will make a sacrifice,
and I see the firestone and the wood,
but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?”

Tomorrow morning,
as is our custom on the first day of Rosh Hashanah,
we will read and return to the chilling story of the Akeida –
the Binding of Isaac.
A father willing to sacrifice his son?
Who would do such a thing?
This was not a father seeking to save –
this was a father willing to destroy.

The angel, of course, is essential to the story.
In the language of the Greek playwrights,
the Angel of the Akeida is the “Deus Ex Machina” –
the character whose function it is
to resolve an otherwise irreversible plot situation,
to surprise the audience,
and bring the tale to a happy –
or, at least a *palatable* –
ending.

We all know the scene.
Abraham places the knife on Isaac’s neck,
and just as he is about to pierce the first layer
of his son’s skin,
a messenger of God appears, crying out,
“Abraham – stop!
Don’t you dare hurt that child.
See, look – *there* is the ram,
caught in the thicket,
for your sacrificial offering.”

Elsewhere in our biblical and rabbinic literature,
our angels have names,
they have identities,

they have backstories.
Michael.
Gabriel.
Raphael.

But not here.
In spite of its critical, lifesaving function,
this angel is an anonymous,
unnamed, and unknown figure,
who suddenly appears out of nowhere.
Perhaps it truly *was* an angelic, heavenly being,
who swooped down at just the right moment,
and then returned to the highest of heights,
once its earthly work was done.
Or, who's to say that this anonymous angel,
this unnamed "messenger of God,"
wasn't simply another human being,
passing by at exactly the right place,
at exactly the right time?

And if we are going to talk about our Rosh Hashanah angels,
then I would be remiss if I didn't mention the angel
that we will meet on Sunday,
during our Torah reading for the Second Day.
In this story,
another near death of a child,
and another "Deus Ex Machina" –
another anonymous, unknown angelic-like figure
who interrupts, who rescues, who saves.

On Sunday,
we will follow Abraham's maidservant, Hagar,
and her son Ishmael into the wilderness,
after Abraham's wife, Sarah,
decides that she can no longer bear the sight
of her husband's mistress,
and the son that they have borne, together.

When her meager flask of water runs dry,
Hagar rests her thirsty son under a bush,
and then turns away –
unable to bear the sight of her suffering child.
We shudder at the sound of her heartsick wail:
"Let me not look on, as the child dies."
And then, just as the scene becomes too excruciating to bear –
the anonymous angel, is there.

“Hagar, look up,” the angel says.
“Look, there is a well of water right up ahead –
do you see it, now?
The child will be ok.
Everything will be ok.”
The angel erases what might have been.

But was it an angel, coming down from the heavens?
Or, was it simply an anonymous pedestrian,
noticing a mother and child in need?

Was it an ordinary passerby who stopped,
who went out of his way,
who offered an angelic dose of compassion,
kindness, and care?

The man on the side of the road in Wurzburg.
The one who stopped the knife.
The one who showed them the water.
We may never know who exactly they were,
but we will always remember what it was,
that they did.

I believe, in angels.

As we contemplate our lives,
and as we sit with the reality that, someday,
we will no longer be here,
we all want to know that we will be remembered.

We want to know that it will have mattered
that we were here.
We want to know that our lives, our stories, our values,
will persist, long after we are gone.

This is why we put our names on plaques and on buildings.
This is why we bequeath our most precious items
to those who will outlive us.
This is why we earmark money
for people and causes that will benefit from our careful savings.

All of these forms of giving are certainly worthy,
admirable, and impactful.
But there is another kind of legacy that is equally valuable,
and equally significant.
Our *quiet* legacy.

The *quiet* impact that we make
when no one else is looking;
when no one else will ever know that it was us.
The kindness, the generosity, the altruism
that we extend to others,
not because it will result in everlasting fame
or recognition, but, rather,
because it was the right thing to do.
With our quiet legacies,
our names may fade with time,
but the impact of what we did
will linger and endure,
long after we are here.

And in Judaism, this may be the most important kind of legacy, of all.

