

# *Wrestling with Angels: Kedushah for Yom Tov*

A *midrash* in *Devarim Rabbah* (11:3) tells us that Moshe and Yaakov debated who was greater. Yaakov argues that he is greater, since he wrestled with an angel and was victorious. Moshe responds that he is the greater: “Yaakov,” he says, “you wrestled with an angel on human turf and won, but I ascended to the angels’ home turf, and they were scared of me.”

This motif of Moshe competing with the angels introduces a theme that permeates Jewish thought, surfacing in multiple ways in every genre of religious writing. Moshe is said to wrestle with angels in various ways, but most centrally, he, on behalf of humans, wrestles with the angels over the question of who should be given God’s Torah. The rabbinic literature (*Shabbat* 88b–89a) tells that when Moshe ascended to heaven, the angels incredulously protested to God: “Will you give the precious treasure which You have held on to for so long to creatures of flesh and blood?!” With God’s encouragement, Moshe responded that indeed, the Torah clearly addresses creatures of flesh and blood. Angels do not need the Shabbat to rest from their work; angels do not need to be reminded that they were slaves; angels can’t be told to honor their parents; and angels do not need to be told not to kill or steal. The Torah, Moshe argues, is fundamentally a text for *imperfect* creatures.<sup>277</sup>

This motif reflects an anxiety Jewish texts have long had about angels. On the one hand, the angels were perfect, and humans could only aspire to such an angelic existence. On the other hand, Moshe does best the angels, and by virtue of possessing the Torah, the Jews can claim to surpass the angels. The relative value of humans when compared to angels is debated in a discussion on the very first verse of the Torah,<sup>278</sup> but we will focus here on the reflexes of this question in our prayers.

## **Reflections of This Anxiety in Our Prayers**

This tension has been reflected in the liturgy of the Jews for thousands of years. We have many prayers from some Jews in the era of the Second Temple, preserved in some of the texts found among the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran in the Judean Desert. My colleague Dr. Joseph Angel discussed these prayers in a recent book, and analyzed in particular the relationship between the prayers of the humans and the prayers of the angels as described in these texts. Dr. Angel argues that in the prayers preserved, “Liturgical time [= the moment of prayer]...occurs at the place where earthly and heavenly temples conjoin.”<sup>279</sup> When one prays – or at least when a community prays – the distinction between heaven and earth is blurred. Humans look like angels, who look like humans. All are united in the praise of God. But Dr. Angel goes on to observe that although the lines may have been blurred, they have not been eradicated altogether. Again, to quote him: “The heads of the [Jews] may have been in the heavens, but they were equally aware that their feet...were firmly rooted on the ground.”<sup>280</sup>

## **The *Kedushah*: Sanctifying with the Angels?**

This dilemma – the desire to emulate and indeed join with the angels, but also a realization and assertion that humans were not angelic – finds a different voice in the liturgy of the Rabbis, and has filtered down to our own prayers today. The moment at which the union of heaven and earth is most heightened in our prayers is the *Kedushah*. On Shabbat

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<sup>277</sup>. For more on this theme, see Peter Schäfer, “*Rivalität zwischen Engeln und Menschen: Untersuchungen zur rabbinischen Engelvormstellung*,” *Studia Judaica* 8 (Berlin/New York, 1975).

<sup>278</sup>. See the commentaries of Saadiah Ga’on and Avraham ibn Ezra, ad loc.

<sup>279</sup>. Joseph Angel, “*Otherworldly and Eschatological Priesthood in the Dead Sea Scrolls*,” *STDJ* 86 (Leiden, 2010): 103.

<sup>280</sup>. *Ibid.*, 105.

we say *Kedushah* twice in the mornings, and the two are different in a critical way; indeed, the two reflect a fundamental disagreement about the way we should relate to the heavenly realm.<sup>281</sup>

The backbone of every *Kedushah* is, of course, the two verses from *Yeshayahu* and *Yechezkel*: “Holy, holy, holy” and “Blessed is the glory of God.” These are the two verses in the Bible in which prophets report on what the angels say in heaven, in praise of God.<sup>282</sup> In the *Kedushah* of *Shacharit*, these two verses essentially comprise the entire *Kedushah*, followed only by “Let the Lord reign forever!”<sup>283</sup>

In this *Kedushah*, we join with the angels. The Ashkenazic rite begins, “Let us sanctify Your name in the world, as they sanctify Your name in the heavens.” A line is drawn: we are down here, they are up there. But we praise God in the same way that they praise God; we “sanctify God’s name” by citing the two lines known to be uttered by the angels, “Holy, holy, holy” and “Blessed.” By uttering these lines, we join with the angels, we sanctify God the same way they do. The formula with which the Sephardic *Kedushah* begins on Shabbat and festivals is even more explicit: “The angels, multitudes of above, with Your people Israel, those gathered below, shall give You a crown – together they will triply ‘Holy’ You!”<sup>284</sup>

In an ancient *machzor*, the *Kedushah* is introduced with a longer formula which makes the equation explicit:

Let us sanctify Your name in the world / the revealed one and the hidden one  
Like the council of holy *seraphim* / O God, glorified in holiness  
The way they sanctify it in the heavenly realms –  
For thus is it written by Your prophets:  
*Seraphim* standing over Him / and His train filling His temple  
Each with six wings  
With two He covered His face / and with two He covered His legs  
With two He flew / calling one to the other, saying.<sup>285</sup>

