

Being in the Image of God : Yitro 2021 ----- Rabbi Rena Kieval

This week in Parshat Yitro we read in the Torah of the momentous revelation of God at Sinai. Amid thunder, lightning, the sound of a shofar, and also eerie silences, God declares the core *mitzvot* that we know as the Ten Commandments, *aseret ha-dibrot*. The opening of those statements, or commandments, presents a kind of puzzle, and the solution to that puzzle teaches us about a most basic principle of Torah and Jewish belief.

The first and second of the Ten Commandments state, “I YHVH am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods besides Me. You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, or any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them.” (Ex. 20:2-5)

The prohibition seems clear enough. We are not to make images or likenesses of God or to worship any. Since God in fact has no known image, to create something and call it an image of God would by definition be false, or at best, suspect.

But here is the puzzle: in the Genesis creation story we are told that God says “Let us make humans in our image, after our likeness.” We learn from this that there *is*, in fact, an acceptable image and likeness of God. And we learn that that likeness is: a human being.

When we create other human beings, we *are* making God’s image in a way that is apparently Godlike, and desirable. We might also say that when we create *ourselves*, so to speak, growing into the fullness of who we are as people, we are also making God’s image as God intended and desired. The author Richard Zimler once used this wonderful description for human beings: “God’s self-portraits.”

Rabbi James Jacobson-Maisels offers the insight that what is rejected in the Ten Commandments and throughout the Torah is any image or likeness of God that is static and dead, that gives the illusion of permanence or absolute definition. A human being, in contrast, is a living, dynamic, unfolding process. What it is to be divine, he says, and to carry the divine, is not to *be* some *thing*. Each human being is not *a divine image*, but is rather a *living out of* the divine image.

We also note that in the first commandment God introduces God’s self as the God of liberation, who took us out of Egypt. Our primary understanding of God is as liberator. How often throughout the Torah and through centuries of Jewish thought, we identify God as the One who redeemed us from slavery in Mitzrayim. So we may learn that how we live out our lives as containers of the divine image is through a process of liberation: liberation of ourselves and the liberation of others from both internal and external enslavements.

Other ancient cultures also had the idea of bearing, or even being, an image of God. But in those cultures, that was reserved for the king, such as Pharaoh, or other rulers. The radical innovation in the Torah is the idea that *every* human bears the divine image. We may sometimes think: God is in this person, but not in that person. Those people are holy, or divine or beloved, but not me. Certainly, it can be hard to see the divine in some of the people around us, and sometimes even in ourselves. But the Torah is telling us that this is not so. We all bear the divine image, even when we think we do not, even if we mistakenly think another person does not. The divine is being lived out in each one of us.

Let us each honor and grow that image of God within ourselves to the best of our ability, as God's own self-portraits.

Shabbat Shalom