

Malachim – The Good Angel and The Bad Angel, A Lesson for Covid Times

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The song, "*Shalom Aleichem*," welcomes the *malachim* who accompany us home from shul on a Friday. Leaving aside that many of us are not great proponents of heavenly hosts, the song's sentiment is a beautiful one. Like all the most lovely Shabbat traditions, it is written by the Kabbalists in *Tzvat* in the late 16th century and works off of a Talmudic midrash about a good angel and a bad angel accompanying us home from Temple. Many of you know the drill. If the home is peaceful the good angel says, "May it be this way next Shabbat" and the bad angel, really the evil angel, says "Amen." And vice versa. A beautiful and inspiring image.

I have to say, that the best meme for this is from the Flintstones. You remember it, Fred is facing temptation and there's an angel on one shoulder counseling him to resist it and a devil on the other urging him to go for it. At the start of the show the devil wins, because the episode's plot would be very thin if the good angel prevailed. So let me paint you an image with two modern, not particularly Jewish angels battling it out. Picture a snowstorm with, say 6 to 8 inches of fast falling snow. There's a TBI board meeting that night and the good angel councils caution, so you shoot a text off to Ira sending regrets. Or it's a Friday, erev Shabbat, and you send the same to me. Safety first.

Now picture yourself living in the Boston area. You've had a ski weekend at Loon Mountain planned for months. The storm is going to drop 6 to 8 inches of snow, not so bad. The interstates are probably salted and cleared and if you take it a bit slow it should be okay. Besides, it's a snow day and you can get an early start. You load the kids in the car and away you go. Except for one scary episode near Franklin, the trip goes pretty well. Why do those semis go so fast anyway? You get to the ski slope and with all that fresh snow, you have a great weekend.

Hmm...seems like the bad angel got the jump this time.

I tell this story because I think it reveals a lot about how we calculate risk. It's not that we're hypocrites, but we'll tolerate a lot more risk if we're highly motivated to do something or it feels vital. And ditto for safety, especially if we feel it can be embraced at little cost like buying a safety-oriented car or, these days, wearing a

mask at a concert or movie. Or conversely, logging on to services from home when the cases begin to climb.

I didn't even have to say COVID, did I?

I like the angel image because it speaks to one's voice. I feel like we're at a crossroads right now. There's still a case for being locked down and locking down again when the next potent Greek lettered variant arrives, *has v'hilah* (God forbid). But we've also been dipping our toes in the waters of returning to normal and, of course, things are different now than they were. Most of us at this service are vaccinated and the price of staying locked down gets higher as time goes by, especially for kids, young families, and the frail elderly (and maybe not so frail).

We've had some remarkable successes at TBI through this pandemic. Service attendance is rock solid as is attendance at adult ed sessions. Board meeting attendance is ridiculously high. But speaking personally I know what I long for; I miss the sanctuary ringing with song, God bless our masked almost minyan. I miss sitting down at an oneg and settling in for a conversation. Desperately. As a rabbi, I miss the door jamb moment that almost always comes on a Friday night. 90% of the pastoral work I've done happens when the social hall empties out and I see someone quietly waiting for me. "Rabbi am I keeping you?" Keeping me? From hearing the song of your heart? "Of course not," I reply, "it's always good to get a chance to catch up on things..." and off we go. And this is just one moment in an oneg, which is the hour when TBI-niks learn who is sick, who is suffering heartache, and who is looking to connect. It's when love and friendship go to work.

Our Talmudic story is vivid and earnest. Shalom beit, what is more treasured. But the Flintstones is the Honeymooners as a cartoon, a place where we laugh at how we really organize our lives. The plot begins with the bad angel setting the agenda but, of course, the good angel wins out by the episode's end. I feel like we're in that moment. Figuring out how to sanely navigate this next phase.

Julie, my wife, tells a story about our kids and seatbelts. She was at home with the kids while I was standing in a door jamb somewhere and she had to move the car out of the garage and onto the driveway. We had three kids and the younger ones were quite young, 4 and 5. She figured the simplest way to keep an eye on everyone was to load them up in the car while she backed it out. But at 5 mph and going backwards she didn't bother with seatbelts. As soon as the car started

moving one of the kids started screaming, “we’re going to die, we’re going to die”. They’d never been in a moving car without a seat belt and figured no belt meant instant death. Julie’s calculation was a simple one, the real safety issue was having an unaccounted-for child.

My point? We need to keep recalculating as we go through this crisis. There are so many factors to balance including being honest about how we make decisions. It’s not exactly a battle between our *malachim*, our good and bad angels, but we have many internal voices speaking to us. Sometimes the angel counseling us to get out on a snowy road is not such a bad one. Sometimes the angel that says, let’s go to all Zoom services for 2 months until we really know what this Omicron surge is about is not such a bad one. What we don’t want to be is the 5-year-old locked into the wrong assessment of things. Maybe it’s time to be less skeptical of vaccines than we were in March of 2021. Maybe it’s time to not keep acting as if we are at the same risk as we were before we got vaccinated and boosted. I don’t for a second mean this as a judgement on one’s calculations and decisions. But what I am sure of is that like that sage of old, Fred Flintstone, we should pay attention to those two voices on our shoulders and like him, be open to bobbing and weaving between them.