

Bereshit 5781

People are a mix of heaven and earth.

The Torah gives us two versions of the creation of people.

In Genesis 1:27 the Torah tells us:

וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים | אֶת־הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא אֹתָם:
 And God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.

And in Genesis 2:7 the Torah says:

וַיִּצְרֵף יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָדָם עֹפָר מִן־הָאֲדָמָה וַיִּפַּח בְּאַפָּיו נְשִׁמַת חַיִּים וַיְהִי הָאָדָם לְנֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה:
 the LORD God formed man from the dust of the earth. He blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being.

We can learn a lot about what it means to be a human from these two verses. Rashi explains that when the Torah says people were formed from the dust of the earth with God blowing the breath of life into us, it's telling us that God made people of both earthly matter and heavenly matter. The body of the earthly, and the soul of the heavenly.

Rabbi David Kimchi (Radak), a 13th century French Torah commentator and grammarian, points us to the detailed language used in the verse. It says God blew into Adam *nishmat chayim*, the breath of life, and man became *nefesh chayah*, translated as living being. *Nishmat* is a form of the Hebrew word *neshamah*, which is one of our words for soul. *Nefesh* is another word for soul. The Radak explains that *nefesh chayah* is the life force, something we have in common with all animals, but the *neshamah* is a uniquely human soul, a gift given to us directly by God.

There are many Jewish legends about the golem, a being created from mud that has no soul. The Talmud (Sanhedrin 38b) says that when Adam was created, he was first a golem. He only became a person when God blew his

soul into him. Also, in masechet Sanhedrin we're told that Rava said "If the righteous wish to do so, they can create a world, as it says, 'But your iniquities have separated between you and God.'" A righteous person without iniquities is like God and can create worlds. The story continues that Rava indeed created a 'man,' but it was a golem. Rava sent his creation to Rabbi Zeira, and Rabbi Zeira tried speaking to it but got no reply. Rabbi Zeira told the golem, "You were created by one of my colleagues. Go back to your dust." And of course, there's the most famous golem, the Golem of Prague, created by the Maharal in the 16th century to protect the Jews. If you visit Prague, they will point to the attic where they say the golem lays to this day, although no one is allowed in.

If we're a blend of heaven and earth, how do we express the heavenly side? How should that manifest itself?

We show the heavenly side of us when we walk in God's ways, as we are commanded to do in Deuteronomy 26:17: "You have declared the Lord this day to be your God, and to walk in his ways, and to keep his statutes, and his commandments, and his judgments, and to listen to his voice." How do we walk in God's ways? The Talmud explains:

Is it possible for a human being to walk after the *Shechinah* (Divine presence); for has it not been said: "For the Lord your God is a devouring fire?" But [the meaning is] to walk after the attributes of the Holy One, blessed be He. As He clothes the naked, for it is written: "And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife coats of skin, and clothed them," so you too must clothe the naked. The Holy One, blessed be He, visited the sick, as it is written: "And the Lord appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre," so you too should visit the sick. The Holy One, blessed be He, comforted mourners, as it is written: "And it came to pass after the death of Abraham, that God blessed Isaac his son," so too, you also should comfort mourners. The Holy one, blessed be He, buried the dead, as it is written: "And He buried him (Moses) in the valley," so too you should bury the dead.

In other words, we are Godly, we are expressing the heavenly side of ourselves, when we show compassion to other people.

The NYTimes is usually thought of as a bastion of secular liberalism, but an opinion piece from the paper's Editorial Board earlier this week expressed this most Jewish of values, compassion for others.

Iran is struggling with a rising death toll from coronavirus – 29,000 dead in a country with 82 million people. They managed to flatten their curve for a few months, but since the beginning of September new cases have been increasing. Iran's death toll is the worst in the Middle East, and the country has been struggling to buy emergency medicines. The US government's response has been to oppose a \$5 billion loan Iran requested to help fight the pandemic, and to put even more sanctions on Iran.

This policy is doing great harm to the average Iranian and is doing nothing to stop the leaders of the country who have hard currency and can ride out sanctions in relative comfort compared to the masses who suffer. Barbara Slavin, director of the Future of Iran Initiative at the Atlantic Council, calls the American "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran "sadism masquerading as foreign policy."

Most civilized countries in the world will find ways to be compassionate, even toward citizens of countries they are at war with. The editorial points out that in 2003 when an earthquake killed tens of thousands in Iran, US President George W. Bush sent an airlift with rescuers and medical supplies, and eased restrictions on sending goods and money to Iran. Bush said, "American people care, and we've got great compassion for human suffering. It's right to take care of people when they hurt."

When the civil war was at its worst in Syria, Israel set up a field hospital in the Golan Heights on the Syrian border to treat Syrian refugees, even though

Israel and Syria are technically still in a state of war. Hundreds of Syrians were evacuated to Israeli hospitals for medical treatment.

For the most part Canada has not had much of a policy toward Iran. We've generally gone along with the Americans, not feeling that we have vital interests of our own at stake in Iran. But at a time when there is such a high level of suffering by ordinary citizens in Iran, perhaps it's time that Canada did forge ahead with its own policy. In 2015 Justin Trudeau campaigned with a pledge to restore relations with Iran, but apparently Iran is no longer on the government's radar.

The NYTimes editorial also called on the Iranian leadership to show compassion and release political prisoners who are at risk because of the fierce spread of the coronavirus in the country. The plight of political prisoners in Iran is showcased by the case of Nasrin Sotoudeh, an Iranian human rights lawyer jailed in Tehran's notorious Evin Prison. She was sentenced to 38 years in jail for simply defending, as a lawyer, a group of women who took off their head scarves in public to protest the law mandating head scarves. Sotoudeh went on a hunger strike for a month to call attention to the human rights activists jailed in Iran, and to demand the compassionate release of political prisoners to keep them safe and healthy.

The Jewish tradition teaches us that we should judge others with mercy – and if we do that, it may lead God to judge us with mercy. After all, we can always tell God, “give us a break God, we gave others a break.” If Iran showed some mercy toward its political prisoners, perhaps other nations would be more moved to feel that the Iranian government was deserving of mercy.

The first story of the creation of Man tells us that we were created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in God's image. What does it mean to be created in God's image? The rabbis are clear that this does not mean that God looks like us. What makes us “God-like” is our ability to choose: our free will.

As we are at the start of a New Year, we have a clean slate. May God strengthen our resolve to choose to walk in God's ways, to choose to be compassionate toward all of God's children.