

The Conservative Synagogue
of the Hamptons

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בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים
IN THE IMAGE OF GOD

ימים נוראים תשס"ח
DAYS OF AWE 5768

1. INTRODUCTION

Hayom Harat Olam, today the world is born. The Talmud teaches that Rosh Hashanah is the anniversary of the creation of the world, or more specifically (according to one opinion) the sixth day of the creation of the world -- the day humanity is created.

What do we know about how we were created? Genesis 1:26-27 says as follows:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כְּדְמוּתֵנוּ . . . וַיְבָרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים
בָּרָא אֹתוֹ זָכָר וּנְקִיבָה בָּרָא אֹתָם:

God said, Let us make a human in our image, in our likeness. So God created the Human in God's own image, in the image of God, God created him/it; male and female God created them.

The very first thing said about humanity is that we are created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image and likeness of God -- a statement which may well be the most awesome, grand, radical, inspiring, challenging, disturbing and far-reaching claim made in any scripture of any faith, ever. It is one of the most oft-quoted religious precepts, and at the same time one of the most frequently ignored and violated, to humanity's everlasting tragedy and shame. And it will be our focus throughout these Yamim Noraim.

To what specifically does *b'tzelem Elohim* refer? Our tradition offers a broad range of interpretations:

- the human intellect
- the power of speech
- the soul
- free will
- our creative capacity
- our dominion over the earth
- the human body -- either as bearing bodily resemblance to the Divine, or being in some way a pattern for the Divine.

And this is by no means an exhaustive list. Similarly, the "image of God" has been said to be something that the first human was created with, and subsequently lost; an essential aspect of humanity which endures eternally, but which can be damaged, sullied or hidden; or an aspiration we have yet to attain.

The truth is, we don't know. To say that we are created in the image of God raises far more questions than answers. It is an inherently ambiguous comparison, difficult if not impossible to understand. It is, in a sense, an impossibility -- how can a finite, mortal, flesh and blood being be in the image of the infinite, immortal non-corporeal God? It is also disturbing: if we are indeed made in God's image, how then do we understand human suffering, and all the evil we see perpetrated by humanity? Is this too in the image of God? Heschel calls it a scandalous statement; had Moshe consulted him, he writes, he would have said, "Don't say it."

Then there is a further difficulty, arising from the fact that analogy is not the same as equation. Analogy implies similarity, but also difference: to be *like* God, or to be like God's likeness (*kidmuteinu*), does not mean that we are the same as God. So in what ways are we similar to God, and in what ways different? We have no objective, rational way of knowing. Moreover, what does saying that we are in the image of God teach us, really? If we want to say it teaches

us something about ourselves, it's rather like someone saying, "you're just like your great-grandmother," whom you never met. What does that mean? On the other hand, if we imagine that we can learn something about God by analogizing to ourselves, we stumble into the scandalous, potentially idolatrous side of *b'tzelem Elohim*: the risk of making God in our own image, according to our values.

So what do we do with this? Tonight I want to just lay out a few principles, ground rules, and core ideas that will inform our thinking and discussion for these Yamim Noraim.

The first is a caveat. God is absolute and all-encompassing; we are not. Individually and collectively, we and everything about us are limited, relative, finite, partial. Whenever we speak of any purported correspondence between humanity and Divinity, we need to keep that distinction in mind. For example, we may posit that it is the human intellect that marks us as being in the image of God. But in doing so, we must remember that vis-a-vis God we are speaking of absolute all-encompassing intellect (i.e., omniscience); while our knowledge may in some sense be similar to God's, it is always partial, limited, finite, less whole. At best then, when we speak of being in the image of God, we are speaking of a partial, and therefore flawed, image of God, which in its limitation is therefore both true and untrue. To borrow one of Heschel's analogies: like a pond reflecting the sky.

Similarly, because God is absolute and infinite, whenever we speak of God in human language (and this includes references to God in the Torah, which speaks in human terms), we must understand that we are articulating only a partial truth. Always. Therefore, we can't pick out a verse or two in the Torah, or even a narrative, in which we see God "behaving" in a way that we find challenging, and say, "well that's not a God I want to emulate," or even, "that's how God is, so I should be that way too." That's the first principle.

Second, the most fruitful approach to understanding the meaning of *b'tzelem Elohim* is not to ask in what way we are in the image of God, but rather, "what are the *implications* of our being made in the image of God?" It may well be impossible to pin down the precise way in which we are in God's image; nevertheless, the *fact* that we are created in God's image has enormous implications. Just to get our thinking started, here are a few of them:

- *Imitatio Dei* (striving to imitate God) is the only way to become fully human. It is not a peripheral part of us, not something we can choose to do or not do, but an essential part of who we are.
- Both the human species as a whole, and every individual human being, has inestimable significance and dignity. We are not interchangeable, replaceable, dispensable.
- We are obligated to treat each other, and ourselves, as we would treat the image of God.
- A universalist consciousness -- albeit one that includes within itself particularism -- is imperative. Concern only for self, or only for community, or only for or with Jews, is inadequate and unacceptable.
- And finally, while the phrase *b'tzelem Elohim* may or may not tell us much about the nature of humanity, it tells us a great deal about the meaning of humanity, the purpose of humanity, and most especially, that there *is* a purpose to humanity as a whole, and to each of us individually.

And that's where I want to focus now. We begin with the words of Adin Steinsaltz:¹

No matter how primitive a man is, or how harsh his physical environment, [the] factor that makes him human is present. This is not the Divine soul or any essence that makes a man feel superior; rather it is his humanity, *the reason for considering him to have been made in the image of God*. What does it consist of? . . . *Man is human because he has a task in life to relate to the world, to raise it up and give it meaning and purpose*. Otherwise the universe is an endless repetition, a question without an answer, a movement without a goal.

Avivah Zornberg says something similar, but it in different language:

To be created in God's image is a fact; but to have been given knowledge of it is *the affirmation of a project*. When God first informs a human being -- Noah (Gen. 9:6) -- of his likeness to God, *He makes a claim upon him*, uses the language of imagination to provoke him to transcend the undifferentiated horror of the Flood.²

The fact that the Torah tells us that we are made in the image of God means that God has a claim on us. It means that we have a task, a purpose: we are a project of the Divine. Whatever the *b'tzelem Elohim* analogy *means*, what it *demand*s is responsiveness and engagement. It speaks of God's investment and claim on us; it speaks of responsibility.

What is the nature of the task, the specific purpose? We can spend a lifetime trying to discover and fulfill it, and we will certainly explore aspects of it in the coming days. But the first step is simply to come to terms with the *fact* of it, to let the fact of being in the image of God sink in.

וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ. -- God created the Human Being in the image of God.

Just pause and take in the majesty and dignity of that claim, the awesomeness of it, the burden of it, the power of it, the dreadful terror of it, the possibilities in it, the responsibility -- the responsibility of figuring out what in the world that means for us, what it demands of us.

God said, "Let Us make Humanity in Our image (*b'tzalmeinu*), in Our likeness (*kid'muteinu*)." In the entire creation story, only of humanity does God first express an intention, a purpose (*kavannah*) and then actually create. With the rest of the created world, God's intention or speech *is* the creative act. Only with respect to us does God first say, this is what I want this creature to be. And God's intention, *kavannah*, is that we be like God. Imagine, then, who we are supposed to be, what our world is supposed to be. Imagine what our world *could* be if we took God's intention to heart.

And I ask us to *imagine* for a reason. There is another implication of our being created in the image of God, and it comes not only from from the fact of it, but from the form of it. We are created as an analogy. And that itself -- the form, that we are created by analogy -- teaches us, both methodologically and substantively, how to approach this challenge of being in the image (*tzelem*) and likeness (*demut*) of God.

Tomorrow we'll look at a text by a ḥasidic rebbe, Rav Simḥa Bunem, which plays on the Hebrew word "likeness" (*demut*), related to the word "*domeh*" -- to be comparable or compared.

1. Adin Steinsaltz, *In the Beginning*, p. 21.

2. Avivah Zornberg, *The Particulars of Rapture*, p. 491.

Rav Bunem concludes that to be in God's likeness (*demuteinu*) means precisely that we are able to make comparisons, to compare the self with what is outside itself.

I began by talking about the ambiguity of the comparison of humanity to God, and of our lack of any objective way of knowing what is similar and what is different. But Simḥa Bunem comes and says that we *do* have an intuitive ability to make comparisons, to know what is essentially us, and what is not. And, he says, that ability is itself in the image of God, and therefore, somehow, we do have the capacity to make meaning of this seemingly opaque analogy.

But to do so, we have to approach the question precisely with our God-like power of analogy -- that is, as poetry. Or as we read in Avivah Zornberg's words, the "language of imagination." Here is the approach of one modern Biblical scholar, Michael Fishbane:³

[O]ur accounts of the world and of life within it are narrative constructs, derived from tradition and from the individual imagination. We are always accounting for our place in the world and the nature of things through such creative constructs, and allowing this to guide us, give us orientation, and to provide a framework of value -- at least until some crisis introduces a dissonance that requires a revision or reinterpretation or reconfiguration of the implicit or explicit narrative account we have of things. Surely the text of Genesis 1 . . . is such a tendentious cultural accounting, serving implied and explicit theological and pedagogical purposes. . .

The human being is thus constituted by a creative impulse or "will to imagine," and this quality is certainly a distinctive feature of this species and distinctive among the species of life. The world is thus not a *de facto* given, but an image of what is imagined and imaginable. To share these constructions, and to benefit from the world-images imagined by others, opens a wider horizon of possibilities for the self. . . . [t]he human imagination is our distinctive capacity as creatures in the image of God.

Fishbane begins where Simḥa Bunem leaves off. The Torah's claim that humanity is made in the image of God points to the human imagination as both the substantive way in which we are in God's image, and the procedural path through which we can find out what that means and how to fulfill it. *B'tzelem Elohim*: we are meant to read it not so much as a description, but as a challenge, an invitation, a prod to our imaginations. Fishbane speaks about a methodology of reading Torah, which we may describe as creative interpretation through imaginative association. We're not meant to read the Torah's story of the creation of humanity literally, as a verifiable factual account of how humanity was created; the fact is, we can't get at the real meaning of the Torah's statement, *b'tzelem Elohim*, through rational inquiry alone. We can approach it only as poetry.

And let me digress momentarily, since we are speaking about the creation of humanity, to say a word about "creationism." Those who reject evolutionary theory because of the Biblical account of creation are guilty of a terrible mis-reading and abuse of the Torah. The Torah cannot properly be read as a literal description of the manner in which humanity came to be; in fact it cannot properly be read as literal, factual material at all. It can only be properly understood when it is read as poetry. The Torah points to truths, which can only be arrived at through a deep and ongoing engagement with the text; one whose understanding of the Torah is limited to its surface meaning cannot be said to understand the text at all. Nor is our dignity as human beings threatened by evolutionary science; on the contrary, our using our intellects in scientific

3. Michael Fishbane, "The Image of God and the Human Ideal," pp. 87-89.

study is one of the ways we fulfill the vision of ourselves as made in the image of God.

But to return to our discussion. The reason that the story of our creation is told through poetry is because that's actually the model for reading life -- it's the model for understanding *us*. The fact that we can't get at the meaning of *b'tzelem Elohim* through rational inquiry alone teaches us that we can't get at the meaning of humanity, of our own lives, through rational inquiry alone. Nor can we begin to approach God that way. For that, we need our God-like fully-human "will to imagine." So our goal in these days is not to pin down exactly what *b'tzelem Elohim* really means; our goal is to imagine what it *might* mean -- for us as individuals, as a people, as a species.