The version of the *Kedushah* which we say in *Musaf*, however, is qualitatively different. Here, following the two lines that the angels say, we say *Shema*. To be precise, we say the first line of the *Shema* (“Hear, O Israel,” *Devarim* 6:5) and the last line of the *Shema* (“I am the Lord your God,” *Bemidbar* 15:41). This is not a line borrowed from the angels; on the contrary, the *midrash* explains that this line draws a contrast between the angels and the humans: the angels say “Holy” and “Blessed,” whereas the Jews say *Shema*. Indeed, that this is the dynamic of the *Kedushah* is explicit in some *midrashim*. We read, for instance, in *Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer* chapter 4:

Two *seraphim* stand, one to His right and one to His left...this one answers and this one calls, and this one answers and says, “Most Holy is the Lord of Hosts!” And the *chayot* stand next to His throne of glory and do not know the location of His glory, and they respond and say, “Wherever His glory might be, blessed is the glory of God from its place!” And Israel, a single, unique, unified nation in the land, make God’s great name unique and unified every day, and they say, “Hear O Israel! *Hashem* is our God, *Hashem* is one!” And to His people He responds and says: “I am the Lord your God, who saves you from all danger.”<sup>286</sup>

Thus we quote the angels, and we mimic them. Mimicry is a powerful tool, as it is explicated by the cultural critic Homi Bhabha:

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<sup>281</sup>. This is most thoroughly, and most penetratingly, explored by Ezra Fleischer, “*Kedushat Ha-Amidah (U-She’ar Kedushot): Heibetim Histori’im, Liturgi’im Ve-Idiologi’im*,” *Tarbiz* 67 (1998): 301–350.

<sup>282</sup>. Contrast, however, Shadal’s commentary on *Yechezkel* 3:12.

<sup>283</sup>. For discussion of the prayer with comparison to other prayers in early Judaism, see David Flusser, “*Sanktus und Gloria*,” in *Abraham unser Vater: Festschrift für Otto Michel zum 60. Geburtstag* (ed. O. Betz, M. Hengel, and P. Schmidt; Leiden, 1963), 129–152, and Moshe Weinfeld, “*Ha-Liturgia Be-Kumran*,” in *Megillot Midbar Yehuda: Arba’im Shnot Mechkar* (Jerusalem, 1992), 160–175.

<sup>284</sup>. In a sense, this is captured by Allen Ginsberg’s re-use of the same verse in “Howl”: “Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! The world is holy! The soul is holy! ...Everything is holy! everybody’s holy! everywhere is holy! everyday is in eternity! Everyman’s an angel! The bum’s as holy as the seraphim! the madman is holy as you my soul are holy!”

<sup>285</sup>. Fleischer, “*Kedushat Ha-Amidah*,” 31.

<sup>286</sup>. Of course, in the texts we recite today, this contrast is undercut, but this – Fleischer argues – is the result of later changes to the text made in order to return Israel to the position of being equated with the angels.

Mimicry represents an ironic compromise.... The discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference...mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal. Mimicry is, thus, the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which ‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes power.<sup>287</sup>

The angels are to be respected, venerated, and even quoted. But then a line is drawn. Those quotations are excellent ways of praising God, but they are not the way we human Jews praise God. We are not angels, but we are not inferior to angels. We are simply different. They say “Holy” and we say *Shema*. We have our own ways of praising God, no less powerful than those of the angels.

The final stage of the *Kedushah* is added, in the versions current today, only on Yom Tov. Here we add one more line:

How majestic is your name in the whole land!

This is from *Tehillim* chapter 8 – where it is both verse 2 and verse 10. Perhaps we cite this line because that psalm contains a poignant reflection on the theme of humanity’s uncertain position in the world:

When I behold Your heavens, the work of Your fingers – the moon and the stars which You established –  
What is man that You should be mindful of him? What is humanity that You should notice him?  
Yet You have made him just a bit less than the angels, and crowned him with glory and honor;  
You have made him rule over Your handiwork, placing everything beneath his feet.<sup>288</sup>

“How majestic is Your name in the whole land!” we shout – and thus call to mind the question of our own standing in the world, explored so penetratingly in this psalm.

After quoting the angels’ prayers, and then citing our own, ambivalently and alternately asserting that we act in unison with the angels – or that we have our own human traditions which are different from, but no less valuable than, those of the angels – we step back to reflect on the audacity of what we just said. Can we really be similar to the angels? It seems like the ultimate hubris to even consider this. Indeed, we are dwarfed, in our size and our reach, by the vast and incredibly powerful natural world. And yet – there is a realization of a truth that cannot be ignored – despite our frailty, our slightness, our inability to comprehend any more than our finite vision allows us to see, we cannot help but think that we are “just a bit less than the angels.” And perhaps, during those high points of *Kedushah*, we make up even that gap.

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<sup>287</sup>. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London/New York, 1994), 86–87; this chapter (pages 85–92) is entitled “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse.”

<sup>288</sup>. For a sensitive analysis, see Jeffrey H. Tigay, “What is man that you have been mindful of him? (On Psalm 8:4–5),” *Love & Death in the Ancient Near East: Essays in Honor of Marvin H. Pope* (ed. John H. Marks and Robert M. Good; Guilford, 1987), 169–171.