

## Naming the Angel

*Jacob asked: Please tell me your name. And he replied: Why do you ask my name?* (Genesis 32:30). This verse in Parshat VaYishlach provokes the following midrash:

Rabbi Judah the Patriarch said in the name of Abba Yose ben Dostai: One verse says: *He counts all of the stars and gives names to each of them* (Psalm 147:4). Another verse says: *He brings out their ranks by number and gives each one a name* (Isaiah 40:26).

This teaches that an angel's name changes—a name by which one is called now is not the name by which he will later be called. As Scripture says: *The angel of the Lord said to him [Manoach]: Why do you ask my name being that it is hidden?* (Judges 13:18)—meaning: I, myself, do not know to what my name will be changed (Genesis Rabbah 78:4).

In the patriarch's imagination, angels appear as stars in the night sky, luminous servants at the ready whom God names and renames to each new mission that the angel must accomplish before disappearing into the morning light. Both scriptural verses are true: an angel has a name—and then another, and another. More fluid than fixed, the angel gives Jacob a name, but he has no name to give in return.

The Israeli poet, Yehuda Amichai, finds himself accompanied by the ever changing angel whom he met in the nighttime prayers of his childhood, an angel named by Jacob, himself, as he looked back on his life and forward to the future of his grandchildren who would carry forward his name along with those of his ancestors: *The angel who redeems me from all ill bless these young ones and may my name be invoked upon them along with the names of my ancestors, Abraham and Isaac* (Genesis 48:16).

The poet's angel is named and renamed by life's moments—always changing yet always the same; the angel always redeems:

*When I was a child I prayed the Shema-on-the-bed.*

*I remember the first line:*

*"The angel who redeems me from all ill."*

*After that I prayed no more, not on the bed*

*and not in the hills, not in war, neither by day nor by night.*

*But the angel who redeems remained with me and became*

*the angel who loves and the angel who loves will be the angel of death*

*when the time comes, but will always be that angel*

*Who redeems me from all ill.*

As it was for Jacob, it is only memory that tells us the angel's name. Before the name there is endless possibility. To imagine the names of the angel is to cultivate soul, to live with wonderment and possibility. Expect the angel in your stars and in yourself.

History and hope inheres in a human name while the angel's ever changing name eludes the past. The angel receives a new name from above, while a person, bearing her given name and those of her ancestors, must thereafter make a name for herself.

Our new granddaughter was born on the first day of the parsha which we can call: *Why do you ask my name?* She will be named on Shabbat. Until then, she, together with the angels and the rest of us, will live in a world filled with future and with possibility.