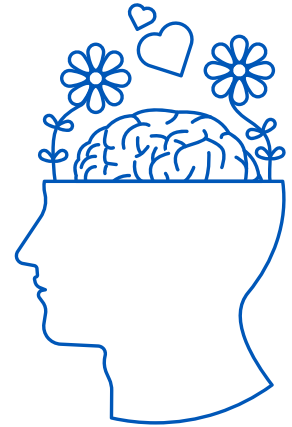


What is B'tzelem El'ohim? A Deep Dive into Middot



Middah – B'tzelem El'ohim

To be Created in the Image of God



*And God created humankind in Their image, in the image of God,
God created them. (Genesis 1:27)*

The idea of all humans being created in the divine image, being born with intrinsic value and worth, is one of the most significant gifts Judaism has given the world. The presumed dignity of a human being was a radical shift from previously held beliefs. “In the ancient world, various kings (and sometimes priests) were described as the images of a god...in dramatic contrast to this, the Torah asserts that ordinary human beings — not just kings, but each and every one of us — are mediators of divine blessings.(1)” The significance of this concept can be observed in its longevity, serving as the bedrock of not only ancient Jewish society but general society today. The United States Declaration of Independence emphasizes this truth: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

The opening verses of the Torah highlight both the existence of this blessing and the mission it carries. In Genesis, human beings are assigned the task of stewarding and leading Earth (Genesis 1:28) to creating a functional and prosperous world for all, and the gift of God’s divine image gives us the qualities “that are needed for the fulfillment of [their] task on earth, namely, intellect, free will, self-awareness, consciousness of the existence of others, conscience, responsibility, and self-control.(2)”

(1) The Heart of Torah, Rabbi Shai Held, pg. 8

(2) Understanding Genesis, Nachum M. Sarna, pg. 15-16

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In Pirkei Avot, Ethics of Our Fathers, God showed Their extraordinary love for humankind, not just by endowing them with infinite value when creating them in the image of God but by expressly telling humankind they had that value inside of them, too.

Pirkei Avot 3:14

הוא הִיה אֹמֵר, חָבִיב אָדָם שֶׁנִּבְרָא בְּצֶלֶם. חֶבֶה יִתְּרָה נֹדַעַת לוֹ שֶׁנִּבְרָא בְּצֶלֶם,
שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר כִּי בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים עָשָׂה אֶת הָאָדָם (בראשית ט)

He (Rabbi Akiva) used to say: Beloved is humankind for they were created in the image [of God]. Especially beloved is humankind for it was made known to them that they had been created in the image [of God], as it is said: "for in the image of God They made humankind" (Genesis 9:6).

In moments of stress when you are drowning in the challenges of engaging with others as either a caregiver, friend or peer, it can be easy to forget about the divine value of those you are caring for. But by creating humankind in the Divine Image, Rabbi Yechezkel Levenstein, former teacher at the history Mir Yeshiva in Bnei Brak, explained that God gave us additional support in rising to the occasion of seeing the divinity in others by giving humans the ability to feel a portion of the divine capacity for empathy and compassion. While engaging with others and serving as a support system, what you need are the tools to combat the compassion fatigue that comes with caregiving and access that divine capacity for empathy God and the angels want to remind you that you have. Because you, too, are made in the image of God, with infinite value and infinite potential to see that image in others, even when it's hard.