Maimonides was a 12th century Jewish physician
who had an opinion, or two,
about moral and righteous living.
Perhaps it was his daily view of sickness and suffering
that prompted him to create the Mishnah Torah –
the quintessential, user-friendly Jewish guidebook
on how to make our lives matter before our time on earth runs out.

Of all of his concepts,
his “Eight Levels of Righteous Giving”
is perhaps his most well-known treatise, of all.
Maimonides’ Ladder – as it is also called –
ranks eight different ways to give –
positioning the most ideal ways of giving at the top,
and the less optimal methods of giving, at the bottom.

On the ladder, giving in a way that is *anonymous*
consistently outranks all other forms and fashions of tzedakah.

Because anonymous giving, by definition,
is never about us.
It is never about who is watching.
Anonymous giving –
or, perhaps we might even call it *angelic* giving –
is about giving for the sake of giving.
It is about kindness for the sake of kindness.
It is about bringing more goodness,
more hope, more generosity into this world,
whether or not we will be known or remembered
for bringing that goodness, that hope, that generosity, in the first place.

How do we act when no one else is looking?
How do we act, when our actions won't result in our name on a building...
when we may not receive any recognition...
when no one else, will know?

I'll always remember the day
that I took my daughter to the pediatrician
for the very first time.
There I was with this three-day old infant,
completely exhausted, dazed and overwhelmed.
I hadn't had a real shower in days –
probably not since before I gave birth;
my body still throbbed, ached, and bled
in places and in ways I never thought possible;

I think that I had slept for about a total of five hours
over the past forty-eight.
I remember sitting in that stark and sterile exam room,
trying desperately, once again,
to get my daughter to nurse –
when a nurse came in to collect the baby's vitals.
As I handed Michaela over to her, she looked at me and said,
“You don't look so good, mama.”
It was then that I burst into tears.
“Oh dear,” she said, handing the baby back over to me.
“Let's take care of you first.”
It was not lost on me that it was hardly her job,
in that moment, to sit with me, to hold my hand,
to listen to me cry, to tell me that everything was going to be ok.
But, she did it anyway.
She normalized my pain.
She gave me hope that things would, eventually, get better.
She reminded me that, sometimes,
the greatest gift that we can give to another
is the gift of our time.
And the gift of our presence.
And then, well before the doctor came in,
she was gone.
Just like that.
Although her sole task that day
was simply to mark down baby's heartrate, length and weight,
she did something far more important during that visit.
And, still, to this day,
I couldn't tell you her name.
I have no idea who she was –

and I likely never will.
But I will always remember what she did,
and how she was there,
just as I was approaching the deepest depths
of post-partum pain.

Giving for the sake of giving.
Kindness for the sake of kindness.
I believe, in angels.

It was the night before Yom Kippur,
the holiest time of the year.
As all the Jews were gathering in synagogue
to begin the prayer service,
Rabbi Shneur Zalman,
also known as the Alter Rebbe,
mysteriously left the small European village.

Some of his devoted and admiring students speculated
that their adored rabbi went to heaven,
connecting to God and the angels in the heavenly sphere
in preparation for this holy time.

Where was their beloved leader?

As the Rabbi's students
waited anxiously for him to arrive,
the rabbi was climbing deep into the woods,
with a sack on his back,
to chop down wood.

They later learned that he then proceeded
to bring the firewood and the sack
into the lonely little house of an impoverished widow
and her five small children.

No task was beneath this great Torah scholar
as he created a blazing fire in the fireplace,
unpacked the food and clothes from the sack,
lovingly fed the children,
and left the woman with many kind
and caring words.

Perhaps we could say that the Alter Rebbe
went to a place even higher, than heaven.

We are immortalized long after we are gone
through our acts of kindness for which there is often no credit,
and no reward, in return.

For the love and care that we give, that often goes unseen.

For the love and care that we give,
especially when we don't have to.

Especially when it isn't "my job."

A hushed whisper on the side of the road: I know someone who can help you.

An ordinary passerby, who could have kept on walking.

A stranger who hears a child's cry, and goes out of his way to help.

A nurse who takes the time to sit and listen.

A home cooked meal delivered with love.

It is through our simple and modest goodness –
our pure and genuine giving –
that we that we act as angels on earth,
changing this world in more ways
than we can ever even begin,
to imagine.