

THE AISHET CHAYIL STUDY PROGRAM:

The *Aishet Chayil* Study Program is based on a commentary on the Book of Proverbs by Rabbi Yitzchak ben Shimson HaCohen (d. 1624). Rabbi Yitzchak noted how the character traits described in each line of *Aishet Chayil* (which is from Proverbs 31:10-31) are represented by a different woman in the Bible. For each woman mentioned in Rabbi Yitzchak's commentary, NJOP has created a "Biblical Personality Card" containing a brief biography of the woman and an explanation of how one might see the connection between the woman and the verse(s).

During SAA/C, each table will receive one or two "Biblical Personality Cards" to be read and discussed at the table. After the main course, each table or sub-group will be asked to present their "*Aishet Chayil*" to the rest of the participants.

Leader's Introduction to *Aishet Chayil* Why We Sing About the "Woman of Valor"

Aishet Chayil, "The Woman of Valor," is actually a selection of verses from the Book of Proverbs (31:10-31) written by King Solomon. It has been speculated that Solomon wrote these verses either as "provincial wisdom" on the ideal qualities of a wife, or as a tribute to his mother, Batsheva. Some commentaries have suggested that the verses of *Aishet Chayil* are descriptions of the Torah, Shabbat, and the soul, all of which have feminine names in Hebrew and thus assume some feminine attributes. As with all of the books of the Bible, Proverbs reflects a deeper understanding of the relationship between the Jewish people and G-d.

The Midrash teaches that the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai was a marriage. On that day the Jewish nation was married to G-d, with the Torah serving as the *ketubah* (marriage contract). The *Aishet Chayil* selection of Proverbs, therefore, can also be read as a description of the ideal Jewish nation – prosperous, generous, beautiful, loyal and happily laboring for the fruits of the Torah.

Why is *Aishet Chayil* recited on Friday night? Again, the question can be answered on two levels. Traditionally, Jewish women are viewed as the caretakers of the home. There is no better time than right before the Friday night meal for a family to acknowledge their deep appreciation to the wife and mother of the family. The Midrash (Bereishit Rabbah 11) cites a more esoteric reason: The Sabbath declared: "Master of the Universe, every day of the week has a partner except for me!" The Almighty answered: "The People of Israel will be your partner." While this is an obvious metaphor, it represents the deeper understanding that the relationship of the Jewish people and G-d is a relationship of holiness, which is best celebrated on Shabbat, the day that is unique in its holiness.

SARAH

**Who can find a woman of valour: Her worth is more precious than pearls.
His heart trusts in her and lacks no treasure.**

The name Sarah means princess, and indeed, in all aspects of her life, Sarah, the wife of Abraham, the first matriarch of the Jewish people, was the essence of royalty. While ancient marriages were often very unbalanced – with the women having virtually no rights and no role other than the preparation of food and the care of children, Sarah and Abraham had a partnership. Sarah worked together with her husband in actively preaching monotheism. Our sages teach us that Sarah taught the women that there is one true G-d, while Abraham taught the men.¹

Sarah was a very beautiful woman. Indeed, twice, when Abraham and Sarah were forced to go to Egypt and to Philistia due to famine, Abraham told the local people that Sarah was his sister, fearing that due to her beauty they would use any means to take her, even to the point of killing him.

Alas, Sarah was barren. Knowing that G-d had promised that Abraham's children would inherit the land of Canaan, she instructed Abraham to take her handmaid, Hagar, as a concubine so that any children Hagar bore would be considered as Sarah's. Hagar bore Abraham a son, Ishmael.

Thirteen years later, Abraham and Sarah were informed by three angels that they would have a child. The Torah tells us that Sarah laughed to herself in disbelief, for both she and her husband were old (89 and 99). One year later, Isaac was born. Sarah and Abraham knew that their son was destined to be the spiritual link in the formation of the Jewish people. Sarah, however, was concerned about the influence of Ishmael on Isaac, and that Ishmael was leading Isaac down a path of violence and immorality.² She insisted that Hagar and Ishmael leave their home. When Abraham hesitated, G-d told him not to be upset, for Ishmael would become a nation (indeed, he became the progenitor of the Arab nations) and that "everything Sarah says, [Abraham should] do." From this, our Sages deduce that Sarah was a greater prophet than Abraham.³

Sarah died at the age of 127. Abraham immediately went to Hebron, purchased *Ma'arat HaMachpela* (the Tomb of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs), for 400 silver shekel, and buried Sarah there.

