

The Anonymous Man

I am very grateful to Temple Emunah to have the opportunity to take a sabbatical – beginning in a couple of weeks. I am also fortunate to have an appointment to be a visiting scholar at Brandeis for the coming semester.

My office will be located in the Mandel Center for Jewish Education and I was told that I needed to complete a number of steps in order to set things up for the coming term.



It was a bit complicated. First, my letter of appointment from the Provost had to be brought to the human resource department to obtain an ID number and from there I could go to the ID office. And then, I would be able to get a parking pass and, finally, get a key to my office.

With these detailed instructions and my letter in hand, I journeyed over to Brandeis on my day off. I was excited as I made my way onto the campus! I parked and was told where the human resources department is.

Running up the stairs with enthusiasm, I headed for the front door of the Marcus-Bernstein building. There, I saw a group of students hanging out in front of the building, but I did not pay them much attention, as I was focused on the four actions I needed to complete.

As I zoomed by, one young student called out to me: “Hey, the building is closed.”

I stopped.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean the building is closed.”

“Oh, but I’m not a student. I’m a new employee and I need to go to the human resources department.”

“Well, there is no one in there.”

I studied this young man dressed casually in a sweater who looked maybe 19.

“Who are you?”

“I’m sort-of in charge here.”

“Really? Let me see your ID,” I asked curious to see if he really was a guard in charge of this building.

He took his wallet out of his back pocket and took out his student ID and showed it to me.

He was not a guard, but an underclassman.

I shrugged looking at him for an explanation.

He replied: “Well, we’re protesting and we’ve shut down this building, so you can’t go in.”

I took a closer look. Sure enough, there were chains and locks on the doors and other students standing in front of the building.

I asked him what he was protesting. He explained that they were protesting for African-American student rights.

We had a short conversation about his cause, although I was unable to get my Brandeis ID.

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There is also an interaction with a stranger in this week's *parashah*. It is one of the more interesting vignettes in the Torah, but it is such a small scene we often don't give it much serious thought.

Jacob asks his son Joseph to go and find his brothers and see how things are going with their flocks. But when Joseph heads to *Shekhem* to find them, they are not there.

Then the Torah states:
“*Va'yimtza'eihu ish* – a man found him [Joseph] wandering in the field. The man asked Joseph, saying: ‘What are you looking for?’”

Joseph responds: “I am looking for my brothers. Can you tell me where they are pasturing?”

