



You know some people have a lot of nerve. Chutzpa, that's what it is. Pure self-centered chutzpa. What kind of people would write something such as the first chapter of Genesis? Neither you nor I would have written anything like that. But there it is in black and white for all the world to see. Jews are known to be chutzpadik. But there are limits. Whoever wrote this apparently believed that in all our vast universe, not to mention all the other universes, the Sovereign Ruler and Creator of it all, actually paid special attention to the creation of this small speck of a planet.

Not only that, but they asserted that the culmination of God's work – the cornerstone of creation, was they themselves, men, and women. It was all made for us, they said.

But the worse, if all this is not bad enough, was that the author of Genesis had the nerve to say that we humans were made in the very image of the Creator. What unmitigated chutzpa!

Well, perhaps. But, perhaps something else – something more subtle – is going on here.

Abraham Joshua Heshel provides us with an insight which may shed light upon the motivation behind this chapter and allow us to see the profound thinking of its author. Heshel pointed out that when we seek to describe ourselves – when we ask the question “who is man? – who am I? – how do I become human?”, our answer never merely describes us as we are. It also expresses what we would like to be. The hope for what we would like to be shapes what we will be. We become who and what we believe we are. Thus, when we think that to be human is to be a creature of war, then, we make war. We fight, we kill, we live our lives in order to dominate others. And if we believe that we are in the image of God, we may just become like God.

Perhaps when our ancestors put into God's mouth “let us make men in our image”, they believed that this was both a statement of what was and an expression of what could and should be. “We are aware of a spark of the Divine within ourselves,” they might have said something like this: “As we write these verses, we are trying to transmit feelings to

those who will come after us. We want them to feel the spark as well. We want them to keep it alive in order for it to glow. Perhaps the light inside of them will shine forth and guide them as they search for who they are.” The word which we translate as “in our image” comes from the word TZELLEM. The philosopher, Maimonides, teaches us in “The Guide to the Perplexed” that TZELLEM really means essence. That TZELLEM is the aspect of a thing which makes it what it is. Thus, it is the Divine in us that makes us what and who we are – uniquely human.

Our essence, our TZELLEM – comes from God. So, in order to understand and actualize what we truly are, we must search for the source of our essence, the one light which our tiny spark reflects.

Where then do we search for God? Our search begins by looking inward into ourselves. Our own minds and hearts provide our first link to the Divine. We catch glimpses of God when we experience our own amazement at being alive. When we stand in awe before the vastness of the universe, we are moved by a feeling that there is a greater something which touches us and draws us upward.

There is a story of a man while walking along the seashore one day, came across a young girl. In the girl's hand was the very end of a long kite. The man looked at the string and followed it up as it disappeared in the sky – for the kite was so far away that it could no longer be seen. “Excuse me my friend,” said the man. “How do you know that there is still a kite up there?” The girl looked at the man and then up into the sky and said simply, “I know there is something up there because when I hold the string, I can feel the tug.”

Somewhere inside of us, there is a string attached which tugs at our soul. Even when we cannot articulate what is up there, we can still sense that we are being drawn toward something beyond ourselves.

Our inward search for God can also be helped through the act of prayer. In prayer we remind ourselves that the Earth is full of God's glory, if only we look with open eyes and open minds. Our prayers sensitize us to the reflections of God which are all around us. As we speak of God who “creates light and brings on the evening”, we become aware that God is manifested in the order of the universe and in the process of nature. When we pray to

God" who loves his people Israel, we feel God's participation in our own loving and our own growth. And when we address "the Redeemer of Israel", we see that God is the source and the motive force of our yearning for freedom and liberation.

Our prayers tell us also that God is present when we lift up one who has fallen, when we heal one who is sick and when we help liberate someone who has been captive.

The Prayerbook helps us to feel the pull on the string which connects our inner selves to the One above for whom we search.

Another way to look for God is by looking backward. Our world is constantly changing. Yet today we still deal with many of the same human concerns which have confronted Jews of countless ages past. We share the hopes and dreams of Isaiah and Akiva for the world redeemed. We are saddened, frustrated, and outraged when it seems that there is no justice and God is nowhere to be found. But so were Kohelet and Job, Levi Yitzchak and Elie Wiesel.

We can enrich our search for God through Torah study. As we look backward into our past and learn from all those who have been seeking and meeting God since the beginning of our people.

Our tradition offers us the experience of 4,000 years' worth of God seekers. Beginning with the authors of our Bible and continuing with the newest five-year-old whose joy and wonder prompt the question, "Daddy, who made me?" when we study Torah, when we open ourselves to Jewish learning, we put our individual pilgrimage into the context of a total people searching for God. We also gain a vocabulary with which we speak of a subject which often lacks the right words.

Whatever we choose as a map, our search will be aided by the wisdom, inside and sensitivity of those who came before us.

Our quest for God continues as we search outward to the world around us. As we discovered through our inward search and our prayers, we find God not only in our minds and our hearts, but also in our actions and our relationships with others.

The Midrash explains that very graphically in the Pesikta D'rav Kahanah. Some amazing words are put into God's mouth. "Would that my children forsake Me," says God,

“so long as they keep my torah.” What? God doesn’t care if we believe in Him. God is not concerned whether we search out for Her/Him or not?

Just the opposite. For in this passage, God goes on to say, “For if My children forsake Me, but maintain My Torah, study and observance itself will lead them to Me.” According to this Midrash, living Torah inevitably brings us to awareness of God and of Godly values.

Our Torah demands that we take this world seriously because God created it and said that it was good. It has us treat others as ends and never as means, for they, too, were created in God’s image. The Torah posits the Divine attributes of justice, mercy and peace as principles which must live in our lives. When a friend approaches a friend, and offers an unselfish hand, when a mother comforts her frightened child, when I reach out with my whole being to encounter “you”, in this moment we meet the eternal Thou....

The search for God never ends. In the life of an individual and in the life of a people, the search is an ongoing process which we approach but never fully reach. We search by looking inward through actual self-awareness and prayer -- backward through study and outward through interaction with the world. Through our search we draw nearer to God and closer to an understanding of who we are as humans created in God’s image.

Rabbi Akiba used to say, “Beloved is man that he was created in God’s image, but yet a greater love it was that man was given the knowledge that he or she was created in God’s image.” In approaching God, we become the most human that we can be. We become filled with the knowledge that we are created in God’s image. Our lives then become filled with actions that testify to the fact; we are created in God’s image!

The Torah which we read this evening speaks not only of the creation of the first person, but of each of us and of all humanity. Through these verses God addressed each of us and says, “Let us, you and Me – create a human, create a person that you can be and pray will be.” “You and I together,” says God, “can create a life which is truly in our image.”

Is this chutzpa? Yes. But it is the kind of chutzpa which is a gift for and a path to the Holy One, blessed be He. Amen.