

NOVEMBER

Shalom Aleichem

Rabbi Chava Koster

Introduction

Elbogen in his seminal work on Jewish liturgy, confirms that *Shalom Aleichem* was written by the kabbalists of Safed in the late 16th or early 17th century. According to a homiletic teaching in the Talmud, two angels accompany people on their way back home from synagogue on Friday night, a good angel and an evil angel. If the house has been prepared for the Shabbat ("the lamp has been lit, the table set, and his couch spread"), the good angel utters a blessing that the next Shabbat will be the same, and the evil angel is forced to respond "Amen", "I agree". But if the home is not prepared for Shabbat, the evil angel expresses the wish that the next Shabbat will be the same, and the good angel is forced to respond "Amen".

The custom of singing *Shalom Aleichem* on Friday night before Kiddush is now nearly universal, despite the fact that certain rabbinical authorities have expressed misgivings. As has been noted by Rabbi David Bar-Hayim of Jerusalem, the 18th century Rabbi Jacob Emden in his *Sidur Beth Ya'aqov* prayer book pointed out many problems regarding this song (addressing requests to angels, expressions that do not make sense, etc.). A similar attitude to the singing of *Shalom Aleichem* is attributed to Rabbi Elijah, the Vilna Gaon.

Many different melodies have been written for *Shalom Aleichem*. The slow, most well known melody for the song was composed by the American Rabbi Israel Goldfarb on May 10, 1918 while sitting near the Alma Mater statue in front of Low Memorial Library at Columbia University. Goldfarb's work is often presumed to be a traditional Hasidic melody. He wrote in 1963, "The popularity of the melody traveled not only throughout this country but throughout the world, so that many people came to believe that the song was handed down from Mt. Sinai by Moses.

Julie Salamon

Author, co-president of The Village Temple

A couple of weeks ago the Rabbi introduced the Talmudic teaching about the Shalom Aleichem prayer, with the image of a man carrying a good and bad angel perched on each shoulder.

As he reached home, if the Shabbat was being prepared properly—candles, Kiddush, etc—then the good angel “won” and said Shalem Aleichem to the bad angel who was required to respond: Aleichem Sholem. And to shake hands. If the bad angel “won,” Shabbat not prepared, then the good angel was forced to shake hands with him.

Like many seemingly simple stories, this one becomes more and more complicated the more you think about it. Is it saying that if you don’t observe the commandments, you succumb to evil? Or if you do, good triumphs. Or, as the Rabbi pointed out, is the story meant to emphasize the ongoing struggle between good and evil—a struggle that is internal and external?

As a kid, I felt the weight of those two angels. On one shoulder stood the angel of my existence—a girl growing up in small town Ohio with loving parents and a sister I adored. My dad was the beloved town doctor.

We were the only Jews but I don’t recall anti-Semitism, only the sensation of being a bit strange, but in a loving community. On the other shoulder stood my family history—grandparents, aunts uncles and potential cousins—all killed in the Holocaust.

I was lucky to have parents who chose a path not of bitterness, but of healing. They didn’t forget—my sister and I were always aware of what they had lost. But they taught us to be grateful for the chance we had to create a better world.

That isn’t to say I don’t sometimes stagger under the weight of those angels duking it out for my soul. And often it feels like the Evil Angel weighs a ton and the poor good angel just a few ounces. Sometimes it seems like those who believe in good must be saps. Or not read the newspaper.

How do you believe in goodness with personal tragedy to contend with, new wars every day, the lessons of history—especially on this day, the 50th anniversary of the assassination of a beloved American President, John F. Kennedy.

For me the struggle became especially rough after Sept 11, terrorism in our own back yard. But a friend sent me an article in those dark days, that helped me stay the course with the good angel. The essay was written by Stephen Jay Gould, paleontologist and essayist, who died a few years ago.

This is what Gould wrote shortly after the World Trade Center attacks on Sept 11, 2001.

“The tragedy of human history lies in the enormous potential for destruction in rare acts of evil, not in the high frequency of evil people,” wrote Gould. “Complex systems can only be built step by step, whereas destruction requires but an instant. Thus, in what I like to call the Great Asymmetry, every spectacular incident of evil will be balanced by 10,000 acts of kindness, too often unnoted and invisible as the ‘ordinary’ efforts of a vast majority.’

