Genesis 37:15

12) One time, when his brothers had gone to pasture their father’s flock at Shechem,
13) Israel said to Joseph, “Your brothers are pasturing at Shechem. Come, I will send you to them.” He answered, “I am ready.”
14) And he said to him, “Go and see how your brothers are and how the flocks are faring, and bring me back word.” So he sent him from the valley of Hebron. When he reached Shechem,
15) a man came upon him wandering in the fields. The man asked him, “What are you looking for?”
16) He answered, “I am looking for my brothers. Could you tell me where they are pasturing?”
17) The man said, “They have gone from here, for I heard them say: Let us go to Dothan.” So Joseph followed his brothers and found them at Dothan.

Humans and Angels: How Can We Tell the Difference?
(Shoshana Michael Zucker is a translator and editor and lives in Kfar Saba)

It’s hard to know what was in Jacob’s mind when he sent Joseph to check on his brothers and the flocks (Genesis 37:11), because just one verse earlier the Torah explicitly notes that he was aware of the jealousy and tension between them: “So his brothers were wrought up at him, and his father kept the matter in mind.” It’s even less clear whether Joseph was aware of the risk because he seems rather oblivious to the sensitivity of the situation. In any case he answers his father, “Here I am” and goes off towards a destiny-changing encounter.

Joseph doesn’t find his brothers easily because they aren’t in the Nablus region as expected but rather they are farther from the Hebron Valley, in Dotan. The commentator Rashbam understands this is as a credit to Joseph who does not want to return to his father without completing his task. At precisely the right moment, the right person sees him wandering, asks what he is looking for, and is indeed able to give the correct answer. The coincidence is so amazing that Rashi claims, “It was Gabriel,” an angel. However, Ibn Ezra stubbornly insists on reading the verse, “according to its simple meaning, a passerby.”

But what if there is no disagreement between them? Perhaps the passerby is an angel?

The word malach in the Bible is a messenger, earthly or heavenly. Jacob himself saw heavenly angels in his dream of the ladder reaching to heaven (Genesis 28:12), and later sent clearly human messengers to his brother Esau (Genesis 32:4). At what stage did Jacob realize that man he wrestled at the Ford of Jabbok was an angel (Genesis 32:22-30)?
How can we tell the difference?

Did the passerby on the way to Nablus know that he was a divine messenger or understand the role he played in carrying out a divine plan?

That seems unlikely but he was aware of his environment. He saw Joseph wandering, he approached him, he asked, and he helped. Most likely, he never knew the outcome of his actions.

Perhaps the message here is that each of us can serve as an angel or divine messenger. By paying attention, and responding with concern to people around us, we also have the potential to be a messenger of the divine. But we might never know it.

_The Angel Who Didn’t Know He Was An Angel_
(Rabbi Jonathan Sacks)

I know of no comparable passage in the Torah: three verses dedicated to an apparently trivial, eminently forgettable detail of someone having to ask directions from a stranger. Who was this unnamed man? And what conceivable message does the episode hold for future generations, for us? Rashi says he was the angel Gabriel. Ibn Ezra says he was a passer-by. Ramban however says that “the Holy One, blessed be He, sent him a guide without his knowledge.”

I am not sure whether Ramban meant without Joseph’s knowledge or without the guide’s knowledge. I prefer to think both. The anonymous man – so the Torah is intimating – represented an intrusion of providence to make sure that Joseph went to where he was supposed to be, so that the rest of the drama could unfold. He may not have known he had such a role. Joseph surely did not know. To put it as simply as I can: he was an angel who didn’t know he was an angel. He had a vital role in the story. Without him, it would not have happened. But he had no way of knowing, at the time, the significance of his intervention.

The message could not be more significant. When heaven intends something to happen, and it seems to be impossible, sometimes it sends an angel down to earth – an angel who didn’t know he or she was an angel – to move the story from here to there.

I believe that there are times when we feel lost, and then someone says or does something that lifts us or points the way to a new direction and destination. Years later, looking back, we see how important that intervention was, even though it seemed slight at the time. That is when we know that we too encountered an angel who didn’t know he or she was an angel. That is what the story of Joseph’s stranger is about.