



## Created In God's Image: Equality and Responsibility

Rabbi Shai Held

Genesis famously tells us that human beings are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27). But surprisingly, it does not tell us what this means. Both Jewish and Christian commentators have offered an array of interpretations, often seeking to identify a particular human quality as the image of God within us. For Maimonides (1135-1204), for example, the image of God is reason (Guide of the Perplexed, 1:1); for R. Meir Simḥa of Dvinsk (1843-1926), it is free will (Meshekh Hokhmah to Genesis 1:26,31); for R. Eliyahu Dessler (1892-1953), it is the capacity to give freely and generously.<sup>1</sup> And yet fascinating as many of these interpretations are—if nothing else, they tell us what aspect of human being Jewish thinkers tend to hold most sacred—there is nothing in the Torah itself to support them. So what *does* the Torah mean when it tells us that we are created in God's image?



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Among Bible scholars, one of the most common interpretations is that being created in the image of God means being given the special role of “representing... God's rule in the world.”<sup>2</sup> The Torah's view is that people are God's “vice-regents” and “earthly delegates,”<sup>3</sup> appointed by God to rule over the world. One traditional Jewish commentator,

<sup>1</sup> R. Eliyahu Dessler, *Mikhtav Me-Eliyahu*, vol. 1, p. 32.

<sup>2</sup> J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005), p. 26. For our purposes here, it doesn't matter all that much whether representing God's rule in the world is the *purpose* or *meaning* of being created in God's image or merely the *consequence* thereof. Middleton, for example, argues for



R. Saadia Gaon (882-942), anticipated this understanding of Genesis, arguing that being created in the image of God means being assigned to rule over creation (Saadia Gaon, Commentary to Gen. 1:26).

The ancient Near Eastern context sheds remarkable light on the audacity of the Torah's message. In the ancient world, various kings (and sometimes priests) were described as the images of a god.<sup>4</sup> It is the king who is God's representative or intermediary on earth, and it is he who mediates God's blessings to the world.<sup>5</sup> In dramatic contrast to this, the Torah asserts that ordinary human beings—not just kings, but each and every one of us—are mediators of divine blessing. "The entire race collectively stands vis-à-vis God in the same relationship of chosenness and protection that characterizes the god-king relationship in the more ancient civilizations of the Near East."<sup>6</sup> Genesis 1 thus represents a radical democratization of ancient Near Eastern royal ideology. We are, the Torah insists, all kings and queens.<sup>7</sup>

Put negatively, the Torah's assertion that every human being is created in the image of God is a repudiation of the idea, so common in the ancient world, that some people are simply meant to rule over others. Put more positively, the Torah's assertion that all humanity, without exception, bears the image of God is a theological brief on behalf of human equality. If everyone is royalty, then on some level, when it comes to the interpersonal and political spheres, no one is.

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the former. For examples of the latter, see Moshe Weinfeld, "The Creator God in Genesis 1 and in the Prophecy of Deutero-Isaiah," (Hebrew) *Tarbitz* 37:2 (1968), pp. 105-132 (relevant passage is on p. 113); and John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology, Volume One: Israel's Gospel* (2003), p. 109.

<sup>3</sup> Middleton, *Liberating Image*, pp. 59, 60.

<sup>4</sup> For some accessible examples from the ancient world, cf. Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (1988), p. 114.

<sup>5</sup> Middleton, *Liberating Image*, pp. 108-122.

<sup>6</sup> Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, p. 114.

<sup>7</sup> Middleton, *Liberating Image*, p. 121. Cf. also, for example, Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, pp. 111-117; and Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1989), p. 12.