Now according to Fishbane, this will to imagine (reflecting as it does the image of God) forms the core of our capacity to will the good. I suggest that it also makes possible *teshuvah* (repentance, return, response); we might even say that imagination constitutes the core work of *teshuvah*. As Fishbane so eloquently articulates, through our imagination we weave stories of who we are -- stories which give us meaning, orient us, account for our place in the world, guide us and shape our values. We ourselves are constructed of the narratives we tell about ourselves and our world; we create our narratives, and in turn are created by them. As we revise them, we too change. And we are invited into this process by the first such narrative, Genesis 1: "in the image of God, God created the human being." God created us through analogy and imagination, so that we too might create ourselves -- and all kinds of other wonderful things -- through analogy and imagination.

To enter Torah, to enter a synagogue or the world of prayer, and most especially to enter these Yamim Noraim, is to enter a world of imagination, a world of poetry. I invite you to approach the process of prayer in just that way -- what dreams are expressed by the liturgy? Where do the melodies take your imagination? It is my goal on these Yamim Noraim to spark the imagination in each and every one of us -- to enter into a process of interpretation, comparison, metaphor. Hopefully, too, as Fishbane says, we'll introduce "a dissonance that requires a revision or reinterpretation or reconfiguration" of the narratives we've told of ourselves thus far -- and thereby "open a wider horizon of possibilities for the self." Together and individually, maybe we can begin to construct a new narrative of who we are -- one that takes *b'tzelem Elohim* seriously.

Who do you imagine you are? Who do you imagine you could be? And what do you imagine God imagines?

2. SELF-AWARENESS⁴

We read in Genesis 5:1:

זֶה סֵפֶר תּוֹלְדוֹת אָדָם בְּיוֹם בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אָדָם בְּדְמוּת אֱלֹהִים עָשָׂה אֹתוֹ:

This is the book of the generations of Adam, on the day of God's creating of Adam, in the likeness of God (*bid'mut Elohim*) [God] created him.

Commenting on this verse, the Zohar (II, Shemot, 70b) says:

[I]t is said that God made man in the "likeness" of God. By the word "likeness" we are to understand a kind of mirror in which images appear momentarily and then pass away . . . "This is the book of the generations of Humanity", i.e., the book which reveals the inner meaning of the features of man, so as to teach the knowledge of human nature.

We often assume that to be made in the image of God means that we are meant to reflect, or mirror, God. And it's true. But here, something else is going on. Picking up on the Torah's juxtaposition of "the book of the generations of Humanity" with the likeness of God (*demut Elohim*), the Zohar says that "likeness of God" is poetic language intended to convey the notion of a mirror, reflecting to us who we are and who we should be. In other words, the analogy by which humanity is compared to God conveys God's "intention," so to speak, that the human be self-aware, self-reflective.

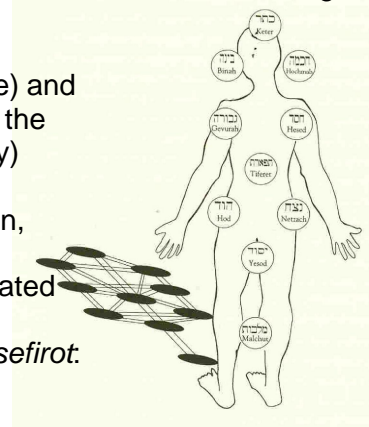
Rabbi Akiva expressed it this way:

הוא היה אומר חביב אדם שנברא בצלם. חבה יתרה נודעת לו שנברא בצלם. שנאמר (בראשית ט) כי בצלם אלהים עשה את האדם.

[Rabbi Akiva] used to say: Beloved is humanity in having been created in the image [of God]. Extra-abundant love: it was made known to him that he was created in the image [of God] , as it is said (Gen. 9:6), "for in the image of God did [God] create humanity." (Pirkei Avot 3:14).

4. One understanding of *b'tzelem Elohim* sees God's relationship to the world as patterned after the human body. Lurianic Kabbalah posits a series of ten lenses or vessels (*sefirot*) through which the Divine light and energy is refracted in the created world. These ten *sefirot* are most often pictured in the form of a human body, as for example in this diagram from *God in Your Body* by Jay Michaelson. Each of the ten *sefirot* evokes a cluster of associational meanings, including an association with a particular part of the body.

Keter (Crown, Will, Nothingness), Hokhmah (Wisdom) and Binah (Understanding) form the head. Hesed (Love, Grace, Abundance) and Gevurah (Power, Judgment, Awe, Contraction, Limitation) reflect the right and left arms. Tiferet (Compassion, Harmony, Truth, Beauty) corresponds to the trunk, Netzah (Endurance, Victory) and Hod (Splendor, Humility) the right and left legs, and Yesod (Foundation, Creativity, Connection, Covenant) the phallus. Only Malkhut, associated with sovereignty, Shekhina, the People Israel, the created world, and the earth -- has no specific bodily correlation. In this teaching, we focus on the head, and the cluster of the first three *sefirot*. Keter, Hokhmah, and Binah.



The implication is that self-examination -- the accounting of the soul (*heshbon hanefesh*) and the struggle to understand the self -- is a religious obligation. It is of course a religious obligation in that it is a core component of *teshuvah* (repentance, return); without it, we cannot obtain forgiveness. But it is a religious obligation even apart from that, because self-reflection and self-knowledge is part of our essence as human beings made in God's image.

Indeed, self-knowledge is the key to speaking meaningfully about any other way in which we are made in the image of God. We can posit many qualities or aspects of humanity which are potentially in God's image: intelligence, speech, free will, our physical bodies, creativity, power, deeds. But anything we posit will always be only *potentially* in the image of God, like absolute numbers which are neither positive nor negative. It is our awareness -- our capacity to be reflective -- that enables us to express all our other capabilities in a way that mirrors the Divine. Self-awareness assigns the positive or negative.

So if self-reflection and self-awareness is an expression of God's love for us and a religious obligation -- if we possess an innate impulse and ability to learn about ourselves -- why do we find it so hard? No doubt, the impulse to learn about ourselves is strong, especially in our culture. Introspection is "in," especially among Jews. It's not that we don't look in the mirror. It's that we are remarkably adept at averting our own gaze when we do. We *do* run after ourselves, almost as fast as we run away from ourselves. And as skilled as we are at searching for our true selves, we are even more masterful at hiding.

Why? One reason, I think, is obvious. It's embarrassing, and often painful. When we look long and hard in the mirror, we see a lot of things we'd rather not see. I don't want to focus on this today, because I think we know this. I simply want to raise it as a challenge -- a challenge to all of us to do our best in the next ten days to overcome the embarrassment and hold our own gaze a bit longer.

Instead, I want to focus on another reason why I think we find self-awareness hard, and that is this: we avoid knowing ourselves too well because with knowledge comes responsibility. A moment ago, we read the passage from Pirkei Avot about the extra measure of love in being told that we are in God's image. In fact, it is Noah who is told, just after the flood:

שֶׁפָּדַדְתָּ אֶת הַדָּם בְּדָם אָדָם יִשְׁפָּדְךָ כִּי בְצִלְמֵ אֱלֹהִים עָשָׂה אֶת־הָאָדָם:

One who sheds human blood, by a human shall his blood be shed,
for in the image of God did [God] create humanity (Gen. 9:6)

We are given self-knowledge, made aware of our being made in God's image, in the moment when our behavior has proved most disappointing. It is as though God is saying: "I created you in My image; I created you to know who you are and to act accordingly, but you didn't. So now I'm telling you: You are meant to reflect Me. And because you are meant to reflect Me, you are obligated always to know how you appear, and so I too will reflect you. I am your mirror. Look well, and make sure your reflection is as it should be."

Avivah Zornberg, in a passage we looked at last night, says it this way:

When God first informs a human being -- Noah (Gen. 9:6) -- of his likeness to God, He makes a claim upon him, uses the language of imagination to provoke him to transcend the undifferentiated horror of the Flood.

"To provoke him to transcend." The language of imagination, the mirror, the call to

self-awareness and reflection, is intended to provoke us, to inspire us to rise to a higher level. To inspire us to transcend.

I'm reminded of a moment when I was still practicing law, and had just begun my Jewish learning. I had just attended a study session in which we learned another passage from Pirkei Avot, regarding the difference between disputes "for the sake of Heaven" and disputes not for the sake of Heaven. At the time, I was in the midst of a high profile but really rather trivial trial, and as I left the session I commented that the trial I was working on was not exactly a dispute for the sake of Heaven. The person I was with responded, "that's true, but as long as you know it, it's ok." And I remember thinking that that was exactly, precisely wrong. It was because I knew it, that it wasn't ok. Knowledge implies responsibility. Because I know, I have to act differently.

And this, I believe, is one of the reasons we would prefer not to know ourselves so well. Because intuitively we understand that once we know, it will no longer be ok to just continue as we are. Intuitively we know that knowing ourselves will carry with it the responsibility of changing ourselves.

But there is yet another reason why we find it so difficult to look in the mirror. To go back to our original text from the Zohar: "By the word "likeness" we are to understand a kind of mirror *in which images appear momentarily and then pass away.*" A human being -- whether ourselves or another -- is not so easy to know. We aren't pieces of furniture that we can simply set before us and examine. The mirror isn't consistent; the images comes and go. Every person at all times is possessed of undiscovered depths and capacities, mysteries yet to be revealed. It is yet another way in which we are made in the image of God: we, like God, are never fully knowable.

Nor are we static. We change, we grow, we make make different choices today than yesterday. This too is a reflection of the image of the Divine. God is absolute, infinite, capacity; one of God's names is "I will be what I will be" (*ehyeh asher ehyeh*). As long as we are alive and conscious, there is no point in our lives when we do not have the capacity to do something different, to be something different -- to change. So although we are obligated to strive to know ourselves, we are always -- or I should say, we are *ideally* -- aiming at a moving target.

So, then, how do we get to know ourselves?

First, we learn to embrace, rather than be afraid of, our capacity to surprise ourselves. Sometimes we are surprised by the intensity of our response to something. How angry, or frustrated, or frightened we are. How much we want something, how much we miss something, how much we miss someone. Sometimes we can be surprised by our lack of response -- how little we care, how disengaged we are. Sometimes we surprise ourselves in positive ways, by how much we are able to bear, how much we are able to do, how much we have to give, how kind, noble, or brave we can be. Other times we are surprised and saddened, even shocked, to see how small we are -- how petty and competitive and ungenerous. We surprise ourselves in so many ways, pleasant and unpleasant. And it is precisely when we do surprise ourselves -- positively or negatively -- that we can learn the most about ourselves.

The question is, how do we deal with self-surprise? It's frustrating to aim at a moving target, and it can be very unsettling to be to prove unpredictable to ourselves. In the terms we used last night, it demands revising our narratives of who we are -- altering, sometimes radically, our self-image. It means letting go of what we thought we knew about ourselves, in order to learn

something new. And we always have a choice. We can refuse to see, refuse to notice, refuse to accept this surprising person as ourselves. We can keep telling the same stories about who we are, and simply edit out the parts that don't fit the usual script. Or we can hold our own glance a bit longer, stay present -- and be surprised. We can tell a slightly different story, we can rewrite the script.

Which brings us to a related point: we have to learn to tolerate mystery, most especially in ourselves. Any time we say anything about God, we have to know that whatever we say is only one side of a dialectic, an irresolvable tension. And the same is true of us. Like God, a human being is filled with contradictions and paradoxes. Some of them are problematic, and must be addressed: for example, when our behavior conflicts with what we claim to value. But some of our contradictions are noble; they are the source of our greatness, and essential to our humanity. When we speak of self-reflection, we come upon one of those essential contradictions, a paradox at the heart of every human being: that is, we have the capacity for self-knowledge, and we are infinitely mysterious. Both sides of the dialectic reflect the Divine image -- God too has self-consciousness, and God too is infinitely mysterious. And we are called, as an act of *imitatio Dei*, to expand our capacity to tolerate paradox and mystery.

Avivah Zornberg, quoting both Keats and Rav Nahman of Bratslav, writes:⁵

It is the measure of the great *tzaddik* to be capable of asking questions, "without irritably reaching after fact and reason." R. Nachman says elsewhere (Likutei 2:52): "This is the way that the human being is like God: God, too, has unanswerable questions." In asking questions of God, against God, without answers, the human being enacts his likeness to God.

