

Becoming an Angel

Ever since I have lived in Los Angeles people have been jealous. For 8 years now, I have heard friends and acquaintances respond with awe and excitement when I tell them about my experiences in sunny southern California. Think about a January day when we have a brief heat spell and you find yourself sitting on the beach soaking in the sun, you happen to call your friends or family in the northeast and tell them about your day as if it was routine. What is the response you get from the person on the other side of the call, “I wish I was there with you!” Warmth in the middle of winter is reason enough to be jealous, but when you throw in star sightings, great restaurants, skiing and surfing in the same day, Disneyland, the Getty and the beautiful landscapes of the chaparral, there are so many reasons to be proud to live in Los Angeles.

But there is one reason that I bet not many people have really thought of. We live in Los Angeles, in Spanish pronounced Los Angeles, it is the City of Angels and each of us is an Angelino, each of us is an Angel! Does it mean we have a higher calling because we are in fact angels? Do we need reminding of this higher purpose when sit in traffic on the 405? One does not have to be a resident of Los Angeles to be an angel; any human being can be called to this higher purpose. Being an angel is in fact at the very core of our existence here on earth. As the Midrash Tanhuma teaches, “Angels are the creation, of our own positive thoughts, words and deeds.”¹ We are called to serve a greater purpose, to engage in holy work, to be God’s messenger here on earth, helping God to fulfill God’s mission on earth. It is that holy work that transforms us into Angels.

¹ Grishaver, Joel Lurie. Teaching Jewishly, p. 11

For thousands of years, angels have fascinated us as a people. Angels appear in the Torah, the rabbis ascribe them all sorts of divine characteristics. Angels are God's messengers, God's *m'lachim*, helping to do God's work. We might think that these angels are divine beings whose mysteriousness might cause us to question their existence just as we sometimes question God's existence. As Dr. Ron Wolfson writes, "God doesn't depend on angels. God depends on us to be angels. As unbelievable as it may sound, each of us is God's agent, [God's messenger], here on earth. We are God's hands, feet, eyes, ears – and most important, God's heart. God needs us. And when we perform an act of loving-kindness, no matter how small, we bring God's presence into the world, into our world."²

Our challenge each day is to live up to the higher calling for which we were created. We have to be God's messenger, responding to the calls of the people close to us. We need to comfort them when they are sick; we need to listen to them when they need support and we need to care for the people we love. These tasks are never simple; we need reminders to help us figure out how we can be angels. Rosh Hashanah is that reminder, and each year in the Rosh Hashanah Torah reading there is one word that appears three times, reminding us how to respond to the calls of the people we love. The response is one word, in Hebrew it is *Hineini*, we have to respond to the people we love by saying, "*Hineini*, here I am." Which we can understand to mean, "I am ready to help you and care for you."

The story we read this morning is arguably one of the most challenging of all our sacred texts. God decided to test Abraham by asking him to sacrifice his beloved son,

² Dr. Ron Wolfson. [God's To-Do list: 103 to Be an Angel and Do God's Work on Earth](#). Kindle location: 166-171

Isaac. As our two fallible biblical heroes walked off together Isaac noticed that there was wood for the offering but there was no animal. Abraham informed Isaac that God would provide an animal for the offering. After Abraham had bound Isaac on the altar and had made the final preparations for the sacrifice, an angel of God called out to Abraham imploring him to stop the offering to God. In each of these instances, first when God called to Abraham, Abraham responded *Hineini*, when Isaac called to him, Abraham responded *Hineini*, and when the angels called to him, Abraham responded *Hineini*. When Abraham responded this way he was acting as an angel: by recognizing the other, being accessible to the other and by awakening to a sacred relationship.³

Rabbi Norman Cohen teaches that in the first instance, when God called to Abraham and his response was *hineini*, “Abraham had a relationship with God that forged over an entire lifetime. Abraham was ready to respond *hineini*. [Abraham’s readiness to respond in such a way] is based on recognition, based on his long standing relationship with God and the trust they share.” Rabbi Cohen reminds us that, “this is so with each of us, and our relationship with everyone close to us. When one of them requests something of us, our impulse must be to respond out of the long term commitment we share and the trust that is built up over time.”⁴ When a loved one calls to us for help, the trust and the commitment we share with them inspires us to say *hineini*, here I am.

