

Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Bereishith

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By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

“When Enoch had lived 65 years, he begot Methuselah. After the birth of Methuselah, Enoch walked (*vayit-halekh*) with God 300 years; and he begot sons and daughters. All the days of Enoch came to 365 years. Enoch walked (*vayit-halekh*) with God; then he was no more, for God took him” (Bereishith 5:21-24).

In the midst of a routine listing of births and deaths, the Torah includes these unusual verses relating to Enoch. He is singled out as one who walked with God.

It is often pointed out that translations do not always capture the meaning of the original. This is true in the verses about Enoch. The English translation simply states that Enoch walked with God. But the Hebrew word, *vayit-halekh*, is in the reflexive “*hitpa’el*” form. It means more than just walking. It comes closer to “walking with purpose,” or “walking in righteousness.” Or even closer to “drawing God into himself.” *Vayit-halekh* has the connotation of process. Enoch didn’t merely think of God or worship God; he was constantly striving for relationship with God.

The verb form *hit’halekh* is also used once in connection with Noah, a pure, righteous man who walked with God. This is great praise for Noah; but in Enoch’s case, this verb form is used twice! The Torah is clearly underscoring a unique and praiseworthy quality of Enoch. Even his death is recorded mysteriously: “he was no more, for God took him.” The Torah is indicating that Enoch was so absorbed in a Godly life that his death seemed to be a natural translation into God’s

spiritual domain.

While various interpretations and legends have arisen about Enoch, the basic teaching is that Godliness/religion is a process. Ideally, one does not “have” religion as though it is a fixed set of beliefs and rules; rather, one’s religiosity is a constantly developing phenomenon. Religion is not “having” but “striving.” God is not “proven” but “experienced.” One “knows God” not by philosophizing about God but by living a Godly life, literally “drawing God into oneself.”

In opening his *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides teaches that “The foundation of foundations and the pillar of wisdom is to know that there is a First Being who brings into being all that exists.” In his *Guide of the Perplexed* (3:54) he spells out what “knowing” God entails. Human perfection depends on the level of one’s apprehension of God. But this apprehension is manifested in a living relationship with God. “The way of life of such an individual, after one has achieved this apprehension, will always have in view loving-kindness, righteousness and judgment, through assimilation to His actions, may He be exalted.”

When the Torah states twice that Enoch walked with God (*vayit-halekh*), it thereby emphasizes that Enoch not only “apprehended” God, but that he actively pursued a Godly life above and beyond others of his times. Enoch set a standard to which all humans should aspire.

If someone asked Enoch if he was religious, he would have answered: “I am striving to be.” When someone asks us: are you religious? The answer should be, like Enoch’s: “I am striving to be.”