Stories relating to the life of Sarah can be found in Genesis 11:29 - 23:19 1) Rashi, Genesis 12:5 2) Tosefta Sotah 5:7 3) Rashi, Genesis 12:12



S A M R A H

Who can find a woman of valour -- Why are these words appropriate for Sarah? Actually, in the opinion of one commentary, the *Shema Yisrael*, the entire *Aishet Chayil* poem was written by Abraham for Sarah. Throughout their union, they were truly partners. She was a noble woman who declined an easy and luxurious life for one of devotion to G-d.

Her worth is more precious than pearls -- We view pearls as precious gems, but to Sarah, pearls were hardly important. What was precious to Sarah was her husband, Abraham, and his mission to bring the knowledge of one G-d to the world. What was precious to Sarah was taking care of the people who followed G-d's ways and joined their camp, even when some of them made insulting remarks (according to the Midrash¹, some accused her of taking in a foundling and calling it her own when Isaac was born, since she was so old). What was precious to Sarah was making sure that her son, Isaac, was not corrupted by the wicked ways of his half-brother Ishmael; and what was precious about Sarah was that all this was done with her whole heart.

His heart trusts in her and lacks no treasure -- Throughout the narrative of Abraham and Sarah, one sees unity in their relationship. Twice Sarah was kidnapped and taken to the opulent palaces of local leaders (Pharaoh and Avimelech), but she held her tongue and did not say that Abraham was her husband, since they would then murder Abraham. She put herself in mortal danger, yet never faltered from the righteous path. There is no doubt that Sarah was extraordinarily gifted, with an unprecedented understanding of the Divine. In fact, when Abraham hesitated to trust her judgement regarding the banishment of Ishmael, G-d Himself told Abraham to listen to his wife, and indeed, history proved that her decisions strengthened their historical destiny.

1) Talmud Baba Metzia 87a

All are part of the infinitely complex workings of G-d's heavenly world.

You've been asked to read and discuss some Torah stories that include angels...Let's review them together.

REQUEST that a volunteer read the first story and then ask the question that pertains to that story. Allow two or three minutes for discussion. The moderator's job is to keep discussion relevant and germane to the provided text. After a few minutes, or when discussion slows, share the concluding answer provided on the enclosed Moderator's Answer Sheet.

REPEAT for other stories...(Moderator should use his/her judgement to determine whether or not to read all four stories or to stop after two or three, depending on participant interest and time).

AFTER discussions are over...

These stories demonstrate how angels fulfill specific missions of G-d. One might think, based on the understanding that G-d creates angels with special missions, that angels are rare...that they are only created in times of need. The creation of angels, however, is discussed in the Talmud (Chagigah 14a):

Shmuel said to Chiya ben Ray..."Every single day ministering angels are created from the stream of fire, who sing G-d's praises and afterwards expire, for it says: 'They are new every morning; Great is Your Wise' (Lamentations 3:23). In this, he differs from R' Shmuel ben Nachmani, who said in the name of R' Yonatan: From every single word that is uttered by the Holy One, blessed is He, an angel is created, for it says 'By the word of G-d the heavens were created' and 'By the breath of His mouth, all their hosts' (Psalms 33:6)."

The differing opinions cited in the Talmud question the exact physical source (G-d's word or a stream of fire) from which angels are created. They agree, however, that angels are created every day for a multitude of tasks. Indeed, throughout the Talmud and the Zohar (the Jewish book of mysticism), angels are given assignments ranging from representing nations, to standing in for people in the Divine court.

Understanding the multitude of tasks assigned to angels will help us understand the implied meanings of the song *Shalom Aleichem*. Now we simply need to discover what the purpose of these Friday night angels are...

Which angels are we speaking to on Friday night?

In the Talmud (Shabbat 119b), Rabbi Josi the son of Judah is quoted as saying:

On the eve of Shabbat, two ministering angels accompany a person home from the synagogue. One angel represents the positive forces and one angel represents the negative forces. When the person arrives home and finds the candles lit, the table set and the house in proper order – in other words, a house prepared for Shabbat – then the positive angel says "May it be thus for another Shabbat!" The negative angel must affirm this and say "Amen." If, however, the house is not ready for Shabbat, the negative angel says "May it be thus for another Shabbat!" The positive angel must affirm this and say "Amen."

