

Do you ever think of chocolate as a gift from God? I know my fiance does. Well, there was a moment in my life where this seemed to be the case for me, although it presented itself as one of the most amazing coincidences of my life.

Let me explain. As you may or may not know, the first year of rabbinical studies is in Israel. And entering the path to the rabbinate was like embarking on a journey and facing one of the biggest transitions of my life. Like the Israelites we spoke of two weeks ago that were on the verge of entering the promised land, I too needed to mark the transition. Before I could enter the promised land, I had to first wander through my own wilderness. I set out on a cross-country backpacking trip, to very literally wander through the wilderness.

The Passover Seder was my last taste of civilization. We recalled the Israelites who chose to leave their familiar but difficult lives, with only their faith in God and the dream of a new life. In a very real way, I was embarking on the same journey.

One of my first stops was Shenandoah National Park in Virginia. It was still fairly early in the season and temperatures were lower than I had expected. This was compounded by being in the mountains, and lead to a rather chilly experience. It got so bad one night, that when I washed my dishes in a nearby stream, I saw that icicles had formed on the roots of a tree. The extent of the cold didn't fully sink in until the water droplets on my pots and pans had frozen. It was then that I decided to leave the mountains in search of lower ground and a warmer place to camp.

During those cold nights, I dreamt of a nice warm cup of hot chocolate. I had all of the materials with me: a mug, a camping stove, and enough fuel to heat the near-frozen water to boiling. I simply lacked the hot chocolate.

I soon found a new place to camp out of the mountains which was significantly warmer, (although still not too warm). One day, I was enjoying my new location when I noticed some pieces of trash lying on the ground. I wanted to do my part to clean up the campground and enjoy a clean home in the woods.

As I was picking up wrappers, cigarette butts, and other pieces of trash, it was clear they had been on the ground for a while. Weather worn and faded, I gathered these pieces of refuse into a bag. My mind wandered and I began to question what I was doing. One of the main intentions of my trip was introspection and contemplation, and this instance was no exception.

I wondered if we get rewarded for doing good deeds. On the cosmic level, I didn't know. I wasn't sure what I believed. On the practical level, there was no one around to see me, so I couldn't get my trash-collecting merit badge. Ultimately, I remembered what Judaism taught, and I recognized that it I wasn't doing it for a reward. I was doing it because it was the right thing to do.

I continued picking up pieces of trash, when I saw the corner of a wrapper sticking out from some tall grass. When I picked it up, I couldn't believe my eyes. There, along the edge of my campsite, was a clean, non-opened packet of hot chocolate mix. I stood frozen in shock, until I started jumping for joy!

This was one of the most amazing coincidences of my life. I had been craving hot chocolate in the cold, and I had just been cleaning up trash, wondering if we are rewarded for doing good things. It couldn't have been any more perfect.

I still have no idea where the packet came from or how it got there. Perhaps a previous camper had dropped it. Perhaps it fell out of a backpack. Regardless, I felt rewarded for doing something good with something I really wanted. Rarely are there such obvious consequences and connections, but for me, it was clear as day. A realization surfaced that felt fresh and new and yet comfortably familiar: There are no such things as coincidences.

Have you ever been thinking of someone when out of nowhere they call you? Have you ever bumped into a old friend who told you something you wouldn't have known otherwise? Has there ever been a situation in your life where you remarked, "What an amazing coincidence?"

Well, as I mentioned, I don't believe in coincidences. I believe that coincidences can be God's way of communicating with us. The power of coincidences is that non-believers can dismiss them as chance and improbabilities. However, to one who has their eyes open, we can see examples of God's role in our lives every day. Like a radio, when we tune into God's signal, we can hear the messages loud and clear. We receive messages everyday, in fact we are bombarded by them. Radio, TV, internet, movies, magazines, newspapers, billboards, bumper stickers, signs, pamphlets, tele-marketers, junk mail, junk email, junk faxes. How are we to know which messages to listen to and which ones to ignore?

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The word "malach" which we commonly translate as "angel" actually means "messenger." The Torah is filled with stories of people communicating with these messengers of God. When Abraham is about to sacrifice his son Isaac, a messenger steps in and stops him. When our people are given the name "Israel - one who struggles with divine beings," it is because Jacob wrestled with a messenger all night long. When Moses encounters the burning bush, it is a messenger of God who speaks through the flames.

I'd like to tell you another story. This is the story of how **we** are now God's messengers. "The trouble with human beings is that they have free will. Of course, this is how God designed them, so when they **choose** to love God, it is infinitely more powerful than if they are **forced** to love God. Unfortunately, this leaves the possibility that they will choose to ignore God and to hurt their fellow human beings. Angels, on the other hand,

have no choice in the matter, they must love God. They are divine beings with no free will. They are in eternal service to God as God's helpers and God's messengers.

After ages of serving God and delivering messages to the people, the angels begin to get frustrated with the humans. They approach God and say, "O Mighty one, why do these humans continue to live in such hurtful ways? You have given them an instruction book for life, your Torah. You have given them endless love. And we are constantly delivering them messages from you, but they often ignore us."

God responded, "My dear angels. Perhaps your divine distance is making it difficult for you to understand the nature of these humans. To better comprehend their ways, and to more effectively deliver your messages, I will place you on earth with them." And it was so.

In a flash, every divine messenger was placed on the earth in human form. Although their charge was the same, with their new bodies came the gift of free will and the curse of forgetting their heavenly home. Messages destined for delivery came in the form of unconscious thoughts and flashes of inspiration. An instinctual urge to serve God in the pit of their being was the only indicator of their divine origins. When they carried forth a message and helped to make the world a better place, they received a glimpse of their heavenly home. It was felt as a warm sense of peace and happiness, like a fire on a cold winter eve.

As time passed, these messengers of God in human form continued delivering their messages and began to live human lives. They started families with the humans and continued to help God and humanity as best they could, even if they couldn't remember why. The fire of God, burning within each of these messengers was then passed on to their children as a glowing divine ember. This new generation and subsequent generations continued their divine task of delivering messages to the world and helping to heal its fragmented existence. Each one tried to develop their own reasons and rationale for their actions and motivations, but ultimately it was the reward of divine connection that they felt when performing their tasks, that encouraged their continuous work.

Today, we are the inheritors of this divine ember. We have the messages to deliver and the actions to perform. We are often unaware of our messages and their recipients, and yet instinctively we deliver them. It can come in the form of a reminder or a thank you, a hug or even a smile. All we know is that when our messages reach their destination, we have a taste of our divine home.

Even though we are the messengers, we are also the recipients of messages. They may come to us in the form of a phone call or a chance encounter. They may be from an old friend or a familiar face. Often when we do receive these messages, we mistakenly call them "coincidences." If our eyes are open, we can see messages from God all over. If we follow our instincts, or that still small voice within us, we can even help to deliver these messages.

At some point, there was a hiker with this divine ember. Knowingly or not, intentionally or not, he dropped an unopened pack of hot chocolate on the ground. This was his message. When I arrived at the campsite, I felt the urge to clean up the trash. This was my task. When I came upon the hot chocolate which I had been dreaming about during my week in the cold, I believe this was my reward.

I could have easily dismissed it as a coincidence. But I was open to the possibility that there was more meaning in that event, that somehow there is something greater than me out there, and for some reason it cares about our lives.

Thank you God for giving us the opportunity to deliver your messages to others, and for the insight to recognize your messages when they come to us. And together we say, "Amen."