How does one learn to respond in such a way? This response is not a simple reflex. There may be something that holds us back. But there is also something calling us to respond.

³ Cohen, Norman. *Hineini in Our Lives*. Chapter headings 1-3.

⁴ *Ibd.* p. 7

In light of the wars that have been fought in the last decade, there has been much to shake our heads over. Lives have been lost and tears have been shed. In the midst of that sorrow, however, we can learn great lessons from the bonds of brotherhood that have formed in the platoons that are fighting wars overseas.

The story of Juan Restrepo is one of loyalty, brotherhood and a continually responding *hineini* to the other soldiers in his platoon. His story is told in a new book, by Sebastian Junger, entitled War. In this book, Junger demonstrates the lessons of brotherhood through the story of a platoon stationed in Afghanistan. As an embedded reporter with this platoon Junger helps us to live the day-to-day challenges and the struggles faced by each man of the platoon on a daily and sometimes hourly basis. From dodging bullets in firefights to avoiding rocket propelled grenades we come to understand how one puts his life on the line for his family, his platoon.

Juan Restrepo was a medic who was born in Colombia but lived in Florida, he had two daughters and spoke with a light lisp, and he quickly became loved by everyone in his platoon. “He was extremely well liked because he was brave under fire and absolutely committed to the men of the platoon. If you got sick, he would take your guard shift; if you were depressed he’d come and play guitar for you. He took care of his men in every possible way.”⁵ One hot summer afternoon, the men of Second Platoon were out on patrol. Enemy gunners had taken fire on the Americans as they took cover. Restrepo was the only man hit. There had been so much gunfire coming from so many different directions that no one dared to run out to get him. When they finally went to get him he was going in and out of consciousness. He was brought to an aid station. One of

⁵ Junger, Sebastian. War. Kindle location 741-746.

the members of his platoon wrote in his journal that Restrepo was too good a man for God to let die. Word later came in that Restrepo didn't make it. No one wanted to believe it!

Later, the men built an outpost in the Korengal Valley in Afghanistan and they named it Restrepo after Doc Restrepo, who everyone in the platoon had come to love and call a brother.

Junger later writes that the only time he saw a man cry at the Restrepo outpost was when he asked one soldier if he was glad the outpost had been named after Doc Restrepo. This soldier nodded and then his face just went in his hands. Another soldier had struggled with Restrepo's death as well. "We loved him like a brother. I actually saw him as an older brother," he said. "After Restrepo went down, I didn't care about anything. I didn't care if I died or not. I'd run out to into the open, not worrying about getting shot. I did that until someone pointed out that if I got hit, someone else was going to have to run through gunfire to save me. The idea that I might get one of my brothers killed was enough to get me to knock it off."⁶

Restrepo's story and the legacy that he has left is one of responding *hineini*. The lesson for us is to know that we have to go out and help the people we care about. We cannot hesitate. Juan Restrepo was most certainly an angel to the people of his platoon. His effort to help out when his brothers were sick or depressed shows us that each of us can respond when we are called. When Restrepo took a shift or played his guitar, he responded *hineini*, using his skills to help those who were in need. Each of us has a skill;

⁶ *ibid.* location 2879-2893.

each of us has a resource to help the people around us. We can make a difference in their lives. That is what it means to be an angel.

