

MEDITATIONS ON CREATING A SOCIETY TO BE IN THE IMAGE OF GOD

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Do you remember what it was like, way back then, when we were an agrarian people living in the Land of Israel? The Torah was our guide for living, for each one of us and for all of us together. We would leave one corner of every field we planted for the poor and the landless to harvest. Ah, truth be told, we were not always happy when that pre-designated corner turned out to be the best of our crop. And so the grain that fell from our simple plows, to be left for the gleaners who followed behind, no shame, no awkwardness, it was the way we knew, what God wanted as much as our keeping of the Sabbath. The olives that remained upon our trees after the shaking, and the grapes still upon the vine after the picking, for the poor as well, the grapes perhaps to become their kiddush wine. On Shabbat we were all as royalty, a day to remind of equality that we might do better to make it so in the coming week, serving God with our rest, even as with our labor.

That was the nature of Jewish society then, at least what God hoped it would be, the Torah lived through deeds, as it is still meant to be lived, holy commandments the means by which to make the ideal real in the world of our striving. Our world then was agricultural. We knew the earth to be God's, her bounty given as a gift to share, the laws of agriculture nurturing our relationship with each other, with the land, and with God. The land her own Sabbaths we were to give every seventh year. And in the seventh year in the fields we came to think we owned, shared now by all, we could not harvest but that which grew of itself, only to pick that which was needed for one meal at a time, rich and poor rubbing shoulders, God's plan to remind us that we are all but tenants on the land. And in the way of our sharing in that simpler time, an economy rooted in the land, debts were forgiven in the seventh year, a chance for all to start again.

It was an ideal of justice, of equity and harmony that formed the tapestry of the social order meant to govern the way we lived. Through the years while yet upon the holy land, time unfolding on the loom and we adapting to change as it came, we held to the ideal as best we could. Oppressors came and went and amidst the din of destruction and despair, the danger of forgetting. Infusing the written word with new life, oral

teaching that expanded on the Torah came to be written down as Mishna and Gemorrah, the Talmud guiding the ideal, from Babylonia to Vilna to wherever Jews in time and space abide. Through exile and dispersion, a light unto the nations we were meant to be, though sometimes needing our own light to find the path when we strayed.

Taking a break from desk meditations on what it means to create a society to be in the image of God, I went to sit and think by Jamaica Pond. Asking where I was going in the middle of the day, a neighbor said, "ah, you're going to think with your legs." Sunlight glinting upon the water, a breeze rustling the leaves above, a pair of white swans faithful to each other in their gentle presence wing to wing, a young woman jogging by stirred me from my reverie. "Are you Rabbi Reinstein," she asked? Once upon a time a sixth grade student of mine in the learning of mishna and its application to life, now bound soon for Ghana to give of herself to others, choosing a part to play in the world's repair. She asked what I was thinking about, and I said "of d'rashot for the Yamim Nora'im," and "what will the focus be," she continued. Grateful for the opportunity to explain, more to myself than to her, "something," I said, "about creating society to be in the image of God." A thoughtful pause and then she said, "that's interesting, because usually we think of people being created in the image of God."

And so it is, the human being created in the image of God, **בצלם אלקים**, the starting point of Jewish ethics. Reflecting God's oneness, the first human was created as one so that none should be able to say, "My ancestor was greater than yours." All emerging from one, the one reflecting all, the rabbis taught, "Whoever destroys a single life destroys an entire world, and whoever saves a single life saves an entire world." If every person is created in the image of God, each one entirely unique in their own reflection of God's image, what happens when all these images of God come together to form human society, or to form one square of the quilt in a given place and time? How is God's image reflected in the collective nature that is all of us together?

