

## IN THE IMAGE OF GOD

A High Holiday sermon for 5742, 1981  
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The Jewish people has given to the world many revolutionary concepts. Perhaps the greatest concept we have given is the teaching that humankind is created "in the image of the Divine." Classical scholars tell us that the two great cultural nations of ancient times were the Greeks and the Hebrews, but the Greeks had an entirely different attitude about the relationship of humankind to the Gods. How can we account for this difference? The Greeks discouraged the imitation of the Gods; the Jews encouraged the imitation of God. The difference is rooted in what these two cultures thought about the Divine.

The Greeks taught that the only difference between the Gods and humankind was a matter of degree, a matter of relative power. The Greeks did not necessarily associate their Gods with morality. Their mythic stories tell of Zeus, the chief God, sleeping with his daughter. Other Greek myths tell of the Gods stealing from one another or making war upon one another. To imitate the Gods, in the Greek sense, was not to be nobler or more ethical as a human being, but to gain the power to do whatever you wished to do. Any human attempt to gain such power, we are told, was considered to be a dire threat by the Greek Gods. So when Prometheus stole the fire of the Gods, he was chained to a rock and vulturous birds forever ate away at his liver. The Promethean myth tells us what the Greeks thought of anyone who tried to be like the Gods.

Let us contrast this Greek view with the teaching in the Book of Leviticus, Chapter 19: "The Lord proclaims, 'You shall be holy, as I the Lord your God am holy.'" There is a double meaning here. First we are told that the God of Israel is holy, which is to say, he is different from the other Gods. He is different in that he acts righteously. He is concerned with compassion and peace. This holy God commands his people not to be unlike him. They must imitate him. They must try to be as He is.

It is in this light that we must understand the teaching in the book of Genesis that humankind is created in the image of the Divine. This radical Hebraic concept holds up to humankind the possibility that we are able to take into ourselves the divine qualities of love, compassion, and justice.

In the pagan cultures, sin meant the failure to perform properly the rituals associated with the Gods. In Judaism, sin was the failure to imitate God in His holiness. What we are saying here is that the Jewish people was the first to believe in human potential. It is certainly from us that the humanists gained their inspiration. The roots of modern democracy and the human potential movement of modern psychology lie in the Torah.

But the Jewish people has not been able to rest with the satisfaction that it has given the world a new platform from which to launch the forward movement of the human race. First of all, the dominant religion of western civilization does not seem to have fully embraced this Jewish doctrine. The grand notion that God gave to humankind an innate potential to be good was all but stifled through all the dark years of medieval Europe. The central doctrine for a thousand years, emanating

from the Catholic Church, was that humankind was born in sin and destined for Hell unless it accepted the authority of the Church and its saving grace. Those who have seen Michelangelo's terribly magnificent painting of the Last Judgement in Rome's Sistine Chapel cannot help but notice the abject fear in the faces of those humans who await their condemnation from the central figure in the painting, who has the authority to condemn them. Will Durant, the historian, tells us that medieval Christians came so to fear Jesus as the final judge that for many years they dedicated more churches to Mary, Mother of Compassion, than to her son. Judaism was able to avoid this negative view of a sinful and hell-bound humankind, precisely because it emphasized the Genesis doctrine that humans were created in the Divine image.

In modern times, many of the churches of Christendom have deemphasized this older Christian view of man, as originally presented by St. Paul and St. John, and as restated by Luther and Calvin. In modern times, there are two other major assaults on the doctrine of our Torah. One assault teaches that while some humans are created in the Divine image, others are not. The other assault teaches that in this scientific age, humans have become divine, and we don't need God anymore.

