And the LORD spoke to Moses saying: Speak unto the entire congregation of the Children of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I, the LORD your God, am holy.¹

Yesterday, we talked about the גל 멋וֹ-לֶהָם (tselem Elohim), the divine image that inheres in all of humanity and how that divine image requires us to treat all human beings with dignity and respect. Today, I would like to talk about how the divine image in each of us affects how we look at ourselves. Once again, I will be discussing the observations of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel in Quest for God. As we discussed yesterday, Rabbi Heschel notes that while Judaism forbids images of God, Judaism teaches that humanity is designed to reflect God’s image. Heschel explains:

... Judaism ... insisted upon its worship being independent of art. It is life itself that must represent the God of Israel.²

The craving to keep that reflection pure, to guard God’s likeness on earth, is then the motivating force of Jewish piety.³

So, what does it mean for us to reflect God’s image? How do we represent God on earth? The Talmud explains:

Rabbi Chamma bar Chaninah said: What is the meaning of that which is written, “Walk after the Lord Your God”? (Deut. 13:5)⁴ Is it possible for a human to walk after the divine presence? Is it not already written, “For the LORD your God is a consuming fire”? (Deut. 4:24)⁵ Rather, the text means to reflect (lit. “walk after”) the qualities of the Holy One, Blessed is He. Just as God clothes the naked, as it is written, “and the LORD God made for Adam and his wife

¹ Leviticus 19:1-2.
² P. 124 fn. 19. Quotations from Quest For God in this sermon are from the 1987 printing by Crossroad Publishing Company, New York.
³ P. 124.
leather cloaks and clothed them” (Gen. 3:21); you, too, clothe the naked. The Holy One, Blessed is He, visited the sick, as it is written (immediately after Abraham’s circumcision), “the LORD appeared to him in Elonay Mamre” (Gen. 18:1); you too, visit the sick. The Holy One, Blessed is He, consoled mourners, as it is written, “And it was after the passing of Abraham and God blessed Isaac his son” (Gen. 25:11); you, too, console mourners. The Holy One, Blessed is He, buried the dead, as it is written, “And God buried him (i.e. Moses) in Gay” (Deut. 35:6), you, too, bury the dead.

Interestingly, much as we respect the divine image in others by treating them with caring and respect, we cultivate our own divine image through the same acts, by reflecting God’s care for humanity. Ultimately, our goal is to be emissaries of God on earth. In a recent opinion piece in the Jewish Week, author Temimah Goldberg Shulman tells of the vital nature of our role as reflections of the divine image:

For without Mankind finding its power in order to reflect the divine’s mission of social justice, what is the Higher Power, but sitting in a vacuum, a celestial echo chamber of sorts?

In a different section of Quest for God, Rabbi Heschel talks about the nature of Jewish prayer. There, too, he also emphasizes that our ultimate goal is to be a reflection of God:

We do not step out of the world when we pray; we merely see the world in a different setting. The self is not the hub, but the spoke of the revolving wheel. In prayer we shift the center of living from self-consciousness to self-surrender. God is the center toward which all forces tend. He is the source, and we are the flowing of his force, the ebb and flow of His tides. Prayer takes the mind out of the narrowness of self-interest, and enables us to see the world in the mirror of the holy . . . by taking counsel with what we know about the will of God, by seeing our fate in proportion to God. Prayer clarifies our hope and intentions. It helps us discover our true aspirations, the pangs we ignore, the longings we forgot. It is an act of self-purification, a quarantine for the soul . . .

I mentioned last week, when commenting on unetane tokef, that the Hebrew word for prayer, תפילה (tefillah) is reflexive, meaning something along the lines of “to evaluate oneself.” I used to
think of this as meaning that prayer was supposed to be a form of self-flagellation, but Rabbi Heschel shifts the focus from such a self-centered evaluation. Prayer is not about “what have I done wrong,” or even “what can I do better,” but about “how can I reflect God’s will.” When we refer to God as שמים השלום (oseh hashalom), Creator of peace, we are meant to reflect on how we can advance God’s design for peaceful coexistence on earth. When we refer to God as מלך א Loving, the sovereign who loves justice and righteousness, we are reminded to champion justice and righteousness on earth. Rabbi Heschel explains further:

The main ends of prayer are to move God, to let him participate in our lives, and to interest ourselves in Him. What is the meaning of praise if not to make His concern our own? Worship is an act of inner agreement with God. We can only petition Him for things we need when we are sure of His sympathy for us. In prayer we establish a living contact with God, between our concern and His will, between despair and promise, want and abundance.11

In this morning’s Haftorah, God says that the people don’t understand why their fasting has been ineffective and has not earned God’s favor. God explains that the peoples’ fasts have failed because they don’t really understand what God wants. How appropriate, then, that this synagogue has a longstanding tradition of dedicating the Yizkor service and appeal to education. Understanding God’s ways is the first step to following in those footsteps. Isaiah dreams of a day where:

And you seek me out daily and desire to know my ways . . . נקטפו... קוה ענת ולא ראית עתני. Because you do business on your fast days and oppress your workers. You fast in strife and argument, and strike with a wicked fist . . . Is this a fast that I desire? . . . Is the following not the fast that God desires: loosen the fetters of evil, untie the cords of the yoke, set the oppressed free, and break every yoke. Is it not to break off of your bread to the needy and bring the wretched poor into your home, when you see a naked person clothe him, and do not hide from your kin. 12

God says, that the people seek God out daily, but their prayer and fasting fails because they don’t really understand what God wants. How appropriate, then, that this synagogue has a longstanding tradition of dedicating the Yizkor service and appeal to education. Understanding God’s ways is the first step to following in those footsteps. Isaiah dreams of a day where:

11 P. 18.
12 Isaiah 58:2-8.
Through study, we gain understanding of God’s ways; through prayer, we align ourselves with those paths.

Quite some time ago I heard the story of an aspiring rabbi at his interview for admission to the Jewish Theological Seminary. The student rushed through his morning and ran up Broadway to the seminary for the interview. He was taken aback by the first question, which came from Rabbi Heschel: “Did you see God today?”

Based on Quest for God, I suppose that at least one answer that Rabbi Heschel would have accepted was, “Yes. I saw God this morning, when I woke up and looked in the mirror. I see God each time I look at a human being in need, and I see God reflected in my deeds each time I offer a hand. When I pray, I let God in my heart, and I pray that God’s image will be reflected in everything I do, in how I speak to and care for friend and stranger alike.” As we draw toward a close of the penitential season, let us fill ourselves with knowledge and understanding of God and inspire ourselves to project the image of God into the world.

As we approach the Yizkor service, I would like to close my remarks by reflecting on one aspect of humanity that is most reflective of the divine. In Genesis we are told:

This is the story of the generations of Adam - on the day that God created Adam, God made him in God’s image. Two verses later we are told:

And Adam lived thirty and a hundred years and begat a son in his image in his likeness. An important part of our divine image is the ability to create like beings. In the literal sense, children carry the DNA of their parents, but that is the least of it. Each positive lesson we teach to future generations will help project our divine image into the future. With each lesson that we learn from our prior generations and put into action in our lives, we carry their divine image into this world.

As we remember our loved ones today, let us remember their most holy aspects and aspire to perpetuate their divine image in this world even down to our next generations. Where they triumphed in areas of spirituality, charity, kindness, honesty, and justice, let us live in their צלם (tselem, image) and their דמות (d’mut, likeness). Where they may have fallen short, let our personal growth move us toward the potential that came with the צלם א-להים (tselem Elohim, divine image) that they passed on to us.

As God chose to make humanity in God’s image and likeness, this year may we continue to study God’s Torah so as to understand God’s ways; to engage in prayer that genuinely aligns ourselves with those paths; and to draw from examples of the divine image that we saw in our loved ones; so that we might recreate ourselves in ways that more powerfully reflect the divine image in each of us.

---

14 This story was relayed by Rabbi William Lebeau, then the dean of the JTS Rabbinical School, I believe in a talk to the incoming freshman class of the undergraduate JTS/Columbia program in 1994.

15 Genesis 5:1.

16 Genesis 5:3.