So small in our organic finitude, a heartbeat in time, a speck in the expanse of galaxies, how do we human beings come to resemble God, **אין סוף**, the Infinite One -- without end, without form? There was an echo among all the twinkling stars of those galaxies upon creation of the human, "How good, how very good." Affirming the grandeur of our creation in God's image in the way that we live in relation to each other, imitating God, "imitatio Dei" becomes the way of our resembling God. The Hebrew is **התדמות לאל**, making oneself like God. It is the great challenge of the Torah, **קדושים תהיו**, "Be holy, for I, God, your God, am holy." "But how?," we protest. From beyond quill and parchment, a still small voice, "read on, and then look around you:" leave the corners of your field for the poor; pay a worker on time; don't gossip -- what's that doing there?;

don't stand idly by the blood of your neighbor; love your neighbor as yourself. Directed to each one of us, we express the holiness of our creation in relation to each other. We emulate God by living in accord with the attributes that we come to know as God's way. It is expressed beautifully in the title of a book by Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, "Living in the Image of God." Affirming the ultimate importance of the individual, as soon as there is more than one individual, creation in the image of God becomes a social construct. Each of us is created in the image of God, but only in relation to others are we given the privilege and the obligation of "living in the image of God."

"And you shall walk in God's ways/ללכת בדרכיו", two simple words toward the end of the Torah, in the portion Ki Tavo, similar in their challenge to "you shall be holy," that become the source for emulating God's attributes as a specific mitzvah. It is the 611th commandment out of 613, the crown penultimate, the remaining two concerning the reading and writing of Torah. To walk in God's ways is the purpose to which all of the commandments point, a standing-on-one-foot summation of the whole Torah, like love of neighbor in the teaching of Hillel to the Roman, summation of a way of life rooted in Torah. But what does it mean? Of a similarly worded exhortation to follow after God...: *Rabbi Chama said in the name of Rabbi Chanina..., As God clothes the naked..., you should clothe the naked; the Holy One visited the sick, so should you visit the sick; the Holy One comforted those who mourned, so should you comfort those who mourn; the Holy One buried the dead, so should you bury the dead.*

So too, the rabbis instruct us in regard to God's attributes that we sing many times during these holy days, ...ה' קל רחום וחנון. We sing them not for God's sake, but for ours -- *Holy One of Being, Whose name is Being, God gracious and compassionate, patient, abounding in kindness and faithfulness.... As God is gracious and compassionate, so should you be gracious and compassionate.* We tend to put "shoulds" off, both our society and ourselves, people in need seem distant, faceless, those with a lesser voice, of lesser connection, wait. From the 17th century, Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz, known as the holy של"ה, acronym from the title of his book, "Two Tablets of the Covenant," שני לוחות הברית, teaches that emulating God is more than a "should:" *Consequent to a person's being made in the image of the Holy Creator, one is obligated - על כן מחויב - to emulate God in every way possible, and you shall walk in God's ways.*

If every person is created in the image of God, what does it mean for people to create together a society that reflects the image of God, if not to express collectively God's attributes of caring that each one of us is to emulate as an individual?

We are joined to each other in the way that we care for each other. The word for society

is חברה, of the same root as חבר, friend. The root means "joined" or "connected." As friends are joined to each other in mutual caring and concern, so the ideal of people joined together as a caring society. In the traditional organization of Jewish communities, the role of various societies or חברות was essential to the well-being of the community. The חברה קדישא, the "holy society," looked after the dead, the חברה גמילות חסדים, the "society of loving kindness," was a free loan society, the חברה ביקור חולים, the society for visiting the sick, and, conveying such tenderness in another age and time, the חברה הכנסת כלה, the society for dowering poor brides. Beyond the scope of needs to realistically be met by caring individuals, the chevras sought collectively to meet the commonweal.

