

מכון הדר

MECHON HADAR

Using All of Our Wings: Soaring Beyond the Angels

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Much of the content and the choreography of our *tefillah* practice is borrowed from the angels. We sing in unison because the angels sing in unison, we stand with our feet together because the angels have only one leg, and we rise on our toes when we say *Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh* / Holy, Holy, Holy,¹ because we are attempting to reach the heavenly realms, to fly as it were, like angels.

I remember learning about this flight as a child and being very frustrated. Angels, I thought, were flying, but I was just going up on my tippy-toes. “A pretty poor imitation of an angel,” I thought, and I felt kind of cheated.

However, there is a *midrash* in Vayikra Rabbah that makes it clear that our rendition of angelic flight is perfectly accurate. Maybe even too much so:

ויקרא רבה כז:ג

ר' יעקב בר זבדי פתח: ולא יהיה עוד לבית ישראל למבטח מזכיר עון (יחזקאל כט:טז).
וכתיב: שרפים עומדים ממעל לו שש כנפים שש כנפים לאחד בשתים יכסה פניו ובשתים יכסה רגליו
ובשתים יעופף (ישעיה ו:ב).
בשתים יעופף, לקילוס.
ובשתים יכסה פניו, שלא להביט בשכינה.
ובשתים יכסה רגליו, שלא יראו פני שכינה, דכתיב: וכף רגליהם ככף רגל עגל.
וכתיב: עשו להם עגל מסכה (שמות לב:ח), על שם: ולא יהיה עוד לבית ישראל למבטח מזכיר עון.

¹ ישעיה ו, ג: "קדוש קדוש קדוש ה' צבאות מלא כל הארץ כבודו."

VaYikra Rabbah 27:3

R. Ya'akov b. Zavdi introduced: *And the House of Israel will no longer rely upon something that is reminiscent of sin* (Ezekiel 29:16). And it is written: *Seraphim stand above Him. Six wings for the one, six wings for the one. With two it does cover its face, with two it does cover its legs, and with two it does flap* (Isaiah 6:2).

With two it does flap, to praise [God].

With two it does cover its face, so as not to look directly at the Divine presence.

With two it does cover its legs, so that they will not be seen by the Divine presence. As it is written, *And their legs are like the hooves of a calf*. And it is written, *they have made themselves a cast of a calf* (Exodus 32:8). In accordance with, *And the House of Israel will no longer rely upon something that is reminiscent of sin*

What we see from this *midrash* is that the angels themselves don't fly. They flap their wings, but remain in the same place. They have six wings, but they only use two of them. Two thirds, the majority of their wingpower, is not being spent on flying; to the contrary, it is being spent on keeping themselves down. Perhaps the angels could have flown if they used all of their wings, but they never do. Four of their wings are spent on hiding, on staying in the same place. Just as we rise on our toes as if we are going to fly and then don't, so too the angels furiously flap their wings and remain exactly where they were. The language of the verse is painfully precise when it describes the seraphim as *standing* next to God.

The angels are immobilized by shame at past defeat. They see that their legs are the legs of calves, their own bodies remind them of the sin of the golden calf, and they cover themselves. The angels are also afraid to look at the *Shekhinah*, to encounter God directly. They're afraid of spiritual intimacy, they're afraid of spiritual success, they know that if they look up and see God they can no longer pretend that God does not see them. The angels are tethered by their shame about the past and their fear of the future. And so are we.

None of us lives up to our true potential. None of us uses all of our wings to fly. We let who we were determine who we are, and we let who we are determine what we will become. We limit ourselves and then we wonder why we aren't making any progress. We put in a tremendous amount of effort and hard work, but we aren't doing the preparation that we need to do to truly succeed.

We have to be unashamed of our past failures and unafraid of our future success. We need to stop mimicking the angels, so that we can become better than they are.

Human beings have a tremendous capacity for change, but change is frightening and destabilizing. We approach it with a lot of energy and hide the half-commitments of our hearts. Witnessing our own potential can be devastating. We could be great, but we are not. We see how much we can accomplish and how much we haven't, and we want to hide ourselves in shame. Instead, when we rise to our toes during the *Kedushah*, we should use that moment to identify what we are aiming towards and acknowledge what is holding us back. We are flying just as the angels fly, and that is why we are not making any progress. When we imitate the angels we should recognize that they are limited in a way that we do not have to be. When we become more ambitious than we are afraid, we will be able to soar.