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By
Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Vayetsei

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As a young bachelor, Jacob fled home to escape his brother Esau's deadly wrath. Along the way, Jacob went to sleep and dreamed of angels ascending and descending a ladder that connected heaven and earth. When he awoke, he realized that he had had an amazing revelation. "This is nothing but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

This vision must have been a great source of strength to Jacob. He had literally seen his life in context with heaven and earth, in a vibrant relationship with God. It was the dream of a young idealist, seeking to make his way through the travails of life while maintaining a profound spiritual outlook.

At the end of this week's Torah reading, Jacob again sees angels. But now Jacob is much older, the head of a large family. He is on the way back to his ancestral home. Just as he had fled his home in fear of Esau so long ago, he now dreads confronting Esau upon returning home. "And Jacob went on his way and the angels of God met him. And Jacob said when he saw them: 'this is God's camp.' And he called the name of that place Mahanaim (camps)."

This confrontation with the angels was not the idealistic, hopeful experience that Jacob had experienced as a young man. This was not a group of angels who connected heaven and earth. These were angels coming to offer Jacob courage as he was about to meet Esau. Jacob called the place Mahanaim—camps i.e. a military encampment. This wasn't a time for idealistic dreams; it was a time to prepare for war.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik commented on the difference between a camp (mahaneh) and a community (edah). A camp exists as a defensive tactic. Those within the camp are surrounded by enemies; their physical existence is threatened so they come together to protect themselves.

A community, by contrast, is united not by fears of external enemies, but by a shared worldview, a shared desire to live happy, good lives.

During the course of life, we sometimes feel that we are in an edah; we live among people we trust and like; we strive for similar goals; we try to link heaven and earth by living our earthly lives with a keen sense of the spiritual. Yet, there are other times when we feel that we are in a mahaneh; we are threatened, our families are in peril. We unite in order to defend ourselves.

For much of our lives, whether we realize it or not, we find ourselves simultaneously in an edah and in a mahaneh. Yet, different moods prevail at different times. When things go smoothly, we feel that our angels unite heaven and earth. Life is filled with possibilities, with happiness, with societal peace. Yet, there are times—too many times—when we cannot avoid being in a mahaneh mode. We face deadly enemies, merciless killers. The angels we see are angels who warn us of the dangers all around us. We hunker down; we worry about our physical survival. We ready ourselves for war.

Perhaps Jacob's confrontations with both sets of angels is meant to be a reminder to us. We must never cease to see the angels connecting heaven and earth. We must never lose our humanity and our spirituality. We must never allow others to force us into a permanent mahaneh mentality.

Yet, we must also be prepared to function as a mahaneh when we are threatened. When we are called upon to defend our lives and our way of life, we need to know that the angels of the Lord are with us in our mahaneh.

Coming together as a mahaneh is our way of saving our lives. Coming together as an edah is our way of saving our way of life. Even when we are seemingly at peace, we must see the angels of Mahanaim and be prepared to defend our lives from enemies. Even when we are in the midst of battle, we must never lose sight of the angels connecting heaven and earth.

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