Zornberg's source, Rav Nahman,⁶ is even more explicit: just as there are unanswerable questions directed to and against God, there are unanswerable questions to and against and about, human beings. The measure of the *tzaddik* -- of our righteousness -- is to keep asking unanswerable questions, without rushing to oversimplistic answers which are, inevitably, false.

This is one of the best ways to come to know one's self, and it is the core work of these days: to ask questions of ourselves, about ourselves, against ourselves. Today is the day to begin bringing to consciousness all those questions that have always lain just beneath the surface. The ones we'd rather not ask, and the ones we don't have ready answers to -- either because there are no answers, or we just don't know them yet, or we're not ready to hear them yet. This is the day to hold onto those questions, and not, as we sometimes do, banish them with a facile answer that we *know* isn't fully true.

Moreover, we need to ask questions not only of ourselves as individuals, but collectively, as a path to communal self-awareness. Do we have the ability -- as Jews, as Americans, as a

5. Avivah Zornberg, *The Particulars of Rapture*, p. 191.

6. Rav Nahman of Bratslav, *Likkutei Moharan*, II, 52:

מה שְׁקִשָּׁה קְשִׁיּוֹת עַל הַצְּדִיקִים, זֶהוּ מְכַרְח לְהִיּוֹת. כִּי הַצְּדִיקִים מְתַדְמִים לְיוֹצְרָם, כְּמוֹבָא, וְכִמוֹ שְׁקִשָּׁה קְשִׁיּוֹת עַל הַשֵּׁם יִתְבָּרַךְ, כְּמוֹ - כִּן בְּהִכָּרֵם שְׁיִהְיֶה קְשָׁה קְשִׁיּוֹת עַל הַצְּדִיק, כִּי הוּא מְתַדְמֶה אֱלֹו יִתְבָּרַךְ:

As for the questions of/against the *tzaddik* (righteous person), this is inevitable. Because the *tzaddikim* are similar to their Creator, and just as there are unanswerable questions directed to/against God, so too, it is inevitable that there will be unanswerable questions against the *tzaddik*, who is similar to God.

species -- to stay with the most difficult questions of our day, and keep asking them, keep challenging, even though they may seem unanswerable? And I mean the big questions: what is the cause of the evil, or suffering, in our world? what can we do about it? why are human beings so bent on destroying each other?

Essentially, we are speaking of cultivating humility in our quest for self-knowledge, of approaching our task of learning about ourselves with awe, and with an expectation that it will be a lifelong process.

But we do not approach it in a vacuum, without assistance. Last night we referred to a text by Rabbi Simḥa Bunem:⁷

“God said, Let us make man in Our image” “Adam” from the decree of the “adamah.” After everything magnificent and beautiful was created, HaShem wanted to show the Divine work, that all would be seen. And without Adam, nothing within creation could perceive anything except itself. HaShem created Adam, with the powers of both the heavenly and earthly creatures, in that he is able to compare (לדמות) everything to himself. And this is the nature/essence of humanity, that he can see and understand and compare, outside of himself, and this is “let us make man in Our image, like our likeness,” with the power of comparison.

We are unique in the created world in having the capacity to compare, to perceive what is like and not like ourselves. And making such comparisons -- comparing ourselves to others, positive role models or negative examples-- can teach us a lot about who we really are. Who am I like, or not like? who would I want to emulate? whose negative characteristics make me absolutely crazy because they are too much like me? whose positive characteristics point out unfulfilled potential within me? Similarly, we compare various versions of our potential “self,” distinguishing which “selves” are authentic and which are not. When I look at what I say about myself, how others see me, what is true of me, and what is not? What do I wish were more true of me, that I might aspire to? Most especially, we learn about ourselves through the power of comparison, of poetry, in encountering Torah, as we read in the passage from the Zohar: “This is the book of the generations of Man’, i.e., the book which reveals the inner meaning of the features of man, so as to teach the knowledge of human nature.” The main reason we study Torah is not to learn about God. The main reason we study Torah is to learn about us -- to learn how to be, and how not to be.

To come back to the Zohar text with which we began: “By the word ‘likeness’ we are to understand a kind of mirror in which images appear momentarily and then pass away.” We come to see ourselves -- really see ourselves -- in brief moments of insight, the way a flash of lightening on a dark night illuminates the landscape for just a second. Then the mirror is removed, and the reflected vision of ourselves is gone. We can’t control when the lightening will flash, but we can be alert and open to it, and we can set the stage for it. In other words, we can welcome what I’ll call a certain storminess in our lives. We come to know ourselves best in

7. Kol Simḥa, on Bereshit 1:26:

יאמר אלהים נעשה אדם בצלמנו וכו' (בראשית א' כו). אדם מגזרת אדמה. אחר שנעשה הכל מפואר ומהודר רצה השם להראות מעשיו שיראה הכל. והמצאות, לבד מאדם, לא ישיג כי אם כל אחד - עצמו. ברא השם את האדם והוא כח כולל מעליונים ותחתונים אשר יוכל לדמות הכל בנפשו. וזה מהות אדם שיראה ויבין וידמה, לא זולתו, וזהו נעשה אדם בצלמנו כדמותנו בכף הדמיון, כי לא ישער אלא הדומה קצת - בדומה:

moments of disruption, disorder, over-reaction, intensity -- when we are shaken up. The self is most readily encountered at the boundaries of the self, in the moments when our buttons are pushed, when our limits are reached, when we can't hold it together anymore. And we learn more about ourselves from our failures and disappointments, than from our successes.

God, again, is our model. The creation of the human being -- God's "mirror" (the way in which God would become, as Rav Bunem said, revealed to God's self) -- entailed a great disruption, a tearing apart of the oneness of God. And for God too, the creative process involved surprise, loss, disappointment -- we might even say failure. If we are afraid of the storms, if our primary goal in life is to keep everything smooth and easy, to be unruffled and calm and happy, we will never learn who we really are, and never, therefore *become* who we really are.

"To be created b'tzelem Elohim, in the image of God -- that is an expression of God's love. That we know it -- that we have the potential to know ourselves -- love beyond measure." Let us not refuse the gift.

3. POWER

Looking at the kabbalistic schema of the human body as corresponding to God, we are moving now to the left hand, associated with *Gevurah*, meaning power or might.

Human beings are made in the image of God in that we have power.

Many of us have strong, and complicated, feelings about power. Some of us want power. Some of us want it *a lot*. Others are afraid of power, resentful of power. Some of us imagine ourselves to be more powerful than we are, others have trouble acknowledging how much power we have. And many of us are, justifiably, uncomfortable with, or suspicious of, power. If we were to play the word association game, and I were to say "power," it's unlikely that the first thing to come to mind would be, "God-like." On the contrary, we are more likely to think of abuse, degradation, violence, betrayal. We think of Lord Acton's famous quote, "Power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely."

And for good reason. Humanity has a very poor track record when it comes to power, which has not fared well in our hands. Rarely does it's use reflect the Divine image. In short, power is a problem. But power is not a dirty word. And the remedy for the dangers of power is not to try to eradicate power because, like it or not, we are powerful.

In our introduction we noted that the very first thing the Torah says about humanity is that we are made in the image of God. The second thing is that we are powerful:

God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. They shall rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth, and all the creeping things that creep on earth." (Gen. 1:26)

Power is one of the ways, perhaps the primary way, in which we are in the image of God. It is of our essence. To say that we don't want to be powerful is about as meaningful as saying that we don't want to take up any physical space. Inevitably our actions and inactions have an impact in the world, on each other. And I'm talking about everyone. Power manifests differently in each of us; in some it is obvious, in others more subtle. Some people are physically powerful, financially, politically or socially powerful. Some people are emotionally powerful, intellectually powerful, or morally powerful. But all of us are powerful in some way. Indeed, the moment someone loves or cares about us, we acquire the power to affect that person.

Now, it's obvious that many creatures -- even nature herself -- are powerful. How is our power unique, that we speak of it as reflecting the Divine image?

We are unique in that our power is coupled with self-awareness, including awareness -- or capacity for awareness -- of our own power. And that's the key. Power itself is neither positive nor negative, moral nor immoral. It is simply power, a force. Everything depends on how it's used. So, despite our ambivalence about power, we have two obligations with respect to our power. One, we are obligated to embrace and use the full extent our power, not abdicate it. At the same time, we are obligated to understand, control and manage our power, so that our exercise of it truly reflects the image of God.

Now, at no other time in history has the full force of human power -- for good and for ill -- been more apparent. Yet, most of us still have no idea how truly powerful we are. Adin Steinsaltz writes:

Man generally passes through the world aware that it is full of possible colors and meanings; and he tries to make his own connection with all its many possibilities. What he may be less aware of is the fact that there are worlds upon worlds, besides the one he knows, dependent on his actions. In Judaism man is conceived, in all the power of his body and soul, as the central agent, the chief actor on a cosmic stage; he functions, or performs, as a prime mover of worlds, being made in the image of the Creator. Everything he does constitutes an act of creation, both in his own life and in other worlds hidden from his sight. Every single particle of his body and every nuance of his thought and feeling are connected with forces of all kinds in the cosmos, forces without number; so that the more conscious he is of this order of things, the more significantly does he function as a Jewish person.⁸

Steinsaltz and his source, Rabbi Hayim of Volozhin,⁹ present us with an image of a constant flow of God's energy, light, or breath, enlivening and empowering all Creation. The concept here is that we parallel that flow of Divine energy -- our power, too, energizes worlds upon worlds. It is a remarkable idea, with particular resonance in the realm of halakhah and the

8. Adin Steinsaltz, *The 13 Petalled Rose*, pp. 154-55.

9. Rabbi Hayim of Volozhin *Nefesh HaHayim*, Chapter One, Sections 2-3:

It is . . . necessary to understand why it is said, "in the image of *Elohim*," rather than in the image of any other name of God. The reason is that the name *Elohim* denotes that God's Blessed Name is Master of all Powers. . . . Just as in the original creation of all worlds God created and originated them by the Divine Power *ex nihilo*, so, indeed, their power of existence and their structure at all times and at every instant, depend solely upon the influx of new light with which it will please God's Blessed Name to permeate them. And were God to remove the Powers of Divine influence even for one moment, they would vanish into void and nothingness. . . .

This explains why God is called the Master of all Powers. God is Master of every individual power which exists in the world. It is God who gives them their force and energy at all times, and they are always in the Divine hand to change and arrange as God wishes.

In a similar fashion Adonai created Man and gave humanity dominion over myriads of powers and over numberless Worlds. These were all transferred to human beings that we may conduct them through every detail of our movements, in deeds, words and thoughts. Our guidance of these powers may be either good, or (Heaven forbid), the opposite of good. For with our good deeds, words and thoughts we sustain and give energy to numerous Powers and Holy Celestial Worlds. . . . But on the other hand, by deeds, words or thoughts which not good (Heaven forbid!) we destroy countless and numberless powers and Holy Celestial Worlds . . .

This, then, is what is signified by the verse, "And *Elohim* created humanity in God's own image; in the image of *Elohim* God created the human" (Gen. 1:27). Just as God's Blessed Name is *Elohim*, which signifies that God is master of all Powers which exist in all the Worlds, and that God arranges them and lead them at every instant according to the Divine will; in the identical fashion God's Blessed Will gave humanity dominion to rule over myriads of Powers and Worlds through each of our specific acts and dealings, at every instant, according to the Celestial World in which that act, word, or thought is rooted, as though we were actually master of the energy of those Worlds.

observance of mitzvot. We won't go into it at length here, except to caution that before we simply ignore or abrogate Jewish law, we ought to take seriously this notion that our deeds may have an impact on worlds upon worlds of which we are completely unaware. We may not be able to discern, in our own lives, "meaning" from the observance of some particular aspect of halakhah. But perhaps the impact of that mitzvah -- *our* impact -- extends far beyond what we are able to see or understand.

