

“DON'T BE SUCH AN ANGEL”

There is a mystery at the heart of the renowned Shabbat hymn Shalom Aleichem. No sooner do we usher in the angels, welcoming them in the first verse, than we usher them out in the fourth verse! Why are we so inhospitable?

Rabbi David Lincoln told me of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik's beautiful answer. We are eager to associate with angels in all their flawlessness, explains Rabbi Soloveitchik, but we cannot live with them. A short visit is all human beings can really take, then we must return to the imperfect, messy, struggling human world.

The Bible exhorts us “You shall be holy men to me” (Ex. 22:30) to which the Kotzker Rebbe commented -- let your holiness be human, holiness formed of clay. For God, said the Kotzker, has plenty of angels.

Certain human beings have resolved to rise above human nature, but that is a quixotic and ultimately unworthy aim. Rather our task is to refine human nature, not to discard or deny it. We are earthbound bodies, not seraphs, and have to deal with the joys and trials that the physical entails. God has not called upon us to be angels, but human beings. To be human, after all, is hard enough.