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By
Rabbi Marc D. Angel

The Torah indicates that the Holy Ark of the Mishkan was covered by Keruvim, angelic figures. “And the Keruvim spread out their wings on high, screening the ark-cover with their wings, with their faces one to another; toward the ark-cover were the faces of the keruvim” (Shemot 37:9).

In describing Solomon’s Temple (Chronicles II 3:13) the Bible reports that the countenances of the Keruvim “faced the house” i.e. the Temple. This seems to indicate that the Keruvim’s faces were not looking at each other.

Noticing the difference in description of which way the Keruvim faced, the Talmud (Baba Batra 99a) offers the Midrashic opinion of Rabbi Elazar: When Israel did the will of God, the Keruvim faced each other; but when they did not do the will of God, the Keruvim faced away from each other.

(The JPS translation resolves the discrepancy by translating the phrase in Chronicles [ufneihem la-bayyit] as “and their faces were inward.”)

Rabbi Elazar’s message was that the intimacy of the relationship between God and Israel is contingent upon the righteousness of the Israelites. When we are upright and pious, the Keruvim look at each other face to face—symbolic of the direct relationship between Israel and God. When we fall short in our righteousness, the Keruvim face away from each other—symbolic of a colder relationship.

When we look carefully at the verse in Shemot 37:9, we see that the point is not only that the Keruvim face each other…but that they face the ark-cover i.e. the Holy Ark in which the Tablets of the Covenant were housed.

The lesson may be: as long as the Israelites look in the direction of the Holy Ark, they will strive to live according to the ideals of the Torah. They recognize that they are answerable to God for their words and deeds. If Israel maintains this high level of religious awareness, then they can look into each others’ eyes in friendship, love and harmony.

But when the Israelites turn their heads away from the Holy Ark, they diminish their awareness of the commandments of the Torah. They forget that they are answerable to God for their words and deeds. As a consequence, alienation sets

in that divides people from each other. They sin against one another—without regard for the commandments of the Torah—and thus they can no longer look into one another's eyes with love, friendship and harmony.

When people speak "lashon hara," when they sow dissension—they thereby demonstrate that they have turned their eyes away from the Holy Ark. Symbolically, they cause the Keruvim to turn their faces away from each other. In turning away from the teachings contained within the Holy Ark, they also turn away from their fellow human beings. They slander, lie, cheat, commit violence…because they have lost sight of God and Torah.

The Torah sometimes refers to the Tablets of the Covenant [luhot ha-berit] as the Tablets of Testimony [luhot ha-eidut]. What is their testimony?

Each person tends to rationalize his/her behavior and describes it in the best possible light. People may engage in sinful behavior but find ways to justify themselves so as not to think they have sinned. The Tablets of Testimony are the litmus test that determines whether we are indeed following the ways of God or not. We need to measure ourselves by the standards of the Torah; the Torah itself testifies whether we are behaving in a moral and upright manner, or whether we are in fact veering from the teachings and ideals of Torah.

If we stay focused on the Holy Ark and on the Tablets of Testimony, we are more likely to live upright, loving and kind lives. We are more likely to be able to look compassionately and honestly into each other's eyes. We are more likely to avoid speaking ill of others, or slandering people via electronic media, or behaving dishonestly or disrespectfully.

We can each do our share to cause the countenances of the Keruvim to face each other, symbolic of a warm relationship among ourselves, and between ourselves and the Master of the Universe.

Angel for Shabbat