

# Toronto Torah

## Beit Midrash Zichron Dov

Parshat Vayelech/Shuvah

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This issue of Toronto Torah is dedicated by Paul and Chavi Jacobs  
to commemorate the Yahrzeit of Paul's mother, Pearl Schraub Jacobs, Perel Hadassah bas Yosef a"h

### The Great Angels Debate

**Idan Rakovsky**

One of the most potent poems we recite in the Selichot prayers is *Machnisei Rachamim* (Angels of Mercy). The author of this poem, which dates back to as early as the 10<sup>th</sup> century, is unknown. In it, we ask the angels to help us in our process of repentance, by bringing our prayers closer to G-d: "Angels of mercy! Bring our plea for compassion before the Presence of the Lord of mercy. Angels of prayer! Cause our prayers to be heard before Him Who hears prayer..." (Metsudah tr.)

After all we have said and prayed for, after our efforts towards honest and complete repentance, we call on the angels to help us reach what may be seen as the unreachable - the throne of the King of the World. For most of us, it is almost impossible to imagine our Selichot without this powerful poem, which emphasizes the human need for a divine answer.

However, for many decades this poem has been the subject of a meaningful and important debate. It might seem like a particular debate over a particular poem, but it is actually a debate over the fundamentals of the Jewish belief: Should Jews pray to angels?

The Babylonian Talmud (Sanhedrin 44b, Koren tr.) states: "Rabbi Yochanan says: A person should always pray for mercy that all heavenly beings should strengthen his power of prayer, and that he should have no enemies causing him trouble

in Heaven above." Rashi explains, "One should ask the angels to help him by asking for mercy for him."

However, the Jerusalem Talmud (Berachot 9, Koren trans.) explicitly states that one should only pray directly to G-d, skipping any intermediaries: "If a human is in trouble, he should cry neither to Michael nor to Gabriel [names of angels], rather he should cry to Me [G-d] and I shall answer him immediately."

One of the greatest halachic authorities to reject the idea of praying to angels is the Rambam, in his commentary to the Mishnah. (Introduction to Perek Chelek, Sanhedrin, MHC tr., emphasis added) The Rambam there describes his thirteen fundamental principles of Jewish faith, in which the fifth principle is: "One must not pray to anything beneath Him in existence: **angels**, stars, planets, or elements, or anything composed of these... **Hence, we must not worship those powers as means to bring us nearer to Him.**" The Rambam, known for his great rationalism, denies the idea that one should approach angels as intermediaries in his prayers to G-d.

Based on this Rambam, many halachic authorities discussed a solution to the fact that this poem appears in our prayer books. How should we recite them?

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Maharal of Prague offered to change the wording of the poem, writing (Netivot Olam, Netiv

Ha'Avodah 12): "We should change the wording of this poem, and instead of asking the angels to help us we should **command** them to help us." The Chatam Sofer (18<sup>th</sup> century) shared his creative way to skip the prayer without removing it from the prayer book: "My custom is to extend the recitation of the prayer that is said before 'Machnisei Rachamim, 'and by doing so to skip this poem." (Responsa Orach Chaim 166)

On the other hand, Rabbi Yochanan of Troyes (16<sup>th</sup> century), offered that there isn't any theological problem at all with the poem, since in his opinion this prayer does not refer to the angels, but rather to the "righteous people of the generation." Similarly, Tzidkiyahu haRofeh (Shibbolei HaLeket, 13<sup>th</sup> century) wrote that there is no problem with the recitation of this specific prayer, as we do not put all of our trust in the angels to accept our prayers.

Despite the controversy about this prayer, one who feels that reciting it elevates his process of repentance certainly has authorities on whom to rely. Consult your halachic authority, and may Hashem accept all of our prayers.

