

Rosh Hashanah Morning Sermon 5785
Rabbi Andy Vogel
The Image of God: The Complexity Within Us All

Shanah tovah. We've just read, in the Creation story that is this morning's special Rosh Hashanah Torah portion¹, the tremendous positivity of Jewish tradition – the order and structure of the universe, as laid out in the Creation story, day by day, the declaration embedded in the portion, and repeated again and again, that the Creation is good. And the pinnacle of the story is, of course, God's pronouncement of human beings created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God.

It is the Torah's insistent affirmation that human life is holy. And it is an affirmation that we need very much in this year, especially after the year we have just lived through.

It is astonishing how much this image of God has been defiled over the past year! The violence has been horrifying, and the death toll of Israelis and Palestinians (and now Lebanese) whose lives were taken by murder, or by war leaves us reeling. God's image, which our tradition says is inherent in human beings, has been grossly desecrated this past year again and again.

This year has been the most difficult Jewish year since I have been a rabbi, and a year of extraordinary heartbreak and grief for our community. Our hearts have continued to break, again and again, at the tremendous pain and loss.

And if your own heart is breaking, I want to ask you to consider the heartbreak of others who may be sitting here in this Sanctuary today, whose pain may be different from your own (or, maybe in some ways, very similar to yours):

- Consider the members of the Temple Sinai community who are Israelis, or have family or dear friends in Israel, whose fear and grief and trauma is real, and it continues. Some of them are deeply worried about Israeli children of family or friends who are currently serving in the Israeli Army, not knowing where they are, or whether they are safe.
- Consider the members of our congregation who are deeply connected to, through work or friendship, Palestinians, living in Gaza or the West Bank or elsewhere in the Palestinian diaspora, and how they have been devastated by the terrible loss and destruction to them and their families.
- Consider the two Temple Sinai members who had extended family members in Israel who were taken hostage by Hamas on October 7, both of whom, sadly, were killed in the tunnels in Gaza – and, in each case, their bodies were only recently returned to their family members. We offer them our condolences.\
- Remember our high school students, trying to work through the maze of complications, and;
- Remember our college students, many of whom feel caught in complicated situations, with a wide variety of experiences and reactions among them:
 - some who are fearful of identifying openly as Jewish;
 - some who are deeply confused and troubled by what's going on on their campuses;
 - and, yes, there are some who are proudly engaged in speaking out in one direction or another, usually from a strong sense of values that spring from their Jewish identities;
 - but, consider the many who are just trying to reason through the tangle of history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and trying to find their own community in which they can learn and be themselves, frequently far away from support of their parents and synagogue-community – this is hard.

¹ Temple Sinai read Genesis 1-2 as this year's Rosh Hashanah Day 1 Torah reading, in our cycle of reading the various portions provided to us in the *Mishkan HaNefesh machzor* each year.

- And, I've seen this year how, through this crisis, our whole community has been asking essential questions with tremendous seriousness and integrity – about what it means to be Jewish, what it means to be an American Jew; struggling with questions about what it means to be part of the Jewish people, what their relationship is with Israel and Israelis, and what it means to pray (as we do in our Siddur) for *shalom*, for *tzedek* (justice), for Am Yisrael, and for *Kol Yoshvei Tevel* (all who dwell on earth), because some of things seem to stand in tension during this troubling and confusing time. There are no easy answers.

When you stop to think about how much pain we're all holding – and how different and varied our reactions are and have been – our emotional reactions, as well as our political responses – you cannot help but get an appreciation for how rich and complex we are as human beings.

Which leads me back to the *tzelem Elohim*, the Divine Image within human beings, as described by today's Torah portion. Through the centuries, our Sages saw so much in human life that is special and unique, and holy, that they identified with the *tzelem Elohim*, the Image of God:

- Maimonides taught² in the 12th century that the Image of God in human beings was our intellect and our intellectual capacity,
- while the leader of 19th century Enlightenment German Jewry, Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch³ wrote that that Image of God was also found in the form of the human body, which we must honor and sanctify.
- The Polish rabbi Rabbi Aharon Levin⁴, taught that the Divine Image in humans was our capacity to have free will, to make free choices, to make the distinctions between moral choices and our animalistic urges.
- Rabbi Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg, an 19th century Lithuanian rabbi, taught⁵ that the Image of God in each human being is our ability to engage in spiritual awareness, to develop an inner spiritual life.
- And the feminist writer Ellen Frankel suggests⁶ that just as God transcends all matter and energy, the image of God in human beings is similarly beyond all comprehension, beyond all grammar, and beyond all the simple gender categorizations that we frequently employ.

