Created in the Image of God:Thoughts on Parashat Bereishith, October 2, 2010

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In describing God's creation of human beings, the Torah teaches that we were created "in the image of God". Philosophers and commentators have pondered the meaning of this phrase, and have given various explanations. What does it mean for humans to be created in God's image since God is an eternal, incorporeal being? Some have defined "image" as referring to intellect or will. Others have interpreted "image" to refer to humanity's spiritual quest. Still others have applied this verse to the teaching that human beings have infinite value, and that human life must be respected to the highest possible degree.

We live in a world where it is not always easy to detect the "image of God" in humanity. There are billions of people on earth, and it is difficult to focus on the divine worth of each of them. Moreover, there are a substantial number of hateful, murderous people--how are we to respect the "image of God" in such people?

Perhaps the Torah is teaching us an ideal concept about human potential. God created the first human beings, Adam and Eve, in "His image", as a lesson to subsequent human beings that they, too, can find this "image" within themselves. If they fully develop their human capacities, they will discover the "image of God" within themselves. But this "image" is not an automatic birthright: it has to be earned. It exists in potential, and it is our task to realize that potential. Human beings who do not nourish the "image of God" within themselves thereby dehumanize themselves, and deprive themselves of their spiritual potential. Murderers and terrorists and hate-mongers are examples of people who have, in a profound sense, forfeited their "image of God". When the Torah teaches that humans were created in God's "image", this should be seen as a challenge and opportunity, not as an automatic gift that requires no further action on our part.

We develop the "image of God" within ourselves as we improve ourselves intellectually, morally, spiritually. We come closer to God's ideal for humanity, as we become more sensitive to the potential within all human beings, and as we strive to increase love and understanding among the human family.

A story is told of Fiorello La Guardia, when he was presiding at police court in New York City. One winter day, a trembling old man was brought in for stealing a loaf of bread. The defendant said that he and his family were starving, and he had to steal the bread to survive. La Guardia said: "The law makes no exception. You stole. The fine is $10." But then La Guardia took $10 out of his own pocket and paid the fine! Then he said: "Now I'm going to fine everybody in this courtroom fifty cents for living in a town where a man has to steal bread in order to eat." The bailiff went around the room, collected the money, and gave it to the poor, incredulous man.

Seeing the "image of God" in others means that we strive to identify with their needs and feelings; that we seek to increase compassion and thoughtfulness in society; that we feel personal responsibility for others. By developing our own inner "image of God", we make space for others to develop their own inner "image of God"--and this leads to a better, more spiritual humanity.

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faith as taught by Maimonides, and will also be studying modern thinkers and scholars who have written on the same topics. There is no fee for this class, but advance registration is requested by notifying Rabbi Angel at mdangel@jewishideas.org; or by calling 212 362 4764.

Angel for Shabbat