

Alyth



Alyth Chavruta Project

B'Tzelem Elohim

Week 5



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

Proverbs 27:17



Introduction

Welcome to the fifth and final 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. In this final text pack, we look at modern sources that reflect on the reality of *b'tzelem Elohim* in the contemporary world. These sources are not meant to resemble a comprehensive or representative picture, but to suggest some ideas about how we can think about the ideas today. We would very much welcome any other suggestions of sources that speak about the idea of *b'tzelem Elohim* today.

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, וְצַנְּנוּ
לְעֶסֶק 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.





'The Divine Image' (1789)

To Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love
All pray in their distress;
And to these virtues of delight
Return their thankfulness.

For Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love
Is God, our father dear,
And Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love
Is Man, his child and care.

For Mercy has a human heart,
Pity a human face,
And Love, the human form divine,
And Peace, the human dress.

Then every man, of every clime,
That prays in his distress,
Prays to the human form divine,
Love, Mercy, Pity, Peace.

And all must love the human form,
In heathen, Turk, or Jew;
Where Mercy, Love, and Pity dwell
There God is dwelling too.

Questions

1. How does this non-Jewish poem develop the idea of *B'tzelem Elohim* in a Christian context?
2. How are Blake's ideas similar or different to the Jewish ideas we have been studying so far?

‘The Human Being as the Image of God’ (2024)

The statement that humans are *tzelem Elohim* reflects that human dignity is rooted in God – which is to say, it does not originate with society. Whether the state respects or violates human dignity, it is *not* its source. However, I am reluctant to attribute human dignity to a specific object or source, like the soul, that can be given and also taken away. The imagery of the soul itself, a discrete spirit separate from the body, that is inserted at the beginning of life and removed at the moment of death, is also problematic, as is the notion that the soul is an artifact from the Divine realm, infused in to the human shell, rather than an intrinsic part of the human organism. I have always felt that the biblical concept of the unity of self, in which the spirit and body are ‘fused’, does greater justice to human nature than the dualist approach that separates body and soul. The conception of a unified self also makes for healthier attitudes toward the body.

...

Despite this ideal ... in every human society, people are sometimes swayed – brainwashed, as it were, by culture and society – that they have none of these dignities. Therefore, the Torah’s account in Genesis, telling people that they are images of God, represents an act of love. At Sinai, God intervened in human history and revealed to humans that they were images of God. In the Exodus, the liberation of the slaves revealed to them that they were not Egyptian property. Rather, they were humans, loved and created by God to seek out a homeland and build a society that honoured their dignity.

Revelation and religion exist to communicate this truth to all people. Rabbi Akiva says: ‘Beloved is the human, who was created in the image of God’ (Pirkei Avot 3:14). Rabbi Akiva confirmed that being an image of God – with its attendant dignities – means that one is in a constant state of being loved. Rabbi Akiva then stresses that this love is raised to a further level. Given



that human society does not act on this truth and treat all people as they deserve to be treated, God reveals to people that they are loved and made in the image of God: 'Even greater love was shown by God in that the human is informed that he was created in the image of God' (Pirkei Avot 3:14). In Akiva's teaching, the creation of human life stems from God's love. The act of God's revelation to humans of this status is a further act of Divine love.

Questions

1. In what way is the claim that humans are *b'tzelem Elohim* an expression of love?
2. What claim is Greenberg making about revelation?

From *In God's Image* (2025)

Living in a world that promotes proclamations about how all people are created equal or that they hold certain unalienable rights is in itself nothing self-evident. Such a rare reality is the civilisational peak of a process that began with the idea of the creation of all human beings in the image of God. If it is treated as obvious, it is only because we ourselves, not only our ideas, have been shaped by this principle, and are not only its beneficiaries but its artifacts. Our own self-conception affirms it and demands the political world we share, even while we struggle to find our place within it.

The image of God is inescapably meaningful to us. It is part of us, at least inasmuch as we belong to the long historical chain that began with the book of Genesis and culminated in the modern liberal world. The ideas associated with man and woman's creation in God's image and the ideals to which these have given rise are deeply impressed in us, and they animate us no less than they animated the heroes of that ancient epic. They led us to embrace faith in God, and to reject it and him; they drew us closer to organised religion, and they drove us to embark on a personal spiritual mission, or toward atheism. But we were and are propelled in both directions by the same fundamental idea, the principle that constitutes humans as individuals, as possessing singular value and endowed with rare abilities of reason, free choice, control, and conscience.

The idea of the image of God obliges us even today to support freedom and democracy. It requires us to protect our autonomy and that of our neighbours, to respect the dignity and intrinsic value of all human beings, to fight for human and civil rights, and to struggle for the establishment of a just, egalitarian society. The image of God compels us to see the divine in another, their unique, irreplaceable value, which stems from their subjective exceptionality.



Questions

1. What does Persico mean by ‘the modern liberal world’?
2. What is the relationship between ‘liberalism’ and the idea of *B'tzelem Elohim*?

‘B’tzelem Elohim’ (2001)

We've all got a life to live
We've all got a gift to give
Just open your heart and let it out
We've all got a piece to bring
We've all got a song to sing
Just open your heart and let it out
Yeah

When I reach out to you and you to me
We become *B'tzelem Elohim*
When we share our hopes and our dreams
Each one of us *B'tzelem Elohim*
We've all got a tale to tell
We all wanna speak it well
Just open your heart and let it out
We've all got a mountain to climb
We've all got a truth to find
Just open your heart and let it out
Yeah

When I reach out to you and you to me
We become *B'tzelem Elohim*
When we share our hopes and our dreams
Each one of us *B'tzelem Elohim*

*Bereshit barah Elohim*¹
Bereshit barah Elohim
Bereshit barah Elohim
On our hopes, on our dreams

¹ Genesis 1:1



Bereshit barah Elohim

Each one of us, b'tzelem Elohim

Bereshit barah Elohim

On our hopes, on our dreams

Bereshit barah Elohim

Each one of us, *b'tzelem Elohim*

Yeah

Yeah

When I reach out to you and you to me

We become *B'tzelem Elohim*

When we share our hopes and our dreams

Each one of us *B'tzelem Elohim*

Each one of us *B'tzelem Elohim*

Each one of us *B'tzelem Elohim*

Each one of us *B'tzelem Elohim*

You can listen to this song [here](#).

Questions

1. How does this modern song conceive of the idea of *B'tzelem Elohim*?
2. How is Nichols's presentation of the idea similar or different from the way we have been discussing it so far?

William Blake (1757-1827) was an English poet and artist from the Romantic movement. His poem 'The Divine Image' included here formed part of a cycle of poems entitled *The Songs of Innocence and Experience*, published together in 1794.

Irving (Yitz) Greenberg (b. 1933) is senior scholar-in-residence at Yeshivat Hadar in New York, a non-denominational centre for Jewish learning. He is the author of many books and articles.

Tomer Persico (b. 1974) is Research Fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute and a Senior Research Scholar at the University of California, Berkeley Centre for Middle Eastern Studies. The extract included in this text pack is from his book, *In God's Image: How Western Civilisation Was Shaped by a Revolutionary Idea*, published last year.

Dan Nichols (b. 1969) is a Jewish-American singer and songwriter. He composed some of the melodies we use at Alyth, particularly the very popular setting of *Hashkiveinu*, which we sing often as part of Erev Shabbat. The song included in this text pack is from his 2001 album, *Be Strong*.

HAPPY STUDYING!

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

acp@alyth.org.uk

0208 457 8782