Human life is holy, for all these reasons – and more. (I've provided a study sheet in the back of the Sanctuary you can take home with even more traditional commentaries on the meaning of the Divine Image.) You may know the famous teaching from our tradition: "One who saves a single human life is as if they have saved an entire world, and one who destroys a single human life, as is if they have destroyed an entire world."⁷

And then, there's one Midrash⁸ that tells the story of how, when God was ready to create human beings, God consulted with the attributes of Truth / *Emet*, Justice / *Tzedek*, *Hesed* / Lovingkindness, and *Shalom*, Peace, asking – should I create human beings? *Shalom* spoke up first. "No, you can't! There will never be Peace." *Hesed* spoke up and said, 'Yes, humans will have so many opportunities to show their compassion.' Justice agreed – some people will work for justice for their entire lives. But Truth interjected: "No! They will never find me." The debate went on, and the score was two for, two

² [Guide to the Perplexed](#) 1:1:5. Also see Rabbi Ovadia Seforno, in [his comments](#) to Gen. 1:27.

³ Comment cited on [this study sheet](#) from Temple Sinai Torah Study, Bereshit 5778.

⁴ Author of *HaDrash v'Halyun*, 1879/80 -1941, Poland, in *Itturei Torah*, vol. 1, p. 22.

⁵ The "Sabba of Slobodka," in *Itturei Torah*, vol. 1, p. 22.

⁶ In *The Five Books of Miriam*, p. 8; see Esther the Hidden One.

⁷ Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5, 2nd century.

⁸ Midrash Bereshit Rabbah 8:5, retold very effectively [here](#).

against. So God picked up Truth and hurled it toward the earth, where it shattered into a million pieces for us to find.

In other words, a basic tenet of human existence, from our very origin, is there is not one truth, but rather there are a multiplicity of truths. **The image of God is in our multiplicity, variety, diversity, contradiction.**

In fact, neuroscientist Dr. Patrick House from Stanford, who studies human perception, writes⁹ that “the uniqueness of human consciousness [may be in] **our ability to hold more than one contradictory idea in our head** at the same time.”

But for so much of the past year, it seems like we’ve been asked to make a binary choice – one or the other. As if we have to pick being either pro-Palestinian or pro-Israel, and there seems to be such little ground for anything between these two opposite poles. That either you support a Free Palestine or you stand with the Jewish people. Or that you either think that Israel’s retaliation against Hamas is just and justified, or, alternately, that Israel’s actions are actually the culmination of decades of Jewish injustice perpetrated against others. The debate has been cast too often in the binary terms of an “either-or” choice. Even more, one of the things that has most frustrated me this year is so many people’s willingness to flatten the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as black-or-white – similarly, in binary categories – which usually tend to align with their previously conceived notions.

But the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not a binary reality – it is actually many realities, and it contains so many contradictions that are hard to reconcile. Since the holy quality of being human, the Image of God within us, is to be able to consider sophisticated complexities simultaneously, I think that our challenge in the year ahead, as we face our own responses to the crisis Israel and Palestine now, is that **we have to lean into that complexity, and hold multiple truths in our minds all at once.**

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Earlier this Fall, a remarkable exchange between parents, here in our Religious School, demonstrated this challenge. Parents had gathered for a session to reflect together just a few weeks after the horrific attacks on October 7, and after the Gaza war had begun, and after the protests started on campuses. At one point, one parent, a mother, sitting in the circle said with some degree of anguish: “I just can’t believe that Jewish lives are valued so much... less than other people’s lives!” And a father sitting right next to her in the circle sat up straight and he said, “That’s so interesting, because what I was thinking was ‘I can’t believe that Jewish lives are valued so much more than other lives.’”

The mother in this discussion was talking about how some protestors in the streets were celebrating Hamas’s brutal attacks, thereby denying the value of Jewish lives – and the father in this discussion was reacting to Israel’s overwhelming retaliation that had killed a terribly disproportionate number of Palestinians in Gaza. And I think that all of us listening to that discussion that day were all struck at that moment by the realization that two opposite perspectives could **both** be legitimate and true, even as they seemed at first to be contradictory.

At that moment, it again became clear to me how hard it is to hold the multiple truths of this terrible conflict in our minds and our hearts all at once.

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In addition to distorting complex realities, one problem with reducing things to simplistic categories is that it results in dehumanizing the other. It leads to misunderstanding the other’s history, dreams and

⁹ Patrick House, *Nineteen Ways of Looking at Consciousness* (St. Martin’s Press, 2022), p. 10.

desires. The Palestinian writer and activist Iyad el-Baghdadi has said¹⁰, “The solution is not to constantly try to moralize. ... The future needs to be rooted in the truth that all human beings are equal, and that Jewish life is equivalent to Palestinian life, and that we can together work on a future in which nobody is oppressed and we can address the inequities of the past.”

Sometimes the phrase “it’s complicated” is a pretext to cover up the injustice that one’s own group does. But I mean leaning into complexity here to mean something different – that we have to see the humanity not only in ourselves, but also in the other – to see their loss and grief, just as we see our own, to try to engage in radical empathy.

