

Parashat Bereishit 5776, 2015

*“Let Us Make Man In Our Image, After Our Likeness...”*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, HaRav Yosef Shemuel ben HaRav Reuven Aharon, David ben Elazar Yehoshua, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

And G-d said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness...” (*Sefer Bereishit* 1:26, this and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

The phrase, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness,” has been the subject of intense scrutiny since time immemorial. To whom, after all, did the Holy One Blessed be He refer when He employed the terms, “us” and “our?” Rashi (1040-1105), in his commentary on our verse, provides us with a famous interpretation that is based upon several *Midrashim*:

**Let us make man:** From here we learn the humility of the Holy One, blessed be He. Since man was created in the likeness of the angels, and they would envy him, He consulted them... **Let us make man:** Even though they [the angels] did not assist Him in His creation, and there is an opportunity for the heretics to rebel (to misconstrue the plural as a basis for their heresies), Scripture did not hesitate to teach proper conduct and the trait of humility, that a great person should consult with and receive permission from a smaller one. Had it been written: “I shall make man,” we would not have learned that He was speaking with His tribunal, but to Himself.

G-d’s humility is certainly writ large in Rashi’s explanation. This is congruent with the well-known Rabbinic dictum, “Rabbi Yochanan said: ‘In every instance wherein you find the greatness of the Holy One Blessed be He referenced, therein you will find a statement of his humility.’” (*Talmud Bavli, Megillah* 31a, underlining my own) At the same time, however, Rashi notes that the angels were envious of man and “they [the angels] did not

assist Him in His creation [of man].” The following passage from the *Gemara* helps elucidate this comment:

Rav Yehudah said in the name of Rav: “At the time the Holy One Blessed be He sought to create the first man, he created one group of ministering angels. He said to them: ‘Is it your will that we should create man in our image?’ They said before Him: ‘Master of the Universe, what will be his actions?’ He [G-d] responded: ‘His [man’s] actions will be thus and so.’ They [the angels] then said before Him: ‘Master of the Universe, “What is man that You should remember him, and the son of man that You should be mindful of him?”’” (*Sefer Tehillim* 8:5) At that moment, He sent forth his smallest finger amongst them and consumed them with fire. So, too, with the second group [of angels that He had created]. The third set of angels then said to Him: ‘Master of the Universe, the first ones who spoke before You – What purpose did they serve? The entire Universe belongs to You and everything that You want to do in Your world – do!’ When the terrible behaviors of the Generations of the Flood and the Tower of Babel came to the fore, they [the angels] said to Him: ‘Did not the first groups of angels speak properly [i.e. accurately] before You?’ [After all, look what man has now done!] G-d then said to them: ‘And until old age I [G-d] am the same, and until you turn gray I will carry; I have made and I will bear and I will carry and deliver.’” (*Sefer Yeshayahu* 46:4, *Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin* 38b, Talmud translation and all brackets my own)

Man, it appears, is the ultimate study in contrasts. In one sense, man is capable of living on an almost angelic plane of being, “Yet You have made him [i.e. man] slightly less than the angels, and You have crowned him with glory and majesty.” (*Sefer Tehillim* 8:6) Nonetheless, immediately prior to this paean of praise, the same King David declared, as did the ministering angels in our Talmudic passage, “When I see Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and stars that You have established, what is man that You should remember him, and the son of man that You should be mindful of him?” (Verses 4-5, underlining my own).

Many Kabbalistic and Chassidic works focus upon man’s dual nature, and speak in terms of the raging battle within us between the *nefesh behamit* (animalistic-oriented soul) and the *nefesh Elokita* (the G-dly soul). Perhaps the recognition of this unceasing internal

psychological and spiritual conflict lead our Sages to question whether or not man should have been created at all:

Our Rabbis taught: Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel argued for two and a half years [regarding the creation of man]. This group said, “It would have been better for man not to have been created than to have been created.” [In contrast,] the other group stated: “It was better for man to have been created than to have not been created.” [Finally a consensus was reached,] and they concluded: “It would have been better for man not to have been created than to have been created.” Now, however, that man has been created, let him carefully examine (*y’phashpfash*) his actions. Others said the proper text is that man should scrutinize (*y’mashmash*) his actions. (*Talmud Bavli, Eruvin 13b*, translation, brackets and underlining my own)

Rabbi Shmuel Halevi Eidels *zatzal* (1555-1631), known by his Hebrew acronym as the “Maharsha,” is renowned for his detailed two-part commentary on the *Talmud Bavli* that analytically examines both Halachic and Aggadic passages. In his glosses on the above-cited Aggadic section from *Talmud Bavli, Eruvin 13b*, he notes that man is an essential part of Hashem’s Universe, for if he did not exist there would be no one to perform the Torah’s commandments. Yet, on the pragmatic level, this idea contains a conceptual double-edged sword: The *mitzvot lo ta’aseh* (negative commandments) are, in the main, fulfilled by simply refraining from performing certain specified actions. Therefore, were man never to have come into being, each of the *mitzvot lo ta’aseh* would be fulfilled by default, since there would be no one to violate their integrity. With man’s creation, however, this calculus changes and a negative risk-reward valence incorporating the distinct probability of violating the *mitzvot lo ta’aseh* is present. The plus side of the equation of man’s existence in the Cosmos is to be found, however, in his potential fulfillment of *mitzvot aseh* (positive commandments):

... for if he had not been created, it is incontrovertibly the case that the positive commandments would never be fulfilled. Now that man has been created, it is possible that he will act meritoriously and perform them, and in that way he will be rewarded.