Let me tell you a story from my boyhood. I was born and raised for the first thirteen years of my life in a small, Jewish neighborhood in Norfolk, Virginia. When I was about seven years old, an older boy more than twice my age, without warning, stuck his fist in my stomach, and while I doubled up in pain, he exclaimed, "You damn Jew!" This was only the first of many beatings I experienced as a young boy simply because I was a Jew. There were many so-called Christians who lived a block or so away from our small Jewish street who tried to teach me that, as a Jew, I was an inferior person. Not long after my initial beating, the same bunch of teen-agers who took turns attacking younger Jewish boys, challenged the blacks, who lived just behind us, to a rock throwing contest. The blacks participated without particular relish. I couldn't help but notice that the whites zealously throwing the rocks and broken bottles at the blacks were the same boys who were beating me up! Somehow, as a very young boy, I got the idea that the blacks and we Jews must be in the same boat. We were the hated. We were the outcasts.

Some years later, I came to study in my Sunday School class the passage from the Torah which teaches, "And God created humankind in His own image." "That includes me," I said to myself, "me, also; and that includes the blacks. It's got to include all of us."

From my early childhood on, I have carried that passion with me. I had the intense need for that statement to be true; for if it were true, then I was not the filth that my tormentors insisted I was.

Long before I became a Rabbi, I was working to prove that the teaching in Genesis is true. In World War II, I served as an Information and Education specialist in the army and almost got mobbed by a group of southern army officers, when I gave them the designated lesson demonstrating the equality of the races. One Colonel literally climbed over five rows of people to take a swing at the Sergeant teaching the course. As a non-commissioned officer, I could not have responded to the Colonel's physical attack, but I was quite willing to take this risk in my need to teach that the war was being fought for a purpose.

The Holocaust would not have been possible, if Europeans had not been taught for a thousand years that everyone is going to Heaven but the Jews, and the modern plight of the Negro people would not be possible, if we had not taught in America for 200 years that the Negro was an inferior species. We Jews have a double stake in proving the authenticity of the Genesis teaching. We must prove its validity because God wants us to demonstrate its truth; and we must prove it is true, because if we don't, Jews, blacks, and other misunderstood peoples will suffer endlessly.

We are living in a community where there is a rising tide against black people, because of the Liberty City riots and because of the increase in robberies and murders in our neighborhoods. We have a tendency, we white people, to say, if some blacks are robbers, all blacks are robbers. We have a tendency, we Anglos, to say, if some Latins are murderers, all Latins are murderers. Rubbish! As Jews, we have been the victim of generalizations for thousands of years. Shall we now partake of that same prejudice? The enemy is inflation and hard times. The real enemy is the vestiges of slavery, unemployment, and lack of training. The real enemy is the drug traffic. Let's fight these things, but let's not fight those created in the image of the Divine. Those who do not believe in the possibility of blacks and Latins to be just as good citizens as Anglos are making an assault on a basic Jewish teaching. They are pulling the rug out from under Judaism. They are saying that our most revolutionary idea is a fraud. I will never accept that conclusion because my stomach still hurts from that son-of-a-gun who punched me in the belly, and I still remember Auschwitz.

Now I know that some of you are saying to yourself, "That Rabbi is very idealistic, but he's not much of a realist. Can't he read the statistics in our community? Robberies and murders are increasing every day." Believe me, I can read the statistics, and I am perfectly capable of being frightened when I hear that a man a mile away from me was shot while trying to get his mail from a mail box. But I also know that it is in times like this that fundamental beliefs are tested, and I would hate to see the members of my congregation giving up a heritage of four thousand years, because they are not experiencing the best of times.

There is a great backlash at work today. Even if we grant that big government has been too much with us, and too many people have been milking the national treasury unnecessarily, the fact remains that the Reagan administration is taking steps that will mitigate against the poor and under-privileged of our nation. If these people suffer more than they are, we can anticipate more robberies and more riots as they get more desperate. Reagan is right when he says that hand-outs are degrading, but I see no countering program where he is giving the under-privileged opportunities for training and employment. When the Cubans first came to this country, our nation wisely expended billions of dollars to help them learn English and to help them learn the techniques of our capitalistic society. We have not done this for the black community. We should treat them also as immigrants who have been denied access not only to the techniques of capitalism but also access to the English language, as the majority of Americans speak it. Let's stop the hand-outs, and let's give the blacks the kind of opportunity they deserve. Let's spend billions to train them in how to use the things that America offers. Either we do this kind of thing, or we become responsible for keeping the black community where it is - in limbo, outside the mainstream of American society.

