

Tikkun Leil Shavuot 5783—The Evolving Meaning of Creation in the Image of God

Compiled by Rabbi Steve Segar---Congregation Kol HaLev

1. Genesis 1:26-27

(26) And God said, “Let us make the human in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth, and all the creeping things that creep on earth.” (27) And God created the human in his image, in the Divine image God created it; male and female God created them.

2. Pirkei Avot 3:14

(14) He (Akiva) would say: Beloved is humankind, since it is created *b'tzelem* (in the image [of God]). An even deeper love - it is revealed to humanity that they are created in the image, as it says (Genesis 9:11) "for in God's image God made humankind."

3. Sifra Kedoshim 4:12, Genesis Rabbah 24:7

Ben Azzai taught: This is the record of Adam’s line. –When God created humanity, God made them in the likeness of God, male and female God created them (Gen. 5:1-2) is a great principle of the Torah. Rabbi Akiva said: You shall love your neighbor as yourself (Lev. 19:18) is an even greater principle. On the contrary, [Ben Azzai’s principle is greater because] you must not say, “Since I am despised, let my neighbor also be despised.” Rabbi Tanchuma said: If you do so, know whom you despise, for He made him in the likeness of God.

4. Midrash Tanchuma Noach 4

And YHVH Elohim said: Here, the human [is like one from us]” [Gen 3:22]—This is what scripture said: “God made the human virtuous” [Eccl 7:29]. The Holy One, who is called righteous and virtuous /tsadik v’yashar, did not create humankind in the Divine image except in order that they should be tsadik v’yashar like God.

5. Moses Maimonides---Guide for the Perplexed, I, 1

Now humanity possesses, as an attribute, something that is very strange, as it is not found in anything else that exists under the sphere of the moon, namely, intellectual apprehension. In the exercise of this, no sense, no part of the body, none of the extremities are used; and therefore, this apprehension was likened unto the apprehension of the deity, which does not require an instrument, although in reality it is not like the latter apprehension, but only appears so to the first stirrings of opinion. It was because of this something, I mean because of the divine intellect conjoined with human beings, that it is said of the latter that they are "in the image of God" and "after God’s likeness," not that God, may God be exalted, is a body and possesses a shape.

6. Maharal of Prague-Rabbi Judah Loew, *Derekh ha-Chayyim* 3:14

This is the meaning of the verse, "Let us make the human in Our image, after Our likeness," for splendor clings to the human face and a divine spark clings to humanity. This is "the image of God." It is in this way that the human being is unique among all creatures, in the splendor and light of the image.

This light is not at all a physical light, but rather divine light and splendor that clings to humanity, and about which it is stated: "For in the Divine image did God make humankind."

7. Rabbi Meir Simcha ha-Kohen of Dvinsk, *Meshekh Chokhma*

The image of God refers to humanity’s ability to choose freely, without being coerced by nature, to act out of free will and intellect... It is this alone that we know, that free will results from divine constriction, that God, may God be blessed, leaves room for God’s creatures to act in the manner of their choosing... God, therefore, said "Let us make humankind in Our image," that is to say, the Torah speaks in human language, for God said, "Let us leave room for human beings to choose, that they not be forced in their actions and obligated in their thoughts, and that they have the free will to do good or evil as they desire, and that they be able to do things against their nature and against what is regarded as upright in the eyes of God."

8. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith*, p. 11

There is no doubt that the term "image of God" in the first account refers to humanity's inner charismatic endowment as a creative being. Humankind's likeness to God expresses itself in one's striving and ability to become a creator. Adam the first who was fashioned in the image of God was blessed with great drive for creative activity and immeasurable resources for the realization of this goal.

9. Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, *Mikhtav me-Eliyahu*, I, p. 32

The power of giving is a divine power, one of the traits of the Creator of all things, may the One be blessed, who shows compassion, is beneficent, and gives, without receiving anything in exchange... In this way God made human beings, as it is written: "God created humankind in God's own image," that they be able to show compassion, be beneficent and give.

10. Arthur Green: *Judaism's Ten Best Ideas* (p. 15)

"Why are graven images forbidden by the Torah?" I once heard my great teacher Abraham Joshua Heschel ask. Why is the Torah so concerned with idolatry? You might think that it is because God has no image, and any depiction of God is therefore a distortion. But Heschel read the commandment differently. "No," he said, "it is precisely because God has an image that idols are forbidden. You are the image of God. Every human being is God's image. But the only way you can shape that image is by using the medium of your entire life. To take anything less than a full, living, breathing human being and try to create God's image out of it—that diminishes the divine and is considered idolatry." You can't make God's image; you can only be God's image.

11. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks <http://the-trace-of-god-noach-covenant-conversation-5778/>

God taught Noah and through him all humanity, that we should think, *not of ourselves, but of the human other* as in the image of God. That is the only way to save ourselves from violence and self-destruction. This really is a life-changing idea. It means that the greatest religious challenge is: Can I see God's image in one who is not in my image — whose color, class, culture or creed is different from mine?

12. Rabbi David Mevorach Seidenberg: *Kabbalah and Ecology*

Yosef ben Shalom Ashkenazi (13th century Spain) wrote in his commentary on *Sefer Yetzirah* (the "Book of Formation", an early mystical tract where the term *Sefirot* first appears) that the heavens and the Earth together, i.e. the cosmos itself, was God's image:

All the existences...whether silent or growing or moving or speaking (rock, plant, animal, human)...every one of them, all of which are His, is in the structure of His seal – understand this for it hints at the truth, as it is said "Let us make a human being (adam) in our image as our likeness", and it says "the heavens rejoice and the earth sings out / *yism'chu hashamayim v'tagel ha'aretz*" (Ps. 96:11) – the first letters [of these four words] spell out *YHWH* and the last letters (read backwards) spell out "His image / *tzalmo*" (Ashkenazi 1961, *ad* 1:12, 67–8)

The universe is God's image, and not just the image of *Elohim*, the name for God used in Genesis 1 that is the template for humanity, but an image of *YHWH* (the Tetragrammaton, often translated as "Lord"). *YHWH* alludes to a higher dimension of God than *Elohim*, and the letters of the Tetragrammaton, *Yud Heh Vav Heh*, represent the structure of the *Sefirot*. On the largest scale, the four letters of the name *YHWH* were seen as corresponding to the multi-level process of emanation that creates and sustains all, which was characterized according to "the four worlds" or stages of being: emanating (*Yud*), creating (*Heh*), shaping (*Vav*) and acting (*Heh*). From this perspective, emphasized in Cordoveran Kabbalah, the entirety of Creation, embracing all the levels, was conceived as an image of God.

Here as elsewhere, the unity of being, which is concomitant with the presence of divinity in all being, is the root of the extraordinary proto-ecological sensibility displayed in Kabbalah. Applying these principles to ecotheology, if the image of God is an image of the diversity of life, then we might say that God's image is diminished every time human beings cause another extinction (Seidenberg 2015, 239).