

In God's Image

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What does it mean to be created in God's image? Or to act in a God-like way? As I reread Parashat Ha'azinu, I was struck by the ways Moses's song poetically develops God's care for the Israelites, and I discovered in the vivid and diverse metaphors the beginnings of an answer. From the opening lines, where God's words are likened to varieties of rain, sustaining and giving life to all, to God as an eagle "who rouses his nestlings" and "bears them along his pinions" (Deut. 32:11), this God builds up, guides, teaches, and protects. God provides for the Israelites' physical needs with gifts of abundance, nurturing the people with "honey from the crag" as a mother nurses her child (Deut. 32:13). The Israelites' lack of gratitude inflames God's anger, but God bestows mercy and forgiveness, despite there being no mention of *teshuva* (repentance). God gives.

God's benevolence is, according to the teachings of Rav Eliyahu Dessler, the key to understanding what it means to be created in God's image.¹ Dessler (1892–1953) was a proponent of the classical *Mussar* tradition, a system of self-reflection and ethical character formation grounded in the teachings of Rabbi Israel Salanter. Dessler writes:

When the Almighty created human beings He made them capable of both giving and taking. The faculty of giving is a sublime power; it is one of the attributes of the blessed Creator of all things. He is the Giver *par excellence*; His mercy, His bounty and His goodness extend to all His creatures. His giving is pure giving for He takes nothing in return. He can take nothing for He lacks nothing, as the verse says,

"... If you are righteous what do you give to Him?" Our service to Him is not for His need but for our own, since we need a means of expressing our gratitude to Him. Man has been granted this sublime power of giving, enabling him too to be merciful, to bestow happiness, to give of himself. "God created man in His own image." (Carmell, *Strive for Truth!*)

For Rav Dessler, God, as creator of all things, is the "Giver *par excellence*"; thus, the most God-like act an individual can perform is to give. Too often, we equate giving with loss. If I give to someone else, I will have less. In contrast, Dessler suggests that through giving, we actualize our full selves. We are not giving "away" something, but fully engaging our powers to be God's agents in the world. The true purpose of existence is to live this life of generosity. Further, "service to God" (i.e., prayer) is not something that God needs; rather, we humans need a means of expressing our gratitude. Prayer reminds us of what we have received and affords an opportunity to be thankful for those gifts. In expressing gratitude, we are acting as a "giver." Though we cannot give God anything of substance, we can offer thanks.

It is, I think, no coincidence that Ha'azinu is read just before Sukkot, a holiday whose rituals highlight the importance of expressing gratitude and giving. In the parashah, the Israelites enjoy the land's largesse but forget God's goodness and turn to other gods. Sukkot is also *hag ha-asif* (Harvest Festival), recalling the moment in the agricultural calendar when farmers could breathe easily knowing that the last crops had been harvested. Lest they attribute their bountiful harvest solely to their own efforts, they are commanded to

¹ I am grateful to my colleague Rabbi Eliezer Diamond for introducing me to the writings of Rav Dessler.

dwelling in the Sukkah, to acknowledge their own vulnerability and gratitude for God's protection. We too leave behind the comfort and security of our homes to experience the frailty and uncertainty of life and put our trust in God. On Sukkot, we are commanded to be joyful, and we create that experience by sharing the sukkah with visitors real and symbolic. The Zohar (Emor 103a) teaches that seven distinguished leaders (*ushpizin*) join the righteous in the sukkah, with a special invitation extended to one of them each night. According to the Zohar, the food one would have offered the *ushpizin* should be given to the poor instead: that is the only way to merit the presence of *ushpizin* in your sukkah. Indeed, according to Maimonides, when one feeds the poor on Sukkot and other major holidays, God rejoices. It used to be common practice to invite the poor to share a Sukkot meal, and nowadays many donate to food pantries and soup kitchens.

This year, as we celebrate Sukkot in the wake of flooding, fire, plague, and political turmoil, we are mindful that many in our own communities and across the world do not enjoy the blessings of food, clothing, shelter, and other basic necessities. But cultivating a habit of giving encompasses more than transforming our abundance into gifts for the needy. It requires us to rethink our orientation to others and interrogate our own desires and drives. When is my giving simply a cover for self-interest? How can I receive in a way that also gives back—through gratitude and care for the giver? May we move into Sukkot with this new understanding of the power of the act of giving, knowing that when we give, we are living *b'tselem Elohim* and fulfilling our purpose in the world.

Beyond Reach

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*Attentive the heart. The ear listening:
Is anyone coming?
Every expectation contains
the sadness of Nevo.*

*One facing the other—two shores
Of a single river.
The rock of fate:
Ever far apart.*

*Spread your wings. See from afar
There—no one is coming,
To each his own Nevo
In a land of plenty.*

—*Mineged* [From afar], Rachel Bluwstein (1890–1931)

In the concluding lines of this week's parashah, the term *mineged* (from afar) refers to the geographic fate of Moshe: he may view the Land "from afar" on Mt. Nevo, but will not be allowed to enter it (Deut. 32:52). Rachel's poem above, titled with this word and written in Tel Aviv in 1930, depicts a situation of existential absence and desire.

Like other Hebrew writers of her generation, Rachel's decision to write in Hebrew and not in her native tongue—in this case, Russian—was shaped by an ideological commitment to Hebrew as a language of national renaissance. Rachel's poems are filled with biblical allusions; in this poem, the identification with the biblical figure emerges from a seminal moment of psychological crisis: the abrupt denial of a dream on the brink of its joyous fulfillment.

Some readers understand the poem as referring to the poet's own life—to the anguish of her illness (tuberculosis), on account of which she was exiled from Kibbutz Degania, and to which she eventually succumbed, in a small, rooftop apartment at the end of Bogroshov Street in Tel Aviv. The final stanza's appearance on the poet's gravestone in the Kinneret Cemetery reinforces this poignant, though ultimately limited, reading. The poem itself insists on something both more intensely intimate and infinitely cosmic: everyone is alone with their own Nevo, their own frustrated dream. The compact resonance of the Hebrew delivers a strong blow: *ish unevo lo*. In this case, the artifact of the poem echoes beyond the poet's death, casting its shadow-like wings over the vast land before it.

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