At this juncture, the Maharsha arrives at the crux of the *machloket* (dispute) between Beit Hill and Beit Shammai:

One side said that it would have been better for man not to have been created because of the [probable] violation of the *mitzvot lo ta'aseh*, since it is possible that the ultimate loss [due to these prohibitions] will far outweigh any benefit that will accrue as a result of man's creation and consequent fulfillment of the positive commandments. [In other words,] *yatzah scharo b'hefsado* (his reward will be as naught in comparison to his loss). The other view opined that it was better for man to have been created than not created, since it is possible that he will fulfill the *mitzvot aseh*, rather than merely have the *mitzvot lo ta'aseh* fulfilled by default. [In other words,] *d'yatzah hefsado b'scharo* (his loss will be as naught in comparison to his reward). (Translations my own)

As we have seen, the original passage concludes with the statements: "It would have been better for man not to have been created than to have been created. Now, however, that man has been created, let him carefully examine (*y'phashpfash*) his actions. Others said the proper text is that man should scrutinize (*y'mashmash*) his actions." I believe that the key to man's potential spiritual growth and improvement may well be contained in both these Hebrew terms that are explained in different ways by our classic commentators.

The *Aruch* (Rabbi Yechiel ben Natan, 1035-1110) explains "*y'phashpfash*" as referring to careful inspection of one's actions after having committed a sin. In contrast, "*y'mashmash*" refers to the scrutiny of one's potential actions to ascertain whether or not they fit the criteria of meritorious behavior. Each of these approaches, therefore, should prevent a person from committing a *chate* (sin) or, at the very least, from repeating it. Rashi follows the *Aruch's* approach in reference to "*y'phashpfash*," while significantly expanding upon the analysis of "*y'mashmash*." In doing so, he comes close to paraphrasing the *Mishnah* in *Pirkei Avot* 2:1, wherein Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi said: "Be as careful with a minor *mitzvah* as with a major one, for you do not know the rewards of the *mitzvot*. Consider the cost of a *mitzvah* against its rewards, and the rewards of a

transgression against its cost.” Thus, in his commentary on our Talmudic passage, Rashi states the following:

*Y'mashmash b'ma'asuv* – for example, if one has an opportunity to perform a *mitzvah*, he should consider the loss that will obtain due to its non-performance in light of the reward that would accrue as a result of its performance. He should, therefore, not put off its performance because of the [momentary] monetary expenditure, since its reward will surely come in the future. [Moreover,] if the possibility of performing a sin presents itself, he should carefully consider the “reward” that will accrue immediately over and against the future loss for which he will have to make restitution.

In my opinion, however, the most trenchant analysis of “*y'phashpfash b'ma'asuv*” and “*y'mashmash b'ma'asuv*” is found in the classic gem of the Mussar Movement entitled, “*Mesilat Yesharim*,” authored by the great Italian kabbalist and ethicist, Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto *zatzal* (17707-1746). Rav Luzzatto defines “*pishpush*” (the nounal form of “*y'phashpfash*”) as:

...to examine all of our actions, in general, and to carefully think about them. [To ascertain] if they contain therein actions that we ought not to do that do not follow the ways of the commandments and statutes of Hashem. Any actions that fit [this negative criterion] should be destroyed from the world.

In contrast, he defines “*mishmush*” (the nounal form of “*y'mashmash*”) as:

...the careful and exact analysis of even good actions, to determine and see if they contain any aspect, whatsoever, that is not good or any bad feature that must be removed and destroyed...one must scrutinize his actions [in this fashion] to examine their innermost content, the purpose of this examination to [yield] actions that are pure and perfect.

According to Rav Luzzatto then, the ultimate purpose of “*pishpush*” and “*mishmush*” is “for man to scrutinize all of his actions and to be aware of all of his approaches [to the world], in order that he will not have any bad habitual behaviors or negative moral qualities – and all the more so that he will not perform any manner or variety of sins.” (Translation and emphasis my own)

Rav Luzzatto has provided us with a blueprint for true spiritual growth and development that will allow the Almighty to dwell among us; namely, to examine all of our actions, those that we know need improvement, and even those that we currently believe to be above reproach. Now, we have the authentic opportunity to become more than who we are today, by changing our ways so that we may ultimately change ourselves. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom,

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email [rdb718@gmail.com](mailto:rdb718@gmail.com).

\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* for Women on “*Tefilah: Haskafah and Analysis*,” may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

\*\*\* I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here: <http://tinyurl.com/82pgvfn>.

\*\*Follow new postings on my Twitter accounts: [@theRavZatzal](https://twitter.com/theRavZatzal) and [@Torahtech613](https://twitter.com/Torahtech613).