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BH

KILLER ANGELS ... THE NASTY COUNTERPARTS TO THE MALACHEI HASHARET

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You are almost certainly familiar with the benevolent guardian angels, the malachei hasharet. You sing about them every Friday night in the song beginning, "Shalom aleichem, malachei hasharet." But you may not know that there's an opposing team: the evil malachei chabalah (angels of destruction).

There are any number of ways you can provoke these angels Angels of destruction (malachei chabalah, see Zechariah 5:4)

Come and take note that things which fire cannot burn, a false oath can consume.

R. Yonah said: This is on account of lying.

R. Yose says: It is also on account of the truth. [Even if someone takes an oath believing that it is truthful, if the oath turns out not to be truthful, he is punished.]

Haggai expounded in accord with this statement of R. Yose:

There was a case concerning a woman who went to cut out her dough with her girlfriend. Now in her kerchief two dinars were tied up. They fell down and were cut into the dough of the girlfriend. Afterward she remembered the two dinars. She went and sought them in her own house but did not find them. She returned to her girlfriend and said to her: Give me the two dinars that fell and ended up somewhere in your house.

The other said: I know nothing about it. If she [i.e., I] know a thing about them may she bury her son. And she ended up burying him.

When they came in from the graveyard, she heard a voice saying: If that woman had known where the two coins were, she would not (37b) have buried her son.

[She went and took the oath again;] If that woman [i.e., I] knows where they were, may she bury her son. Another son of hers she buried. When they came in to comfort her, they cut open a round loaf of bread and found the two dinars baked inside the round loaf of bread.

That is the meaning of the saying: Whether one is righteous or guilty, do not get involved with an oath.

(Y. Shevuot 6:6, 37a-b (Venice))

This poor woman really did not know that the coins were in her house. But by taking those two vows, she lost two of her sons. Whether this story actually happened, or it is simply a cautionary tale, it certainly drives home the point that taking vows is a dangerous business.

As human beings, we have a limited point of view: we only see a small part of the great canvas of life that God is painting. Only God sees the totality of the grand design. So when we promise something in the future, and attach a penalty to the promise if we break it, we are inviting disaster.

Discussion Questions:

1. Have you ever taken a serious vow? Were you able to keep it? What happened?
2. Could the fact that the sages lived in such tumultuous political times have something to do with the fact that they so strongly disapproved of oaths? Why or why not?
3. Why couldn't God, in this situation, show mercy? What is it about an oath that constrains even God?