A Ladder of Angels -- Genesis 28

After Jacob was blessed by his father, he is forced to flee from the land of Israel in fear of his brother's anger. Before he leaves, Isaac instructs him not to take a wife from the Canaanite women, but to go to Padan Aram, to the home of Rebecca's brother Laban. Receiving a final blessing, Jacob heads off into exile.

As night falls, Jacob sets up camp on a mountain top. Laying his head upon a stone, he falls asleep. Dreaming, Jacob sees a tall ladder that stretches from earth and far into the Heavens. Upon the ladder, angels were ascending and descending.

As Jacob dreamed of the ladder, G-d spoke to him, promising to give the land on which he lay to him and to his descendants. Furthermore, G-d informed him that his descendants would be like the dust of the earth, spreading to the four corners of the world and that they would be a source of blessing for all nations. Even in Exile, G-d promised, He would be with Jacob and his descendants and would bring them back to the land.

Jacob woke with a start, aware that he'd had an experience with the Divine. Awe struck, he exclaimed: "Surely G-d is in this place; and I knew it not...How full of awe is this place! This is none other than the house of G-d, and this is the gate of heaven."

Early in the morning, Jacob set his stone pillow as a pillar and poured oil upon it, sanctifying it. He called the name of the place Beth-el (meaning House of G-d).

QUESTION: If G-d speaks to Jacob in his dream, what is the significance of the angels on the ladder?

S A M P L E

Textual Sources

SOME OPINIONS ON WHAT THESE ANGELS REPRESENT

(Genesis 28:12, Ibn Ezra, Rashi, and Sforno)

... (ב) וַיַּחַלֵּם וַהֲנֵה סֻלָּם מֵצֶבֶת אֲרָצָה וְרֹאשׁוֹ מֵגִיעַ הַשָּׁמַיְמָה וַהֲנֵה מַלְאָכִי אֵל-לְקִיָּם עֹלִים וְיֹרְדִים בּוֹ (י"ג) וַהֲנֵה ה' נֹצֵב עָלָיו...

(12) And [Jacob] dreamed, and behold a ladder stood on the ground and its top reached the heavens; and behold angels of G-d were going up and down it. (13) And behold, G-d stood on top of [the ladder]...

Ibn Ezra (Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra, Spain 1092-1167)

...גַּם כֵּן כָּתוּב וּמַלְאָכִים אֲחֵרִים יֹרְדִים לְמַלְאֵת שְׁלִיחוֹת הַשֵּׁם בְּדֶרֶךְ מְלֹךְ עִם מְשֻׁרְתָיו.

...and thus it is written that other angels came down, to fulfill the mission of G-d like a king with his entourage.

Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchak, France 1040 - 1105)

עֹלִים וְיֹרְדִים -- עֹלִים תְּחִלָּה וְאַחַר כֵּן יֹרְדִים. מַלְאָכִים שְׁלִיחוֹהוּ בְּאֶרֶץ אֵין יוֹצֵאִים חוּצָה לְאֶרֶץ, וְעָלוּ לְרִקְיעַ, וְיָרְדוּ מַלְאָכִי חוּצָה לְאֶרֶץ לְלוֹתוֹ.

Going up and down: They went up first and afterwards they came down. [The ascending] angels were those that accompanied [Jacob] in the land [of Canaan] and they could not leave the land, so they went up to the heavens. And angels came down to accompany [Jacob] outside the land [of Canaan].

Sforno (Rabbi Ovadia Sforno, Italy 1475-1550)

עֹלִים וְיֹרְדִים -- ה' נֹצֵב כִּי אֲמַנָּם כֵּן יִהְיֶה לְבִסוּף שְׁשָׂרֵי הָאֻמוֹת אַחַר עֲלִיתָם יָרְדוּ וְהָא-ל יִתְבָּרַךְ הַנֹּצֵב לְעַד לֹא יִטּוֹשׂ אֶת עַמּוֹ כְּאֲמָרוֹ כִּי אֲעֲשֶׂה כָלָה בְּכָל הַגּוֹיִם וְאוֹתָךְ לֹא אֲעֲשֶׂה כָלָה...

Going up and down, G-d stood: Were it not for that [G-d standing there], eventually the [angelic] representatives of the nations, after they went up, would descend again, and the Holy One, Blessed be He, who is eternal, will not abandon His nation, as He says: "Because I will make an end to the nations but I will not make an end to you [the Jewish people]."