As the image of God is honored interpersonally in the way of our response to others, and our character gauged, so the quality of a society is gauged in its caring for the most vulnerable. When we are told to leave the corners of our fields and that which falls from the plow or remains unpicked, thirty-six times when emphasizing our responsibility for those most in need, the Torah speaks of real people, telling us "it shall be for the stranger, the orphan and the widow, לגר וליתום ולא למנה יהיה." But our memories are short, dulled by satisfaction and success. Lest we forget and ask why such need to care, the Torah anticipates and reminds, כי עבד היית בארץ מצרים, "because you were a slave in the land of Egypt." Utterly alone then in our otherness, with different emphasis the Torah reminds of that barren state and says at other times, reminding not that we were slaves, but כי גרים הייתם ברץ מצרים, "because you were strangers in the land of Egypt." That reminder comes as signature to a warning, "And you shall not impose restrictions upon a stranger -- for you know the soul of the stranger..." ואתם ידעתם את נפש הגר. It is a commandment rooted in empathy. From 13th century Spain, Rabbenu Bachya offers God's response to us as strangers in Egypt as the way our response should be to the stranger among us: *It does not say, for you know the stranger, rather, "the soul of the stranger." That is to say, you know that the soul of every stranger is downcast, and does not have anyone to whom to raise her eyes, but for Me. I will therefore have compassion upon him, as I had compassion upon you when you were strangers in the land of Egypt.*

It seems so simple. Every human being is worthy of care and compassion because they are a human being. Humanness does not end at a national border. Can there be a more universal identification card or passport than God's image stamped on our being? And so the measure of a society in its living in the image of a such a simple truth. From 19th century Germany, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch writes in response to God's compassion for the stranger: *The treatment accorded by a state to the aliens living within its jurisdiction is the most accurate indication of the extent to which justice and humanity prevail in that state.*

A fascinating word play jumped out at a me while looking at the *Machzor*, the holiday

prayer book. *Machzor* means cycle, as in the cycle of a year, or of a life. A prayer said three times in the cycle of every day throughout the year, during these days with added urgency in its emphasis on life. It is the second blessing in the *Amidah*, the standing prayer, the blessing called גבורות, which means "powers," referring to God's power to sustain the living and even in the end of days to raise up the dead. , אתה גנור לעולם ה' -- "You, mighty for the world, God, Who gives life to the dead, abundant to save." And then, familiar now with Yontev tune, מכלכל חיים בחסד -- "You sustain the living with kindness and give life to the dead with abundant compassion..." interweaving of the living and the dead, perhaps that the living not become as dead in life, or or to join the living and the dead through deeds of loving kindness, and then entirely for the living: סומך נופלים -- "You support the fallen," ומתיר אסורים -- "You free the bound," ורופא חולים -- "and You heal the sick," ומקיים אמונתו לישני עפר -- "and You keep faith with those who sleep in the dust." A prayer for human needs modeled by God, for the fallen on hard times, for the sick, for the homebound and prison bound whom justice failed, a prayer that the living not sleep in the dust. Suddenly new to me, a prayer for society as created in the image of God, for a nation to walk in God's ways.

Of God as Sustainer, it is that first word that jumped out at me -- מכלכל -- sustain, support, nourish. Seeing the word play for the first time, perhaps attuned to it by the climate of the times, מכלכל -- sustain, is of the same root as כלכלה -- economy. Economy -- that which sustains a nation, the production, distribution, and consumption of its wealth. A nation's true wealth is measured in the well-being of its people, all of its people. Not the language of everyday Hebrew, there are layers of meaning in a phrase that comes to mean economics -- תורת הכלכלה -- a teaching of the economy. Torah with a small "t," or "tav," if you will, means teaching, instruction. Writ large, the Torah is called תורת חיים, a Torah of life. The Torah is meant to guide in all realms of life, leading us to walk in God's ways wherever life takes us, in our homes and schools, on the streets of town and city, in the market place of commerce and ideas, wherever we see God's image in the presence of an other. A torah of the economy, such textured possibility in words rich with association from Bible times to modern times. תורת הכלכלה -- A torah of the economy is one that values people above all, whose concern reflects God's concern for the stranger, the orphan, and the widow, the most vulnerable of society, an economy that gives priority to human needs.

