

Rabbi Dr. Julie Hilton Danan

Today is the birthday of the world. Unlike our other festivals, this is not a holiday from our own sacred saga like Passover or Hanukkah. This is the symbolic birthday celebration, not for the Jewish people, but for the all humanity.

Biblical scholars showed us how the biblical story of creation was revolutionary in its insistence that human beings are all one family. Prof. Nachum Sarna pointed out that if you read the opening of Genesis closely, you see that in the six days of creation, God creates plants, insects, fish, birds, and animals, each *“according to their kinds,”* *li-minehu*. There is a vast panorama of biodiversity, many species and much variety. When we come to God’s creation of human beings, we might expect that people, too, would be *“according to their kinds,”* all the different races and societies.

But no! There are not all kinds of human beings created. One human being is created, or one pair. The Midrash tells us this is so that no one can say, *“my parent was greater than yours.”*

In preparation for Rosh Hashanah, Rabbi Shai Held of Mechon Hadar taught a group of rabbis that if you compare the Israelite story to other ancient near eastern creation myths, another distinction stands out.

Most ancient myths culminate in the creation of that nation's land and people. Here the Hebrew Bible stands out. Even though the Hebrew Bible is the saga of our people's covenant with God, it doesn't start off with *us*. Rather it starts with one prototypical human, shaped from generic soil in the Garden of Eden, a place that can't be located with normal geography. The message is clear: our Torah's creation story is universal, and this holiday of Rosh Hashanah is universal, as well.

Science, too, tells us that we are all related much more than we think. Just this month, the New York Times Science page reported that "three separate teams of geneticists survey DNA collected from cultures around the globe, many for the first time, and conclude that all non-Africans today trace their ancestry to a single population emerging from Africa between 50 and 80,000 years ago." According to science and Torah alike, we are all kin.

The key value word from the creation of humanity is *Betzelem*, in the image, the likeness of the divine. When the human is created as male and female together (or as one androgynous individual according to the Midrash), she-he is stamped with the divine image. *And God (Elohim) then said: 'Let us make man (Adam / humanity) in our image, after our likeness...* What is the nature of this image? As usual in Jewish tradition, there are many opinions! Perhaps, it is our intellect and understanding, our vision or speech, our will and dominion. Or maybe our soul and our capacity to love.

As a mystic, I tend to identify with those who say that the Divine Image is consciousness itself. The Divine spirit that animates all creation from the farthest star to the tiniest amoeba, somehow made me to be me, and you to be you. What greater awe and wonder can I feel?

The Talmud uses a simple story to teach this concept. A King of flesh and blood stamps his image on every coin of the realm, and every coin appears identical. But the King of Kings, the Holy One of Blessing, stamps the divine image on every human being, yet each of us is unique.

According to technologist and ethicist Gil Yehudah:

“The message here is not to describe God’s Nori – a historical event of how humanity was formed. . . but to inform us about **how we should behave and see others in the world**. The religious message here is clear -- all people (regardless of their belief, nationality, ethnicity, or even their behaviors) are to be treated with the kind of respect one would treat a prince. Consider this: You see the child of royalty, and you realize “that’s the face of our royalty.” And just like you treat the child with royalty and dignity -- you should treat *all* people with royalty and dignity -- since all people are viewed as if they have inherited the image of their divine origin.”

Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, a modern Orthodox Rabbi and the founder of CLAL teaches, “Every image of God has three fundamental dignities - infinite value (“saving one life is like saving a whole world”); equality

(every image of God - that means Jew and Arab, or Jew and gentile, it means white or black, it means male or female) is equal; and uniqueness (every image of God is unique, is irreplaceable; there is no one else like this person in the world).ö Unfortunately, as we know, the inherent dignity and worth of every human beingô the Jewish dream for the worldô is still far from realization. We have only to look at the cover of the Sunday Times to see one example: a starving Venezuelan mental patient, one representing multitudes deprived of their dignity. Or in today's paper, a cobalt miner in the Congo. Or any day, sitting on the sidewalks of New York City.

This central message of the Torah, the inherent dignity of human beings, has critical import today for our country. The greatness of America flows from our founding principle that all are created equal. True, at first that equality was not enjoyed by all. But slowly and with great struggle, equality, diversity, and opportunity have expanded. Yet here we are, in the 21st century, struggling anew with growing open expressions of intolerance and xenophobia. We have elected an African American president, but we haven't gotten to a point where all African American citizens feel that their lives and dignity have equal worth. We have freedom of religion, but hate crimes against Muslims are at their highest point since 9-11. We have freedom of speech, but too often that is used as an excuse to bully, exclude and belittle people of different opinions, genders, or national origins. Including, as we know, Antisemitism.

The Torah's message of *Tzelem Elohim*, the essential worth of all, is a powerful antidote. Because in truth, we don't just share our family tree with all people, but the human fate as well. When it comes to our shared future, living in different neighborhoods won't separate us. When it comes to our shared future, living in different congressional districts won't separate us. When it comes to our shared future, borders and boundaries won't really separate us. In the words of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., "We must learn to live together as brothers or perish together as fools."

And if we are going to survive and not to perish, we must come to see the image of God beyond humanity alone. In the words of Natan Margalit, the creator of Organic Torah, "The Torah tells us that we are created in the Image of God and it is true and we can be as gods, to create or destroy." Unfortunately, we now "have the ability to destroy our physical world here on earth. With our amazing brains we have evolved the ability to take apart, to analyze, break down and separate all the miraculous aliveness that has taken eons to emerge. We have raised ourselves up so high in our godliness that we imagine that we are separate from the aliveness of the world." Only a more integrated relationship to the holiness of all creation can help us to save the fragile balance of our planet.

