

Shabbat Balak

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"Behold, This is the image and likeness of G-d!"

The Midrash about the proclaiming Angel is one that can seem quite funny. The visual is perhaps a little too Della Reese to be taken seriously. Though if you remember the opening credits of "Touched By an Angel," they do put together the angel imagery somewhat nicely. The Sun streams through the clouds, the rays illuminating everything they touch . . .

But what does the Midrash really mean?

I heard the Midrash while attending Erev Shabbat services at Kehilliat Yisrael in Pacific Palisades. At the service we attended, Rabbi Rami Shapiro, one of the leading Progressive Jewish thinkers of our time, who has just relocated from Miami, Florida, was the guest speaker .

Rabbi Shapiro put it like this:

The challenge of the Midrash is for us to strive to hear the proclaiming angel that goes ahead of every one of us.

Simple enough. Or is it?

I went home and thought long and hard about the Midrash, and it's challenge.

Here is what I came up with, and perhaps you might like to try it with me. Try spending one entire day, thinking to yourself at the approach of every individual, as you look in their direction, "Behold, this is the image and likeness of G-d."

It is not easy. In fact, it is down right hard. It is exhausting. I work in a large hospital. Approximately 10,000 people enter through our doors in a day. Admittedly, they don't all pass me; I probably come into direct contact with maybe 80 to 150 people. But that is still a lot of angels to strive to hear. Then there are many others: the guy in line at the grocery store, or the woman in the lap pool ahead of me, the drivers on the roads and streets with me - I am lucky, I guess that I don't have to take any freeways. And so many others.

Think about how you interact with the various people that pass through your world.

Some, I would say very probably the vast majority of them, barely register on our frequency -- the pedestrian loaded with shopping bags, the homeless lady who passes through your line of vision as you change lanes to avoid the driver in front who is really going far too slow.

It was quite a revelation to me, the day last week that I tried the exercise.

I heard once, that the mind acts as a filter -- for were we to allow ourselves to feel, experience and be present for all the exchanges, impulses and stimuli we have, we would blow a fuse! Perhaps our filters are too fine in the modern, hectic, auto-centric life we lead in Los Angeles. We sit cocooned in our cars, doors locked, windows up, AC on, listening to our CD players, behind our sunglasses, trying desperately to convince ourselves that we are somewhere else. Anywhere else.

How hard we work to avoid hearing the voices.

So, the if the idea of an entire day of hearing the proclaiming angels sounds a little too intense, try this exercise:

Tomorrow morning, when you stand in the bathroom, your face moist from that first splash of cool water -- look deeply into the mirror, and listen hard to the voice of the angel that stands there in front of you -- "Behold, This is the image and likeness of G-d."

This is the hardest voice to hear. We just completed a month of Pride, celebrating our liberation; yet, we are still a people prone to think less of ourselves for our differences.

But take heart -- remind yourself, listen to the voices.

-- Shabbat Shalom.