Created in God's Image?--Thoughts for Parashat Bereishith

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Bereishith

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

“So God created Mankind in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them” (Bereishith 1:27).

This verse has perplexed our sages for many generations. Since we believe God to be non-corporeal and not representable by any physical image, what does the Torah mean when it declares that humans were created in God’s image?

Various interpretations have been offered. Image refers not to any physical quality but to reason; or free will; or creativity; or spirituality.

A widely-held teaching is that each human being is of infinite value since he/she is created in God’s image. To harm a person in any way is to debase the Godliness within that human being. Jewish philosophers and social activists promote the view that each human life is infinitely precious; each person, in a sense, is an image of God and therefore should be honored as God is honored. Although this is a comforting and idealistic interpretation, it strikes me as being false.

History—including our own time—is replete with human beings who are the antithesis of Godliness. Can we really maintain that Stalin or Hitler were worthy to be honored for the image of God within them? Can we honestly see Godliness in terrorists, murderers, pathological haters?

In her recent novel, “The Enemy Beside Me,” Naomi Ragen describes the work of a woman who devotes her life to hunting down and prosecuting Nazis. The novel focuses on the mass destruction of Lithuanian Jewry, with the most heinous crimes against Jews committed by Lithuanians themselves. Can we say with honesty that the murderers, rapists and thieves were created in God’s image, that their lives were infinitely precious?

I can’t.

Then what does the Torah mean when it states that God created human beings in His image?

I believe this passage must be interpreted as stating a potentiality, not a fact. God endowed human beings with the possibility of becoming Godly. But this is a quality that must be developed by each person. Some are able to actualize this potentiality so as to be worthy of being in the image of God. Others, though, suppress the possibility of Godliness. They choose to defile the seeds of Godliness within them, so that in fact, they live and die without actualizing the image of God. Such people are not worthy of respect. On the contrary, they are to be deplored for having crushed the potentiality of Godliness within them.

When people strive to actualize the image of God within them, their lives are indeed infinitely precious. When they abort the image of God within them, they distort and defile the potential for Godliness within them.

God planted His image in all of us, so that we can develop it and allow it to grow and flourish. To live as an image of God is not a guaranteed gift: it is the ultimate challenge.