Being an angel is offering hope at a fragile and uncertain time. Being an angel is supporting the people we love at a time of need. In Jewish tradition it is customary to recite the words of the shema before going to bed. It was believed that the nighttime was mysterious and uncertain and by invoking God in prayer, Jews would find comfort and protection in these spiritual and sacred words. In a 9th century commentary to the Torah called the Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer, we learn of a special addition to this bedtime prayer. This prayer invokes four angels, "May Michael be at my right; may Gavriel be at my left; may Uriel be before me; may Raphael be behind me and may the presence of God be within me."⁷ Each of these names has meaning in Hebrew. Raphael means God's healing. As Rabbi Joseph Meszler, author of *Facing Illness, Finding God*⁸ explains, Raphael, the healing angel is behind us, supporting us. If we invoke this prayer at night when we lie down in bed, behind us is physically underneath us. Those who are need of healing lie on a bed, it is the bed that holds them up, keeping them from the harsh uncomfortable floor. Raphael invokes this bed of healing, a comforting, and sturdy, yet soft support. When we are in need of healing, when we search for wholeness, we want to find people who support us, who make our beds comfortable and sturdy, yet soft and warm. Each of us can be the person who reaches out to another and supports someone in our lives or in our community. Being an angel is responding *hineini*. Each of us is capable of being an angel of healing to someone in this community. It is easy to do.

⁷ Pirkei D' Rabbi Eliezer chapter 4 <http://www.daat.ac.il/daat/vl/tohen.asp?id=293>

⁸ Meszler, Rabbi Joseph. *Facing Illness, Finding God*. Introduction xv-xvi.

Rabbi Meszler also tells the story of a young cancer patient whom he had met at Shabbat services.⁹ Different people were given the opportunity to speak at these services in which they gave an interpretation of the week's Torah portion. When Laura was given the opportunity to speak, she decided to tell her story through the lens of the Torah which that week called on the Israelites to give gifts if their hearts so moved them. These gifts were then used to build the Tabernacle in the wilderness. As many people who face serious illness do, Laura wrestled with God. She wondered where God was on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays when she would lie on the radiation table for thirty minutes only to come home and be seriously ill. Her treatments combined with the plagues thought that she was fighting for her life against a disease that was eating away at her respiratory system was enough to challenge her faith.

Thursday afternoons she would come home and take her medications with three jars of baby food given to her by a friend because her friend thought that the baby food would go down and come up easier than real food. After a brief break for television, another friend who just wanted to keep her company visited. Her boss would pay her to basically sit and watch people go by when she didn't have the strength to answer the phones. People called intermittently just to see how she was doing. Laura concluded her words that Shabbat by saying, "Within the mitzvah of these gifts, my friends have built a place for me a little less frightening where, while I live, these gifts will carry me to a place of strength and love. And in the tiny mitzvah, a quick call, a jar of baby food, an honest embrace, this is where God is."

⁹ *Ibd.* p. 158-160

Laura is teaching us that it is our friends and our loved ones who come to our aid at times of great need. The foundation of such actions lies in our sacred texts. Contained in the book of Job is the story of a man who faces great loss and despair. His three friends come to his aid. These friends are often criticized for their actions, but when we think about their intentions, we realize that each was involved in sacred work. In Job 2:11 we read, “When Job’s three friends heard about all that had befallen him, each came from his place. They met together to go and console and comfort him.” Think about this verse, each friend came from his place. They got up and went. Their places do not have to be taken as physical space, it could refer to their own psychological state. Whatever was going on in their lives, even if they had some brokenness, they dropped everything and came to the aid of their friend. We don’t have to be whole to respond *hineini*, we can come from our own place as well. Additionally, their goal was to console and comfort. Their positive thoughts and deeds remind us that they were being holy; they were being angels.

Laura’s friends also came to comfort. Her story is a modern version of Job’s friends. Laura teaches us the very essence of why we are here, we can be God’s messengers, we can help others, and we can be angels. Each gift we bring, whether it is our physical presence or a tangible item, represents God’s presence. Bringing those gifts is the way we respond *hineini* to the people we care about. We may not be able to cure people from diseases, but we can help people find wholeness. We can pick up the phone and tell people we care about them. We can bring a meal, send a card or give a warm embrace. That is how we respond *hineini*.

