FUCHSBERG JERUSALEM CENTER
STUDY PRAY EXPLORE

Parashah:	Mishpatim
Read On:	Feb. 14, 2026 | 27 Shvat 5786
Torah:	Exodus 21:1–24:18
Triennial:	Exodus 21:1–22:3
Maftir:	Exodus 30:11-16
Haftorah:	II Kings 12:1–17

TORAH SPARKS

THE ANGEL

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Dvar Parashah

In urging the states to ratify the Constitution, James Madison wrote: "If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary." He went on to explain a system of government totally unreliant on angels, a system of government in which people provided checks on people.

It seems, in many ways, an heir of this week's parashah, a system in which, although we can assume people may want to do right, people will do wrong. And when people do wrong, there is a system of punishment and restitution. Humans provide checks on humans, and God undersigns the whole system.

And yet. In the middle of this parashah, God sends an angel, a מלאך.

We read: הִנֵּה אָנֹכִי שֹׁלֵחַ מַלְאָךְ לְפָנֶיךָ לִשְׁמָרְךָ בַּדָּרֶךְ וְלַהֲבִיאֲךָ אֶל־הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר הֲכִנֹתִי׃, "Behold, I am sending an angel before you, to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place I have prepared." For what do we need an angel? We have a working system, designed by God himself.

Perhaps, as many commentators suggest, the angel is a punishment. Perhaps we, who could have governed ourselves with a God-given system, still need an angel. Building off Shemot Rabbah, many of the medieval commentators suggest that the sending of the angel is a punishment for what we did with the Golden Calf, falling so far from the prescribed bounds of our law. The language of the aftermath of the Golden Calf story echoes the language present in our parashah: וְשָׁלַחְתִּי לְפָנֶיךָ מַלְאָךְ, "And I will send an angel before you. There, God will explicitly tell Moses, that a מלאך will go before the people because God's own presence will not.

If the מלאך is what we receive when we have failed, when we have fallen outside the bounds of the covenant, then it is worth asking: where else does the מלאך appear? What does its presence tell us? Can we be governed by ourselves, in a system based on revelation, or must we have heavenly intermediaries?

Trace the מלאך through the Torah and a pattern emerges. The angel is, overwhelmingly, the mode of divine encounter for foreigners. Hagar, fleeing into the wilderness, meets a מלאך ה׳, twice. Lot encounters two of them in Sodom. Abraham's servant is told that he will encounter one on his way to find a wife for Isaac. Balaam, the pagan prophet, is intercepted by a מלאך on his road. When God engages with those outside the covenant, the מלאך is the medium. Direct speech, פנים אל פנים, is reserved for the patriarchs and for Israel. The מלאך is the interface for outsiders.

But sometimes, even we merit angels instead of God.

At the Akedah, God commands Abraham directly: קַח נָא אֶת בִּנְךָ, "Take your son." The voice that initiates the test is unmediated, divine, intimate. But the voice that stops it? וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו מַלְאַךְ ה׳ מִן הַשָּׁמָיִם, "and a מלאך of God called to him from the heavens." The communication has been downgraded. Perhaps in the moment of raising the knife, Avraham has crossed into territory that belongs to the nations: child sacrifice, the offering of sons on altars, the worship practice of those outside the covenant. He is doing what they do. Even if commanded by God, Abraham is engaging in practice that is not, will not, be our practice. And so, for that moment, he receives what they receive. Not God's voice, but the angel's.

Something similar happens with Jacob. He lies down at Beth El and dreams of מלאכי אלהים, angels of God, ascending and descending a ladder. God does speak to him directly in the dream, but the architecture of the vision is angelic. And where is Jacob? He has just left the Land of Israel. He is fleeing toward Laban, toward Aram, toward exile. He is, at that moment, geographically and existentially between identities, not quite the heir of Abraham, not yet Israel. And the מלאכים appear again at the border when he returns to Israel, carrying with him stolen תרפים, Laban's household gods, stolen by Rachel. The מלאכים are border figures, marking the threshold between covenant identity and something else.

Then there is the Burning Bush. When God appears to Moses, we read first that a מלאך ה׳ appeared to him in a flame of fire. Only afterward does God speak directly to him. But in the moment before he turns to see, Moses is also of mixed identity. He is living in Midian, married to the daughter of a Midianite priest, and they all think he's Egyptian anyway. The מלאך is the right starting point; it matches where he is. It is only after he turns aside, after he engages, that the encounter upgrades, from מלאך to the voice of God. When Moses crosses the threshold from outsider to prophet, the mode of encounter changes with him.

The pattern, then, is not simply about foreigners versus Israel. It is about identity. The מלאך appears when covenantal identity is unstable, when we are acting like the nations, when we are caught between worlds, when we are unsure who we are and therefore unsure whom we are in relationship with. We receive the מלאך when we are not ourselves. It reflects back to us the distance we have created.
Of course, this is precisely what happens with the Golden Calf. Israel builds what the nations build. We worship as the nations worship. We become, in that moment, indistinguishable from the peoples around us. And the consequence is precisely calibrated: we receive what outsiders receive. We will encounter God the way Hagar does, the way Bilaam does. Not because God is angry, or not only because God is angry, but because the מלאך is what fits the space we have created.

The מלאך, then, is a mirror. It shows us where we are standing, inside the covenant or at its edge, settled in our identity or wandering between selves. When we know who we are, God speaks. When we forget, or when we choose something else, the מלאך appears: faithful, protective, present, but not the same. A guardian, a guardrail, and a guarantee that we are not ready to govern ourselves.