That is to say: there are some things that are not complicated. No matter who you are, if you only stand up for the human rights of your own group, then you don’t really stand for human rights at all.¹¹ And if we deny or minimize violence or destruction done to any person, we are denigrating the Image of God within us.

As Jews, we have very often focused on our own exile, suffering and persecution as the source of the legitimacy of the State of Israel, without spending enough time studying or understanding the suffering that Israel’s founding brought upon Palestinians. We have taught and studied the Holocaust, which is such a profoundly formative part of Jewish history in the modern period, obviously everyone should keep learning about it, but as a community, we know very little about the Nakba, the Palestinian term for the “catastrophe” of their exile and dispossession. Can we hold both of these narratives in our minds at the same time, without negating either one, and without it being misconstrued that we’re equating them?

October 7, and the war that has ensued, have shown that **the truth of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not “either-or,” but more like “both-and.”** That’s hard.

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I see this work reflected so powerfully in what’s called the Parents Circle / Families Forum, a group of Israelis and Palestinians who share one thing in common: they have all lost a family member in the conflict. No one wants to be a member of this group, because in order to be join, you have to be bereaved. They have committed themselves to telling their stories of tremendous loss and pain – to tell what happened to their children or husbands or wives or other family members. But they are committed not just to telling their own stories, but to bearing witness to each other’s stories – they are Palestinians who share the pain of Israelis, and Israelis who share the pain of Palestinians.

Two members of this group came to Brookline just last week¹²: Laila Alsheikh, who is Palestinian and lives in Bethlehem in the West Bank. Her 6 month-old son, Qussay [pronounced: “*koos-eye*”] died after breathing tear gas thrown by Israeli soldiers, who then also prevented her from taking him to the hospital for more than five hours. She said her life was turned completely upside down after he died, and she was filled with anger, and refused to have anything to do with Israelis for 16 years! But she said¹³, that over time, she came to a different place, and she made the decision to move past feelings of revenge, to try to end the cycle of violence – and she realized that ensuring a better, more peaceful future for her children would involve meeting to Israelis, telling her story and hearing theirs, and seeing them as human who shared some of the same experiences.

¹⁰ Quoted in Lydia Polgreen’s *New York Times*, “[Restoring the Past Won’t Liberate Palestine](#),” February 18, 2024.

¹¹ See Nicholas Kristof, *New York Times*, “[How to Think Through the Moral Tangle in Gaza](#),” June 1, 2024.

¹² The YouTube recording of their session at TBZ can be [found here](#).

¹³ See her testimony on the Parents Circle website, <https://parentscirclefriends.org/ourtearsarethesame/>.

And an Israeli mother named Robi Damelin was her counterpart who traveled here with her. She joined the Parents Circle after her son David was killed. He had been a gifted musician, and had earned a masters in the Philosophy of Education, and he had very mixed feelings about serving in the Israeli army. One day, while manning a checkpoint, he was killed by a Palestinian sniper. Robi said that two decades later¹⁴, she still carries her grief with her wherever she goes. And she said that when she was invited to attend her first meeting with bereaved Palestinians telling their stories, she realized that her grief and loss in losing her beloved and gifted son was, in fact, not only hers, but that the loss of the Palestinians sharing their stories was also so real and true. And now she says she does not want anyone else killed in the name of her child.

Together, these brave families are challenging the binary narratives. Each of them said that, at times, when they show empathy for the other side, they are sometimes accused of being self-hating, of betraying their people, as being either antisemitic or anti-Palestinian. But they know that they are being more fully human, and that they are affirming the humanity of the other, as well. And this, to me, is the most beautiful response to grief and loss in this terrible conflict. It embodies being created in the Image of God.

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I don't know what awaits us in the New Year ahead – none of us knows when or whether a ceasefire will come, if the hostages will be released, if the people who are chanting slogans against Israel will continue to protest, if the destruction and death in Gaza will continue, or if a new extended round of horrible violence will now erupt in Lebanon, that would affect the lives of Israelis and Arabs profoundly. Nobody knows.

But I do know that one challenge for us is to see through the eyes of someone else, someone very different from ourselves perhaps, to grasp the multiple truths of what is unfolding for them, as well as for us. We have to engage in our own learning this year – to learn the stories and the multiplicity of truths of people whose lives are beyond the scope of our immediate vision. We have to move beyond “either-or” – and more towards “both-and.”

Because, after all, as the Torah tells us this morning, that's the key to grasping the humanity of others in this difficult time, and that's how we can fulfill our own humanity. That's how we can fulfill being Created in Divine Image.

Shanah tovah.

¹⁴ Testimony on the Parents Circle website, https://www.theparentscircle.org/en/stories/robi-damelin_eng/