

"THE IMPERSONATION OF GOD"

Those who follow the scientific literature, and even the daily press, know that modern science is on the verge of a great breakthrough. Before long, we are told, we shall hear the news that mankind has achieved the synthesis -- the artificial production of life, defined as a large molecule which can reproduce itself. So certain are scientists that this can be done, that only this past month the President of the American Chemical Society called upon the government to establish the "synthesis of life as a national goal." The laboratory creation of life is imminent; it is only a matter of time.

There is no question but that when this is accomplished it will have the most far-reaching consequences in every field of human endeavor, most of them as yet unforeseeable and unpredictable.

Already, in a number of journals here and there, the religious question is making itself felt. We must begin to anticipate these religious problems, specifically the question: will the synthesis of life constitute a challenge to the Jewish notion of God as Creator? If a living, self-replicating molecule is produced in the laboratory, will this act have profound religious repercussions upon us?

In order to answer this question intelligently and honestly, albeit, briefly, let us refer to the basic teachings of Judaism as reflected in this morning's Sidra.

Next to the idea that God created the world, the most important concept in all of Genesis is that a part of that creation in some way resembles the Creator. This is the idea that man was created in the

צלם אלהים, the image of God. In some ways, the Bible tells us, man is like God.

But this is more than a mere statement of fact. It is also a charge and a challenge: Man's function is to fulfill the image of God in which he was created. His purpose in life is to achieve, evermore, that resemblance to his Creator. His mission, in other words, is to imitate God. That is what the Torah itself means when it commands us: *אחרי ה' אלקיכם תלכו*, "you shall go after the Lord your God." This was formulated by our great philosophers as the commandment, *להתבונן באלהים*, to be God-like, to imitate God. The result of the imitation of God is the whole of Jewish ethics. When we are told to be ethical, we are, in essence, told to act as God acts. Man must constantly say, about the One in Whose Image he was created, *וה' נדיב* *וה' רחום*, just as He is gracious, so must I be gracious; just as He is ^{compassionate} *רחום* -- passionate and loving -- so must I be merciful. Just as He visits the sick and consoles the mourners, so must I do.

Such is the general idea of the imitation of God, what is generally known ~~by~~ the Latin term, imitatio Dei. But let us be more specific. If we are told, at the very beginning of the Torah, so early in the history of the universe, that man was created in the Divine Image and that he therefore must resemble God, we must first know something about God in order to be able to imitate Him. But what do we know about Him at this point? From a study of the first chapter of Genesis, we know three things about God. First, we know that He is the Creator of all things: "In the beginning God created heaven and earth..." Second, we know that He created man as a natural being, but

also endowed him with some special transcendent significance. On the one hand man is a completely natural phenomenon: *אדם מן האדמה*, he is but "dust from the earth." On the other hand, *ו' אלהים יאמר ברוח חיים*, "and he breathed into his nostrils the breath of life" -- man is a spiritual being as well. The third thing that we know about God is that He is the source of all morality. When we are told that God created the world and that at each stage he declared *וַיֵּבֹרֶךְ*, that "it is good," that means that it is God who determines what is absolutely good and what is evil, what is right and what is wrong.

To be God-like, to imitate Him, means therefore that man the creature must emulate the Creator in the three ways we have mentioned. First, we must be creative; man must seek always to create and to enhance God's creation, to advance the welfare of God's world by employing the creative abilities which He implanted within us. It means that we must participate in -- as the Rabbis put it -- *עושה רצון ה' וציוויו*, the settlement and civilization of the world. The first way in which man imitates God is by acting creatively, by becoming a co-creator with God.

The second way of imitatio Dei is to protect human life and to improve its quality. It means we must always consider life as precious, as sacred, and as inviolable.

Third, it requires of us to establish the *וַיֵּבֹרֶךְ* -- ^{the} good ^{as} determined by God, in our lives, in our society, and our culture. We must take the absolute morality decreed by the Almighty and live it out to its fullest. How do we carry out what God declared is good and decent? -- the answer is: the totality of our Torah and our tradition, the performance of our various mitzvot.