But even apart from the mystical, cosmic realm of which Hayim of Volozhin and Steinsaltz speak, even in the world we do know, we are all too often unaware of the extent of our power, and in our ignorance, we wreck havoc, great and small.

The consequences of our ignorance or underestimation of our power are obvious on the global scale:

- genocide;
- the destruction of the habitability of the planet;
- war after war entered into under the delusion that the human response to aggression can be controlled;
- the blossoming into violence of hatred nurtured over generations.

On the personal level, too, how many times have we caused deep and lasting wounds -- with biting or insensitive words, an angry look, a dismissive gesture, impatience at just the wrong moment -- because we had no idea that we had that much power in another's eyes? How much untapped power do we possess to stand for something, to be a force for good? And how many opportunities are lost because we underestimate our power to influence other people for the good -- because we underestimate our power of persuasion, our ethical power as role models, our spiritual or charismatic power, our power to love and to heal?

So we need to take seriously just how powerful we are. And we need to clear up some common misconceptions about power.

Misconception number one: power gives us freedom. Actually, no. Power creates responsibility. The account of our creation in Genesis chapter 1 teaches that we are created to rule over -- that is, to have power. But the next chapter speaks of our creation quite differently. In chapter 2, the human being is created to guard and to protect -- that is, to be responsible. The two go hand in hand. The Talmud could not express it more directly: "One who acquires a slave acquires a master over himself" (Kiddushin 20a, 22a; Arahin 30b).

This is why simply abandoning power is not an acceptable solution to the problem of power, and why abdicating or squandering our power can be as great a sin as abusing it.

Because we have political power, we have a responsibility to use it. We have an obligation to advocate and to vote, and to use our votes to propound our noblest values, not to protect our narrow self-interest.

Because we have powerful intellects, we have a responsibility to educate ourselves -- both secularly and Jewishly. We have a responsibility to challenge and broaden our thinking, to apply our minds to new ways of uplifting the image of God in humanity

Because we have the power of speech, we have a responsibility to speak out when we see injustice, to use our words to heal and repair, to speak words of Torah.

Because we have the power to heal the human body, we have a responsibility to make sure that everyone has access to health care.

Economic power carries a responsibility of caring for the poor, technological power comes with the responsibility of bettering and not harming society. We have charismatic power, social power, sexual power, emotional power, spiritual power, creative power -- all of which come with concomitant responsibilities.

And there is another kind of power of which we rarely speak: ethical, moral power. Each and every one of us, potentially, has enormous ethical power. It derives from constancy in doing the right thing, in standing up for just causes. How many of us fulfill our responsibility to develop our ethical power to its fullest, and use it? And what has happened to the ethical, moral power that America once had?

The responsibility of power is particularly complicated in Israel, entering her 60th year of power as a state. It is complicated because Israel, it seems, must use physical power to survive. But that exigency doesn't excuse us from the responsibility of doing everything possible to prevent our own power from becoming abusive, and does not give us the right to ignore the abuses we see. Now, we may say that Israel is better than most or any other nation in the use of its power. I would agree. But before we congratulate ourselves, we would do well to remember that not all comparisons are ennobling. We are created to use our power to reflect the image of God; we are meant to compare ourselves to God, to the highest possible standard, not the lowest. So how significant is it that we are better than those whose use of power is at the level of the beast?

Misconception number two. There is a finite amount of power to go around; therefore, if I cede power to another, I will be less powerful. The Divine model of power -- absolute power -- is exactly the opposite. The first and greatest expression of God's power (i.e., creation), is a sharing of power, most notably with us:

God said, "Let us make a human in our image, after our likeness. They shall rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth, and all the creeping things that creep on earth."

Similarly, every Shabbat we pray the beautiful poem El Adon, which speaks of God's investing power in the great lights of the sun and moon: "power and might [God] placed in them" (כח וגבורה נתן בהם). Divine power entails empowerment: "power to," rather than "power over." Which means that the more we are locked into power struggles -- competing for power in a zero sum game -- the less powerful we actually are.

So as we begin, each of us, to take stock of the various kinds of power we have, we ought to ask how thoughtful we are in harnessing our power to empower others? Do we encourage the people we love to fulfill their potential, or would we be just as happy if they remained in some way dependent on us, so we can feel more powerful? Do we mentor others in our workplaces and fields of expertise? Do we welcome talented newcomers, or feel threatened by them? Do we share wisdom, teach what we know? Do we use our financial power not only to give to those who need, but to support initiatives which will help everyone become self-sufficient? Do we use our political power to ensure that every American can exercise voting power, or are we content to leave certain groups disenfranchised?

And this brings us to the third misconception: that is, that power always and necessarily involves an assertion of the self. Certainly, power *sometimes* requires the assertion of the self. No question. But not always.

We have spoken of creation as the first expression of Divine power. The exercise of that power began with *tzimtzum*, a withdrawal of the Divine into Itself to create space, a vacuum, room for an other. Only then was there the second phase, emanation: the assertion and outpouring of the Divine will and energy.

And *tzimtzum*, restraint, is in fact the hallmark of God's power. As Avivah Zornberg says, "The Talmud traces biblical passages where God's power is juxtaposed to His forbearance." God demands of us humility "as another face of greatness," because it is this commingling of power and forbearance, greatness and humility, "the godlike play of the lion and the lamb in one face," that is the "genetic marker" of the image of God.¹⁰

In other words, if human power is to be truly in the Divine image, it must always be commingled with restraint.

Jewish ritual observance is constant training in this. I have the power to consume anything I want; but to emulate God I refrain from eating certain things. Kashrut. There is no necessary limit on the exercise of my power in having an impact on the world around me. Once a week I emulate God's restraint and I too hold back, rest, and appreciate rather than influence. Shabbat. Jewish ethical law is similarly filled with ethical injunctions to restrain our power vis-a-vis the most vulnerable members of society, the strangers, orphans, debtors. Just when we have the power to exploit, we are commanded to forbear.

So, how *do* we respond to vulnerability? Do we exploit vulnerability or protect it? And we are speaking here of all kinds of vulnerability, not only the physical or financial vulnerability embodied in the Torah's categories.

Do I nurture those who are emotionally vulnerable, or take advantage of them? Am I compassionate and protective, or repulsed and contemptuous, when I see neediness? Does seeing weakness in others frighten me? When someone is in the wrong, vulnerable to embarrassment and shame, or when I hold the moral ground, do I milk it for everything it's worth, stand on every last inch of my rights, or do I allow the other person to save face and salvage dignity? Do I use my talents and intellectual power to seize as much as I can for myself, exploiting every possible advantage and opportunity, or do I hold back and leave space for someone else to prosper or shine? When I have the upper hand in an argument or debate -- do I go in for the kill or let it go?

Indeed, our sages teach (Pirkei Avot 4:1) that the greatest expression of power is a form of restraint -- not the assertion of the self, but the exertion of power over the self:

10. Avivah Zornberg, *The Particulars of Rapture*, p. 362:

The Talmud traces biblical passages where God's power is juxtaposed to His forbearance. More accurately, *invetanuth* [humility] emerges as God's association with the depressed members of society, the widow, the orphan, the demoralized. . . . in requiring a humility that is another face of greatness, God looks . . . for a genetic marker of the *tzelem elokim* (the image of God), the godlike play of the lion and the lamb in one face.

בן זומא אומר, איזהו חכם, הלומד מכל אדם... איזהו גבור, הכובש את יצרו... איזהו עשיר השמים
בְּחֶלְקוֹ... איזהו מְכַבֵּד, המְכַבֵּד אֶת הַבְּרִיּוֹת... .

Ben Zoma said, "Who is wise? One who learns from all people... Who is powerful? One who conquers his inner drives... Who is wealthy? One who is content with what he has... Who is honored? One who honors all creatures... .

I can't resist sharing another, more contemporary version of this teaching:

Ben Franklin said: Who is wise? He that learns from every One.
Who is powerful? He that governs his Passions.
Who is rich? He that is content.
Who is that? Nobody.

Okay, maybe it's not so easy. But in truth we abdicate power over ourselves all the time:

- when we succumb to our desires and temptations against our better judgment;
- when we fail to control our impulses;
- when we act unconsciously;
- when when we waste our time and talents for lack of discipline;
- when we give up trying to change aspects of ourselves we would like to change;
- when we lash out in anger, when we allow envy to poison a relationship, when we permit ourselves to be paralyzed by fear.

Now, to come back to the passage by Avivah Zornberg, we can look also at her source, a passage from the Talmud:¹¹ "Rabbi Yoḥanan said: Wherever you find the power (*gevurah*) of the Holy Blessed One, you find God's humility (*invatnut*)," which humility, Zornberg notes, "emerges as God's association with the depressed members of society, the widow, the orphan, the demoralized."

So it should be with us. Wherever we find our own power, of any kind, we should find our association with the weak, vulnerable, disadvantaged, marginalized.

11. Megillah 31a:

אמר רבי יוחנן: כל מקום שאתה מוצא גבורתו של הקדוש ברוך הוא אתה מוצא ענוותנותו דבר זה
כתוב בתורה ושנוי בנביאים ומשולש בכתובים. כתוב בתורה כי ה' אלהיכם הוא אלהי האלהים
ואדני האדנים, וכתוב בתריה עשה משפט יתום ואלמנה. שנוי בנביאים כה אמר רם ונשא שכן עד
וקדוש וגו', וכתוב בתריה ואת דכא ושפל רוח. משולש בכתובים דכתיב סלו לרכב בערבות ביה
שמו, וכתוב בתריה אבי יתומים ודין אלמנות.

Rabbi Yoḥanan said: Wherever you find the power (*gevurah*) of the Holy Blessed One, you find God's humility (*invatnut*). This is stated in the Torah, repeated in the Prophets, and stated a third time in the Writings. It is written in the Torah, "For Adonai your God is the God of gods and Lord of lords" (Deut. 10:7), and it says immediately afterwards, "Who exacts justice for the orphan and widow." It is repeated in the Prophets: "Thus says the High and Lofty One, Who inhabits eternity and Whose name is holy" (Isa. 57:15), and it says immediately afterwards, "[I dwell] with one who is of a contrite and humble spirit." It is stated a third time in the Writings, as it is written: "Extol the One Who rides upon the skies, Whose name is Adonai" (Psalm 68:5), and immediately afterwards it is written, "Father of orphans and advocate of widows."

Now, this is hard, because it reminds us of our own vulnerability. In fact, nowhere do we feel least powerful than when we are confronting the depths of human pain, and we feel we can do nothing about it. So we want to turn away, forgetting that one of our greatest forms of power -- very much like God's -- is simply presence. What is more powerful than our attention and focus? And when we turn away, we abdicate that power. and in doing so close off the possibility of discovering that perhaps there is more we can do -- perhaps we are more powerful than we thought.

To come back to where we began, Lord Acton may have been an accurate observer , but his cynicism is profoundly counter to what the Torah teaches. Power does *tend* to corrupt -- but it needn't. We have power over our power -- it is up to us to use it well. Abraham Lincoln is closer: "Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character, give him power." So God did. We have witnessed all too often the power of humanity wearing the mask of the demon. When will we reclaim our power, so that it can begin to resemble the face of God?

4. DEEDS

Rabbi Moshe Cordovero, in his *Tomer Devorah* (Chapter One), says as follows:

It is proper for a person to emulate his Creator, for then he will attain the secret of the Supernal Form in both image (*tzelem*) and likeness (*demut*). For if a person's physical form reflects the Supernal Form, yet his actions do not, he falsifies his stature. People will say of him, "A handsome form whose deeds are ugly." For the essential aspect of the Supernal "Form" and "Likeness" is that they are deeds of the Holy Blessed One. Therefore, what good is it for a person to reflect the Supernal Form in physical form only if his deeds do not imitate those of his Creator?

