

Flying Lessons (Terumah)

The air up there in the clouds is very pure and fine, bracing and delicious. And why shouldn't it be?--it is the same the angels breathe. -Mark Twain

After repeatedly denouncing and prohibiting the creation of statues, portrayals of the human form, or anything resembling idols – on pain of death – God issues an unusual command.

In the construction of the sanctuary, in the Holy of Holies, atop the Ark of the Covenant – where the Tablets of the Law are reverently concealed – God commands us to place not one, but two human figures.

These two Cherubim, as they are called, take the form of young children with wings on their backs.

Rabbi Ovadia Sforno (1475–1549) wonders about this apparent contradiction: how could one of Judaism's most abhorrent prohibitions be allowed in the heart of its holiest space?

Sforno sees this as a powerful and deliberate message. The Cherubim represent what we commonly refer to today as angels – heavenly beings that directly fulfill God's will on Earth. On rare occasions, they appear as human beings, sometimes disguised as unassuming people, their mission unnoticed. Most of the time, however, they remain invisible.

But why are there angels on top of the Ark, and why specifically winged ones?

Rabbi Raphael Pelcovitz, in his notes on Sforno, draws from Maimonides' Guide to the Perplexed (I:49, I:54) to explain:

Flying represents both the ability to ascend and swiftness of movement – both requiring wings. Similarly, humans can strive for spiritual and intellectual elevation, soaring to greater heights of understanding and apprehension of God.

This is achieved by studying God's ways, as exemplified by Moses. One can only know Him through His actions – His 13 attributes – which can only be grasped through the Torah. This is why the Cherubim are not only atop the Ark but also gaze upon its cover – the source of divine truth and wisdom.

For Sforno, the Cherubim convey an implicit message: at the heart of Judaism lies the belief that we can and must elevate ourselves. That elevation comes through God's

Law. If we keep our eyes on the truth, we too can soar—like the very angels themselves.

Shabbat Shalom,

Ben-Tzion

Dedication

To the memory of Ben-Tzion Tuvia Zeff, z"l. May his family be comforted among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.

To the Brit Mila and naming of our grandson, Hadar Spitz. May he come into Torah, Chupah and good deeds. Mazal Tov!