

The Image of Humanity
Sermon for the Second Day of Rosh HaShanah 5781
Rabbi Greg Weisman – Temple Beth El of Boca Raton

There is a lovely baby book that Tami and I have enjoyed reading to our girls, *On the Night You Were Born*. It makes our eyes well up each time we read it, because of the beautiful message it sends, that on the night of baby's birth, all of nature celebrated. Polar bears danced, geese flew home, the moon stayed up extra late, into the morning, and it concludes, "For never before in story or rhyme/(not even once upon a time)/has the world ever known a you, my friend,/and it never will, not ever again.../Heaven blew every trumpet/and played every horn/on the wonderful, marvelous/night you were born." As far as I know, the author Nancy Tillman is not Jewish, but every time I read that story, it feels like Torah to me. Perhaps more precisely, it feels like Midrash, those rabbinic commentaries, stories, and explanations that give so much texture and flavor to our biblical texts, especially the texts about creation.

Today is the second day of Rosh HaShanah, the continued anniversary of the creation of the world. This morning we read from the beginning of Genesis in our Torah service, reminding ourselves of God's word to bring light, to arrange the cosmos, of breathing life into being. And on the sixth day, God declared "*Na' ashe Adam B'Tzalmeinu KiD'muteinu... VaYivra Elohim et HaAdam B'tzalmo, B'tzelem Elohi Bara Oto, Zachar Un'keivah Bara Otam*—Let us make a human in our image, like our likeness...And God created this human in His image, in the image of God did God create him, male and female God created them." (I apologize for the gendered pronouns, but I wanted to make clear when the Torah uses pronouns and when it refers to God by name, and I just can't bring myself to refer to God as It.)

Humanity, human beings, each one of us, are created *B'tzelem Elohim*, in God's image. It's a theological statement that is core to our belief system, one that is so often referred to within our Reform ideology, and yet I am still awe-struck whenever I spend time thinking about it. *Ribono Shel*

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Olam, the Master of the Universe, *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*, the Holy One of Blessing, in creating us, wanted our form, our visual appearance, to be a reflection, a likeness, an image of God's holiness and sovereignty. That whenever we behold another human being, in our minds eye we should be beholding God.

Like so many other ideas, like a weekly day of rest, this is something that Judaism brought into the world. In the ancient Near Eastern world that our biblical ancestors traversed, they did believe that God's image, or the image of the gods, could be beheld on earth, just not in every human being. That honor, that privilege, that divinity, was reserved for the King, and in a few cases the Queen. We know that to the Egyptians, Pharaoh was God; it was only the sovereign, held up above humanity in his kingdom, who was *B'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God. The rest of them...feh. But when God declares, Let Us make a human in the divine image, the paradigm shifts. As my teacher Rabbi Dr. Shai Held recently taught,¹ not only does this verse declare the divinity of our appearance, but the royalty of our being as well. Being made in the image of God was something reserved for the royal class, and that did to change. When God told us that we were made in God's image, God elevated each of us to royal status. Rabbi Held wondered, "Imagine what it would be like if we approached every human being with the same awe as if we were approaching the king or queen, or the president." The closest I've been to a president or queen is seeing a motorcade- President Bush's in Israel, President Obama's in Los Angeles, and Queen Elizabeth in Berlin. Each memory is unforgettable, and I can still feel the awe I felt. Only if the beggar on the street, or the overnight checkout clerk, the hotel chambermaid, people we so easily

¹ Rabbi Dr. Shai Held addressed the Greater Miami Board of Rabbis' High Holy Day Sermon Seminar in August 2020, where he shared this idea.

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look right past in our busy lives, also evoke the same awe, would I truly be fulfilling the mitzvah of seeing each person as *B'tzelem Elohim*.

We know from watching the news or reading a history book that we have fallen short of fulfilling that mitzvah in almost every generation. Our instincts to protect ourselves and our kin make us evolutionarily wary of others, and so rather than approach them with awe, we approach with trepidation and fear. That fear turns to hate, to bigotry, occasionally to violence. I believe that God reminded us that we are all *B'tzelem Elohim* as an antidote to that wariness, the *yetzer haTov* to try to balance the *yetzer haRa* of hate, bigotry, and the laundry list of –isms that plague us. Too easily we fall into them, too often too.

On Selichot I mentioned that these days of repentance are not only about identifying our transgressions of the past year. We ought to use our time of *Cheshbon Nefesh* to look for credits too, not just debits. What are the ways in this past year that we have been successful in bringing a greater sense of holiness to the world? How have we brought honor to ourselves, our community and tradition, our God in our behaviors. Where did we see the holiness and feel the awe in our fellow human beings, and how can we use those memories to frame our visioning of the new year that is upon us.

I am continually proud of this congregation, of how we consistently strive to be an *Or LaGoyim*, a light unto the nations and an example in our community. We feed the hungry and clothe the naked. We have responded to disasters like hurricanes, earthquakes, and global pandemics with generosity and concern. But in this past year, we challenged ourselves in new ways, deepened our commitment to those around us.