Rabbi David Seidenberg, author of *Kabbalah and Ecology: God's Image in the More-Than-Human World*, teaches that Jewish mysticism finds the divine image in nature as well as human beings. He writes, "when we come to expand *tselem* [the divine image] reach [to nature], its original meaning is also intensified. Imagine, or remember, the awe you feel standing at the edge of the Grand Canyon, or descending into a forest, or witnessing an extraordinary storm or sunset. What would it be like to look at another person and feel that kind of awe? Imagine regarding a bus driver or a stranger who sits down beside you, or even an enemy, with those eyes. Imagine or remember what it is like to see a lover or a child with those eyes."

The challenge is huge, but as Mussar, Jewish ethics, teaches, when it comes to changing the world, we really have to start with ourselves. This Rosh Hashanah, I would like to suggest three ways that we can see and enlarge our experience of the Divine Image in all people: by making it into our spiritual practice for the year ahead, by using particular Jewish values to help all people, and by joining with others to create a more loving and just society.

First, we can work on ourselves by taking on a spiritual practice of seeing God's image in every person. There are many ways to do this. While I was at the ALEPH Kallah this summer, we learned a beautiful biblical chant from Rabbi Shefa Gold that means, "Your people are my people, your God my God." So now I go around and when I see people I

think seem different than me, I say this chant to myself. You can just say the first words to yourself: *amech ami*, or in English, "your people are my people." I find it most powerful when I think the person is very different from me, as when they have a bumper sticker that I don't like.

The Torah tells us "to know the heart of the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." Empathy with others is a mitzvah. When we hear someone telling their human experience, which may be very different from ours, which might even be hard to hear, we can whisper to ourselves "Shema Yisrael" as a reminder to listen deeply.

Seeing the image of God in others is most fully realized face to face, as in the story that I told last night. Ordinary interactions in the course of a day can become sacred I-Thou encounters when we take a moment to connect, to look someone in the eye, to use their name, to say a word of blessing or thanks. A real face to face encounter is worth even more today in our age of social media. In the old days the Hassidim told the stories of the Baal-Agalah, the wagon drover who drove the Rebbe. For me the modern version is an Uber driver. Fifteen minutes in the car can be my time to learn about the life of someone from a very different experience, often with deep wisdom to share. My father of blessed memory had a knack for this. He engaged people in conversation and was eager to learn from every person, turning strangers into friends.

Second, we can enlarge the image of God when we use our particularity to help all human beings. We are blessed today with many non-profit groups that use Jewish values to help all human beings. The American Jewish World Service is an amazing organization that uses Jewish values and teachings as their guide to help end poverty and promote human rights in the developing world. Mazon is a Jewish organization that works to feed the hungry of all races and religions. HIAS, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, started out saving Jewish Refugees and today is a premier organization working to help *all* kinds of refugees. Teruah is a Rabbinic organization working for human rights in Isarel and the U.S. Hazon is a Jewish group that connects our tradition to the environment, organic food, and farming. These are just a few examples. Supporting such organizations is like living the Aleynu prayer: using our unique destiny to make the world better and honor the divine image in all people and in nature.

Third, we can become involved with groups and dialogues that bring diverse groups together. At this important juncture for our country, of course we must exercise our civic rights and responsibilities to be involved in the political process and to speak out wherever we see intolerance. And hand in hand with that, we must work together to create what Martin Luther King called "Beloved Community," a society in which we see one another in the divine image. I always come back to the

words of my teacher Reb Zalman, "The only way we can get it together is together."

Two upcoming events sponsored by the American Jewish Committee are designed to promote this community here in Westchester. On Sunday afternoon October 30, at Congregation EmanuEl of Westchester in Harrison, there will be a service and Beloved community dinner on the theme of "Love in Our Faith Traditions," featuring interfaith speakers talking about love of God, love of neighbor and love of the stranger from all traditions, and great music with African American Church, Jewish, and Mormon choirs. Then Thursday, November 17, a week before Thanksgiving, is the annual Diversity Breakfast at Manhattanville College in Purchase. This amazing Westchester tradition began in response to the events of 9-11 and now attracts over three hundred people. The theme of this year's breakfast is: #wewalktogether "Our great nation is comprised of people of many races, religions, languages, and ancestries. Walk together with us as we celebrate our differences and affirm our shared values." Reminders for these events and others will go in our emails. They are precious opportunities to meet people of diverse backgrounds, to expand our networks, to create alternatives to insularity and intolerance, and to communicate the value that we are all in this together, all created in the divine image.

Let me conclude with a story:

To challenge her class, a teacher once cut up a map of the globe from a magazine, to make a very difficult puzzle. The pieces looked almost alike. To her surprise, the children were able to put it together quickly. When she asked how, they said, "There was a picture of a person's face on the other side, and when we put that person together, the world became whole." The rifts in our nation feel deep. Repairing our world seems hard. But it all starts when we look at every person with respect and see the divine image in every human being. When we see that human beings are part of, not apart from, our world. That is the simple but profound message of Rosh Hashanah, our birthday, the birthday of our world.

Learn More

Links to groups mentioned in the sermon:

American Jewish World Service: <https://ajws.org/>

Mazon: <http://mazon.org/>

HIAS (Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society): <http://www.hias.org/>

Truah: <http://www.truah.org/>

Hazon: <http://hazon.org/>