

Alyth



Alyth Chavruta Project

B'Tzelem Elohim

Week 2



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'Iron sharpens iron, so a person sharpens the wit of their friend.'

Proverbs 27:17



Introduction

Welcome to second week of the latest series of the Alyth Chavruta Project. In this course, we will be tracing the history of the idea of *B'Tzelem Elohim* – the idea that human beings are created in the image or the likeness of God. This week we will study some instances in the Hebrew Bible in which God's physical image is mentioned.

Further resources and advice on how to get the most out of chavruta can be found in our [revised FAQs](#). We look forward to seeing you on Thursday to share our learning with each other.

Blessing for Study

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו, וְצִוָּנוּ
לְעִסּוֹק בְּדִבְרֵי תוֹרָה.

Blessed are You, our Living God, Sovereign of the universe, whose commandments make us holy, and who commands us to devote ourselves to the study of Torah.

Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheynu Melech ha-olam, asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav, v'tzivanu la-asok b'divrey Torah.

Genesis 3:8

וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ אֶת־קוֹל יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים מְתַהַלֵּךְ בִּגְן לְרוּחַ הַיּוֹם וַיִּתְחַבֵּא הָאָדָם
וְאִשְׁתּוֹ מִפְּנֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים בְּתוֹךְ עֵץ הַגֵּן:

And they heard the voice of God walking around in the garden at the breezy time of day; and the human and his wife hid from before God amongst the trees of the garden.

Radak, Commentary on Genesis 3:8

וישמעו, יש מפרשי' מתהלך בגן, בעוד שהיה אדם מתהלך בגן שמע את קול אלהים ומאחר שאמר וישמעו היה לו לומר מתהלכים, והנכון כי טעם מתהלך על קול ה', כי מצאנו בו לשון הליכה, קולה כנחש ילך (ירמיה ו' ט').

‘And they heard’ – There are commentators [who explain] ‘walking around the garden’ [thus]: as Adam was walking around the garden, he heard the voice of God. And since it says ‘and they heard’, it should have said ‘walking’ [in the plural]. But the correct understanding is that ‘walking’ refers to the voice of the Eternal, for we find that Scripture uses language of walking with respect to a voice, as in ‘her voice shall go like a serpent’ (Jeremiah 46:22).



Midrash Bereshit Rabbah 19:8

**וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ, אֶל תִּקְרִי וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ אֶלָּא וַיִּשְׁמִיעוּ, שָׁמְעוּ קוֹלָן שֶׁל אֵילָנוֹת
שֶׁהָיוּ אוֹמְרִים הָא גִּנְבָא דְגִנְבָא דְעֵתִיָּה דְבְרִיָּה.**

**דְּבַר אַחֵר שָׁמְעוּ קוֹלָן שֶׁל מַלְאָכִים אוֹמְרִים ה' אֱלֹהִים הוֹלֵךְ לְאוֹתָן
שְׁבָגָן.**

'They heard [*vayishme'u*]' (Genesis 3:8)– do not read it *vayishme'u*, but rather, *vayashmiu* [they made heard] – they heard the voice of the trees saying: 'This is the thief who deceived his Creator.'

Another interpretation: They heard the voice of the angels saying: 'The Eternal God is going to those in the garden.'

Questions

1. How do you understand this verse from Genesis?
2. Do the commentaries and midrash change your understanding of what is happening in this verse?

Exodus 33:18-20

י"ח וַיֹּאמֶר הָרְאֵנִי נָא אֶת־כְּבוֹדְךָ: י"ט וַיֹּאמֶר אֲנִי אֶעְבִּיר כָּל־טוֹבִי עָלֶיךָ וְקָרָאתִי בְשֵׁם יְהוָה לְפָנֶיךָ וְחִנַּנְתִּי אֶת־אֲשֶׁר אַחֲרָי וְרַחֲמֹתַי אֶת־אֲשֶׁר אֲרַחֵם: כ' וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא תוּכַל לִרְאֹת אֶת־פָּנַי כִּי לֹא־יִרְאֵנִי הָאָדָם וְחַי: כא וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה הִנֵּה מְקוֹם אֲתִי וְנִצַּבְתָּ עַל־הַצּוּר: כב וְהָיָה בְּעֵבֶר כַּבְּדִי וְשִׁמְתִּיךָ בְּנִקְרַת הַצּוּר וְשָׁכַנְתִּי כִפִּי עָלֶיךָ עַד־עֲבָרִי: כג וְהִסְרֹתִי אֶת־כִּפִּי וְרָאִיתָ אֶת־אֲחֵרָי וּפָנַי לֹא יִרְאוּ:

¹⁸ He [Moses] said, 'Please, let me behold Your Presence!' ¹⁹ And [God] answered, 'I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim before you the name of the Eternal, and the grace that I grant and the compassion that I show,' ²⁰ and God said, 'But you cannot see My face, for a human being may not see Me and live.' ²¹ And the Eternal said, 'Behold, three is a place near me. Station yourself upon the rock,' ²² and as my Presence passes by, I will place you in the cleft of the rock and shield you with My hand until I have passed by. ²³ And I shall take my hand away and you will see my back – but My face may not be seen.'

Babylonian Talmud, B'rachot 7a

"וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא תוּכַל לִרְאֹת אֶת פָּנַי", תָּנָא מִשְׁמִיָּה דְּרַבִּי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן קֶרְחָה, כִּד אָמַר לוֹ הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא לְמֹשֶׁה: כְּשֶׁרָצִיתִי – לֹא רָצִיתִי, עֲכָשְׁיוּ שְׂאֵתָה רוּצָה – אֵינִי רוּצָה.

'And God said, "But you cannot see My face" – it was taught in the name of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korchah: Thus said the Holy Blessed One to Moses: 'When I wanted to [at the Burning Bush], you did not want to; now that you want to, I do not want to.'



"וְרָאוּ כָּל עַמֵּי הָאָרֶץ כִּי שֵׁם ה' נִקְרָא עָלֶיךָ וַיֵּרְאוּ מִמֶּךָ", תְּנִינָא, רַבִּי אֱלִיעֶזֶר הַגָּדוֹל אוֹמֵר: אֵלּוּ תְּפִילִין שֶׁבְּרָאֵשׁ. "וַיִּהְיֶה כַּפִּי וַיֵּרָאֵת אֶת אַחֲרָי", אָמַר רַב חֲנָנִי בֶּר בִּיזְנָא אָמַר רַבִּי שְׁמַעוֹן חֲסִידָא: מִלְּמַד שֶׁהָרָאָה לוֹ הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא לְמֹשֶׁה קֶשֶׁר שֶׁל תְּפִילִין.

‘And all the nations of the earth shall see that the name of the Eternal is called upon you, and they shall be afraid of you’ (Deuteronomy 28:10). It is taught [in a *baraita*] that Rabbi Eliezer the Great says, ‘This is a reference to the *tefillin* of the head,¹ upon which the name of God is written, as they demonstrate to all that the name of God is called upon the Jewish people.’ With regard to the statement of God to Moses: ‘And I will remove My hand, and you will see My back’ (Exodus 33:23), Rav Chana bar Bizna said that Rabbi Shimon Chasida said, ‘This teaches that the Holy Blessed One showed Moses the knot of the *tefillin* of the head.

Questions

1. Why does Moses ask to see God?
2. Why is Moses allowed to see God’s back, but not God’s face?
3. What does it mean for God to wear *tefillin*?

¹ *Tefillin* are the leather boxes that are strapped to the head and the arm containing scrolls with biblical passage written on them.

Isaiah 6:1

בְּשָׁנַת־מוֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ עֻזִּיָּהוּ וַאֲרָאָה אֶת־אֲדֹנָי יֹשֵׁב עַל־כִּסֵּא רָם וְנִשְׂא
וְשׁוּלָיו מְלֵאִים אֶת־הַהִיכָל:

In the year King Uzziah died, I saw *Adonai* sitting upon a high and lofty throne, and the skirts God's robe filled the temple.