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I was blessed to be a part of these efforts, but I remind us of them now to celebrate the members of our community who brought them to fruition.

We formed an LGBTQ Task Force, aimed at celebrating the diversity within our congregation and pushing us to be more open and more welcoming to everyone, regardless of who they love. This year for Pride Month, despite the limitations that the coronavirus pandemic presented, we celebrated Pride Shabbat with the faces and voices of our LGBTQ community. “It was a wonderful Shabbat,” one of our members said, “When I was little something like this would have been unimaginable!” We followed that up with a conversation with Rabbi Denise Eger on how our movement leads the struggle for LGBTQ equality in the faith-based world, being the first denomination to publish a collection of LGBTQ-focused prayers, blessings, prose, and poetry. As the warm embrace of our congregation enveloped our LGBTQ folk, I’m inspired to see that work continue to blossom in the new year.

This year has also brought forth a newfound commitment to racial justice from within our community. Members of our community drove us to go on a Civil Rights Journey to Georgia and Alabama, to stand witness to our nation’s history and strive to learn the lessons of a legacy of racial discrimination. They came back from that journey wondering what work there was to be done in our time; we do not live in 1960s Birmingham. But through our book discussions we have learned that the issues of race did not end with the passage of the Civil Rights Act. We have witnessed the deaths and maimings of Black citizens, seemingly without justification or explanation, and when our Black neighbors asked us to join them in a march for peace and justice, we did. With our friends Wayne Barton, Pastor Ronald Brown, the Boca Raton Police Department, and houses of worship around the city we stood together (socially distant) to celebrate the cooperation we enjoy and to

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challenge ourselves to do more with and for one another. Off of that foundation we jump into 5781, inspired to do more.

I raise these two commitments- to LGBTQ equality and racial justice- because they are part of our congregations' expression of our commitment to seeing each as having been created *B'tzelem Elohim*. Part of that commitment is to pay special care and attention to those individuals and groups who have historically been oppressed. We, descendants of slaves to Pharaoh, have our own story of oppression and redemption, and as we remind ourselves each year at Pesach, part of our obligation emanating from our experiences is to root out oppression and support its victims. Still a minority ourselves, still vulnerable to anti-Semitism and being cast as the Other in the world's eye, we nonetheless call ourselves to stand with, in front of, behind, and beside other vulnerable groups, fulfilling Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra's teaching that "the judgment of those who witness oppression and remain silent is the same judgment as the oppressors themselves."²

But our commitment to fighting oppression is not limited to a defensive posture, of lending our help to those in need. It is also an outgrowth of our affirmative commitment to celebrating the holiness each individual. Time and again, those who wished to denigrate people because of the color of their skin, their religion, or who they loved, suggested that those individuals were of a different stock. During the colonial period of the 17th, 18th, and 19th Centuries, there were many who believed that the story of God creating a single human being from which we all descended was true...for white people only. They promoted a hideous narrative of second, lesser creation to justify their hateful belief in racial inferiority. They did not learn from our Mishnah, which so

² Ibn Ezra on Exodus 22

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beautifully teaches that God created that first, single human being, to promote peace among people, so that no one could say to another that their heritage is greater anyone else's.³

Our own nation's history is rife with examples of treating LGBTQ folk as sub-human, denying not only their rights but their dignity and self-worth as well. We as Jews have felt that sting, the dehumanizing propaganda of white nationalism trained on us from time to time. We have fought back against this attack on our own people, and we reject its insipid dehumanization by reaffirming the humanity of each person, each iterative expression of God's majesty and holiness. When we stand up for those others wish to tear down, when we celebrate and exalt those who others wish to denigrate and dehumanize, we fulfill our obligation to them, to the Holy One, and ultimately to ourselves to be the very best expression of God that we can be.

In the face of every human being there is the reflection of God. It has always been there. We say that that reflection is *B'Tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God. But that image is the image of humanity, with God's image as an essential feature. Our task is to find it, to see it, to honor it and to celebrate it. In our polarized time, in a world where it is so easy to other a fellow human being, the reminder that we are all, each a singular creation of the Holy One could not be more compelling. When we remind ourselves that we are each created *B'Tzelem Elohim*, we ought to consider ourselves bound by a new mitzvah, a new commandment, to elevate and celebrate the humanity and divinity of each and every human being. To celebrate with nature each person's birth, because God rejoices as well. Only when we do that, when enhance the beauty of our world that

³ Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5

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God created for us and bring love and peace to those around us can we consider ourselves as having fulfilled that obligation.

In a moment we will hear the sounding of the Shofar, the fanfare of Harat HaOlam, the birth of the world and the herald of the new year. Let its calls remind us of why we were created, to bring God's holiness into this world. Let its varied melodies challenge us to continue to celebrate the diversity among us. And let its reverberations continue to inspire us throughout this new year 5781.

Shana tova.