

## Dignity after Katrina

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The news of the past month has been dominated by images of the impact of Hurricane Katrina, debates about where to lay the blame for the unnecessary destruction and loss of life, and appeals to help survivors to resettle.

Throughout this period, what I have found most disturbing, both in the government response to the hurricane and in much of the news coverage of the disaster has been the lack of dignity with which those affected by this tragedy have been portrayed.

I have been struck over and over by the differences between the response to this disaster and the response to the terror attacks of September 11. These situations are, of course, vastly different—the terrorist attacks, unanticipated by most Americans, exposed us to a fear that many of us had never before experienced. Then, we could be angry at the perpetrators, and could debate the appropriate political response. In contrast, we expected Hurricane Katrina, even if we did not anticipate the extent of its effects. In the case of an act of nature, we cannot be angry at anyone—save God—for directly bringing about the storm.

My own experience of these two events is also colored by the fact that I was living in Manhattan on September 11, whereas I was safe here in Chicago during Hurricane Katrina. Even taking these differences into account, I am struck by the differences in the portrayals of the victims of each tragedy.

One of my primary experiences of September 11 was that of coming face to face with thousands of individuals whom I would never have the chance to meet. In New York, pictures of missing people were everywhere. For months, the *New York Times* ran a section called “Portraits of Grief” which offered pictures and short biographies of those killed in the terror attacks. The paper was filled with stories of those who barely escaped, those who saved others’ lives, and those who failed to get out quickly enough.

In the past few weeks, the newspapers and TV news have shown more and more human interest stories about those affected by Katrina. However, our first images of this tragedy were of masses of people packed into the Superdome and other sites, bodies lying in the streets, and mobs of so-called looters. We rarely encountered these people as individuals, but rather, as members of a crowd. The individuals who were presented to us appeared either in the roles of victims, at the mercy of the forces of nature and of the decisions of the US government or as unruly members of a looting mob—though, as we’ve increasingly learned, the initial reports of criminal activity were wildly exaggerated. The message, in all of these portrayals was that the people affected by Hurricane Katrina—disproportionately poor and African-American—are somehow different from the rest of us and therefore not worthy of individual attention.

During the time that the Katrina tragedy was unfolding, I woke up one morning to a headline announcing that more than 150 Iraqis had been killed in a terrorist attack. I will never know the names, much less the biographies of these 150 or more individuals; while the *Times* lists

the names, ages and hometowns of American soldiers killed in Iraq, the identities of ordinary Iraqis are not considered significant enough to note.

I would suggest that these portrayals of those considered to be different from us represents an offense to the central Jewish concept that human beings are created *b'tzelem elohim*—in the image of God. I would also suggest that today—Rosh Hashanah—is precisely the moment in which we are obligated to consider the implications of this belief in creation *b'tzelem elohim*. I want to examine this concept of creation *b'tzelem elohim* as it relates to three areas—our self-perception, our relationship with God, and our interactions with other human beings.

First, though, a definition is in order. Scholars and theologians through the ages have debated the meaning of creation *b'tzelem elohim*. An anthropomorphic view of God would view this description as suggesting that God actually looks like us. Some, like Moses Maimonides, who railed against anthropomorphism, understood the concept of *tzelem elohim* as a statement about the capacity of the human intellect. Others have defined this concept as a comment on our ethical and moral capabilities.

I am inclined, however, to follow the suggestion of a contemporary scholar, Yair Lorberbaum, a professor at Bar Ilan University, who argues that in the minds of the early rabbis, the concept of creation *b'tzelem elohim* means that human beings are manifestations of God in the world. That is—we do not simply resemble God intellectually, ethically, or otherwise, but rather—we actually *are* extensions to God. Thus, we have, for example, a midrash in which human beings are suffering, and God cries out “My head hurts, my arm hurts, etc.”

Taking this understanding of *tzelem elohim* as defining each human being as a manifestation of God, we can now consider the ways in which this concept plays out in the three realms I identified—our relationship to ourselves, our relationship to God, and our relationship to others.

In terms of the way in which we view ourselves: The Talmud comments that each person has both sins and merits. Those whose merits are greater than their sins are considered righteous. Those whose sins are greater than their merits are considered wicked. Those with a roughly equal number of sins and merits are in the middle. Any given action—whether a transgression or a mitzvah—might swing the balance one way or the other. Similarly, the text tells us, the entire world has both sins and merits and is judged accordingly. Any action by any person might swing the balance for the entire world. Thus, each person, the Talmud says, should say to him/herself “*kol ha'olam kulo talu'i alay*”—“the entire world depends on me.” Each of us, individual and unique reflections of the divine image that we are, should see ourselves at every moment as capable of determining the direction of the entire world. This is a huge responsibility, no doubt. And yet—can you imagine what the world would be like if we each took ourselves and each of our actions this seriously? What if, rather than think “what I do now doesn't matter to anyone but me” or “no one cares what I do,” we thought, in every instance, “This action that I am about to take may decide the course of the entire world.” This view of ourselves both emphasizes our individual importance in the eyes of God and of the world, and casts us as agents both of our own fate and of the fate of the world. We are not simply passive recipients of whatever the world offers us; rather, we are actors capable of

determining the direction of our own lives as well as the direction of our communities, our countries, and of the world as a whole.

