

Joseph & The Mysterious Man Vayeshev

So he [Jacob] sent him [Joseph] out from the valley of Hevron, and he came to Shechem. And a man found him—here, he was roaming in the field; the man asked him, saying: “What do you seek?” He said, “I seek my brothers, pray tell me where they are tending sheep.” The man said, “They have moved on from here, indeed, I heard them say, “Let us go to Dotan.” (Gen. 37:14-17)

RaShi: *And a man found him:* This was [the angel] Gabriel, as it is written, *And the man Gabriel, whom I had seen in a vision, was sent forth in flight...* (Daniel 9:21).

Ibn Ezra: *And a man found him:* according to the plain meaning, a passerby on the road.

From the midrash: *And a man found him:* R. Yannai said, He was met by three angels/*malakhim*—“and a man found him”; “the man asked him” and “The man said.”

Nachmanides: *And a man found him—here, he was roaming in the field:* This is saying that he [Joseph] was straying from the road, and did not know where to go, and entered a field since he was looking for them in a place of pasture. The text mentions this at length in order to tell us that many events befell him that could have rightly caused him to turn back, but he endured it all for the honor of his father. It is also to inform us that the divine decree is true and human diligence is worthless, for the Blessed Holy One sent him a guide without his knowledge in order to bring him into [his brothers’] hands. It is this that the rabbis (in the midrash) intended when they said that these men were angels/*malakhim*, for these events were not without purpose, but rather to inform us that [*Many thoughts are in a person’s heart,*] but it is God’s counsel that is accomplished (Proverbs 19:21).

R. Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, Itturei Torah: *The man asked him, saying: “What do you seek?”:* The angel/*malakh* taught Joseph that whenever he finds himself wandering on life’s paths, when his soul is confused, he should remember to clarify for himself what he really wants and yearns for. Then he will be able to return [to the path], he will first make clear to himself that which he truly seeks.

Questions for discussion:

- There is disagreement among commentators about whether “the man” that encountered Joseph was just a person or some kind of divine messenger. How does the story change, depending on which of these opinions you follow? What happens if, following the midrash, we read it as three divine messengers, not just one?
- Both Nachmanides and the Kotzker Rebbe see some deeper meaning in Joseph’s encounter with “the man.” For Nachmanides, the *malakh* is an instrument of God’s designs, making sure Joseph arrives where he is supposed to. For the Kotzker, the messenger brings a spiritual teaching about reminding oneself of our deepest yearnings. Have you ever had a random encounter that you later viewed as having some deeper meaning or purpose?