

What Does It Mean to be Created in the Image of God?

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God made a good world. But God did not make this world perfect. It is our task to finish the job, to complete the task. God wants us to contribute to the betterment of the world. The principle of betzelem elohim teaches that you and I are nothing less than co-partners with God in the perfection of Creation. With the great God-like qualities we possess, also come great responsibilities.

Let's learn Torah together. The parashah for this Shabbat is called *Bereishit*. In this Torah portion we are introduced to one of Judaism's most important principles: namely, that every human being is created in the image of God. In Hebrew we call this principle *betzelem elohim*. This principle is derived from Genesis 1:26-27.

Let's study those verses. "And 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.' And God created man in his image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

To be created in God's image means that we resemble God in some way. It means that God is reflected in us in some way. But we should not understand this verse to teach that we physically, literally, look like God.

No. Judaism teaches that God has no physical form or shape. God is real but invisible. To be created in God's image can only refer to non-physical ways that we resemble God. We share qualities with God. What God-like qualities do we possess? Our Godly attributes include: conscience, intellect, the capacity to invent, the capacity to dream new dreams, the capacity for free will.

To be created in God's image means that we possess God-like qualities. Okay, so what? What are the ethical implications of being created *betzelem elohim*?

First of all, it teaches us that every human being possesses infinite worth. It means that every human being possesses the right, by virtue of being created in God's image, to be treated with respect, dignity, kindness, justice, and compassion.

Sadly, the world does not treat most people this well. All too often, people are treated with disrespect and injustice. From time to time, I overhear how some people, even in our

own Summit community, treat and talk to the man who mows the lawn; the woman at the supermarket check-out counter; the clerk at the department store. What I hear is not right.

So here's an experiment I would like you to try. For one day, try treating every single person you meet that day as if they were created in the image of God. Do you think it might make in the way you treat people? I guarantee you it will!

Now listen to these words: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, justice, and the pursuit of happiness." Where are these words from? Yes, these words appear in the Declaration of Independence. What was Thomas Jefferson thinking of when he wrote these words?

I believe Jefferson had in mind Genesis Chapter one, verses 27-28. He was thinking of the principle of being created in the image of God. If I'm right, then our Jewish principle of *betzelem elohim* is embedded in America's Declaration of Independence.

Finally, one more implication of the principle of *betzelem elohim*. Every human being has the responsibility to live up to our God-given qualities and capacities. God made a good world. But God did not make this world perfect. It is our task to finish the job, to complete the task. God wants us to contribute to the betterment of the world. The principle of *betzelem elohim* teaches that you and I are nothing less than co-partners with God in the perfection of creation. With the great God-like qualities we possess also come great responsibilities.