

The Cherubim Protecting the Ark

Raise your hand if you have an amulet, a piece of jewelry warding off evil forces. For those of you who do not have your hands up, do you have a *hamsa* to ward off the evil eye? When I went on the 2015 Jericho Jewish Center Congregational Israel trip, I brought back *hamsas* for all of the office staff.

The device protecting our ancestors was not a *hamsa* but rather the Cherubim. In Parshat VaYakhel we read ויהיו הכרבים פרשי כנפים למעלה, “The cherubim had their wings spread out above, shielding the cover with their wings. They faced each other; the faces of the cherubim were turned towards the cover.”¹ This was not just an elaborate art piece; the cherubim were supposed to protect the ark and the tablets therein.

The first mention of the cherubim appears in Genesis after the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. We read there וישכן מקדם לגן-עדן את-הכרבים, ואת להט החרב המתהפכת לשמר את-דרך עץ החיים.

¹ Exodus 37:9

“G-d placed the cherubim at the east end of the Garden of Eden and gave them a flaming sword which turned each way to guard the Tree of Life.”² G-d’s given reason for expelling Adam and Eve was not that they sinned by eating from the Tree of Knowledge, but rather that they would eat from the Tree of Life and become immortal. Therefore, he needed to enlist the cherubim to protect the Tree of Life.

In our Prophets class, we recently began the Book of Ezekiel. In one of Ezekiel’s visions he wrote about the cherubim and their role. He writes: “Then G-d departed from over the threshold of the temple and stopped above the *cherubim*. While I watched, the *cherubim* spread their wings and rose from the ground...”³ The *cherubim* are thus serving as G-d’s protectors, following G-d’s movement. That is their function in the Tabernacle as well-to protect the Ark, the place in which G-d dwells when G-d is directly encountering Israel.

The idea of the cherubim serving as a source of protection, like our *hamsas* or “red threads,” is one to which I hold dear. They are, in

² Genesis 3:24

³ Ezekiel 10:18-19

Samson Raphael Hirsch's words, the "guardians of the Torah." Hirsch asserts that the cherubim are not an end unto themselves but rather they "depict Israel and show them how they are to emerge, as a consequence of their accomplishing the keeping of the Torah." He goes on to say, "If Israel keeps the Torah which is entrusted to it, with gold-like firmness and strength...being one of the bearers of the Glory of God on earth- then Israel will become a pair in cherubim who in mutual respect and consideration are peacefully directed one to the other, each one there for the other, each entrusted to the other-in brotherly co-operation, a whole nation keeping and protecting the Torah, and together in achieving a throne for the glory of G-d on earth."⁴

Our actions have an impact on the cosmos. Through living a life of Torah, we can become a *cherub*, a מלאך, an emissary for G-d. Our actions have a greater impact than we can fathom, and through guarding the Torah, we become protectors of the Torah. Hirsch brings home to us the direct role we can have in being the stewards of Torah. It is not to us

⁴ ד"ה סוככים בכנפיהם על-הכפרת Exodus 25:20 Samson Raphael Hirsch on

to look externally for where the angels and messengers of G-d are; rather we need to become those emissaries, the ones who protect Torah.

As we prepare to conclude reading about the Tabernacle, the first House of G-d, let us think about what we can do to bring Torah into the world and to protect its importance. Perhaps a start is to turn towards each other with kindness and love, recognizing that we are all trying to accomplish the same goal even if we go about it in different ways. May we have success in working together as guardians of Torah and *yiddishkeit*.