

Parshiot Nitzavim-Vayelech, 5784, 2024:

*Standing Before Hashem and with Each Other*

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ה' יעזור וירחם על אחינו כל בני ישראל, בארץ ישראל ובכל חלקי הארץ

The opening verses of Parashat Nitzavim enumerate nine different categories of people.

This level of specificity is markedly different than most passages in the Torah:

You are all standing this day before the Hashem, your G-d, the leaders of your tribes, your elders and your officers, every man of Israel, your young children, your women, and your convert who is within your camp both your woodcutters and your water drawers, that you may enter the covenant of Hashem, your G-d, and His oath, which Hashem, your G-d, is making with you this day. (*Sefer Devarim 29:9-11*, this, and all Torah translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

I believe two *pasukim* in *Sefer Bereishit* help us understand the rationale for this unusual listing: “And God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness, and they shall rule over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the heaven and over the animals and over all the earth and over all the creeping things that creep upon the earth.’ And God created man in His image; *b’tzelem Elokim* (in the image of God) He created him; male and female He created them.” (1: 26-27). *Chazal* understand *b’tzelem Elokim* in a variety of ways. Some, such as Hillel in *Midrash Vayikra Rabbah* 34, and Rabbi Bena’a in *Talmud Bavli, Bava Batra* 58a, believe that “God created man in His image” is to be taken at face value. In their view, we literally look like Hashem. The more widely accepted approach, however, is to reject any physical comparison to Hashem, as He has no form, and focus instead on the abilities that He gifted us that make us “similar” to Him. According to the Rambam (1135-1204), the most prominent of these is our intellect:

Since man is distinguished by a most unusual trait found in no other sublunary being—rational awareness, which does not depend on sense perception or any limb or organ—our awareness is likened to God’s, which uses no organ, although it is not like it really but only

at first impulse. It is because of this, the divine mind that touches us, that man is said to be *in the image and likeness of God* — not that God has a body and shape. (*The Guide to the Perplexed* I: 1, translation, Lenn E. Goodman and Phillip Lieberman, page 21)

My rebbi and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), builds upon this passage and suggests the following:

There is no doubt that the term “image of God” in the first account [that is, *Sefer Bereishit* 1: 26-27] refers to man’s inner charismatic endowment as a creative being. Man’s likeness to God expresses itself in man’s striving and ability to be a creator. Adam the first who was fashioned in the image of God was blessed with a great drive for creative activity and immeasurable resources for the realization of this goal, the most outstanding of which is the intelligence, the human mind, capable of confronting the outside world and inquiring into its complex workings. (*The Lonely Man of Faith*, Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Thought, Volume 7, No. 2, 1965, underlining and brackets my own)

Whatever the exact meaning of *tzelem Elokim* may be, one idea is quite clear: every human being is potentially holy, since he or she has been created in the image of the Almighty. In addition, the final *mishnah* in *Masechet Sanhedrin* focuses upon the irreplaceable nature of all members of the Jewish people:

Therefore, man was created alone to teach you that anyone who destroys even one soul from the Jewish people is considered by the Torah as if he has destroyed an entire world. [So, too,] anyone who saves even one soul from the Jewish people is considered by the Torah as if he has saved an entire world. (Translation my own)

The Maharsha (1555-1631) analyzes this mishnaic statement and suggests: “The phrase in the *mishnah* is very exact when it states: ‘*nefesh achat m’yisrael*—one soul from the Jewish people,’ since the form of man was created alone in the image of God, the One of the world...” I believe this emphasis on the words “*nefesh achat*” is urging us to recognize the stamp of Hashem that is engraved upon each member of the Jewish people. This concept is filled with profound ramifications, for when we interact with our fellow Jews, we must remember we are communicating with someone who has the stamp of the Almighty upon him.

This notion forms the foundation for our understanding of the Torah's enumeration of nine categories of people in our opening passage: Irrespective of whether our fellow Jew is a leader of our people or a common manual laborer, that is, regardless of a person's social and economic status, he is *kadosh*, since he represents God's presence in this world. As such, he embodies unlimited value and deserves to be treated accordingly.

We live in a time when many of us place a great deal of emphasis on the *mitzvot* that are obligatory between ourselves and Hashem (*mitzvot bein adam l'makom*). Therefore, we often meticulously observe *Kashrut*, *Tefillin*, *Succah*, *Mezuzah*, and *Shabbat*. When it comes to commandments between our fellow Jews and ourselves (*mitzvot bein adam l'chaveiro*), however, we may be far less conscientious. As a result, hurtful sarcasm, biting cynicism, *lashon hara*, and even public embarrassment of others are often commonplace. It is vital, therefore, that we remember our *parasha's* opening verse: "You are all standing this day before Hashem, your God." Each one of us is created in His divine image. Surely this is one of the most important messages of *Chodesh Elul*, one we must take to heart as we prepare our *neshamot* to encounter the Hashem on the approaching *Yamim Noraim*.

Shabbat Shalom and *Kativah v'Chatimah Tovah*

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 would like to be added, please contact me via email: <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: [Tefilah and Tanach](#)

\*\*\* I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.

N.B. Part of my summary of the various approaches to understanding the term “*tzelem Elokim*” is based upon Rabbi David Silverberg’s excellent article entitled: “Tzelem Elokim: Image or Imagery?” which may be found at: <http://haretzion.org/alei/1-5tzele.htm>.