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By
Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Beshallah

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The late Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach founded a synagogue in Berkeley during the 1960s in order to reach out to the many young Jews who had drifted away from Jewish tradition. He named it the House of Love and Prayer. In the summer of 1967, he was asked to explain his vision for this synagogue.

He answered: “Here’s the whole thing, simple as it is. The House of Love and Prayer is a place where, when you walk in, someone loves you, and when you walk out, someone misses you.” (Quoted in “Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach: Life, Mission and Legacy,” by Natan Ophir, Urim Publications, 2014, p.119)

In these few words, Rabbi Carlebach expressed a profound insight worthy of immortality! He offered a vision not just for the House of Love and Prayer…but for all places of Jewish worship. When we come together to pray, we are vastly strengthened spiritually if we feel harmony and love among our fellow worshipers. The value of each individual is measured by whether he or she is missed after leaving the synagogue. Do people really care about each other? Do they relate warmly to each other? Do they share a spiritual quest?

Some synagogues strive to achieve the goals articulated by Rabbi Carlebach. They devote great effort to maintaining a harmonious community, to appreciating the uniqueness of each member, to creating a spiritual environment where people can feel a sense of the Divine Presence. Other synagogues are characterized by political infighting, “macheritis” (where individuals seek to assert their self-importance), by prayer that is not genuinely serious. Some synagogues tend to have an impersonal feeling, so that no one cares if you come or go, and few people bother to welcome a visitor. In some synagogues, the harmony of love and prayer is diminished by excessive chatter among congregants (and clergy!), by people reading books other than the prayer book, by irreverent drollery.

In this week’s Parasha, we read the Song sung by Moses and the children of Israel after they miraculously crossed the Red Sea and witnessed the destruction of their Egyptian pursuers. “Then sang Moses and the children of Israel this song unto the Lord, and they spoke, saying: I will sing unto the Lord for He is highly

exalted…” (Shemoth 15:1). The verse informs us that Moses and the Israelites—in the plural—sang a song of praise to the Almighty. But when the song actually begins, it shifts to the singular—I will sing.

I believe this verse is alluding to a vital truth relating to prayer. When praying as a congregation, we are a community of people. We are plural. Yet, we are also unique individuals who have different thoughts, feelings, talents and sensitivities. We come together as a “we” but when we begin praying, we do so as an “I.” The spiritual reality is created when the “we” and the “I” are in harmony, when the entire community senses oneness among themselves and in their relationship with God.

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