

REFLECTIONS ON THE DIVINE IMAGE

Our Sidra of this morning teaches us one of the most fundamental concepts of our faith. It is something we speak of often, and that is perhaps why we frequently fail to appreciate its depth and the magnitude of its influence. The concept of man's creation in tzellem Elokim, the image of G-d, is one of the most sublime ideas that man possesses, and is decisive in the Jewish concept of man.

What does it mean when we say that man was created in tzellem Elokim? Varying interpretations have been offered of this term, each reflecting the general ideological orientation of the interpreter.

The philosophers of Judaism, the fathers of our rationalist tradition, maintain that the image of G-d is expressed, in man, by his intellect. Thus, Saadia Gaon and Maimonides maintain that sekhel -- reason -- which separates man from animal is the element of uniqueness that is in essence a divine quality. The intellectual function is thus what characterizes man as the tzellem Elokim.

However, the ethical tradition of Judaism does not agree with that interpretation. Thus, Rabbi Moses Hayyim Luzzato in his "Mesillat Yesharim" does not accept reason as the essence of the divine image. A man can, by the exercise of his intellect know what is good -- but fail to act upon it. Also, the restriction of tzellem Elokim to reason means that only geniuses can truly qualify as being created in the image of G-d. Hence, Luzzato offers an alternative and perhaps more profound definition. The tzellem Elokim in which man was created is that of ratzon -- the freedom of his will. The fact that man has a choice between good and evil, between right and wrong, between obedience and disobedience of G-d -- is what expresses the image of G-d in which he was born. An animal has no freedom to act. A man does. That ethical freedom makes



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man inique in the creation.

But how does the freedom of the human will express itself? A man does not assert his freedom by merely saying "yes" to all that is presented to him. Each of us finds himself born into a society which is far from perfect. We are each born with a set of animal drives, instincts, and intuitions. If we merely nod our heads in assent to all those forces which seem more powerful than us, then we are merely being passive, plastic, and devoid of personality. We are then not being free, and we are not executing our divine right of choice. Freedom, the image of G-d, is expressed in the word "no." When we negate that which is indecent, evil, ungodly; when we have the courage, the power and the might to rise and announce with resolve that we shall not submit to the pressures to conform to that which is cheap, that which is evil, that which is indecent and immoral -- then we are being free men and responding to the inner divine image in which we were made.

The late Rabbi Aaron Levine, the renowned "Reszher Rav," interpreted, in this manner, the famous verse from Kohellet, a verse which we recite every morning as part of our preliminary prayers. Solomon tells us u-motar ha-adam min ha-behemah ayin, which is usually translated as "and the preeminence of man over beast is naught." Rabbi Levine, however, prefers to give that verse an interpretation other than the pessimistic, gloomy, apparent meaning. He says: "and the preeminence of man over beast is -- ayin, "not." What is it that gives man his distinction? What is it that makes man different from the rest of creation, superior to the rest of the natural world? It is his capacity to say ayin, his capacity to face the world and announce that he will not submit to it, that he will accept the challenge and respond "no." An animal has no



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choice -- no freedom -- and therefore must say "yes" to his drives, to the world in which he lives. But a man can say "no" to that which is unseemly and below his dignity. And when he says "no" to all that is ungodly, he is being G-dly. He is showing that he was created in the tzellem Elokim.

Adam and Eve had to learn this lesson, and their descendants ever after must learn from their failure. We are nowhere told in the Torah that the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge was in any way different from the fruit of the other trees in the Garden of Eden. Yet when she was tempted by the serpent, Eve looked at the fruit and in her mind's eye its attractiveness grew out of all proportion to reality. It looked more luscious, it looked more joicy, it looked more appetizing. She even imagined that this was some kind of "intelligence" food. Her instinct bade her to do that which was in violation of the divine command. But counter to this she had the capacity, as a free agent created in G-d's image, to say ayin, to say "no" to her instinct and her temptation. But she forfeited her opportunity. The first human couple did not know how to say "no." This was the beginning of the downfall for them.

Abraham was a great Jew -- the first Jew. Yet in our tradition he is not so much famous for saying "yes," as for saying "no." Abraham was the great iconoclast. It was he who said no to the idolatries of his day, who said no to his father's paganism, who was one man pitted against the entire world, shouting no to all the obscenities of his contemporary civilization.