Assigned the role of God's delegates, human beings are told to "be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it... rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on the earth" (1:28).<sup>8</sup> The mandate expressed here has been the subject of enormous controversy: Some environmentalists have placed the blame for the Modern West's despoliation of the earth squarely at the Bible's feet. Thus, for example, one influential writer charged that according to Christian (and by implication, Jewish) thinking, "God planned all of this explicitly for man's benefit and rule: No item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man's purposes." The environmental crisis, he insisted, was rooted in religious "arrogance towards nature" and the only solution, therefore, lay in moving beyond these patently damaging and outdated ideas.<sup>9</sup>

But does the Torah really think that creation exists in order to serve humanity, and that that is the only source of its value? Again

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and again in Genesis 1, as days of creation comes to an end, the text announces that "God saw that it was good" (*ki tov*) (1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 31). As Maimonides points out, creation is declared good prior to, and separate from, the arrival of human beings onto the scene (Guide of the Perplexed, III:13). (If anything, it is striking that the Torah never describes God looking at human beings in particular and proclaiming them good—perhaps, in the Torah's eyes, where humanity is concerned, the jury is still out.)<sup>10</sup> What's more, Genesis 1 repeatedly emphasizes and seems to revel in the fact that God created both vegetation and creatures "of every kind." This is true of seed-bearing plants and fruit-bearing trees (1:11); of living creatures of the sea and of birds (1:21); and of wild beasts and cattle (1:25). God blesses the

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<sup>8</sup> More familiar to some readers, perhaps, is the King James Bible's rendering: "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth."

<sup>9</sup> Lynn Townsend White, Jr, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis", *Science*, Vol. 155 (Number 3767), March 10, 1967, pp. 1203-1207; passages cited are on p. 1205.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Genesis 8:21.



creatures of the sea and the birds of the sky with some of the same words God uses for humanity: “Be fertile and increase and fill...” (1:22).<sup>11</sup> Among other things, then, the biblical creation story is like a hymn to biodiversity, which is seen as unambiguously good in its own right.

For the Torah, then, creation is precious in its own right. Humanity is given the task of ruling over it—and yet many of us are uneasy about seeing human beings through the lens of royalty. We think of monarchy as an oppressive institution, and of kings and queens as abusers only too willing to exploit their vulnerable subjects. But is this how the Tanakh imagines a king ought to behave, and if not, what is the alternative it envisions? The book of Ezekiel reports that the prophet is sent by God to castigate the kings of Israel, who are intended to be like “shepherds” to Israel, but who instead tend only to themselves. “You have not sustained the weak,” Ezekiel charges, “healed the sick, or bandaged the injured; you have not brought back the strayed, or looked for the lost; but you have driven them with harsh rigor” (Ezekiel 34:1-6). Selfish rulers who do not care for the lost, ill, and vulnerable come in for God’s withering disapproval.

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Much the same vision of kingship is expressed in Psalm 72, a prayer on behalf of the king. What are the desirable attributes and characteristics of royalty? The king should be blessed with “justice” and “righteousness”; “Let him,” prays the psalmist, “champion the lowly among the people, deliver the needy folk, and crush those who wrong them.” Let him behave in such a way that “the righteous may flourish in his time, and well-being abound.” The king, we learn, “saves the needy who cry out, the lowly who have no helper. He cares about the poor and the needy; he brings the needy deliverance” (Psalm 72:2,

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<sup>11</sup> Presumably the blessing from day five (1:22) extends to the land animals created on day six as well, although the text does not make this explicit.



4, 7, 12-13). If Genesis 1 teaches that human beings are meant to be kings and queens over creation, Ezekiel and the psalmist make abundantly clear what kind of kings and queens we are summoned to be: “The task of a king is to care for those over whom he rules, especially for the weakest and most helpless... This means that humans are expected to care for the earth and its creatures. Such is the responsibility of royalty.”<sup>12</sup> What we find in Genesis 1, then, is not a license to abuse and exploit but a summons to nurture and protect.

Human sovereignty over creation is far from absolute; it is God’s will for creation, and not our own, that are we are directed to enact.

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Commenting on Psalm 115’s affirmation that

“The heavens belong to the Lord, but the earth He gave over to humanity” (115:16), R.

Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089-1164) writes: “The ignorant think that humanity’s rule over the earth is the same as God’s rule over the heavens. But they are mistaken, because God rules over everything. The meaning of ‘but the earth He gave over to humanity’ is that the human being is God’s steward (*pakid*) over the earth and everything that is on it, and she must act according to God’s word.” Even as kings and queens, we remain servants of God—and thus stewards, not owners.