[irakovsky@torontotorah.com](mailto:irakovsky@torontotorah.com)

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## Summary

This very short chapter takes place when someone named Tartan conquered Ashdod at the behest of Sargon, king of Assyria. According to Rabbi Avraham ibn Ezra, this king may be Sancherev, or another Assyrian king. (20:1)

Hashem speaks to Yeshayahu and tells him to remove his sandals and clothing. [Targum Yonatan, as well as the Talmud (Yoma 77a), say Yeshayahu was still wearing tattered clothing.] (2) Hashem then says that this is a sign for the countries of Egypt and Kush (often associated with Ethiopia); just as Yeshayahu is standing naked and barefoot, so too will the Assyrian king take slaves from Egypt and Kush - young and old, naked and barefoot, to shame them. (3-4)

As a result of this, people will lose their confidence in those great nations. They will be forced to admit that if such a situation could befall the superpowers, then all of them could not possibly escape this fate. (5-6) According to Rashi, this is a critique of those who look to Kush with expectations of aid and who boast about the great strength of Egypt. According to Ibn Ezra it addresses the Israelites who had fled to Egypt to escape the invasion.

## Insight

This chapter, which scholars say refers to a historically known rebellion of Ashdod against Assyria, delivers a powerful wakeup call to those who place their confidence outside of the Jewish people. While the Rambam (Moreh Nevuchim 2:46) argues that Yeshayahu's prophecy here was in a vision, Don Isaac Abarbanel (Yeshayahu 20:6) writes that prophets perform particular deeds so that people can ask them about it and learn. The fact that Yeshayahu was asked to demean himself in such a profound way in this chapter emphasizes the importance of Hashem's message here.

What was that message? Don't place trust in other nations. The trust of a Jew should always be given to Hashem above all. When that trust is placed elsewhere, it leads to bad things for the people, who then need to be shocked out of their stupor in order to return to the proper direction.

## Bonus Insight

Based on this chapter, the Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 53:13) rules that one who is wearing torn and tattered clothing, such that parts of their body are exposed, may not lead davening. The Talmud (Megillah 24a) adds that one dressed that way also may not

read from the Torah or lift their hands in recitation of *birkat kohanim*.

Rashi (Megillah 24a) clarifies that this law is due to a concern for *k'vod hatzibur* - the community's honour. There is a large debate as to what this term means, and whether waiving the concern is within a community's rights. Rabbi Yoel Sirkis (*Bayit Chadash* to Tur Orach Chaim 53:3) says that such a waiver is impossible even if a community unanimously wishes to waive it. This is because he identifies *k'vod hatzibur* with *K'vod Shamayim* - how a community presents itself before Hashem. When facing our Creator in prayer, we must always present ourselves in an honourable and respectable manner in terms of both demeanour and dress. The fact that we learn this law from this chapter goes to show how undignified Yeshayahu was made to look in order to get his message across to the Jewish people.

*sgotlib@torontotorah.com*

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All times ET. Classes are free & open to all, unless otherwise noted.**

### Shabbat Sept 30-Oct 1

**20 min before minchah on Friday, R' Steven Gotlib, Erev Shabbos Chassidus, Village Shul**

**After hashkamah R' Yehuda Mann, Halachah from the Parshah, Clanton Park**

**Before minchah R' Jared Anstandig, The 613<sup>th</sup> Mitzvah, Shaarei Shomayim**

**Before minchah R' Steven Gotlib, Pirkei Avot, Village Shul**

**After minchah Idan Rakovsky, Mitzvot in the Parshah, Shaarei Tefillah**

**After minchah R' Mordechai Torczyner, Gemara Ketuvot, BAYT (Gruda Beis Medrash) (men)**

### Sunday Oct 2

**9:00 AM R' Zev Spitz & R' Yehuda Mann, Semichat Chaver Program, Clanton Park (men)**

### Monday Oct 3

**2:00 PM Idan Rakovsky, Elul 5782, ZOOM: <http://tiny.cc/idanrak> Last class!**

### Tuesday Oct 4 Erev Yom Kippur

**10 AM R' Steven Gotlib, Yom Kippur in Jewish Thought, Yeshivat Or Chaim**

### Tuesday-Wednesday Oct 4-5 Yom Kippur

**Breakout class during Maariv, Idan Rakovsky, Yom Kippur: Chag Sameach?, Shaarei Tefillah**

**After Musaf until Minchah, R' Mordechai Torczyner, Jebel Muntar: A Rock & a Hard Place, BAYT**

*Our Bein haZemanim hiatus begins after Yom Kippur; we look forward to returning for Parshat Noach!*