So, to imitate God, to fulfill the tzellem, means exercising creativity; the enhancement of life; and moral conduct.

A reading of the first two portions of Genesis, leads us to the understanding that man cannot escape being confronted by these three challenges. These three forms of the imitation of God are not simply three ways for saintly souls to achieve bliss. No man can escape them. We have one of two alternatives: either we fulfill the צלם אלהים, the image of God, or we destroy it; but we can never ignore it. A study of these chapters will reveal what a consideration of contemporary life will affirm: man's disaster, his bankruptcy, lies not in neglecting the image of God, but in distorting it; not in the disuse of the tzellem, but its misuse and abuse. The early Biblical narrative, which we read today and shall continue next week, reveals three tragic errors where man failed to imitate God, and, instead, impersonated Him.

The first instance is the sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. They were commanded not to eat of the עץ הדעת טוב ורע, the "tree of knowledge of good and evil." The serpent enticed them to transgress the Word of God telling them if they would eat of the forbidden fruit then והייתם כאלהים, you will be like God who knows good and evil. Maimonides, at the very beginning of his Guide, records a relevant question: did intelligence, the ability to discern between good and evil, come to man after he sinned? Was it a reward for his crime? Did not man have intelligence before the act of evil? If he were not able to distinguish between right and wrong before, how could God have commanded him in the first place?

Permit me to suggest an answer. The word יָדָע, usually means, "to know." But at times it may also have a slightly different meaning: to make known, to inform, to determine, to establish. Thus, Maimonides

himself, says the following in his Guide, elsewhere, of the verse recording God's message to Abraham, through the angel, after the Akedah: וְכֵן יִדְעוּ כָּל הָעָם. This does not mean, says Maimonides, "for now I know that you are a God-fearing man." God knew this all along! What it means, is this: "now I have made known to all the world that Abraham fears God, and that this is how a God-fearing man is expected to act." Here too, therefore, וְכֵן יִדְעוּ means not that Adam and Eve will know good and evil, but that they will make known or determine by themselves what is right and what is wrong! The sin of the eating of the tree of knowledge, of good and evil, consists of man's desire to reject God's absolute laws of morality, and to substitute instead his own standards and guides. Adam wanted to impersonate God, instead of imitating Him. He thought: I will determine and make known what is good and what is wrong. I do not need God's absolute laws; I can make my own laws to satisfy me according to time and place. Early in history, therefore, man erred. Instead of accepting the אֱלֹהִים of God, he sought to devise his own patterns of behavior.

Today we still have not learned that lesson. There is an entire school of thinkers who seriously propose that there can be no "prescriptive ethics," that there are no absolute rules for right and wrong which we can prescribe in advance of any act. Instead, this school, -- which goes by various names, such as "the new morality," or "situational ethics," -- believes that man can determine by himself how to act only at the moment that he is faced with the need for a decision. There can be no telling in advance what he must do or not do. He must determine it by himself. In other words, God and His morality are out,

man and his fluctuating whimsicality is in. The same thing happens in Judaism, when Halakhah is rejected, when "standards" are offered in substitution for the divine laws, when every Jew is told that he can pick and choose amongst the various commandments of the Torah what he will. When this happens, we have ceased to imitate God. We have begun to impersonate God, each of us acting as a little god by himself.

The second failure of man in the task of imitation of God, occurred in the story of Cain and Abel. Man was told to imitate God the Creator of man and life, by improving life and enhancing mankind. But then man makes the mistake: he imagines himself to be the Master of life. And when man owns a possession, that implies as well his right to destroy it. Hence, Cain rises upon his brother Abel and kills him. This act of murder is not merely rebellion against God; Cain does not deny God, he plays God. He begins as an imposter and ends as a murderer.