We have been speaking on these *Yamim Noraim* of the Torah's claim that humanity is made in the image and likeness of God. *B'tzelem Elohim*. It is a magnificent, far-reaching, and inspiring statement. Perhaps even seductively so. Because *b'tzelem Elohim* is so easy to say, and so difficult to live. On the one hand, it is the grounding of our belief in the inherent dignity and worth of every human being. On the other hand, there is a risk of it becoming as Heschel said, "like the weather -- everybody talks about it, and nobody does anything about it."

It is so lovely and inspiring to think of the image of God as an integral, essential aspect of humanity, that it's tempting to stop there, and to forget that *b'tzelem Elohim* is also an aspirational goal, a challenge. It is intended to transform not only our consciousness, but also our behavior.

Heschel says:¹²

The Bible speaks of man as having been created in the likeness of God, establishing the principle of *an analogy of being*. In his very being, man has something in common with God. Beyond the analogy of being, the Bible teaches the principle of *an analogy in acts*. [or as Heschel says further down, *an analogy of doing*] Man may act in the likeness of God. It is this likeness of acts -- "to walk in His ways" -- that is the link by which man may come close to God. To live in such likeness is the essence of imitation of the Divine.

To walk in God's ways -- this is the classic rabbinic interpretation of the Torah's claim that humanity is *b'tzelem Elohim*.

The Torah is filled with prohibitions on creating any kind of image or likeness of God.¹³ Why, then, did God create human beings in the image of God, seemingly violating God's own rules? The Bible prohibits the creation of anything that would be a *mere* image, or a *mere* symbol -- an unresponsive, inactive representation. For example, we see in Psalm 115:4-7:

עֲצֵבֵיהֶם כֶּסֶף וְזָהָב מַעֲשֵׂה יְדֵי אָדָם: פֶּה־לָהֶם וְלֹא יִדְבְּרוּ עֵינֵיהֶם לֶהֱמוֹת וְלֹא יִרְאוּ: אֲזָנֵיהֶם לֶהֱמוֹת וְלֹא יִשְׁמְעוּ אֵף לֶהֱמוֹת וְלֹא יִרְחוּ: יְדֵיהֶם וְלֹא יַמְשִׁיחוּ וְרַגְלֵיהֶם וְלֹא יִהְיוּ לֹא־יִהְיוּ בְּגִרְוֹתָם:

Their idols are silver and gold, the work of men's hands. They have mouths, but

12. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Between God and Man*, pp. 85, 237

13. See e.g., Exod. 20:4; Num. 33:52; Deut. 5:8; I Sam 6:5, 6, 11; II Kings 11:18; Ezek 7:20, 16:17, 23:14; II Chron. 23:17. The Torah also repeatedly says that there is no-one and nothing like God. See e.g., Isaiah 40:18, 46:5; Psalms 89:7.

they cannot speak; they have eyes, but they can not see; they have ears, but they cannot hear; they have noses, but they can not smell; they have hands, but they cannot feel; they have feet, but they can not walk; and through their throats make no sound.

We, on the other hand, have mouths that speak and feet that walk; we can act and feel, move and be moved. Only humanity has the potential to be in the image of God without violating the prohibition on idolatry, precisely because a human being is not merely a symbol but also an agent.

The kabbalistic tree (see footnote 4, *supra*) presents an image of the human body as the pattern for the way Divine energy is experienced in the created world. On the first day of Rosh Hashanah we focused on the first three *sefirot* -- corresponding to the head -- and we spoke about the human capacity for self-awareness and self-reflection as being in the image of God. On the second day of Rosh Hashanah we focused on the left arm (*gevurah*) and spoke of power as one of the ways in which we are *b'tzelem Elohim*. Tonight we move to the right arm: *hesed*, compassion, love.

Now if you think about it, it's a little strange. If the human body reflects the pattern through which the Divine energy flows into creation, wouldn't we think that love would be the torso, where the heart is located? We generally associate the head with wisdom, and the heart with love and compassion. But no. *Hesed*, love, is symbolized by the right arm, precisely because the mystics understood love not as a feeling, but as an action. To be loving, the heart is not enough, we need the hand.

Now Heschel speaks of *b'tzelem Elohim* as an analogy of being, and an analogy of doing. Most of us are better at one or the other. Some of us have a hard time just being, so we make sure we're always busy doing. Others of us are so focused on developing who we *are*, that we don't actually *do* all that much. We are, of course, called to emulate God in both respects -- being and doing -- and to work at whichever comes less naturally

The juxtaposition of two similar but different midrashim highlights this point. In Sifrei Deuteronomy (Ekev, Piska 13) we find the following:

ללכת בכל דרכיו. אלו דרכי הקב"ה שנ' (שמות לד) ה' ה' אל רחום וחנוך ארץ אפים ורב חסד ואמת נוצר חסד לאלפיל נושא עון ופשע וחטאה ונקמה. . . . אלא מה המקום נקרא רחום וחנוך אף אתה הוי רחום וחנוך ועשה מתנת חנם לכל. מה הקב"ה נקרא צדיק שנ' (תהלים קמה) צדיק ה' בכל דרכיו וחסיד בכל מעשיו אף אתה הוי צדיק. הקב"ה נקרא חסיד . . . אף אתה הוי חסיד
"To walk in all God's ways" (Deut. 11:22). These are the ways of the Holy One: "compassionate and gracious, patient, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, assuring love for a thousand generations, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin, and granting pardon" (Exod. 34:6). This means that just as God is compassionate and gracious, you too must be compassionate and gracious. "Adonai is just in all God's ways and loving in all God's deeds" (Psalm 145:7). As the Holy One is just, you too must be just. As the Holy One is loving, you too must be loving.

There is a similar text In the Talmud (Sotah 14a):

ואמר רבי חמא ברבי חנינא, מאי דכתיב: (דברים יג) אחרי ה' אלהיכם תלכו? וכי אפשר לו לאדם להלך אחר שכינה? . . . אלא להלך אחר מדותיו של הקב"ה, מה הוא מלביש ערומים, דכתיב:

(בראשית ג) ויעש ה' אלהים לאדם ולאשתו כתנות עור וילבישם, אף אתה הלבש ערומים הקב"ה ביקר חולים, דכתיב: (בראשית יח) וירא אליו ה' באלוני ממרא, אף אתה בקר חולים הקב"ה ניחם אבלים, דכתיב: (בראשית כה) ויהי אחרי מות אברהם ויברך אלהים את יצחק בנו, אף אתה נחם אבלים הקב"ה קבר מתים, דכתיב: (דברים לד) ויקבר אותו בגיא, אף אתה קבור מתים.

Rabbi Hama son of Rabbi Haninah said: What does this verse mean, "You shall walk after Adonai your God" (Deut. 13:5)? Is it possible for a mortal to follow God's Presence? But the meaning is to follow the attributes of the Holy Blessed One. As God clothes the naked (it is written: "Adonai God made for Adam and his wife coats of skin, and clothed them"), so you also clothe the naked. As the Holy Blessed One visited the sick (it is written: "Adonai appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre") so you also visit the sick. The Holy Blessed One comforted mourners (it is written: "It came to pass after the death of Abraham, that God blessed Isaac his son"), so you also comfort mourners. As he Holy Blessed One buried the dead (it is written: [God] buried him in the valley") so you also bury the dead.

Although similar, these texts differ in a very significant way. The first midrash speaks of emulating God's *ways* (דרכי הקב"ה), and then lists specific *attributes* by which we might do so: compassionate, gracious, patient, kind and faithful, etc. The second text speaks of emulating God's *attributes* (מדותיו), but then lists specific *behaviors* in which we should engage: clothing the naked, visiting the sick, comforting mourners, attending to the dead. We would expect the opposite. If we are meant to follow God's "ways," we would expect to see examples of such "ways" -- that is, specific deeds. And when we are told to emulate, God's "attributes," we would expect to see a list of those attributes (i.e., qualities). But in each text, we find the reverse, and I suggest that the juxtaposition of ways and qualities, attributes and deeds, teaches us something very profound. What is really at stake in the *b'tzelem Elohim* claim is that we integrate the two -- attributes and deeds. Who we claim to *be* -- our qualities -- must be expressed in action. And vice versa -- we must act in such a way to cultivate God-like qualities. The learning happens in both directions. Sometimes we need to work on who we are, to develop our inherent qualities, and that leads to a change in our behavior. Other times we need to do, to act, and that helps us change who we are.

Tonight I want to focus more on the doing side: deeds both large and small, social action on the grand scale, small acts of kindness and care in our individual lives. And I have to say that one of the great privileges of being a rabbi -- and especially a rabbi in a community such as this -- is that I know what people in this congregation do. It's a community of people who do amazing things. And I daresay that even as I speak, almost everyone in the room is thinking of other people and what *they* do. But I'm talking about you. This room is filled with people who:

- work on political campaigns
- stop by spontaneously to visit someone in the hospital
- are committed to grass-roots causes here and in Israel
- show up at shiva minyanim no matter how busy they are
- pick each other up at airports and drive each other to doctors
- raise money for amazing causes
- remember to call on birthdays
- travel to Israel just to show support
- raise their children with strong values
- volunteer at shelters and food programs
- offer their gifts as healers

The list could go on and on. We do a lot, and it inspires and humbles me. Much of my prayer, at its best, comes of my awareness of the extraordinary and magnificently ordinary actions of people in this community. So I say this not as a rebuke, but to raise our awareness of what we do do, and also to focus us on the potential we have to do more

We are often described as *am k'sheh oref*, a stiff-necked people. We might characterize that stiff-neckedness as a difficulty in the connection between the head and the heart. In fact, there is a ḥasidic teaching that Rosh Hashanah is the head of the year, while Yom Kippur is the heart of the year. And as we know, the journey from the head to the heart can sometimes be the longest and most difficult journey there is. But the neck is also the connection between the head and the rest of the body. In this sense, *am k'she oref* speaks to the difficulty of translating thoughts and feelings into action.

Sometimes the difficulty lies in that there's too much to do -- too many problems to fix, too many demands on our time and energy; we don't know where to begin, so we do nothing. Sometimes it seems to us there's nothing we can do; we watch, feeling helpless. Sometimes the problem is that we don't know what to do, both in a given situation, and generally in our lives.

Other times, we have trouble with follow-through; we know what to do, we want to do it, we mean to do it -- and somehow, we just don't. Most of us (I dare say all of us) have a list in our heads of good things we thought to do or meant to do and never did: writing that note or making that phone call, cleaning out and giving away the things we never use to people who really need them, making changes in our homes to be more environmentally responsible, volunteering, reaching out to that person we know is lonely. We all have our own lists.

And sometimes we know what to do, and we just don't want to do it. Because it's too hard, or too scary, or too demanding -- because it makes us feel anxious or vulnerable.

"What do you do?"

When we ask this question, mostly we mean, "what do you do for a living?" We need to refocus the question. "What do you do for a living?" isn't nearly as important as, "What do you do in the service of life?"

What do you do? How do you enact your values and ideals? How much of your time is spent doing things, large and small, that make a difference, large or small? And how much of your time is spent doing things that you yourself would say are unimportant? Which is, of course, related to one of the key questions that the Yamim Noraim raise for us: How do I spend this precious time I've been granted?

What do you *do*? What do *you* do?

We have been speaking of being created in the image of God. We are all made in God's image. At the same time, each of us reflects a different face of the Divine, and therefore, each of us is called to emulate God -- to walk in God's ways -- differently. Each of us has, so to speak, our own assignment. Adin Steinsaltz writes:¹⁴

Divine service in the world is divided up, with each human being, like the primordial Adam, put in charge of a certain portion of God's garden, put in charge

14. Adin Steinsaltz, *The Thirteen-Petalled Rose*, pp. 102-13.

of a certain portion of God's garden, to work it and keep it. It is said that in the Torah there are seventy faces which are the seventy faces of the divine Shekhinah, and that these contain six hundred thousand faces in accordance with the number of primary souls of Israel, so that every individual soul has a certain part in the Torah. In other words, each soul understands and does things in a way not suitable for another soul. Everyone can and should learn from others the proper way of doing things, but in the end each person has to follow his own winding path to the goal that is his heart's desire. Some lives have an emotional emphasis; others, an intellectual; for some the way of joy is natural; for others existence is full of effort and struggle; there are people for whom purity of heart is the most difficult thing in the world, while for others it is given as a gift from birth. What is more, not only is there no equality among people, there is even no consistency within the life of a single person. . . .

