

Angels on Our Shoulders: But Which One is the Good One?

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One of our loveliest *midrashim* depicts two angels—a good one and an evil one--accompanying each person home from Shabbat services:

It was taught, R. Jose son of R. Judah said: Two ministering angels accompany a person on the eve of the Sabbath from the synagogue to his/her home: a good angel and an evil one. And when he/she arrives home and finds the lamp burning, the table laid and the couch bed covered with a spread, the good angel exclaims:

May it be even thus on another Sabbath too! And the evil angel unwillingly responds "Amen". But if not, the evil angel exclaims: May it be even thus on another Sabbath too! And the good angel unwillingly responds, "Amen". (B. Shabbat 119b)

First, it should be noted that we have angels in Judaism, no matter what you might have been taught. We have huge, cosmic sized angels and tiny, swarming angels (often bad ones). We have personal angels and we have these sorts of angels over which have a modicum of influence. The angels in our passage seem to fall into this latter category. (Check out this link on Angelology written by none other than Kaufman Kohler: <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/1521-angelology>.)

I've been experiencing what seem to be relatives of these angels as I recover from back surgery. Always, in my life, I have pushed myself to do more, challenge limits, overcome obstacles. Perhaps it's just the way I'm wired. The doctors and the physical therapists, on the other hand, have counseled caution and slow progress: don't cook, don't shop, don't clean, don't lift anything more than five pounds. Can you hear me grinding my teeth? Most of my books weigh more than five pounds apiece. So one angel on my shoulder says, "Bend down and clean that up. Start cooking. Start shopping. Don't rest so often. Get with it." The other angel on my shoulder says, "Don't pick that up. Let other people help you. Lie down." But which angel is the bad angel? I'm afraid that if I keep listening to this latter angel, I'll never do anything anymore and we'll be condemned to a life of takeout for the rest of our lives.

Discussion Questions

1. Obviously, the story from the Talmud comes to teach how important habits are. As it says in Pirkei Avot: "One mitzvah begets another and one sin begets another (Avot 4:2)." How important are habits and discipline, not just in religious life, but in all of life? Is there any research on these topics?
2. The existential question here is how does a person change the habits of a lifetime? Is this just part of the aging process? Has it happened to you? What did you do? I need some oral torah on this one.
3. Have you ever felt those angels on your shoulders, not just regarding Shabbat but for other occasions as well? What were they saying and what did you do?

As always, I look forward to your insights and answers!