

Image of the Divine

My grandfather was a public school principal and my grand-mom was a school-teacher. They had side businesses.

Camp Hiawatha was their day camp.

Their other business was Philadelphia School Tours. For a few months, when I was fourteen, my grandparents came to care for my sister and me. I would overhear my grand-mom on the phone, selling tours. On the same night, she would exclaim to one person how the tour of China and the wall was their greatest ... and an hour later she would enthuse to someone else about how the Greece and Israel tour was their best.

After a week, I confronted her—Bubba Jeanne—how can you lie about the tours like that. I hear you telling people different things. She corrected me and explained the personalities. For this person, China was the greatest. For the next, it was Israel. The key was to know the person.

In the Varieties of Religious Experience, William James describes men who start life with a bottle of champagne inscribed to them, while others are born so close to a pain threshold, the slightest irritant may bring them down... He asks: *“Does it not appear as if one who lived more habitually on one side of the pain threshold might need a different sort of religion from one who habitually lived on the other?”*

What does it mean to be created in G-d’s image, or if you prefer, an image more divine, or more holy, than how we may see ourselves? And if we, who just chanted the *Kol Nidre* prayer—as an entire people gone astray—to be released from our habits—what does it mean for the divine if *we*, with our weaknesses, reflect the divine image?

It was at this point in my reflections that two days before Rosh Hashana I called mom. Mom is wise and literate and I asked her for any advice she could offer about creation and our image.

“I’m drawing a blank”, she said.

In its own way, this was an insight. How do we draw the divine image? Perhaps as young children, we start with a simple, perfect image. Then, some of us question or dismiss that image and start over. Others may be frustrated as their ideas of perfection don’t hold.

We move through life in its stages and variety. Childhood, school, work-life, friends, partners, family, older age... Is the divine we imagined in one life the same image we consider as we pray here tonight?

On the afternoon of Rosh Hashana, I looked for inspiration for this Dvar. I went home and played Bach’s Mass in B Minor and read William James describe universal details of saintliness- “-a wider, less selfish, life ...shifting of the emotional center towards loving ...”

I struggled and searched everywhere. Watching the Sunday morning show, I see an exposition of the song Maria from West Side story. When I was 7, my uncle Si took us to see the movie—our first at a drive in theater. Was that a divine act—that he thought to bring us along that night to watch a magical light beam above rows of cars? Or just a night out with the cousins? And what of the song itself and Leonard Bernstein? Or Sondheim, who wrote “the most beautiful sound that I ever heard... say it soft and it’s almost like praying”. Are the simple ways we choose to speak and listen a part of the divine?

Divine acts may be grand of course, but those are not the ones that first come to mind. When Rabbi Elliot led the meditation group last week, he asked us to remember clear acts of love, and the memory came through of my father’s mother, Bubba Rae—who came here from Russia as a teenager. She sat with me in her small kitchen booth, fed me her Kreplach, and showed me unconditional love along with her pure, direct focus.

In Howard Norman’s haunting memoir, he recounts an Inuit tale he translates:

There is a man—an artist who makes sculptures. He lives in a small village with his wife and two children. A shaman turns him into a goose... In this incarnation, he realizes that his choice is to migrate south with the other geese or to die... He despairs, and his wail echoes across the tundra:

“I hate to leave this beautiful place... I hate to leave this beautiful place...”

Of course, we hear in this cry our own mortality -- as on these holy days, we are made especially aware of our time and our choices. We ask who shall live and who shall die, -- and we hold ourselves to account.

But we may also hear in his cry, as an echo of the *Kol Nidre*, a request to be released --a cry to be able to return to a world we find divine.

Part of our opportunity--our purpose --is our fantastic capacity to imagine. And then, our power to re-imagine: what parts of ourselves reflect divine image?

Shall I make a grand gesture or write a song? Should I concentrate on how I speak with someone across a table or a booth? Will I read a novel that may teach me how to live? What questions do I ask myself tonight?

How do we move *towards* our divine self? How shall we live in this beautiful place?