Each and every person's unique combination of strengths and weaknesses, natural inclinations, and particular struggles is an expression of the Divine. So when we think about what we can do, we shouldn't worry too much about what we can't do, or be demoralized because we don't have someone else's role. It's not for us to judge whose assignment is "better." It *is* for us to figure out what our own assignment is and do it, as best as we can, because there are deeds that are uniquely ours to accomplish in this world. No one else can do what we can do. And *b'tzelem Elohim*, the image of God, is found in the full expression of the being and doing of each and every person -- each one of us, doing as much as we can with what we've been given.

Now, my saying that each of us has our own path isn't meant as an excuse to take the easy path. It's good to do the things that come easily and naturally (why not?), but not *only* the things that come easily and naturally. We are also called to rise to action when it's hard, to do the things that make us uncomfortable, those things which not only make a difference out there, but also help us grow. To be clear, I'm not talking about the things that are impossible for us, things that are someone else's task. I'm talking about the things that are possible, but difficult.

As God is compassionate, you be compassionate. Not only with the pleasant, lovely people, who it feels so good to give to and include, but with the people who are difficult, who are hard to be around, who don't make us feel good when we help.

As God is *erekh apayim* (patient and long-suffering), you too be patient and long-suffering. Even with the people who don't seem to be trying, even when you're really in a hurry and someone is maddeningly slow, even with the people who constantly make you crazy.

God bears sin, and forgives -- you too bear offenses, and forgive. Not only when it's no big deal and it's easy -- when it *is* a big deal, and it's hard

Which particular things we find hard to do, and in what contexts, will be different for each of us, and different at different times. Sometimes we are blessed with opportunities to rise to the occasion, with a moment in which we can do something very particular and with obvious significance. Most of the time it's not so dramatic. Most of the time, fulfilling our mission simply means doing the right things, in all of life's little details, each time the opportunity comes up, whether we want to or not.

And it also involves checking in with ourselves regularly in our overarching life choices, because, as Steinsaltz says, "there is even no consistency within the life of a single person." What do you do? What we did then may not be the right thing for us to be doing now, and what

is right for us to do now may not be right later. The key is to keep asking, and adjusting accordingly.

Ultimately, that is the function of *halakhah*. I know many of us are ambivalent, at best, about halakhah. We most frequently define *halakhah* as Jewish “law,” and that is of course what it has come to mean. But the word itself doesn’t actually have anything to do with “law;” the word *halakhah* means “path.” How do we live in the image of God? We walk in God’s ways. As we saw in the text from the Talmud, “walk (להלך) after the attributes of the Holy Blessed One” -- *l’halekh*, “to walk,” the same root as *halakhah*. The *halakhah* is a path to teach us how to walk in the ways of God. It provides the vessels for our noblest thoughts and feelings, so that we can make them concrete.

Nor does it demand blind, uniform submission. The *halakhah* was never intended to homogenize all the individual paths, but rather to provide a framework and unifying function, so each of us can pursue our own path in the context of community -- it keeps us going in the same direction, and gives us a common language so that we can communicate along the way. It doesn’t supplant the individual journey, it structures, guides, and shapes it.

And really, *halakhah* is the natural extension of the fact of our being created *b’tzelem Elohim*. It emerges as the result of the Divine image in human beings expressing itself in normative deeds; it is the expression of the collective effort to figure out how to embody those thirteen attributes, and more. And so, in a very real sense, we ourselves do create the *halakhah*, together with God.

And we need it. It would be lovely if we could count on ourselves to emulate God at all times. The reality is, we can’t. Last week we looked at a passage from the Zohar: “By the word ‘likeness’ we are to understand a kind of mirror in which images appear momentarily and then pass away.” We spoke of the idea that “likeness” here is intended to suggest a mirror for us, an opportunity for self-awareness. But of course, *b’tzelem Elohim* means not only that God mirrors us, but that we are supposed to mirror God. And here, too, the mirror isn’t consistent -- the image comes and goes. Not everything we do reflects God. We would like to see God in every human face at all times; the reality is that sometimes we see hate, evil, violence. We have moments when we reflect the image of God, and then the image fades. And so we need a system of sanctification, of patterning our time and our deeds after God’s ways -- a training system, so that we become better at knowing what to do. And we need the language of *mitzvah*, commandment -- as opposed to speaking merely of good deeds and ethics -- as a reminder that our actions are *meant* to mirror God, that our actions have an impact on God.

We’ll end where we began, with Rabbi Moshe Cordovero. “The essential aspect of the Supernal ‘Form’ and ‘Likeness’ is that they are deeds of the Holy Blessed One. Therefore, what good is it for a person” -- and we may add here, what good is it for *us* -- “to reflect the Supernal Form in physical form only, if our deeds do not imitate those of our Creator?”

5. RELATIONSHIP: UNITY AND INDIVIDUATION

We begin this morning with a passage by the French philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas:¹⁵

Th[e] responsibility for others comes to be for man the meaning of his own self-identity. His self (*son moi*) is not originally *for itself* (*pour soi*); 'through the will of God' it is 'for others'. In this way man becomes, in turn, the *soul* of the world, as if God's creative word had been entrusted to him to dispose of as he liked, to let it ring out, or to interrupt it. This is the ultimate meaning of Genesis 1:27 which affirms that humanity was conceived "in the image of God"; . . .

That the all-powerful Divinity, wishing to create and to secure the being of beings or worlds by his association with them, should depend on man's submission to the Torah demonstrates not only God's humility, alongside -- or perhaps contributing to -- his greatness. It also articulates, quite radically, the inability of being (*etre*) *qua* pure being to provide beings (*etants*) with an adequate *raison d'etre*. Onto-logy -- that is the intelligibility of being -- only becomes possible when ethics, the origin of all meaning, is taken as the starting point. . . .

Levinas' prose is dense, but I believe the meaning is essentially this. For Levinas, the central implication of our being created in God's image is relationship.¹⁶ In creating us, God entered into relationship with us, and specifically, a relationship in which God is both responsible for us, and as it were dependent on us. And because we are created in that image (*b'tzelem Elohim*), relationship, interdependence, and mutual responsibility are demanded of us too. Most specifically, to say that we are created in God's image means that we are obligated to be in relationship to God and God's Torah, and to God's creation, meaning the world and each other.

Paranetically, please understand that I'm not suggesting that there is one particular form that relationship must take. Levinas is not speaking narrowly about any particular model of family, or even necessarily family at all. He is speaking in the broadest sense of commitment and responsibility outside one's self. He speaks of relationship and responsibility on both the horizontal plane (human-human) and the vertical plane (human-God, human-earth).

Now paradoxically, at the same time that being created *b'tzelem Elohim* means that we are created to be in relationship (that the self alone cannot really be said to reflect the image of God), nevertheless the fact of being created *b'tzelem Elohim*, demands that we do have a self:

Tzelem (image) refers to the personal relationship that can only be found between "persons". The personality of man is placed vis-a-vis the personality of God. For there is a religious approach (not Jewish) that sees the religious ideal in the effacement of man's personality. Man's personality is regarded (according to this approach) as a barrier between him and things . . . but this is not the case with an ethical religion. Only as long as man is a person can he preserve his

15. Emmanuel Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, pp. 230-231.

16. In the Kabbalistic tree which we have been tracking throughout these *Yamim Noraim*, we move now to *Tiferet*, associated with the human torso. *Tiferet* is about integration -- balance, harmony, truth. It also means beauty, and compassion. *Tiferet* represents the connection of all the *sefirot* -- left and right, above and below -- and *Tiferet* is all about relationship.

relationship with God. Man is a world of his own and is not required to merge himself in nature.¹⁷

Soloveitchik makes a similar point:¹⁸

The veracity of any witness is based on the fact that he was created in God's image, which in turn is reflected in the *kavod habriyot* due him through his *shelihut*. If a person lacks self-respect, he has relinquished the basis for *kavod*, and has therefore lost the element of believability as a witness.

To be in the image of God means that we do have a self, a person, a separate entity. At the same time, paradoxically, to be a self, a person -- to be fully human according to the Divine image -- also requires engagement with an "other."

Actually, it's even more complicated than that. *B'tzelem Elohim* means that we are created to be an "other" (an independent self with whom God can be in relationship) *and* it means that we are one with and part of the Divine:

The human soul, from its lowest to its highest levels, is a unique and single entity, even though it is many-faceted. In its profoundest being, the soul of man is a part of the Divine and, in this respect, is a manifestation of God in the world. To be sure, the world as a whole may be viewed as a divine manifestation, but the world remains as something else than God, while the soul of man, in its depths, may be considered to be a part of God.¹⁹

According to Professor Yair Lorberbaum of Bar Ilan University, the Torah's claim that we are *b'tzelem Elohim* means we are actually manifestations of, extensions of, the Divine in this world. We are both separate from and part of God, as expressed in two classical midrashim:

אמר רבי מאיר: בשעה שאדם מצטער שכינה מה לשון אומרת: קלני מראשי, קלני מזרועי?
Rabbi Meir said: When a person suffers, what expression does the Shekhinah use? — My head is too heavy for Me, My arm is too heavy for Me.²⁰

תמתי . . . ר' יהושע דסכנין בשם ר' לוי תאומתי מה התאומים הללו אם חושש אחד מהן בראשו
חבירו מרגיש כך כביכול אמר הקדוש ב"ה (תהלים צ"א) עמו אנכי בצרה
"My pure one (*tamati*) (Song of Songs 5:2)". . . Rabbi Yehoshua of Sikhnin said in the name of Rabbi Levi: It means, My twin (*te'umati*). Just as, if one twin has a pain in his head, the other feels it also, so too the Holy Blessed One said, as it were, "I will be with him in trouble" (Psalm. 91:15).²¹

These texts speak not only of empathy, but of something beyond empathy. When we hurt, God hurts; there is a sharing of pain because we are of a piece. The human body is modelled on this pattern -- all the cells, limbs, joints, bones are separate, and at the same time all of a single piece. When one part of the body is ill, or hurts, the whole body suffers. And it is precisely in

17. Prof. Guttman, *Dat Umadda* (Religion and Science), p. 265, quoted in Nechama Leibowitz, *New Studies in Bereshit*, p. 2.

18. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Derashot HaRav*, p. 64.

19. Adin Steinsaltz, *The Thirteen Petalled Rose*, pp. 51-52.

20. Sanhedrin 46a.

21. Shir HaShirim Rabbah 5:3.

this dialectic -- in this dance of being one with and separate from -- that we human beings most accurately reflect the Divine image.

In fact, this pattern of God's creation of us as separate from and part of (as expressed in Genesis chapter 1) is then replicated within humanity itself (as expressed in Genesis chapter 2). According to the second narrative, the first human being is created alone and unique in the world, but this is somehow "not good":

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֱלֹהִים לֹא־טוֹב הָיִיתָ הָאָדָם לְבַדּוֹ אֶעֱשֶׂה־לוֹ עֵזֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ:

Adonai Elohim said, "It is not good for the human to be alone. I will make for him a corresponding other." (Genesis 2:18)

God therefore brings before Adam all the other created beings as possible mates, but none is adequate, *because none comes from the Adam itself*. Eventually, God creates Eve *from* Adam. The model is thus an other who is also part of ourselves -- "this one at last is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh" -- exactly the pattern of God creating Adam from the start.