Moses was a great teacher. He gave us 613 commandments. When you investigate those commandments, you find that only 248 are positive in



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nature, commanding us what to do affirmatively. Three hundred and sixty-five of them are negative, they say "no" to our wills and our wishes. For when we learn to say no, we are being free men under G-d. The famous Ten Commandments have only three positive laws; the other seven are negative. Indeed it is only through these negatives that we can live and survive and thrive at all. Without "thou shalt not murder," there can be no society. Without "thou shalt not steal," there can be no normal conduct of commerce and business. Without "thou shalt not commit adultery," there can be no normal family life. Without "thou shalt not covet," the human personality must degenerate and man becomes nothing more than an animal, a beast. U-motar ha-adam min ha-behemah ayin -- it is this which gives man greater dignity and superiority over the animal; it is his power to say "no."

It is this freedom of human personality taught by our Jewish tradition, that we Jews must reassert once again in our own day. The author, Herman Wouk, told me some time ago that a number of years ago he was boarding ship on a trip overseas. Several hours after he boarded a cabin boy brought him a note from the apostate Jewish author, Sholom Asch, asking Wouk to come to his cabin. There Asch complained to him and said, "I don't understand you Mr. Wouk. You are a young man -- yet you are observant and Orthodox. Why when my generation of writers was young, we were rebels, we were dissenters. We rejected tradition, we rejected authority, we rejected the opinions of the past. What happened to you? Why do you conform so blandly?"

The answer that Wouk gave to the older man is something that I believe is terribly important for all of us to know. He answered, "You are making a terrible mistake Mr. Asch. You seem to forget that the



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world we live in is not a paradise of Jewishness. You seem to forget that the world we live in is one that has become corrupted, assimilated, emptied of all Jewish content. In a world of this sort one does not have to be a rebel at all in order to deteriorate from the high standards of Judaism. If you violate the Sabbath, if you eat like a pagan, if you submit to the cheap standards of morality of the society in which we live, then you are being a conformist, then you are merely allowing your own animal instincts to get the better of you. Today, if I and some of my contemporaries are observing the Jewish tradition, then it is because we are the dissenters, the nein-sagers. For we are the ones who say "no" to the desecration of the Sabbath, "no" to the creeping assimilation that ridicules all of Judaism and threatens its very life, "no" to all the forces that seek to degrade our people and diminish the uniqueness of Israel that is its idgnity and its preeminence. We are the dissenters; you are the conformist."

This is the kind of force, the kind of courage, the kind of conviction that has sustained us throughout the ages. It is what has given us the power to say "no" to the threats of Haman, the cruelties of Chmelnitzki, the genocide of Hitler, as well as the sugar-coated missionizing of more enlightened enemies of Judaism. We have demonstrated the image of G-d when we exercised our freedom and said "no" to all this.

It is not that I am suggesting that we ought to be destructively negative. It is, rather, that I believe that when we fully exercise our critical functions and faculties, then the good will come to the fore of itself. It is because I have confidence in the innate powers of the good, that I suggest we concentrate on denying the evil. Sur me'ra va-aseh tov, "depart from evil and do good." If you will pit all your



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energies into negating evil, then good will be done of its own accord.

It is this power to say "no" that we must exercise in our relations with our fellow Jews in the State of Israel. For, in addition to all our constructive efforts on behalf of the upbuilding of the land, we must be able to call a halt to the creeping paganism that plagues the holy land.

When we find that in our own religious Orthodox community in Israel, certain things are being done which serve only to desecrate the name of G-d, we must not be fearful. We must rise and as one man say "no" to all those forces which would destroy the sanctity of the Torah and the sanctity of the holy land.

In our own American Jewish community we must, here too, be the critics. And when, to mention just a seemingly trivial matter, certain artists and entertainers who are Jewish and who rely upon the community as such for the acceptance of what they have to offer, elect to entertain on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year, we must say "no." We must realize that then this is no longer the domain of ones own conscience, it then becomes a public demonstration of contempt for American Jewry. U-motar ha-adam min ha-behemah ayin, we must not sheepishly go along with everything that "famous people" are willing to tell us. We must be men, we must be human beings, we must use the freedom that G-d gave us when He created us in His image, and learn when to say "no."

I conclude with the statement by one of the greatest teachers of Judaism, a man who indeed showed, in his life, that he knew the value of ayin. It was Rabbi Akiva, the man who was able to stand up to the wrath and the might of the whole Roman Empire and say "no" to tyranny and to despotism, who taught us that chariv adam she-nivra be'tzellem -- "beloved is man that he was created in the image of G-d." Beloved indeed, and



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precious and unique and irreplaceable is man when he has the freedom of will that is granted to him by his Creator. And furthermore, chibah yeterah nodaat lo she-nivra be'tzellem -- a special love was given to man by G-d, it is a special gift when man not only has that freedom but when he knows that he has that freedom -- and therefore uses it to combat evil and to allow the great constructive forces of good, innate in himself, to come to the fore so as to make this a better world for all men.