Looking around the sanctuary I see that balance. Despite the long shadow cast by the evil angel, the good angel is holding its own. I see its reflection in all of you coming together for our community. In Anita’s beautiful music. In our Rabbi’s desire to help us connect. And in the children’s choir, whose hopeful voices make me believe there’s a chance for Shalom, for peace.

With that, Shalem Aleichem and Shabbat Shalom.

David L. Smith

Attorney

Shabbat Shalom!! There are few things more daunting than being the speaker following Julie Salamon. Following Julie AND the Village Temple Choir is probably one of those things. But, it is my assigned task tonight, so here goes!

I asked Anita to open tonight’s service with the “traditional” version of Shalom Aleichem. This is the version that I grew up hearing. I assumed that it was an old, traditional melody tracing back to Eastern Europe, written sometime in the 1700’s, and figured it was a traditional Hasidic melody. I was totally wrong. This version was actually composed by an American Rabbi, Israel Goldfarb, on May 10, 1918 while he sat near the Alma Mater statue in front of Low Memorial Library at Columbia University. Rabbi Goldfarb wrote in 1963 that “the popularity of the melody traveled not only throughout this country, but throughout the world, so that many people came to believe that the song was handed down from Mt. Sinai by Moses.” I am happy to dispel that notion here tonight.

The melody that we usually sing here at the Village Temple was written by Debbie Friedman. It was one of the last songs that she wrote, and she shared with Rabbi Joy Levitt that she believed that her Shalom Aleichem was the song that would be her legacy.

In researching the history of Shalom Aleichem, I found that the liturgical poem was written by the kabbalists of Safed in the late 16th or early 17th century. I was taken back to my own studies of the Talmud in Hebrew High School, and was reminded of the story of the two angels who were said to accompany people on their way back home from synagogue on Friday night – one a good angel and one a bad angel. My original plan was to discuss some of the history and debate about this idea. However, as I did my research, I was overwhelmed by

something in my own history, and the connection between Shalom Aleichem and this very date, November 22nd fifty years ago, and its meaning to me as a member of this congregation, as a Jew and as an American.

Like Julie and Bill, I too was in the 5th grade on November 22, 1963. I vividly recall the chaos of that day, the whispers in school, the radio broadcast over the loud speaker, the early dismissal from school. We were living on Long Island at the time, but my family was very much Boston-based, and the fact that one of our local boys was the President of the United States was of great significance in my house. We got home from school that Friday afternoon in time to see Walter Cronkite weeping as he announced the President's death. My mother, who I am pleased to say is with us here tonight, was crying, and my Dad, who came home on exactly the same LIRR train each and every night, closed his office early and came home. Mom decided that that night was one where we all had to go to synagogue, and off we went. We belonged to a Conservative congregation in West Hempstead where, unlike the Village Temple, most people attended services on Saturday morning. The only time most people went on Friday night was if there was a Bat Mitzvah. On that night, the synagogue was packed. There was not an empty seat. The Cantor started the services, as he always did, by singing Shalom Aleichem. However, rather than the usual uplifting, fast version to which everyone was accustomed and in which everyone usually joined, that night he sang a slow, mournful, solo version. The only sounds that you could hear were occasional sobs throughout the congregation. When the Cantor had finished, the Rabbi walked to the podium. He was a rather stern man who rarely showed his emotions. But on this night, things were different. He spoke in a halting, emotion-filled voice, and said that we all had been overwhelmed by the presence of the evil angel that afternoon, and our congregation had chosen to come together on this saddest of days to join together as a community to mourn this great loss. He spoke of the need not so much of the good angel to safeguard us home for Shabbat, but for the sharing of feeling of each one of us as a community and the need to be together as this terrible time.

It was a quiet and sad service, and the one time where, contrary to usual practice, the entire congregation stood to say Kaddish in memory of our slain President. And the Rabbi asked the Cantor to close the service by once again singing Shalom Aleichem, and asked that we all sing together as we got up to leave.

That was a time that has always stuck with me, as I have always associated that sense of community with the singing of Shalom Aleichem. The warm feelings that I have while singing it are very much connected with my feelings for our Village Temple community and our joint commitment to one another.

I thank you Rabbi for the opportunity to participate in the Prayer Project and to share my thoughts and feelings this evening. Shabbat Shalom!