The implication is that Adam's statement that Eve is "bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh" is far more than a sweet romantic statement. It expresses an existential truth with profound ethical implications. We are, of course, called to relate to another human face as being, like ourselves, in the image of God. But not only that: whenever I see a human face I am meant to see both another, and a part of myself. We are created to live in this tension between connection and separation -- which demands not merger, but ongoing responsible relationship.

Now, mostly we have been speaking about *b'tzelem Elohim* from the perspective that each human being is in God's image. And that is true. But perhaps it's more accurate to think of humanity as a whole as being in God's image. No single human, but Humanity is in the image of God. Samson Raphael Hirsch (Gen. 5:1-2) puts it thus:

[A]ll the manifold marked differences in human beings are naught but the natural development of the fact that God made Man in His own likeness. . . . The whole history of mankind, with its lowest depths and loftiest heights, which shows human beings in the most varied happenings, forms one whole. One thought, one idea lives and is realized in them; in spite of their striking contrast they are all nothing but the developments of Adam having been created in the likeness of God. . . . So ALL men are human beings, the *tzelem Elohim* is never completely lost, that is the first Truth which stands at the head of the history of Man.

In this reading, the "image of God" refers to the totality of humanity, and each individual, each one of us, reveals but a partial image of God. And this image, partial and limited as it is, is therefore flawed -- it is both "true" and "untrue." We can analogize to a mosaic, in which each person is a tile. The tiles in a mosaic reflect an image -- each tile in a sense also reflects that image and is essential to the whole, but no tile standing alone conveys the true picture.

Perhaps this approach can help us understand the role of negative traits in us and others, and even the presence of evil and hate. Is this too in the image of God? One way to imagine it is as an aspect of God that has been ripped from context, out of balance -- like a cell no longer in balance with the totality of the body and thereby cancerous. It is only in relationship to the whole that we find the proper balance -- that our individual tile fits into the beauty of the mosaic, instead of destroying the picture. In a sense, psychology and behavioral science has come in recent years (through the development of systems theory) to understand what the Jewish

tradition understood from the beginning of Bereshit: we are created interconnected, part of a whole.

Now to come back to where we began, Levinas frames the human need for interconnectedness, interdependence, and relationship not in terms of existential necessity (we do have a choice), but in terms of *meaning*.

Meaning. We are all searching for meaning. We need meaning. It is meaning that deepens joy and makes suffering bearable. It is meaning that gives us the energy to work hard, to make sacrifices, to postpone pleasure. Just to keep going. And so we search for meaning. We search in self-help books, and (I hope) in synagogues. We change jobs, we move. We search for self-fulfillment, self-actualization. Then Levinas comes and says there is only one path to meaning, and we learn it from the fact of our being created in the image of God: "Th[e] responsibility for others comes to be for man the meaning of his own self-identity." Meaning for us is found only in responsible relationship.

"Being as pure being," Levinas says, "is unable to provide beings with an adequate reason to be." Only ethics -- the responsibility to another -- makes life meaningful.

There has been a lot of discussion lately in the Conservative movement about a term made popular by Arnie Eisen, the new chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary. In his book "The Jew Within," Arnie speaks of the "sovereign self," pointing to the fact that the modern Western consciousness is organized around the idea of autonomy, regarding which we are very protective. According to Eisen, the idea of the sovereign self is based on a false dichotomy: either we are free, adult, autonomous, or we are obedient, childlike, commanded.

He is, of course, right; it is a false dichotomy. One is not *either* autonomous *or* subservient. If we're thoughtful and honest about our own experience, we know that we function in a relatively autonomous mode in some aspects of our lives, and that in other areas we are responsive to claims and demands made on us by something or someone external.

But more basically, we see now that the pure self-directed autonomous individual is a myth. Such a person doesn't exist, and certainly such a person doesn't exist *meaningfully*. We are created in relationship to be in relationship, to be responsible for and to others -- other people, our world as a whole, and God. We can deny it -- we can spend our days completely self-absorbed on a quest for self-fulfillment, self-aggrandizement, self-actualization, self-direction, self-sovereignty. But if we do, what we are likely to find is only emptiness, meaninglessness:

[M]an as alone and autonomous is "not good," because he would live a static, unchanging, and unwilled life. Man needs to live face-to-face with the Other, dancing to the choreography of his own freedom.²²

What does all this mean for us today?

First, we can now better understand why and how being created *b'tzelem Elohim* demands a universalist consciousness. Anything short of a universalist consciousness -- a sense of concern and responsibility for humanity as a whole -- is a distortion of the image of God. So whenever we move into a particularist mode (and sometimes that's appropriate and necessary),

22. Avivah Zornberg, *Bereshit -- The Beginning of Desire*, p. 15.

whenever we build walls (and sometimes we do need to build them), we need to remember that these are temporary measures -- ways in which the created world distorts rather than reflects the image of God. Here again we can analogize to the human body. Sometimes, in order to understand or heal the body we need to focus on individual organs and cells. At the same time, a good physician never treats just an organ, or just a collection of cells, because a good physician understands that the organ is part of a larger whole, and she treats the whole person. So yes, sometimes we Jews have to focus on Jews -- at times we have to be concerned for our own safety, protection, health and survival. But never as an end in itself. Let's come back to Levinas' statement:

Th[e] responsibility for others comes to be for man the meaning of his own self-identity. His self (*son moi*) is not originally *for itself (pour soi)*; 'through the will of God' it is 'for others'. In this way man becomes, in turn, the *soul* of the world.

But now let's substitute "the Jewish people" for man:

Th[e] responsibility for others comes to be for the Jewish people the meaning of its own self-identity. Its self (*son moi*) is not originally *for itself (pour soi)*; 'through the will of God' it is 'for others'. In this way the Jewish people becomes, in turn, the *soul* of the world.

Second, we learn that reciprocity is of our essence. No one is meant to be self-sufficient -- it's not how we're created. We are built not for independence but interdependence. That means it is holy to receive as well as to give. Thinking systemically, in order for humanity to truly reflect the image of God, we all need to give what we have; correspondingly, we all have to receive what we need. One of my favorite blessings is the one we say after eating a snack, when *Birkat HaMazon* isn't applicable. We bless God as *borei n'fashot rabot v'hesronan* -- Creator of many different kinds of beings and their needs. The plain meaning is that God created the wherewithal to meet our needs; but we can read the blessing also as suggesting that God created the needs themselves. Needs in this sense are holy, precisely because they bring us into relationship with others. To come back to Levinas:

That the all-powerful Divinity, wishing to create and to secure the being of beings or worlds by his association with them, should depend on man's submission to the Torah demonstrates not only God's humility, alongside -- or perhaps contributing to -- his greatness.

In creating us, God, as it were, entered into a relationship of dependence on us; by implication, needs too are in the image of God

Third, *teshuvah* (repentance, return) has to be done systemically: with others, with the community as a whole, and one on one. This is why a person who separates from the community and doesn't participate in the communal process does not receive full atonement. Such a person is missing one of the fundamental elements of *teshuvah*, as understood in its deepest sense: the return to being the unique person each of us was meant to be. The return to being who we were meant to be cannot, by definition, happen alone, because the unique person we were meant to be was created to engage with others.

Just before we chanted the Kol Nidrei last night, we prayed for permission to pray *im ha-avaryanim*, with the sinners. We pray as a whole, as a community and a people before God;

we stand together with the “sinners” around us and the “sinner” within us. It is a reminder that while it is always easier to point a finger at the other (the other person, group, nation, religion), it is not useful; it is, in fact, rather like one body part blaming another. How ridiculous for one arm to be angry at the other, or for the eyes to be contemptuous of the stomach! So while it may be self-satisfying to be able to look outward (or what we think is outward), we need to be thinking of healing the whole. That is why Yom Kippur is as much about forgiving as seeking forgiveness -- it demands that we let go of the finger-pointing, blaming, harsh judgment, and the sense of being wronged.

All of which leads to our last point. To be fully in the image of God, we need to embrace the notion of radical empathy -- not just, “I feel for her,” but “I feel as part of her.” This may be the hardest part. It is certainly not the way we usually experience the world, and when we do, it can be overwhelming. It’s very hard to really take in another’s pain, much less the world’s pain. How would we function? Some very great souls, I imagine, can live that way all the time. Less great but still elevated souls move in and out of that mode. For most of us, it’s something we experience only occasionally, and most often with the people closest to us and who we most love. We can, though, at least aspire to radical empathy more often, and aspire also to being aware intellectually that we are all connected, even if we don’t really feel it.

To come back to the thirteen attributes of God we spoke of earlier, and which we pray several times on Yom Kippur. Adonai Adonai -- why the repetition of God’s name? Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev says that this is the Adonai within (the aspect or image of God within each of us) calling out to the Adonai without (the broader Oneness which is God), “O Adonai.” In other words, the image of God within each of us yearns for connection, to be in relationship with, the image of God reflected in all humanity.

We are all called by God’s name, we all bear God’s face. And we can only really be who we ourselves are, when we know how truly connected we all are.

6. CREATIVITY: ASPIRATION AND COMPLETING ONE'S SELF

We have spoken of many of the facets and implications of being *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God: self-awareness, power, deeds, relationship. Now we will look at two additional, related facets: aspiration and creativity.²³

Let's talk first about aspiration. Here we'll look at several texts, each of which speaks of human aspiration in connection with *b'tzelem Elohim*, but in different ways. First, Rav Kook. He begins by saying that the human being has a natural inclination to aspire for the nearness of God. And this aspiration toward God is, he concludes, the essence of life, the core drive underlying all other drives and aspirations:

We sum up our position by saying that this (the quest for the nearness of God) is the essence, the nature, the basis of existence of the psyche. In other words, this is the general nature of the psyche itself, the essence of its life, which is revealed to us as one basic reality with diverse expressions, with many endless inclinations, yearnings and aspirations under one umbrella. They all play some role in life, but life itself, all life, the essence of life, is this and nothing else, and there cannot be anything else -- only the foundation, which is the aspiration for the nearness of God.²⁴

We human beings aspire and yearn in many ways, for many things. But, Kook says, despite the

23. In the kabbalistic tree, we move now to the very bottom, *Yesod* and *Malkhut*, both of which carry associations with creativity: *Yesod*, the generative creative part of the body, *Malkhut*, the created world. And both of these are associated with aspirational qualities -- *Yesod* with the *tzaddik*, the righteous one, and *Malkhut* with a vision of a world that is habitable for the Divine.

24. Abraham Isaac Kook, *The Essential Writings of Abraham Isaac Kook*, p. 32:

What we said previously, that the inclination to aspire for the nearness of God is the mightiest and most central of the inclinations, yearnings and aspirations of the human psyche, was only to make it comprehensible to the human ear. [It] . . . can, under no circumstances, be regarded as a *particular* force or a central force or even *the* central force, in a general way. This would make it possible to regard the manifestation of this force as a separate phenomenon, and the essence of the psyche itself also as a separate phenomenon. We sum up our position by saying that this (the quest for the nearness of God) is the essence, the nature, the basis of existence of the psyche. In other words, this is the general nature of the psyche itself, the essence of its life, which is revealed to us as one basic reality with diverse expressions, with many endless inclinations, yearnings and aspirations under one umbrella. They all play some role in life, but life itself, all life, the essence of life, is this and nothing else, and there cannot be anything else -- only the foundation, which is the aspiration for the nearness of God.

This formulates for us the definition of man's uniqueness. His life shares with all other creatures the inclination to feel its autonomous nature, together with the aspiration for perfection, which appropriately stems from the profound influence reflected from the perfection of God. The inwardness of the soul has its source in the absolute and eternal perfection in the *Ein Sof* [the Infinite]. The process works to satisfy our aspiration for the nearness of God, in all its aspects. Thereby the soul becomes a faithful reflection of the absolute life of absolute divinity. "In the image of God made He him" (Gen. 1:27).

great diversity in our aspirations and inclinations, properly understood every form of human striving can be seen to be rooted in the innate aspiration to draw near to, and to thus emulate, God. This is true whether it be aspiration in the artistic realm, scientific research and inquiry, architecture and engineering, love, friendship and family connection, sexuality, excellence in athletics and the health and form of the body, intellectual attainment, etc.

