

“Bereishit, altruism, and the Tzelem Elokim”

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This tension between potentiality and actuality was employed by the classical commentator, Moses Nachmanides, to explain why the All-knowing God had to put Abraham through the terrible test of determining his readiness to sacrifice his son. Surely God knew that Abraham’s piety would impel him to respond to His will under all circumstances!

Nachmanides’ answer was that, indeed, God had no doubt about it. However, one cannot compare ‘potential piety’ to ‘actual piety,’ namely, when the attribute is subjected to a practical and publicly demonstrated test. Hence, to justify bestowing His rewards upon Abraham and his offspring, God had to demonstrate to the world – not to Himself – the nature and superlative quality of Abraham’s piety, and its translation into total loyalty and submission. Abraham had to be seen converting his potentiality into actuality.¹

Kohelet, however, did not appreciate that. He could not resolve the problem of man, created in the image of God – and with the whole world implanted into his heart (*Koh.* 3:11) – yet failing to live up to all his vast potential. Kohelet did not imagine that man’s restricted potential was the natural consequence of His Maker’s own self-imposed restriction of the volume of potential with which he was prepared to endow man.

Hence Kohelet's conclusion that "the pre-eminence of man over the beast is nought, for all is *hevel* (vanity)." But *hevel* means, basically, "breath." So we might also read Kohelet as saying, sceptically, that what God breathed into Adam was not, in fact, potential. It was *hevel*, nothing more than simple breath.

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There will be times, inevitably, when, both individually and collectively, the *tzelem Elokim*, divine image, will shine through our actions, endeavours, priorities, and objectives, with a rare intensity; and there will be times – alas too frequently - when the incandescence of that image will be obscured.

That God expected His image to be reflected in all man's actions, is highly unlikely. This may be inferred by the fact that the divine Lawgiver saw no contradiction in juxtaposing in His Torah the statement that man was created in the divine image (Gen. 1:26) and the subsequent accounts of the sins of Adam and Eve (2:25-3:24) and Cain 4:16). This is underscored by God's description of the nature of the men inhabiting His earth at that time as *rak ra kol hayamim*, 'purely evil all their days' (6:5), followed by the admission of His regret at having made man on earth, and at the sadness of His heart (v.6).

A modern example of how the *tzelem Elokim*, the divine image, can often shine through even in a climate of the deepest moral depravity is provided by the numbers of the Righteous Gentiles (*Chasidei umot ha-olam*) who endangered their own lives to save Jews from the Nazis. The recorded total is 28,707; and it may come as a surprise

that the leading nation in this regard was Poland with 7,318 heroes, followed by The Netherlands (6,137), France (4303), and Ukraine (2,713).²

The most well-known of the Gentile heroes of the Second World War was Oskar Schindler who began life in the Hitler Youth and later as a member of the Nazi Party, but who helped more than 1000 Jews to survive. It was the 1993 film Schindler's List that made him a household name. The committee of Yad Va-Shem was reticent at first to award him the honour of Righteous Gentile on account of his background but later rescinded its decision.

Perhaps the least known, but one of the greatest of the Gentile heroes was the Portuguese Consul General in the French city of Bordeaux, Aristides de Sousa Mendes (1885-1954). He issued visas and saved some thirty thousand people in defiance of the instructions of his superiors and of the British Embassy in Lisbon. This resulted in his dismissal, deprivation of livelihood, and vilification, to the extent that he ended his days totally destitute and forgotten in a Franciscan poorhouse.

Acts of selflessness and supreme heroism on the part of such people provide testimony to the existence of the *tzelem Elokim*, the image of God in man, a concept referred to as the motivating purpose of the creation.³ Those whose love of humanity, selflessness, and courage, motivate them to regard the lives of others – especially the helpless and oppressed – as equal to, if not greater than, their own, earn themselves honoured places in the World to Come. In the words of the Mishnah, 'Whoever saves a single life is considered by the Torah to have saved the entire world.'⁴

That grand term, *chesed shel emet*, ‘true kindness,’ is accorded by our tradition to those who tend the dead and attend to the provision of all the requirements of their funeral and burial in a situation when there are no near relatives or others to step forward to do so. The epithet ‘true’ is accorded because that mitzvah is clearly done with no expectation of thanks or reward, since *lo ha-meitim yehalluya* – ‘the dead cannot praise (or reward) You’ (Is. 38:18; Ps. 115:17).

I have often thought that the term *chesed shel emet* is superior to that of *Chasidei umot ha-olam* to the extent that the latter does not capture the notion of *emet*, pure altruism, akin to that displayed by those righteous gentiles who didn’t merely perform deeds of righteousness, but who endangered their own lives to save downtrodden captive Jews who, as far as they knew, would never be in any position to acknowledge, let alone reward, their actions.

The Talmud seeks to exemplify the mitzvah of ‘following after the ways of God’ (Deut. 13:5). This is defined by R. Chama as following His attributes:

Just as He clothes the naked - as He clothed Adam and Eve (see Gen.3:21) – so must you; Just as He visited the sick – as He visited Abraham when he was in pain (see Gen. 18:1) – so must you; Just as He comforted the mourners – as He did Isaac after the death of his father, Abraham (see Gen. 25:11) – so must you; and just as He buried the dead – as He did Moses (see Deut. 34:6) – so must you.⁵

It will be noticed that none of the above examples are what we would define as traditional ‘mitzvot,’ such as studying and observing His Torah, displaying *emunah*

(unqualified faith in God), or praying to Him regularly and outside the context of one's own needs. They are, rather, spontaneous humanitarian acts, but performed in an altruistic situation – that is putting the needs of others before one's own, and being fired by the desire to soothe, alleviate, and improve, their condition.

The *tzelem Elokim* is what defines our humanity. It holds out the challenge for us to employ kindness and compassion, and pursue moral action, to change the world for the best and to struggle to replace war and violence with peace and consideration. The first stage on the path to achieve that most difficult and elusive objective is to recognise the *tzelem Elokim* in others and to attempt to reflect it in all our undertakings.

NOTES

1. See *RaMbaN* on Gen. 22:12.
2. See www.names of righteous by country. Accessed 16/10/2025.
3. See Gen. 1:27.
4. M. *San*, 4:5.
5. Tal. *Sota* 14a.

שבת שלום ושלום על ישראל

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