A story..., from the Talmud Yerushalmi, the Jerusalem Talmud as compared to the Bavli, the more expansive Babyonian Talmud:

Rabbi Chamah bar Chanina and Rabbi Hoshayah Rabbah, the Great, were walking among the (magnificent) synagogues of Lud. Rabbi Chamah bar Chanina said to Rabbi Hoshayah, "how much money did my ancestors sink here?" Rabbi Hoshayah said to him, "How many souls did your ancestors sink here?" -- כמה נפשות שיקעו אבותיך כאן ?

It is a powerful account. We don't know with what tone Rabbi Chamah asked his question, but there is no mistaking the intent in the sharpness of Rabbi Hoshayah's response. He is asking, "how much money was spent on these buildings, even houses of prayer, at the expense of meeting human needs?" It may be that Rabbi Chamah asked his question ruefully, himself lamenting what he saw as misplaced priorities. It is the same Rabbi Chamah, we may recall, who taught that just as the Holy One clothes the naked, visits the sick, comforts the mourner and buries the dead, so should we. In the fuller context of the story and in commentary it becomes clear that it is a teaching story about economic priorities, giving substance to a debate as to which takes precedence, building synagogues or giving tzedakah. Another rabbi, Rabbi Manah, appears on the scene among the synagogues of Lud and says, "Israel has forgotten their Maker in building sanctuaries!" -- וישכח ישראל את עושהו ויבן היכלות !. It is an astounding statement, forgetting our Maker in the building of synagogues! The story is meant to teach the precedence of צדקה, giving of one's means for the sake of justice, raising up people before buildings. An 18th century commentator charges that the ancestors of Rabbi Chamah should not have been so "exacting concerning the design of synagogue buildings." There are different threads in regard to what the focus of communal funds should have been. Support for the poor to learn Torah is one opinion, helping the poor who are sick is another. In the context of the initial debate, buildings or people, both threads, health and education, are woven into the Shulchan Aruch, the magisterial Code of Jewish Law compiled in the 16th century. There, searing the page, commentary shouts back through time with stinging rebuke against the priorities of the people of Lud, ? לא הוון חולים המוטלים לאשפה -- "Were there no sick people being thrown on the trash heap?!"

Perhaps it was from this story in the Yerushalmi that Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel drew when he spoke at a White House conference on aging in 1961: "The true standard by which to gauge a culture is the extent to which reverence, compassion, justice are to be found in the daily lives of a whole people, not only in the acts of isolated individuals. *Culture is a style of living compatible with the grandeur of being human....* In our own days, a new type of fear has evolved...: the fear of medical bills.... A nation should be ready to sell, if necessary, the treasures from its art collection and the sacred objects from its houses of worship in order to help one sick person...."

Reverence, compassion, justice in the daily lives of a whole people..., a society created in the image of God. We have known the flowering of love as a people, of neighbor one for another. Eternal teaching to be adapted, transplanted from ancient fields of corners whose produce was for others, of gleanings left for the taking, of sabbath rest for land and people. And we have known the exile of love, the land her rest denied, God's image shadowed, not able to speak peaceably with one another in debate, nor see the needs of others as our own. The rabbis say the second Temple was destroyed through סינת חינם

-- hatred overflowing. Far we wandered from the land of our desire, from each other and from God, but within we carried the knowledge of what was and of what can be in all the lands of our dwelling.

From another teacher, poet of the soul, and of wind and sea, words that might have been written to tell the story of our people and of our yearning, words with teaching on their wing for all, verses of a song by Maine folk singer, sailor, songwriter Gordon Bok:

*Now through the hollowing green wave we wander,
Long down the stormy seas, and sad,
Long from the land of our desire.*

*Why, when the winnowing sun was keeping
All of our harvest and our toil,
Made we no peace among our kind?*

*Why, when the summering wave was swinging,
And all our hills and trees were green,
Did we not sow our fields with love?*

In lament there is hope, in plaintive key a desire for what has been lost, or if it never was to make it be; and so to restore or to create through love and compassion overflowing a society that is made to be in the image of God.