I have said that there are two modern assaults on the Jewish concept that humankind is created in the Divine image. One, as we have discussed, is the assault which says some peoples are created in the Divine image - with certain specific exceptions. The other assault is by those who invert the Genesis teaching. There are some modern thinkers, knowing something of science, who say that now that humans have learned the secret of the atom and the complexity of the human cell, we can forget all about God. We have caught up with Him, these people say. We have become the Gods.

So spoke the late Erich Fromm, who admits he obtained his humanism in his Yeshiva, studying Torah. The Hebrew prophets had a word for this arrogance; it is "ga-ah-vah." Pre-scientific man was also capable of this kind of arrogance. The ancient Greeks developed a myth which describes their attitude towards humans who think they know it all. The myth is the story of Daedalus and his son, Icarus. Daedalus built wings for himself and Icarus which enabled them to fly. The father gave his son one stern warning, however. He said, "Fly only at a moderate height, neither too high nor too low." "If you fly too low," said the father, "the wings, which are made of wax, will become damp, and the mechanism will become clogged." "On the other hand," Daedalus said, "if you fly too near to the sun, if you fly too high, the wax will melt, and you will make for your own death." But Icarus, the son, was not to be restrained. What good are wings if one cannot fly all the way to Heaven itself? Icarus wanted to become one of the Gods, so Icarus flew as high as he could, the sun melted the wax wings, and he fell to his death.

There is a great truth in this particular Greek myth with which Jews can agree. We can try to imitate God in His ethical character, but we cannot displace God; we cannot storm Heaven. Our Jewish doctrine of human potential has as its corollary, the doctrine of humility. The author of the Book of Proverbs declared, "Reverence for God (the awe of God) is the beginning of wisdom."

Contrast with our modern arrogance, the humility of a person like Einstein, the very scientist who developed the theory that enabled us to split the atom. Einstein taught that no matter how much we learn about the universe, we will always be as infants in comprehending it. He once wrote, "To know that which is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty which our dull faculties can comprehend only in their most primitive forms, this knowledge, this feeling, is at the center of true religiosity. In this sense, I belong in the ranks of devoutly religious men."

Einstein had a capacity for awe and wonder in spite of his tremendous intellectual achievements. This awe is akin to the awe of the Psalmist and the religious Jew. Judaism teaches that it is possible both to stand in awe of God and to believe that we can imitate Him in his holiness. Thus, the religious Jew lives in this state of tension, living under the command of God to try to be like Him ethically and understanding that the more we learn, the more power we humans develop, the more we realize that we are at the very beginnings of knowledge and power.

The Psalmist spoke with this humility when he said, "Oh Lord, when I behold thy heavens, the sun and the moon which thou hast established, (I ask myself) what is

humankind that you even think of them?" But then the Psalmist continues to say, "Yet you have made us little lower than the Divine and you have given us dominion over your creations." The Psalmist had a sense of stewardship. He believed that we were placed on earth to do God's purpose.

Judaism teaches that humankind is capable of infinite growth and that it is worthy of being God's steward. Once we say, however, that we already know what God knows, we have lost the stimulus to grow. There is no more beckoning, no more pull to further greatness. Einstein, in spite of his profound knowledge of the universe, stood in awe before the intricacy of a creation he felt was far beyond his comprehension. Thus, each day to him was an exciting day of discovery, as he went in search of the greater truth. Can modern man continue to believe both in his own potential and in God's transcendent glory? Can we moderns continue to believe in a God who beckons to us to follow His lead? It is not easy in a mechanized and computerized world to believe either in the ethical or in the spiritual.

But Jews who have understood this double claim of our faith have felt the great joy of living with high purpose. I invite you to make this ancient perspective of your people evermore your personal faith.