The "Image of God": Thoughts for Parashat Bereishith

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Bereishith

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

The Torah makes a startling statement about God's creation of Adam/Humankind:"So God created Humankind in His own image [*tselem Elo-him*], in the image of God He created him; male and female he created them" (Bereishith 1:27). Sages have devoted much thought to this verse. What exactly does the Torah mean by the phrase *tselem Elo-him*, image of God? We are too sophisticated to take the phrase literally i.e. that human beings are created in the physical form of God—a Being who has no physical features. Among the most widely held views, "image" refers to intellect, free will or creativity.

I suggest that the phrase refers to the human potential for spirituality. From the very inception of humanity, God instilled within us a desire to transcend ourselves, to aspire to an infinite reality beyond our immediate reach.

Evolutionary biologist Edward O. Wilson, in his book *On Human Nature*, presents evidence that a religious sensibility existed in human beings from the earliest times. All human societies-- from hunter gatherers to moderns and post-moderns—display a predilection to spiritual belief. This spiritual sense is intrinsic to humanity.

Every human being has this capacity, but each of us develops and nurtures it differently. The seed of Godliness within us provides the potential for optimal human spiritual growth . Some are able to rise to great heights…to prophecy itself. Others negate and profane their *tselem Elo-him* by clinging to false ideologies or immoral behaviors.

Dean Hamer, in his book *The God Gene*, argues that our spiritual sense is actually implanted in us genetically. “It is our genetic makeup that helps to determine how spiritual we are. We do not know God; we feel him.” This would fit in well with our notion of *tselem Elo-him*. We all have an innate spiritual disposition, albeit of different levels, and can choose to develop this disposition or suppress it.

Religiosity and spirituality are not the same thing. Religions attempt to create frameworks that foster spirituality. Religions provide rites and ceremonials that are intended to stimulate our spiritual sense. But it is possible to observe the various rites and ceremonials and be oblivious to the spirituality these things are meant to inspire. Ideally, our religious lives should be in sync with our spiritual aspirations.

In 1931, Benjamin Nathan Cardozo gave the commencement address at the Jewish Institute of Religion. He referred to the astronomer Tycho Brahe who devoted long years to mark and register the stars, when people mocked him for this seemingly useless endeavor. Cardozo remarked: “The submergence of self in the pursuit of an ideal, the readiness to spend oneself without measure, prodigally, almost ecstatically, for something intuitively apprehended as great and noble, spend oneself one knows not why—some of us like to believe that is what religion means.”

If we add “God” to Justice Cardozo’s statement, we will have a beautiful understanding of spirituality…and religion at its best. Something within us yearns for transcendence, truth, wholeness, unity. When we feel the presence of God, we not only transcend ourselves…we plumb the depths within ourselves.

The quality of spirituality—the *tselem Elo-him* within us-- is God’s gift to us; how we use or abuse this gift defines who we are as human beings.

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Rabbi M. Angel has a 5 minute youtube program, "Are Terrorists Created in the Image of God." Please see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MF8-

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