Malbim, Commentary on Isaiah 6:1

ואראה את ה', העצם הנשגב לא יושג בעין בשר, והראיה הנאמרת
פה היא ראיית השכל והשגה בלבד, ואחר שמן הנמנע להשיג את
הבלתי בעל תכלית מצד עצמו רק מצד פעולותיו, מבואר כי
ההשגה שהשיג לא היה מצד עצמותו רק מצד דרכי הנהגתו. ...

ודע כי ההנהגה העליונה תתראה בשני פנים, א. ההנהגה הטבעיית
הסדורה מראשית קבועה ועומדת לא תשתנה, והכלים אשר על
ידם ינהיג ההנהגה הזאת הם צבא השמים, אשר ע"י מהלכם
ותנועותיהם ימזגו היסודות יפרדו יורכבו ויוכנו לקבל מזגים
וצורות שונות, ב. ההנהגה הנסיית ההשגחית שיהרוס סדר הטבע
בעת הצורך, וכלי ההנהגה הזאת הם צבא המלאכים, שהם גבוהים
במעלה מצבא השמים והם ישדדו כח המערכת בפקודת רם ונשא,
אולם הנהגה זאת אינה מתמדת, כי לא יבטל הסדר הטבעי רק
לצורך גדול,

החווה פה צייר תחלה ההשגה שהשיג מן ההנהגה הטבעיית, וצייר
המנהיג העליון הזה כמלך יושב על כסאו, שיען שהנהגה זאת



קבועה, צייר המנהיג יושב, כי הישיבה תורה מנוחה וקביעות, והכסא הם צבא השמים כמו שכתוב השמים כסאי והארץ הדום רגלי, ה' בשמים הכין כסאו, עליהם יושב וישם משטרו על ההנהגה הקבועה הטבעיית המתמדת.

'I saw the Eternal' – The exalted essence cannot be apprehended by the physical eye, and the 'seeing' spoken of here is intellectual vision and apprehension alone. And since it is impossible to apprehend that which is without limit from the side of its essence, but only from the side of its actions, it is clear that the apprehension which he attained was not from His essence, but from the ways of His governance. ...

Know that the supernal governance is manifested in two aspects: (a) The natural governance, ordered from the beginning, fixed and standing, which does not change; and the instruments through which this governance is conducted are the host of the heavens, through whose courses and motions the elements are blended, separated, compounded, and prepared to receive different mixtures and forms. (b) The miraculous, providential governance, which destroys the order of nature at times of necessity; and the instruments of this governance are the host of angels, who are higher in rank than the host of the heavens, and who overpower the force of the system at the command of the High and Exalted One. However, this governance is not continuous, for the natural order is not overturned except for a great need.

The seer here first depicted the apprehension he attained from the natural governance, and he depicted this supreme governor as a king sitting upon his throne; since this governance is fixed, he depicted the governor as sitting, for sitting signifies rest and permanence. And the throne is the host of the heavens, as it is written, 'The heavens are My throne and the earth is My footstool', and 'The Eternal has established God's throne in the heavens'. Upon them He sits and sets His dominion over the fixed, natural, continuous governance.

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Questions

1. What does it mean for God to sit upon a throne?
2. How do these translations help us to understand the verses?



A GUIDE TO THE SOURCES

The Babylonian Talmud (also known simply as The Talmud or *Bavli*) is a commentary on the Mishnah from Babylonia, containing the discussions of rabbis from the period just after the Mishnah was finished (around 200 CE), until it was finally redacted in approximately 700 CE.

Midrash Bereshit Rabbah is the major collection of midrash (rabbinic interpretations) on the Book of Genesis, which was finally redacted in roughly the fifth century CE.

Radak (an acronym for Rabbi David Kimchi) lived in France between 1160 and 1235 and was a rabbi, biblical scholar, philosopher and grammarian. He was famous for his commentary on the Hebrew Bible.

Malbim (an acronym for Meir Leibush ben Yehiel Michel Wisser) was a biblical commentator, born in Volochysk (then in Poland, now in Ukraine) in 1809. He completed commentaries of the whole Hebrew Bible over the course of the 1870s and died in 1879.

HAPPY STUDYING!

If you have any further questions, please be in
touch with Rabbi Elliott

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