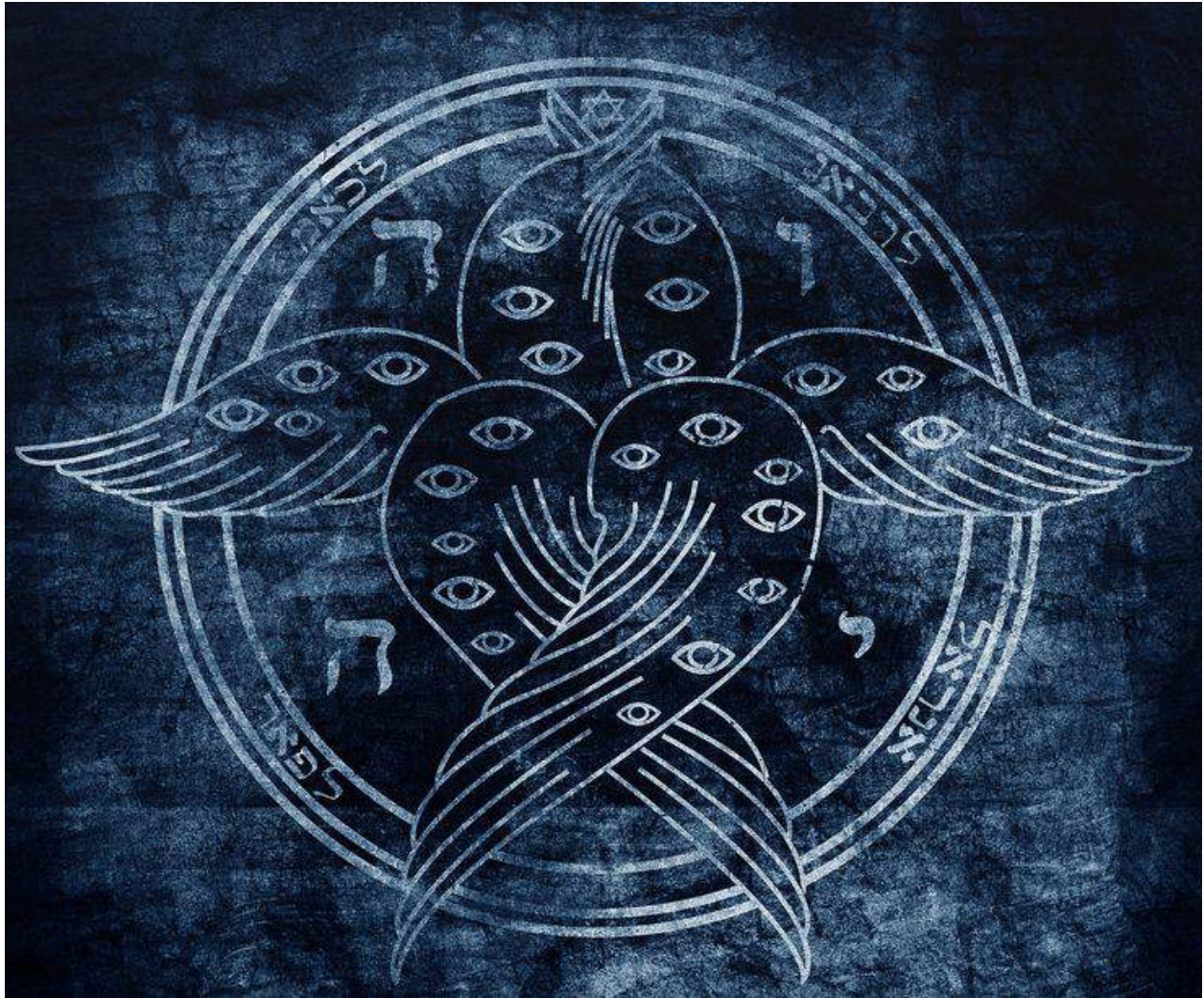
And the anonymous man tells him: “They have gone from here, for I heard them say: ‘Let us go to Dotan.’ So Joseph followed his brothers and found them in Dotan.” (Genesis 37:14-17)

Now, this is a curious episode. First, why include it? Why is this three-verse narrative about getting directions even in the Torah at all? The



Torah does not have many stories like this, nor much extraneous material. The text is terse and each piece must teach us something.

And second, who is this unnamed man? Why isn't he named? Quite strange.



Rashi and many of the traditional commentators say that this man is actually the angel Gavriel who is always by our side looking out for us whenever we get into trouble. This explains why the narrative is here and why the man is nameless; he is not actually a man. The commentators go on to describe that God placed the angel Gavriel there to make sure that

Joseph gets where he needs to, thus demonstrating that God is controlling the entire arc of the plot.

This is a nice notion, but one with which I find unconvincing. Are there really angels protecting us at every turn? If so, then why do they leave us vulnerable so often?

I have to say that I do not believe in literal angels that are not humans. But I do believe in human angels.

And I do not believe that God is a puppet-master controlling all the action of our lives. Perhaps for some, it might be comforting to know God is taking care of us, but this does not reflect reality. And if so, the world would make no sense; it would be a pointless exercise of God moving pieces around a chessboard. To what end? And besides, if God were controlling all the action – then, looking around us, it does not seem that God is doing such a great job.

So, why is this narrative here?

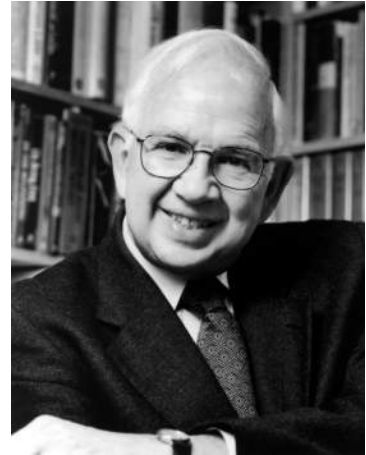
It seems to me that the Torah is trying to teach us a deep lesson about people. This anonymous man saves the day. He is not mentioned by name because often there are people whom we do not even know who help us. The person who holds the elevator door in the station for us so we do not miss our train. A person who gives us a seat at the front of the bus. The person who tells



us how to get where we need to go when we are lost.

The Torah leaves us with this vignette to remind us that often it is the anonymous person or the trivial episode that has profound implications.

