

A Tale of Two Castles

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The elderly Rabbi was asleep one night when he is awoken by a rustling noise in his room. He opens his eyes and there, standing before him is the malakh ha-mavet, the angel of death. The angel says Rabbi, you have lived a long and a good life, but your time is at hand. However, because you have been so pious and upright, I have been asked to grant you one wish before you leave this world.

The rabbi thought a long time, and then he said I wish to know the difference between heaven and hell. Can you show me? The angel told the rabbi to stand up and hold onto his cloak. Suddenly the two were whisked away through the air. They were flying a long time. The rabbi could not see anything, but he could feel the wind whipping past them and he was sure they must be traveling very fast. Then suddenly, in the distance, he spotted a beautiful glimmering castle. As they drew near to the castle he could see that above its main gate was a large banner which read "Baruch haba la'azazel." Welcome to hell."

The rabbi became very fearful. What would he find within? The two landed gently just outside the drawbridge, and they walked inside. Inside the palace walls was a large garden beautifully landscaped with elegant trees and plants which brought forth colorful flowers. In the middle of the garden was an exquisite and very long table laden with the most sumptuous food piled up in crystal bowls and on silver platters. There were soups and stews, salads and kugels, plates filled with chicken and steak and fish and every possible delicacy, not to mention the wine and those incredible desserts! It was a feast fit for royalty. The rabbi was confused. He turned to the angel of death and asked, this is hell? The angel did not answer. As they walked further into the garden the rabbi saw it was filled with people, and they were all crying and moaning. Their bodies were very emaciated. They looked like they had not eaten in weeks or longer.

It was clear they were starving. What was not clear was why? Given all the food that was laid out before them, why had no one eaten. He turned to ask the angel who again remained silent. Then the rabbi spotted two individuals standing near the table and he finally understood. He saw that each person had ladels with long handles attached to both of their arms. The long handles prevented their elbows from bending. One person reached with the ladle into a bowl of soup, but when he raised his arm to attempt to drink it, it just spilled all over him. He could not bring it to his mouth. The other person managed to scoop up a piece of meat with his ladle, but this too simply fell to the floor.

These poor souls were forced to look at of this sumptuous food all day long but could not partake of even a morsel. They were left in agony with the food they desired and needed just beyond their grasp. Now I understand, said the rabbi. Surely this is hell. I cannot bear to watch any longer. Please, take me away.

With that, he grasped on to the cloak of the angel of death. Once again, he found they were flying through the air at great speed, passing through many clouds, until after what seemed an eternity, the rabbi once again saw a castle in the distance. Strangely, it looked exactly like the

first castle. The same walls, the same towers, turrets and gate. And above this castle's gate there was also a banner, except this banner read "Baruch haba la-Shamayim. Welcome to heaven."

The angel and the rabbi walked through the gate and into the inner courtyard. To the Rabbi's amazement, it was identical to the one they had just left. The same trees and plants and flowers. The same exquisite banquet table laden with the same delicious food and delicacies. Only here, the people in the courtyard were all healthy and well fed. They were laughing, smiling, even singing. Everyone seemed so happy, as if they didn't have a care in the world.

The rabbi thought to himself. Ah, this indeed is heaven! But then he noticed something strange. All the people in this garden also had the same ladles strapped to their arms. As before, the handles prevented their arms from bending. How could that be? Asked the rabbi. How is it possible that these people all have been able to partake of the food before them even though they too cannot bend their arms? Once again the angel was silent. Then the rabbi saw.

One man dipped his ladle into a soup tureen. He then lifted the tureen into the mouth of another. A woman scooped up a piece of kugel and fed it to yet another. These people were sated and satisfied, enjoying the blessings before them because rather than trying to feed themselves, they instead fed each other. The rabbi smiled and nodded his head. Yes, he said, yes indeed. This is heaven.

Of course, as Jews we don't believe in hell as an actual place. When we die, our tradition teaches that our souls go through a period of cleansing and purification. But every soul ends up in heaven because the core of every person is the spirit of God.

But this story is instructive to us. Heaven and Hell aren't somewhere up in the cosmos. We have the ability to make heaven or hell right here on earth.

When we only think of our own needs and wants and pursue them without regard for others, that my friends is real hell. You see, not one of us could survive this world if we were unable to rely on others for their friendship and support, their wisdom and their help. When each is only out for their own good in the end we all suffer and we never get to attain the blessings that God has laid out for us.

But when we choose to focus on the needs and desires of others, when we place others before ourselves, without even seeking them out, we find in the end that our needs and desires are met as well. This is the Jewish version of karma – what comes around goes around. If you send forth love, kindness, generosity and altruism into the world, then those same blessings come back to us many fold.

A rabbinic sage didn't say it but one could have: a rising tide lifts all ships.

If we wish to receive God's blessings in the New Year, the way to do that is simple and straightforward: give of your blessings to others.

As the New Year begins, the table is set, arrayed with a feast of blessings. The choice is yours.

Shanah tovah.