Any time we hunger for a challenge, feel a need to grow, to learn, to contribute -- that is, according to Kook, a manifestation of the aspiration for closeness to God. And this aspiration for God in all its manifold manifestations is both the way in which we are made in the image of God, and the way that we fulfill our challenge of becoming like the image of God. This is true because the analogy itself (*b'tzelem Elohim*) is both a statement of who we are, and an aspiration -- what we aim to be.

Now of course, human striving also has its negative side. Sometimes aspiration manifests as blind ambition, aggression, unhealthy competitiveness, a hunger for power over others. When we are aware that our core aspiration is toward the Divine, in the context of everything we've spoken of throughout these *Yamim Noraim* (self-awareness, power, deeds, relationship), we can channel all our energies in a positive direction, and all our strivings will serve to bring us closer to the Divine image. When we are unaware and live unconsciously, we are very likely to go off on all kinds of tangents -- at best wasting our time, talents and energy, at worst, doing serious damage. When our aspirations make us feel crummy about ourselves, when they lead us to envy, jealousy, competitiveness, that's a good sign that we've lost contact with the source of our striving. Similarly, when we're inexplicably bored or directionless, it's again likely that we're denying some way in which we're being called to aspire toward God.

Several other thinkers also speak of *b'tzelem Elohim* in terms of aspiration, and each in a slightly different way. Steinsaltz speaks of aspiring within one's self, to function at a higher level:²⁵

It is said that God created man in his own image. The only way that can be understood is that man was created on the same scale and on the same level . . . One of the stories is that Adam was created tall -- that he reached from earth to heaven. And God put his hand on him and squashed him to a certain size. We do believe that a human being is a multilevered being, a being that is made of, so to say, several stories, one above the other. The highest one is really identical with the Godhead: the highest one. But there is a point of the self, and the point of the self is the point on a column that goes from earth to the highest heaven. I would say that self-consciousness and self-image are at a certain level of this column. Perhaps very small children are almost entirely on the physical level. Later on, perhaps a person may move slightly higher into something that is less corporeal or not entirely corporeal. The column itself can become higher and higher still, which means that the self can reach to higher and higher levels.

Heschel speaks of aspiring beyond one's self, in service of an ideal:²⁶

How are we to understand this kinship of man with the divine? One indication of man's affinity with God is his persistent aspiration to go beyond himself. He has an ability to dedicate himself to a task which goes beyond his own interests and

25. Steinsaltz, Adin, *The Strife of the Spirit*, pp. 235-36.

26. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, p. 316.

his own life, to live for an ideal. This ideal may be the family, a friend, a group, the nation, or it may be art, science, or social service. In many persons this will to serve is kept under, but in the pious man it blooms and flourishes. In many lives these ideals seem blind alleys, but in the pious man they are thoroughfares to God.

HaKetav v'HaKabbalah (on Gen. 1:26-27) speaks of aspiring to higher and higher levels of purity:

“Like Our likeness.” That he would become ever more like Us. And its meaning is that a person should purify himself in thoughts and deeds to ascend higher and higher . . .

Really, all of these texts are saying in different words the same thing Rav Kook says. I bring them precisely because this striving for God manifests differently for each of us -- and I invite you to spend some time with them, to find the formulation that speaks most meaningfully to you and can serve as an entry point.

Thus aspiration.

Closely related to aspiration is creativity, which also reflects the imprint of God in humanity. Soloveitchik says it this way:²⁷

There is no doubt that the term “image of God” in the first account refers to man’s inner charismatic endowment as a creative being. Man’s likeness to God expresses itself in man’s striving and ability to become a creator.

God creates, we create. In fact, the primary way in which our aspiration for God manifests is as creativity -- as the will and need to create, in God’s image. As Adin Steinsaltz writes.²⁸

[O]nly man, by virtue of his divine soul, has the potential, and some of the actual capacity, of God Himself. This potential expresses itself as the ability to go beyond the limits of a given existence, to move freely, and choose other paths, enabling man to reach the utmost heights -- or to plumb the deepest hells. It is, in other words, the power to will and to create.

Man’s free will thus derives its unique potential from the fact that it is a part of the divine will, without limit and without restriction. Man’s creative power is also derived from the same divine power to create things that never existed before, to destroy things already in existence, and to fashion new forms. In this sense, too, man is made in the image of God.

Inevitably, like God who creates in God’s own image, we also create in our own image -- we are almost existentially compelled to do so. Having children is the most obvious, and most literal example of our creating in our image (Gen. 5). But we create in our own image in so many other ways as well. We create institutions, communities, political systems, works of art, literature, music, ideas in our own images.

And we do so in two ways. First, we exercise our creativity in concrete reality. Because we are

27. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith*, p. 12.

28. Adin Steinsaltz, *The Thirteen Petalled Rose*, pp. 51-52.

powerful, the external world really does reflect who we are, and it changes in accordance with our deeds. And second, we create in our own image through the process of projection -- by seeing reality in such a way that it conforms to our self-image. Indeed, we each create our own maps of reality to help us understand and navigate the world, and these maps are, inevitably, made in our own images.

There is also a third way in which we create in our own image, as expressed in the Jewish mystical tradition. "One of the definitions of the name 'Man' or 'Adam' is likeness (*domeh*) to the Supreme. For like God, man creates the worlds in the image of himself."²⁹ Worlds upon worlds are created in the image of humanity -- all of creation becomes what we create it to be.

And of course, it hardly needs saying that, like aspiration, creativity too can be positive or negative. Tomer Devorah puts it this way:³⁰

[W]hen a person transgresses, a destructive creature is created. As stated in the Mishnah, "One who commits a single transgression acquires against himself a single accuser" who stands before the Holy Blessed One and states, "so-and-so made me."

We create "destructive creatures" -- a personification to emphasize the impact of our misdeeds, and by implication, the importance of channeling our creative powers toward the good and the holy.

We human beings, then, have a two-fold inheritance implanted within us: aspiration and creativity. We have an unceasing need to grow and create. We need to grow and create out there. We need to produce things -- to nurture people, and institutions, and gardens, and ideas, and help them grow -- to make our marks and to better the world. And we have an unceasing need to grow and create in here; we need to nurture and grow and aspire within.

Indeed, it turns out that the main thing that we human beings are called upon to create in the image of God -- the primary creative challenge of any life -- is ourselves. Here is the Sfat Emet (Likutim, Parashat Bereshit):

ועל זה כתיב בצלמנו שהאדם נברא שישלים הוא את עצמו על ידי מעשיו וכאילו הוא עושה עצמו
אף כי הוא על ידי כח הש"י, וזה הטעם שניתן הבחירה לאדם כי אם ה' נברא טוב ה' העש'י
פחיתות אצלו ועתה היא יתרון על ידי השלמת עצמו כנ"ל:

For this reason it is written, "in Our image," i.e., that Adam was created in such a way that he would complete himself, by means of his deeds, as if he made himself, even though it is by means of the power of the Holy Blessed One. And it is for this reason that free will was given to man. . .

Nor is there any point in life in which this natural creative aspiration ceases:

Realization -- this is the awesomeness of the covenant between God and man, presented in the threefold tale of the Scriptures: the first covenant with the lump of clay which the Creator, kneading, and by the breath of His mouth, imbues with

29. Adin Steinsaltz, *The Thirteen Petalled Rose*, p. 117.

30. Moshe Cordovero, *Tomer Devorah*, p. 6.

His own likeness, so that it might unfold in man's life and thus reveal that not being but becoming is man's task . . .³¹

The aspiration to create, and specifically to create oneself, is never lost. It can, however, go underground. Sometimes it goes underground because we're just unconscious -- we don't know ourselves that well. But mostly, we do know -- it's just so hard to live this way, because aspiration and creativity is risky business. All creative work of any kind involves self-exposure, and therefore risk -- the risk of being mocked, embarrassed, found wanting, wounded. And all creative work bears the risk of disappointing ourselves. When we aspire, we sometimes fail.

And if it's true of creative work out there, *kal v'homer*, how much more so is it true of creative work in here -- of the risk we take in creating, and re-creating ourselves? It is so very hard to reveal one's self as a work in progress. What if I try out a new way of being and I don't get it right the first time? Or I don't get it right at all, and I feel or look awkward, out of place, strange? It's like a life-sentence to junior high school! We all carry wounds -- on the surface or buried deep -- from some point in our lives (disproportionately, I suggest, from junior high). Wounds we suffered when we wanted to be someone we weren't yet, when we were trying on a new identity, and we were laughed at, or seen through and exposed, or excluded. The work of life, of *teshuvah*, of aspiration, is, unfortunately, very much like that. Except that we don't have to be as cruel to each other as junior high school kids can be. We can support each other.

Adonai Adonai El Raḥum (ה' ה' אל רחום). We spoke last night about the thirteen attributes of God, and the midrash from Sifrei teaching that we are meant to imitate those ways, to enact those attributes. We spoke of Levi Yitzḥak's interpretation of the doubling of God's name (*Adonai Adonai*) as Adonai within calling to Adonai without. In other words, as aspiration. *Raḥum* (merciful, compassionate) comes from the same root as *reḥem* (womb), the creative, generative, nurturing space. In other words, in imitation of God we are meant to be nurturers of each other in the process of self-creation -- to imitate God, we behave in such a way that it is safe to aspire to God, safe to be creative, safe to take risks.

Being in the image of God means that we are *always*, all of us, works in progress. Who among us could ever reach the goal? And as Buber said, the whole point of being created by God in God's own image is "to reveal that not being but becoming is man's task . . ."

Now, the stakes, really, are quite high. I said at the beginning that aspiration and creativity are related, and we've spoken already about some ways in which that's true. There is another way: what we aspire to determines who we will create ourselves to be. And how we create ourselves -- in what image -- determines how we will create the world. Because it is indeed *we* who create the world. "One of the definitions of the name 'Man' or 'Adam' is likeness (*domeh*) to the Supreme. For like God, man creates the worlds in the image of himself."³² Or in the words of Abraham Joshua Heschel, "Man created in the likeness of God is called upon to re-create the world in the likeness of the vision of God."³³

To come back to a text we looked at a moment ago, Adin Steinsaltz says:

It is said that God created man in his own image. The only way that can be understood is that man was created on the same scale and on the same level . . .

31. Martin Buber, *On Judaism*, pp. 112-113.

32. Adin Steinsaltz, *The Thirteen Petalled Rose*, p. 117.

33. Abraham Joshua Heschel (*Between God and Man* p. 170).

One of the stories is that Adam was created tall -- that he reached from earth to heaven. And God put his hand on him and squashed him to a certain size. We do believe that a human being is a multilevered being, a being that is made of, so to say, several stories, one above the other. The highest one is really identical with the Godhead: the highest one. But there is a point of the self, and the point of the self is the point on a column that goes from earth to the highest heaven. I would say that self-consciousness and self-image are at a certain level of this column. Perhaps very small children are almost entirely on the physical level. Later on, perhaps a person may move slightly higher into something that is less corporeal or not entirely corporeal. The column itself can become higher and higher still, which means that the self can reach to higher and higher levels.

We have the power to make ourselves smaller and smaller, or to reach higher and higher. The column itself can be contracted or expanded, depending on our aspiration. And so too the world, created in our image. How high we push ourselves -- how high our aspiration -- directly determines how limited, petty, small and constrictive our world is, or potentially, how expansive, inclusive, grand, and holy. We determine by our aspiration and creativity the extent to which this world is made in the likeness of the dream of God, or the likeness of our worst nightmares. We determine, by the exact measure of our aspiration -- by just how high each and every one of us pushes that column -- how much space there is in this world for the image, and presence, of God.