The definition of humanity as created *b'tzelem elohim* also determines the stance that we take when we approach God today and every day.

On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, our liturgy tells us, "*kol ba'ei olam*"—all of the creatures of the world—come before God in judgment. This formulation can be scary—it is overwhelming to think of ourselves as standing before God, confessing our mistakes and begging for mercy. At the same time, however, this opportunity to stand before God arises only *because* we are creations *b'tzelem elohim*, who are inherently divine and therefore capable of interacting with God, the source of divinity, face to face.

God, as depicted in the liturgy of these days, also faces each of us directly and deals with each of us as an individual, and not as simply another member of the crowd. One piyyut (*ki anu amecha*) offers a number of metaphors for our relationship with God, comparing this relationship, for instance to that of a parent and a child, a shepherd and a flock, a lover and a partner, a creator and the created, etc. While these precise metaphors may or may not speak to each of our experiences of God, the point of this piyyut is that there are numerous ways in which we approach God and, in turn, numerous ways in which God approaches us.

In discussing the creation of human beings in the image of God, the Talmud, in tractate Sanhedrin, comments "if a person makes many coins from one mold, they all look alike, but God fashioned every person in the stamp of the first, and yet not one of them resembles another." Each of us is equally a creation in the image of God and yet none of us is exactly like anyone else. As unique manifestations of the living God, we each are able to come before God face to face, in each of our own ways. We do not surrender to God on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, but rather, enter into a two-way relationship with God, in which we agree to do *teshuvah*, to bear responsibility for our own actions, and to change the way in which we behave in the coming year. God, for God's part, faces us, takes us seriously, and agrees to enter into relationship with us.

But the belief that we are each created *b'tzelem elohim* cannot only affect our view of ourselves and of our relationship with God. The understanding that each person is created *b'tzelem elohim* compels us to treat each person whom we encounter as a unique manifestation of the divine presence.

What was most problematic in the popular depiction of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina was the absence of a sense of each person affected by this tragedy as a unique and infinitely important individual created *b'tzelem elohim*. Instead, the media presented us with pictures of mob scenes and of looters, allowing us to assume that all of these "looters" were acting maliciously, and not out of an attempt at self preservation. Bodies lay on the street for days, to the point that—according to one newspaper story—people began to give directions by reference to the corpses—"walk down the street, take a left at the corpse, then a right, etc." What greater affront to human dignity than for creations in the divine image to become place markers!

At the same time as we encountered the victims of Katrina predominantly as members of a mob, or even as objects on the street, we encountered the victims of bombings in Iraq only as numbers—150 killed on one day, 80 on another, etc. One would have to search hard—and probably in Arabic media—for any indication that these murdered Iraqis were individuals with unique stories and worldviews.

Once we recognize every person as a creation *b'tzelem elohim*, we find ourselves infinitely obligated to interact with this person as a manifestation of the divine. This means recognizing that each person, though created from the same die—to use the Talmudic metaphor— is a unique individual who reflects a particular aspect of divinity and should be approached as such. When we interact with each person, we might bear in mind the midrash I mentioned earlier, in which God responds to human suffering by saying, “My head hurts, my arm hurts, etc.” When we cause suffering to other human beings, we also, by extension hurt God and—I would say—diminish the divinity of the world.

The great Hasidic rabbi, Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav taught that when the greatest sinner comes to you and says "where is your God," you should answer "b'mkom'cha" "where you stand." And anyone who denies that God is, in fact, b'mkomo, within him or herself is kofer b'ikar-- someone who denies the most fundamental principle and who rejects God altogether. For if one cannot believe that God is in oneself, how can one believe that God is anywhere?

Taking each person seriously as a creation *b'tzelem elohim* also means valuing the extent to which each of us acts as our own agent. Often, in our society, poor people are portrayed as victims, who are simply recipients of whatever the government or private charities offers them. This tendency to ignore the individuality or agency of poor people was evident in the portrayal of those affected by Katrina. Instead of listening to New Orleans residents tell us, in their own words, what actions they took to save themselves, their families and their homes, we immediately cast the residents as looters, rebels, or passive victims. Viewing these residents, instead, as creations *b'tzelem elohim* would force us to recognize them as individual actors whose decisions should be acknowledged and respected.

It is not easy to view each person with whom we come into contact as a creation *b'tzelem elohim*. People, as we know, are not always nice, fair, warm, or trustworthy. And we, ourselves, do not always act in a way consistent with creations in the divine image. And yet, despite all of our flaws, God—as we understand God—is still willing to enter into a relationship with us face-to-face, to respond to the decisions that we make about our own lives, and to treat us with the dignity that a creation in the divine image deserves. The challenge is for each of us to do the same.

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