To take Genesis 1 seriously, we have to be willing to hold two realities together simultaneously. On the one hand, according to the Torah, there *is* a hierarchy between human beings and animals: Human life takes precedence. As the Christian theologian Michael Welker writes, “We cannot use the justification for letting our neighbors starve the argument that we must first feed the animals in our own house. We cannot let our children be endangered by wild animals. Human beings have primacy over animals. For this reason the language [of dominion in Genesis 1] is completely unambiguous. In no case may an

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<sup>12</sup> James Limburg, “Who Cares for the Earth? Psalm Eight and the Environment,” in Arland J. Hultgren, Donald H. Juel, and Jack D. Kingsbury, eds., *All Things New: Essays in Honor of Roy A. Harrisville* (1992), pp. 43-52; passage cited is on p. 50.



animal be given higher status than a human being.”<sup>13</sup> Yet on the other hand, human primacy comes with enormous responsibility—to be masters over creation in a way that embodies (like Psalm 72’s image of the king) responsibility and caretaking. There is no contradiction here, only nuance.

The problem with the notion of human stewardship over creation is not that it authorizes human exploitation of the earth and abuse of the animal kingdom—which, as we have seen, it emphatically does not. The problem is, rather, that we have not really taken it seriously enough to try it. In modern times, amidst an almost manic need to produce and consume more and more, we have all too often lost sight of what has been entrusted to us.<sup>14</sup> What we need is not to abandon Genesis 1 but to return to it and to re-discover there what we have forgotten or failed to see altogether. We are created in the image of God and are thus mandated to rule over creation; this is a call to exercise power in the way Tanakh imagines the ideal ruler would, “in obedience to the reign of God and for the sake of all the other creatures whom [our] power affects.”<sup>15</sup>

The approach laid out here overcomes one form of anthropocentrism—the crude notion that

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everything exists for us, and that we are therefore free to consume and dispense with it as we will—while affirming another: In

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<sup>13</sup> Michael Welker, “Creation and the Image of God: Their Understanding in Christian Tradition and the Biblical Grounds,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 34:3 (Summer 1997), pp. 436-448; passage cited is on p. 447. Cf. Tosefta Bava Metzia 11:33.

<sup>14</sup> David Ehrenfeld and Philip J. Bentley write: “As Jews and Christians have found, to their sorrow, the practice of stewardship, under the intoxicating influence of the power that comes with science and technology, is easily twisted and distorted so that stewardship becomes subjugation. When this occurs, as it does all around us, the vision of a power higher than humanity, which gave the original sanction and limit to the idea of stewardship, is itself washed away in a flood of collective egomania.” David Ehrenfeld and Philip J. Bentley, “Judaism and the Practice of Stewardship,” *Judaism* 34 (1985), pp. 301-311; passage cited is on p. 302.

<sup>15</sup> James L. Mays, “What is a Human Being? Reflections on Psalm 8,” *Theology Today* 50:4 (January 1994), pp. 511-520; passage cited is on p. 518.



contrast to the rest of creation, human beings are responsible and answerable for our actions.<sup>16</sup> This is another way to understand the democratization of the image of God: Every human being, each and every one of us, is responsible for our actions. Theologian Norman Wirzba captures this point beautifully: “Despite the desire that many have for greater species equality, the fact of the matter is that we are, because of our spiritual endowment or potential and our technological prowess, masters of this earth. The issue is not how we will shed ourselves of our unique potential and responsibility, but how we will transform it for good.”<sup>17</sup> We have both enormous responsibility and awesome power. “It is up to us to determine if we will make of ourselves a blessing or a curse.”<sup>18</sup>

Shabbat shalom.

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. Douglas J. Hall, “Stewardship as Key to a Theology of Nature,” in R.J. Berry, ed., *Environmental Stewardship: Critical Perspectives—Past and Present* (2006), pp. 129-144; passage cited is on p. 141.

<sup>17</sup> Norman Wirzba, *The Paradise of God: Renewing Religion in an Ecological Age* (Oxford: Oxford, 2003), p. 135.

<sup>18</sup> Ellen Bernstein, “Rereading Genesis: Human Stewardship of the Earth,” in Or N. Rose, Jo Ellen Green Kaiser, and Margie Klein, eds., *Righteous Indignation: A Jewish Call for Justice* (2007), p. 59.