

Sparks

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Why on earth are we here?

Discovering Our Divine Purpose Through Torah

I recall a cute comic strip depicting Moses coming down from Mt. Sinai with the Ten Commandments written in stone. "I've got good news and bad news," he announces to the Israelites waiting anxiously at the bottom of the mountain. "The good news is that I got Him down to ten." The crowd cheers. "The bad news is that adultery is still in."

It is not uncommon for people to think the commandments spoil the fun of life — that G-d is really a cosmic party pooper, and that there is a conflict of interest between man and G-d.

People think that serving G-d is demeaning; servitude implies a slave-master relationship. But that is not the real meaning of serving G-d. The opportunity to serve G-d is the greatest gift we could ever imagine. It's empowering. To serve G-d means that we can do something on behalf of G-d. It's an unbelievable honor!

To understand this I will share with you a very strange story from the Talmud. The Sages encoded deep ideas into such stories. This story conveys a profound truth about who we are, what Torah is, and why we were given the *mitzvot*- commandments.

When Moses ascended to Heaven to get the Torah, the ministering angels said to the Holy One, praised be He, "Sovereign of the universe, what is one born of a woman doing among us?" In other words, what is this imperfect human being doing among perfect beings? How could mortal man ascend to the level of angels?

"He has come to receive the Torah," responded G- d. "He's not staying. He just came to pick something up—the Torah."

The angels were even more upset. "What? Are You about to bestow upon frail man that cherished treasure which has been with You for nine hundred and seventy-four generations before the world was created? What is mortal man that you are mindful of him? And the son of the earth that You have visited him? Oh, G-d our Lord, is not Your name already sufficiently exalted in the earth? Confer Your glory upon the heavens."

By saying, "Isn't your name already sufficiently exalted in the earth?" the angels were cynically reminding G-d that human beings have consistently desecrated His name through all their evil deeds. They were saying, "How can You give human beings your holy Torah? Keep it in heaven. Give it to us!"

People often say that the Torah is a manual for living from G-d. But it is really more than that. It is an assignment from G-d. The Torah is a mission from G- d to be performed on G-d's behalf. That's why the Torah was in the angelic realm. An angel is an agent for G-d appointed to perform a divine mission. Man also has the opportunity to perform a

mission on behalf of G-d. Accepting the Torah means you are accepting a Divine mission. You become a Divine agent. According to Jewish law, if you appoint someone to be your agent, he is equipotent to yourself. You have given him your power of attorney, to act on your behalf. This is the amazing power, responsibility, and privilege entrusted to us through Torah.

The angels did not know what was in the Torah. All they knew was that G-d must really cherish this mission if He had been holding on to it for so long time and had not yet appointed anyone to perform it. When Moses showed up to receive the Torah, they were in absolute shock. All this time, they had heard about this incredible, lofty, exalted mission, and who does G-d finally chose to entrust it to? A human. This is absurd. Humans are such lowly creatures, filled with base inclinations and evil deeds. Humans are going to act on G-d's behalf?

G-d says to Moses, "You have to respond to these angels complaints." In other words, you have to understand why you deserve this mission. What are your qualifications? Most people think that the theme of Torah is about believing in G-d. That's only half the story. Torah is also about believing in yourself. To accept Torah, you must have a tremendous amount of self esteem. You must believe that you are worthy to be G-d's agent on earth -- you were sent here to fulfil a sacred mission.

The message of Shavuot is: You are important and significant to G-d. You have been given the opportunity to represent the Almighty. You have been entrusted with His power of attorney to act on his behalf.

G-d says to Moses, "I cannot answer for you. Unless you realize for yourself what your qualifications are, you can't be entrusted with the mission."

Moses holds on to the Holy Throne, and is charged with amazing confidence to face the angels. In their presence, he asks G-d, "What's in Your Torah?"

"I am the Lord your G-d, who brought you out of Egypt."

Moses then challenges the angels, "Did you go to Egypt and serve Pharaoh? What relevance is the Torah to you?" In other words, Moses argues, "Did you have to serve Pharaoh? Were you oppressed slaves for 210 years?"

The angels concede. They had lived only a perfect blissful life in heaven.

Moses continues to make his case, "G-d, what else is written in Your Torah?"

"Thou shalt not have other gods."

Moses confronts the angels, "Are you living among nations who worship idols?"

To really understand Moses question you need to appreciate what idolatry was really all about. Idolatry was a lot of fun. Most idolatrous practices revolved around sexual promiscuity. The idolaters believed that orgies were a service to their gods. Therefore Moses' point to the angels was, "Do you live in a society which challenges you daily with constant allurements and seductions?"

Angels say, “Nahh, we're angels!”

Moses continues, “G-d, what else is in the Torah?”

“Keep the Shabbat. Honor your father and mother. Don't murder. Don't commit adultery. Don't steal.”

“Angels,” Moses challenges, “do you work hard? Do you need rest? Do you have fathers and mothers that you have to honor? Does jealousy exist among you? Do you have an evil inclination?”

These are the qualifications Moses presented to merit the mission of Torah for humankind: we are lowly beings. That's right! And we are attacked by evil urges all the time. We live in a materialistic society filled with daily seductions. That's why we should get the Torah! We qualify for this mission because we make so many mistakes. We are inundated with problems and challenges from within and without. We are perfect for this job, because we are so imperfect! So the next time you call us “born of a woman,” say it with respect.

The angels are indeed impressed. They even want to befriend humankind, and give Moses useful secrets to help humans in their difficult mission.

What is the mission of Torah? To overcome negative and destructive urges and choose goodness. Goodness that has been chosen is the highest form of goodness. We are highly qualified for this mission because we have a negative inclination that challenges us daily. And we live in a world that presents constant allurements and seductions. We are able to fail, but also to succeed. We are able to destroy, but also to build. We are able to choose to do great evil, but also to choose to do amazing good. Angels are perfect; they have no negative inclination. They have no free choice. They can't struggle. They can't fail. They cannot choose goodness.

Our mission, if we're willing to accept it, is to choose goodness. This is how we serve G-d. Angels sing G-d's praises in a perfect heavenly world. However, human praises surpass those of the angels because we praise G-d from earth, soiled with imperfections, problems, and challenges. This is our greatness.

G-d does not expect us to be perfect. In fact, if we were perfect, we could not have qualified for the mission of Torah. The Talmud teaches that a person can stand in Torah only after he has failed at it. In other words, part of the mission of Torah is to fail, regret, resolve, change, choose goodness, and succeed. We humans are the perfect candidates for the job.

When the angels understood this, they gave Moses gifts—useful secrets. They wanted to invest in the human enterprise. They wanted to be shareholders in Human Goodness, Inc. If you can't work for the company, at least invest in it, and enjoy dividends as a shareholder.

G-d is the major investor in Human Goodness, Inc. G-d invested a spark of the Divine Self in human beings in order to participate in this world. This idea is expressed in the Chassidic tradition that teaches that G-d desires to dwell in this world. G-d lives and

participates in this world through you and me—if we accept the mission. This is the real meaning of G-d creating man in His image.

Every human being has the potential to be an agent and vehicle for G-d. Everything we do can be for G- d's sake. This is the greatest honor and pleasure a person could experience. To live for myself is no great honor, but to live for G-d, to choose goodness for G-d's sake—this is heaven on earth.

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