

**Parshat Vayechi:**  
**“HaMalach HaGoel”:** A Blessing of Protection and a Model for Community  
**Rabbanit Alissa Thomas Newborn**

*Class of 2016*

In Parshat Vayechi, we witness the final moments of Yaakov's life and hear the words of wisdom that he leaves his children and grandchildren. Though this parsha is filled with a wealth of blessings which include guidance and tochacha, today I want to explore one specific blessing with you. This is the blessing Yaakov gives to Menasheh and Ephraim as he makes them his children.

We are all very familiar with the content of this blessing, and the beautiful melody that has been composed for it, **הַמַּלְאֵךְ הַגֹּאֵל אֶתִי מִכָּל רָע; בְּרַךְ אֶת הַנְּעָרִים וְיִקְרָא בְּהֵם שְׁמִי וְשֵׁם אֲבוֹתַי אַבְרָהָם וְיִצְחָק וְיִדְגוּ לְרֵב בְּקֶרֶב הָאָרֶץ;** May the angel who redeemed me from all harm bless these boys, and may they be called by my name and the name of my fathers, Avraham and Yitzchak, and may they multiply abundantly like fish, in the midst of the land.

We say this heartfelt blessing, which poignantly models the covenantal blessing from God, each night in Shema al HaMitah, the bedtime Shema, either the night before or the day of a brit milah or simchat bat, and we often also sing it during seudah shlishit.

What is so special about this blessing which Yaakov gave on his deathbed that we include it in so much of our ritual life?

Shadal, a 19th century Italian scholar and commentator, offers a window into the gravity of 'HaMalach HaGoel'. When we look at the text of the blessing, we immediately see the problem of the word 'hamalach'. How could Yaakov be praying to an angel? Is this not considered idolatry? And more importantly, why would we continue to use this language as a model for prayer?

Shadal explains that the problem of the word 'hamalach' can be addressed in three ways. First, like Rashi concludes, the malach could just be a shaliach, a messenger of God. A messenger is just a halachic extension of the sender, and therefore Yaakov is really praying to God. The Samaritan Tanakh even spells the word 'hamalach' מֶלֶךְ, alluding to God as melech, king, instead of to an angel, a malach. Shadal, however, ultimately takes issue with this explanation, because of the known practice that Jews do not pray through intermediaries and instead pray directly to God.

In a second interpretation, Shadal explains that this malach could be referring back to the same malach who wrestled with Yaakov and named him Yisrael. In praying for that malach to bless Menasheh and Ephraim, Yaakov is asking that they too be considered 'B'nai Yisrael' in name. Through this malach, they will be his children instead of his grandchildren. This explanation makes sense in Yaakov's greater goal of making sure Menasheh and Ephraim inherit just as Reuven and Shimon. But this does not resolve the problem of Yaakov praying to a 'malach'.

Shadal's third explanation, which he teaches in the name of his father, offers a very different approach. There was no malach, angel, involved at all. The word 'malach' refers to the one receiving blessing, not the one giving it. Yaakov nicknamed Yosef 'hamalach hagoel oti mikol ra', since finding out his beloved son Yosef was still alive gave Yaakov a second chance at life and happiness. Yosef was Yaakov's redeemer and source of hope. Any parent can imagine naming a child with such an epithet, 'my daughter, my son, who makes my life worth living, who makes all of the obstacles until now worth it'. With this interpretation of Shadal, Yaakov's blessing asks that Yosef, the one known as 'hamalach hagoel oti mikol ra' and 'hanearim', Menasheh and Ephraim be blessed by God and fill the earth.

With the wisdom of Shadal in mind, let us return to our original question. What is so special about the blessing of 'HaMalach HaGoel' that we include it in Shema al HaMitah, a brit milah or a simchat bat, and seudah shlishit?

Yaakov gives this blessing on his deathbed, in a time of great vulnerability and great love. It is a prayer for protection, one only a parent can give to a child for a life better than his or her own. Yaakov's life was filled with strife, from his fear of Esav and Lavan to the rape of his daughter Dinah, to the death of his beloved wife Rachel, and to the perceived death of his most precious son Yosef. Thus, Yaakov prays that his children have the benefits which come with the names of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov without the ra, without the strife. And in leaving them a legacy, he also prays, **וַיְדַגּוּ לָרֵב בְּקֶרֶב הָאָרֶץ**, that they become abundant and fill the land when he is no longer able to be with them.

During Shema al HaMitah, we pray for protection. As we transition into night and surrender ourselves to sleep, we call upon the first interpretation of Shadal and Rashi, that God be with us and guard us from evil through His shaliach, through his angel. Nighttime is a metaphor for the unknown, for moments when we are not in control, when we need God to carry us through from darkness to light. This may well be nighttime for us, but it may also be despair, depression, or illness.

At the time of a brit milah or a simchat bat, we also ask for protection. But this protection calls upon the second interpretation of Shadal, asking that the newborn baby be brought into the name of 'B'nai Yisrael', with all of the blessings that come with being a Jew. During the brit milah or the simchat bat, a time of both vulnerability and great hope, a parent wants protection and a life free from strife for his or her child, mikol ra, as well as infinite opportunity, yidgu larov.

And as Shabbat comes to its end, we also ask for protection during seudah shlishit. This protection draws from Shadal's third and final interpretation of 'HaMalach HaGoel'. During Shabbat we spend precious time with our loved ones and our community and open our homes to new and old friends. Just like Yaakov viewed Yosef as his malach, we look at the people in our lives as melachim, as holy visitors to our tables, malachei hasharet. We pray at seudah shlishit for the ability to protect each other and safeguard the closeness that Shabbat embodies throughout the rest of the week.

**הַמְלַאךְ הַגָּאֵל אֶתִּי מִכָּל רַע וְבָרַךְ אֶת הַנְּעֻרִים וְיִקְרָא בְהֵם שְׁמִי וְשֵׁם אֲבֹתַי אֲבִרְהֵם וְיִצְחָק וְיִדְגּוּ לָרֵב בְּקֶרֶב הָאָרֶץ**

As Yaakov first uttered, as Shadal expounded, and as our tradition encourages, may we each internalize the multifaceted blessing of protection in HaMalach HaGoel. This protection may come from God guiding us through darkness. It may come in the form of a parent dreaming for a good life for a child. Or it may be a protection we find in each other, in the warmth and love we share in our shul on Shabbat. We have the choice to be each other's melachim, each other's angels. May we as a community hold each other in times of need, celebrate with each other in times of joy, and embody our purpose as Jews whom God blessed that we may bless others.



*Rabbanit Alissa Thomas Newborn is a member of the spiritual leadership at B'nai David-Judea Congregation, an Orthodox shul in Los Angeles. She received her semikha from Yeshivat Maharat and graduated Magna Cum Laude from Brandeis University with a degree in Near Eastern and Judaic Studies Archaeology and Classical Studies Ancient History. Rabbanit Alissa is also a Board Certified Chaplain (BCC) through Neshama: Association of Jewish Chaplains (NAJC). Rabbanit Alissa is on the board of NAJC and on the board of the Rabbis and Cantors Retirement Plan. She is a member of the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health Clergy Roundtable and the Pico-Robertson Mental Health Neighborhood. In 2017, she was chosen as one of the Forward50, the Forward's annual list of the 50 most influential, accomplished, and interesting American Jews.*