

# I Believe in Angels

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Jake was fired from his job this week. After 18 months of investment and work with the new company, and moving across the country with his family, it turns out that Jake is not the person the company is looking for. They expected somebody different and, without warning, Jake is told to clean out his office and leave. For Jake, the new job meant everything: a new home for his family, a step up the professional ladder, pride, a larger salary. Now the word “fire” feels like a sucker punch to the abdomen, there is only emptiness, disorder, and loss.

As much as we are urged to connect with others in our tradition, making connections with others, especially those you only know for a short while, can always be risky. There are shorter honeymoons with work places these days and many companies expect us to begin performing from day one. You can be sure if you entered with a passion to connect with the team on the way in, you will experience a painful separation of equal measure on the way out. The pain and anxiety for Jake of covering his mortgage and other payments, disrupting the lives of his wife and children, and the hard, full-time work of finding work is daunting, especially in a new city. Pain and anxiety will also mask whatever lessons learned and hope come out of the event. The newly unemployed can get really depressed.

We rabbis joke that when a colleague loses his contract, it is either “vayetze” (he left) or “vayishlach” (he was cast out), quoting the titles of the two Torah portions about Jacob’s life in the Book of Genesis. For all the promises and blessings spoken over him by his father Isaac in the last story, Jacob comes up empty handed on his way out. Where is the “dew of heaven and the fat places of the soil, abundance of corn and new wine?(Genesis 27:28)” Doesn’t the wave of a magic wand with the blessing confer on him instant respect? It certainly doesn’t come from Esau who is scheming to kill him. For all the hullabaloo about tricking blind Isaac into getting Esau’s blessing, Jacob leaves penniless and will never see his mother again. There will be no magic wand passed over Jacob’s head for fortune and fame. As he heads off to find his Uncle Lavan, it is clear that Jacob will have to earn everything through hard work. Hunter Esau has the reputation and the materials, the women and the children; Jacob has been cut off.

The vision of the angels and the ladder come at a transitional and fearful time in Jacob’s life. The pain of separation runs deep; all he has is the pack on his back. It occurs to me that the Torah teaches that with painful separations opportunities abound. We just need to see the angels. I believe angels are manifestations of God in other people who protect us and guide us along the way. They are guardian angels who see you when you are invisible to others. They know your pain and can help in whole or in part along your journey in life. When Jacob is first introduced to the vision of the ladder, he doesn’t know what to think. It surprises him because it is unfamiliar to the sedentary life of the contemplative shepherd. The ladder prepares Jacob for the next leg of the journey. He

will need to climb and stretch himself. He will need to ascend and view reality from above. Rashi tells us that the ladder stretches over the border between Jacob's home and the land beyond (the world of uncertainty). The angels of the home world hand Jacob off to the angels of the foreign world. The spiritual journey, when accepted by the pilgrim, tests and challenges him especially when he moves out of his comfort zone. The old language, the old tools of the trade need to be refashioned. Jacob thought he would become a prince but the new reality, introduced by the ladder-bridge and its angels, points him in a new direction. Incredibly, the pain of separation disappears and Jacob finds hope.

Look around and be grateful for your guardian angels. They appear most prominently in the pain of separation and encourage us to go forward, in turns in the road we might not expect, in shadowy valleys that can crush our spirit at times, but we continue to pray and trust that they know what is best for our lives. The journey of the soul is one of faith going forward. Jacob at the end of his life is grateful for "Hamalach Goel," (Genesis 48:16) the Guardian Angel who keeps him from harm -- the one who helped him climb the ladder bridge, the one who blessed his hard work and provided for family and fortune (despite obstacles) and the one with whom he struggled. I believe that in pain and suffering, our guardian angels help us to cope and, with a smile and few words, help us to pass into the new normal of our lives.