As Rabbi Harold Kushner writes: “We never hear of this man again. Yet if Joseph had not met him, he never would have found his brothers. He never would have been sold into slavery. The family would not have followed him into Egypt. There would have been no Exodus. The history of the world would have been so different! Could that man have known how his chance encounter changed



history? Do we ever know the consequences of the little acts of thoughtfulness we perform?” (*Etz Hayim Humash*, p. 229)

But there is something else to this moment. It is the manner of helping. This anonymous man could have been suspicious of Joseph and said, “Hey, what are you doing here?” Or: “You’re not from these parts, are you?”

But instead, he approaches Joseph from a place of curiosity: “What are you looking for?” His position is one of genuine concern and helpfulness. Embedded in his question is the impression that he wants to assist. And that opens up this helpful conversation.

But maybe it’s more than curiosity. When the man sees Joseph, he approaches him from a place of *hesed* – from a place of loving-kindness. How many times are we able to approach others from that place? What a gentle lesson in extending ourselves from a place of love and kindness.

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Friends, as we look around our world today, we see much darkness. There is murder and war and hate. In our country, we are experiencing an epidemic of gun violence. Part of us feels numb to this recurrent violence; we throw up our hands in frustration.

Some politicians have been tweeting their “prayers” to the victims of San Bernardino.

As the cover of the *New York Daily News* stated, “God isn’t fixing



this!” Meaning, that there are no supernatural angels coming down from heaven to stop these terrible acts. Prayer is not enough; if you are a politician, you have the power to DO something!

We do not need a miraculous, supernatural angel; we need to be like the anonymous man in the Torah who aids Joseph. We need everybody to DO SOMETHING! I have no

problem with prayer; but if all you do is pray, you are a hypocrite. We must act. Every politician who does not work to pass meaningful gun legislation – common sense gun legislation - something that 80% of Americans want – should be ashamed; I am sad to say that they are culpable: they have blood on their hands.

As constituents, we have the power to tell our elected officials what we need them to do.

As Nicolas Kristof wrote in the *NY Times* this week: [“On Guns, We’re Not Even Trying.”](#) And the *Times* wrote a front-page editorial for the first time in almost a century.

There should be:

Universal background checks.

Universal gun registrations.

Universal gun licensing.

There should be insurance requirements – just as we need insurance to drive a car, there should be an insurance requirement to own a gun or buy bullets. Let’s take weapons as seriously as we take cars.

85% of gun owners approve of universal background checks. But 40% of guns are bought without even a simple background check. That’s inexcusable.

Let me say this: if you are a gun owner, demand action. If you know gun owners, demand that they act. We must all stand up and change this.

Now.

An email will go out after Shabbat – please open it and [sign the petition to demand action](#).

Does this mean that we are going to stop every act of violence? No. Will terrorists still attack us? Probably. But can we make it more difficult to obtain AR-15 assault weapons? Yes. Can we save lives? Yes.



“Every year, an average of 9,200 Americans are murdered by handguns,” [Ronald Reagan wrote in a New York Times op-ed in 1991](#) backing gun restrictions. “This level of violence must be stopped.”

“He added that if tighter gun regulations ‘were to result in a reduction of only 10 or 15 percent of those numbers (and it could be a good deal greater), it would be well worth making it the law of the land.’” (Kristof)

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Let me return to the Brandeis campus where, even though I was unable to get my ID and parking permit, I decided to check out my office and have lunch. Always a good idea to have lunch when things aren’t going so well!

I was told the kosher deli was just across the way and set out to find it. Sure enough, I got to the right building, but could not find it. A student, a young man with a backpack, asked me what I was looking for.

“The kosher deli.”

“Hey, that’s not far from where I’m going. I’ll take you there.”

And he showed me the way.

While he did not look like the angel Gavriel in my mind, he functioned in the same manner as any angel might. He took me where I needed to go, acting as God’s hands in this world.

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That’s just what our world needs. We are ALL called to be angels, acting as God’s hands in this world. Sometimes that means, showing a stranger the way and sometimes it means that we must stand up and act to make our world safer and more just.

Thanks to an anonymous stranger, the entire arc of the Joseph narrative moves forward. As for me, I enjoyed a tasty cup of soup.

Let's all be the anonymous stranger in this *parashah* and point the world in the right direction on gun violence.