The third instance is that of the tower of Babel. Like God, man should be creative. The tower of Babel is a symbol of man's technological creativity. There is nothing wrong with building and creating. As we have just said, it is an act of fulfillment of the tzellem, the imitation of God. However, the purpose of this creativity was wrong. The builders of the tower said: *על שםנו*, "we shall make a name for ourselves." They wanted to advance the creation of the world, its upbuilding, not for the glory of God, but for their own prestige and ambition and power. Once their own selfish interests were substituted for the advancement of the divine purposes of God, they displaced God, they impersonated Him. Hence, again, man fails in his sublime mission.

Let us, now, return to our original question: the religious implications of the ability of man nowadays to create life. Let it be said, clearly and unequivocally, that, considering all we have said, this deed will not in the least disturb our religious equanimity. Judaism has nothing whatever to fear from the creation of living matter by man. It will be, on the contrary, an exercise in the fulfillment of the divine image: just as God can create, so can man. And just as God can create life -- so can His image, mankind, create life.

If man, who can now already replace human organs and speak of directing his own evolution through "genetic engineering", will actually create life in the laboratory and use that knowledge and ability to improve human life and help a suffering humanity; if he will come thereby to the worship of the Creator of all the universe; if he will, further, assist in establishing God's moral law in the world -- then man's achievements will be a new and great milestone in human progress. Then this scientific breakthrough will be a historic act of the imitation of God and man's fulfillment of His Divine Image.

If man, however, will do here what he has already done elsewhere with his creative genius -- showing a spiritual schizophrenia, a rapid scientific advancement together with an accelerated moral deterioration, then he will be foolish and arrogant and dangerous.

The act will be foolish, because he will begin to imagine that because he has created life, therefore God did not do so originally. This will be no less foolish than the assertion that since I can make a chair, then that somehow proves that no one has ever made a chair

before me. One can well imagine primitive man having just invented the shovel and dug his first hole, rising and uttering the silly boast that since I have dug a hole, it proves that God never created this earth filled with caverns and crevices and caves!

It will be arrogant, because it will lead merely mortal scientist to play God, and convince all of us to believe that we are petty deities. Heaven help us when scientists claim the benefit of clergy! It will be dangerous because it will lead us into devious moral paths, where men keep on making up their own rules as they go on. When we impersonate God (עוֹלָם בְּעוֹלָם) then we ourselves declare what is right and wrong (חַיִּים וְמוֹת). No wonder that as a result of much of the expectation of the synthesis of life, we have already heard some scientists -- notably the grandson of Charles Darwin -- call for a program of eugenics, the selective destruction of those people whom we regard as unwanted and expendable, and breeding only those whom we consider valuable -- the "we" probably meaning the scientists! Certainly we Jews, so long and so terribly considered an inferior race, and destroyed on an unprecedented scale, are aware of the dangers of playing fast and loose with human destiny and human life.

Man is the only creature that is a little more than an animal yet a little less than an angel. Whether we turn beastly or Godly depends only upon us: how we relate to the divine image within us, and whether we imitate or impersonate God. And not only mankind as a whole, but each of us individually, as individuals, are each day faced with momentous decisions as to the quality of our lives. At every step, at

every decision we are called upon to make, we must know that behind it there lies a greater decision: shall we imitate God or impersonate Him; glorify God or play God?

May God grant us the wisdom and the sensitivity and the good sense to learn to express fully the image of God within us by emulating Him and not trying to become gods on our own. Only when all of us would have come to acknowledge the *אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ*, the Master of the world who reigned before any creation was brought into existence, will we be able to say with confidence and faith,

אֲנִי וְעַמִּי בְיָדָיו, in His hand do we commend our spirits, whether asleep or awake, and with our spirits our bodies as well; *אֲנִי וְעַמִּי בְיָדָיו* *(אֲנִי וְעַמִּי בְיָדָיו)* -- for the Lord is with us, we have no reason to be afraid.