

Jewish Teachings on the Image of God in Humanity

Prepared by Rabbi Andy Vogel • Rosh Hashanah 5785 / 2024

וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ
“And God created the human in the image of God,
created it/them in the Image of God.” (Genesis 1:27)

As Humans We Bear Witness to God’s Activity in the World

Nahum Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, p. 12

[T]he characterization of man as “in the image of God” furnishes the added dimension of his being the symbol of God’s presence on earth. While he is not divine, his very existence bears witness to the activity of God in the life of the world. This awareness inevitably entails an awesome responsibility and imposes a code of living that conforms with the consciousness of that fact.

The Image of God is in Our Human Intellect

Rabbi Ovadia Seforno (Italy, 16th century)

The term [*tzelem Elohim*, “the image of God”] is used in connection with judges, i.e. describing the predominating intellectual function they must perform if their decisions are to reflect true justice. Whereas it is an undisputed fact that the human intellect operates without direct dependence on any part of the body, that it does not age along with the remainder of the body it inhabits, but, on the contrary, sometimes improves while the body ages and becomes barely able to sustain the soul which inhabits it, and while it is also a fact that exercise of the intellect does not result in fatigue, etc., it is still not called אלוקים, something divine, but only צלם אלוקים, “something which mirrors something divine.”

Our Bodies Contain a Spirit, and Our Duty is to Sanctify the Body

Rabbi Shimson Raphael Hirsch (Germany, 1800-1888)

1:27 - “b’tzalmo” - This phrase [“in God’s image”] is repeated several times, emphasizing that human beings’ physical frame is worthy of God, and of humanity’s godly purpose. The Torah thus teaches us to recognize and appreciate the Divine dignity of the human *body*. Indeed, the Torah’s purpose is not only to hallow the spirit, but also to hallow the body. This is the basis of all human morality: The human body, with all its drives and energies, was created in a form worthy of God. Our duty is to sanctify the body, in keeping with our godly purpose.

We Are Unique in Understanding our Mortality

Midrash Bereshit Rabbah 8:11 (2nd century?)

The Holy Blessed One said: ‘If I create humans from the supernal realm, they will live and never die; if from the earthly realm, they will die and will not live. Rather, I will create humans from both the supernal and from the earthly.

philosopher Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death*

[cited in Rabbi Alan Lew, *This Is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared*, 2021 printing, p. 118]

“Earlier I mentioned *The Denial of Death*, by philosopher Ernest Becker, and Becker’s observation that we human beings seem to be the only creatures afflicted with the mysterious capacity to understand that we are going to die, and that it is precisely this fact that seems to call us to the world, to our life’s work, and to God.... So, we try to set up something in life that affirms our existence.”

We Exist Beyond Gender Categories, as God Exists beyond Matter & Energy

Ellen Frankel, *The Five Books of Miriam* (1997), p. 4

[T]he verse “male and female God created them” strains against these grammatical limits – just as the Holy One in creating our world transcended the limits of matter and energy.

Like God’s Angels, We Have Competing Qualities & Characteristics

Midrash Bereshit Rabbah 85:11 (2nd century?)

Rabbi Shimon said: When the Holy blessed One came to create Adam the first human, the ministering angels divided into various factions and various groups. Some of them were saying: ‘Let humans not be created,’ and some of them were saying: ‘Yes, let humans be created.’ That is why it is written: “Loving-kindness [*hesed*] and truth [*emet*] met; righteousness and peace embraced” (Psalms 85:11) [i.e., the angels took up sides in a debate]. *Hesed* said: ‘Let humans be created, as they can perform acts of kindness.’ Truth said: ‘Let humans not be created, as they will all be full of lies.’ Righteousness said: ‘Let them be created, as they perform acts of righteousness.’ Peace said: ‘Let them not be created, as they all full of discord.’ What did the Holy One do? God took Truth and cast it down to earth, as it is written: “You cast truth earthward” (Daniel 8:12). The ministering angels said before the Holy One blessed be He: ‘Master of the universe, why are You demeaning Your very seal [which is Truth]!? Let Truth ascend from the earth.’ So it is written: “Truth will eventually spring up from the earth” (Psalms 85:12).

The Human Imagination is in the Divine Image

Rabbi Simcha Bunem of Pesishka (1765-1827, Hasidic, Poland) in *Itturei Torah*, vol. 1, p. 19

“**Let us make Adam” (Gen. 1:26)** – The word, “Adam” is linguistically related to the word, “*dim’ayon*” (imagination)... The advantage that humans have over all other creatures is the power of our imaginations. All the others cannot grasp anything other than themselves. But only humanity was created with the abilities of those both “above” [i.e., Divine] and those below [i.e., animals] – and they are able to see and compare, and can understand and grasp things that beyond our selves. This is the meaning of: “Let us make man in Our image and our likeness” (1:26): Let us make humankind with the faculty of higher cognition, to be able to compare one thing to another, to comprehend and understand through their imagination [i.e., comprehend metaphor].

Our Free Will and Our Ability to Choose Good and Reject Urges, are Like the Divine

Rabbi Aharon Levin, “*HaDrash v’Ha’Iyyun*”, (1879-1941, Poland)

Of among all the creatures, humans alone can do what is good in our eyes, according to our will or desire [*ratzon*]. It is in this aspect that we are like our Creator. Ecclesiastes teaches: “Man has no superiority over beast – no [*ayin*]!” (Ecc. 3:19) What differentiates us is only the “*ayin*,” the “no!”, i.e., the ability to rule over one’s animalistic urges and say “no” to them – that is the meaning of having been created “in Our image, according to Our likeness” (Gen. 1:26).