It is one thing to talk about being an angel as an individual. The summation of individual responses is what we call sacred community. A sacred community devotes itself to being concerned for the wellbeing of others in the community. When each of us joined Temple Isaiah, we became part of a community that is dedicated to making sure each of us is taken care of in a time of need. Caring for others is not just about caring about your friends or loved ones when their lives are broken. Caring for others, being an angel and responding *hineini* is about being mindful of our fellow Temple Members when they are broken and in need of becoming whole once again.

Our Caring Community works so hard to arrange for the delivery of meals, to send a card welcoming newborns into the world, to send bereavement cards, and to send we're thinking of you cards as people confront illness and recovery. A few core volunteers do this work. They spend a lot of time making sure we know that the temple is there when we feel broken. This year we are going to build on those core volunteers. A caring community needs to involve more than just a few volunteers; it needs to involve everyone. A Caring Community is when an entire pre-school class helps to bring meals to a family who has just welcomed a baby into their lives. A Caring Community is when the Torah Study group rallies to bring meals to one of its members whose spouse was in the hospital recovering from surgery. A caring community is when temple members bring a meal to someone who has just had radiation. We need to find new and better ways to be a Caring Community and we need to be more mindful about the well being of our community.

The people who sit behind me on the bima this Rosh Hashanah morning were part of a task force that worked with Cantor Kent and myself on the creation of Temple

Isaiah's Center for Wellness and Gratitude. For three and a half months we worked together to learn, brainstorm and envision this center's role in our community. In this year 5771, we are going to embark on a congregational journey in which we are devoted to wellness and gratitude. We will do this in three ways: through Education, Spirituality and Caring Community. We will offer educational opportunities during the year that help us uncover Jewish approaches to finding wholeness, we will offer opportunities to learn from physicians and to hear personal stories that will help us find a sense of shalom in our lives.

In our pursuit of spiritual wholeness we will offer support groups in the areas of bereavement and caring for elderly parents. We will continue to offer Yoga, our weekly meditation and the Isaiah Women Walking Group. We will begin to offer Health Beats that will use the rhythm of the Jewish year to help us find meaning in the seasons.

The great Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber who taught so passionately about finding God through encounters with others once taught, "When people come to you for help, do not turn them off with pious words, saying: "Have faith and take your troubles to God!" Act instead as if there was no God, act as though there were only one person in all the world who could help – only yourself."¹⁰ That is what we are going to do, we are going to commit ourselves to helping others, and we are going to be angels. If each of us pledges to help when we are called, we will become a better and stronger caring community. We will call on you to give a ride to someone who needs to come to temple to say Kaddish or we will call on you to deliver a meal. When you get the call, be an angel, say, "Here I am" because you may be the only person in the world who can help.

¹⁰ Mishkan Tefillah, p. 155

To begin this work, Temple Isaiah is looking for volunteers who will learn and understand the mitzvah of bikkur cholim, visiting the sick. We will learn how to be empathic listeners; we will learn how to respond to the calls of those in our community who are in need. If you would like to participate in our initial training please respond *hineini*, which is another way to say yes, to the email you receive this afternoon. We also invite the entire community to join us as we dedicate Temple Isaiah's Center for Wellness and Gratitude on Wednesday evening September 22nd, Erev Sukkot, when world-renowned Jewish songwriter, Debbie Friedman, will join us.

Each sacred act that helps others fulfills the verse in the book of psalms which is the foundation of our Center for Wellness and Gratitude, "*Adonai oz l'amo yitein, Adonai yivareich et amo vashalom*. Adonai will give strength to God's people, Adonai will bless God's people with peace." (Psalm 29) When you are called on to help others, respond *hineini*. Lend a hand; be ready to give yourself to the community. Be an angel and give people strength and hope.

In this new year of 5771, may we understand what it means to respond *hineini* and give people strength. May we find ways to ways to respond *hineini* and help others find peace and wellbeing in their lives. And may we join together as angels to comfort and support all who seek wholeness. Let us say: amen.