

“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.”

Most of us have heard these words so many times that we take them for granted. The idea that “all people are created equal” sounds obvious.

But 250 years ago this past July 4, when Thomas Jefferson put quill to parchment and wrote those words into the Declaration of Independence, there was nothing obvious about them. His words were aspirational. In fact, for most of human history, human inequality had seemed self-evident.

So this morning, on Day 2 of Rosh Hashanah, I want to discuss the origins and history of this idea of equality, and to explore how it might inspire us to meet the potential of this New Year.

I want to begin not in 1776, but back in ancient Greece. If you saw Christopher Nolan’s *The Odyssey* this summer, amid the Cyclopes, storms, gods, monsters, battles, and enormous IMAX spectacle, you may have noticed that the issue of hospitality loomed large.

Back then, travel was dangerous. There was no Marriott. No Airbnb. You could not arrive in a strange town, take out your phone and discover that the inn down the road had 4.7 stars, complimentary breakfast, and, according to one angry reviewer named Steve, “terrible water pressure.”

When you traveled, you were vulnerable. Your survival depended on strangers. So the Greeks developed an extraordinary ethic known as *xenia*, the sacred obligation of hospitality.

If a traveler appeared at your door, you fed them. You gave them water, shelter, protection. And the traveler, in return, respected your home. Watching over this entire system was Zeus in his role as *Zeus Xenios*, protector of strangers. In fact, Nolan has his characters refer to this obligation of hospitality, over and over again, as Zeus's Law.

And there was an additional incentive to behave yourself: The stranger standing at your door might actually be a god in disguise. So the basic rule was: Be careful how you treat strangers. You never know who you are dealing with.

Greek civilization had come to understand that we owe something even to people who are not members of our family, our clan, or our tribe. The stranger has a claim upon us.

And yet there was a limitation. The Greeks developed an ethic of hospitality without developing an ethic of human equality. Aristotle, for example, in his *Poetics*, described inherent differences between humans—some were suited to rule; others to be soldiers; and still others to be slaves.

And the Greeks were hardly unusual in this regard. Across the ancient world, societies generally organized themselves around hierarchy. Kings stood above commoners. Men above women. The free above slaves.

But the Torah articulates a radically different vision for humanity. At the very beginning of Bereishit, in the story of creation, we read:

*“Vayivra Elohim et ha-adam b'tzalmo, b'tzelem Elohim bara oto.”* “And God created the human being in God's image; in the image of God, God created humanity.”

*Tzelem Elohim*. The image of God.

And notice whom the Torah is talking about. Not Abraham or Moses. Not a king or a priest. Not even an Israelite. *Ha-adam*. The human being. Humanity.

Now, the idea that a person could be considered b'tzelem Elohim, an image of god, was not actually new. Does anyone know King Tut's full name? It's Tutankhamun. Tutankhamun means "living image of the god Aten." The same divine image idea we also find in the Epic of Gilgamesh. In Egypt, Mesopotamia, and elsewhere, monarchs sometimes claimed a special divine status of likeness to one of their gods.

What was revolutionary about the Torah's account of human creation, however, was its concept that all of humanity is made in the image and likeness of God. Genesis takes a dignity previously reserved for royalty and democratizes it.

You bear the image of God. I bear the image of God. The person sitting next to you who has been coughing through this entire sermon bears the image of God.

The person you love. The person who irritates you. The person whose worldview makes absolutely no sense to you. The stranger whose story you have never bothered to learn.

*Tzelem Elohim* means that there is something sacred about a human being simply because that person is human.

And that raises an obvious question.

What does it actually mean to be created in the image of God?

Maimonides understands the divine image as referring to our intellectual capacities: our ability to reason, to discern, to choose.

The prophets push us toward another dimension. Jeremiah speaks of knowing God through practicing kindness, justice, and righteousness. Micah demands that we do justice, love goodness, and walk humbly.

In other words, the image of God is not merely something we possess. It's something we are supposed to express.

Rabbi Donniel Hartman makes this point beautifully. Being created *b'tzelem Elohim*, he says, isn't a description of who we are; it's an expectation of how we should orient ourselves in this world. To see others, recognize the divinity within them, and not remain indifferent to their needs.

Consider Abraham. In Genesis 18, three strangers approach his tent on a scorching day. He doesn't know who they are. He doesn't ask for their résumé. He sees human beings in need, and he runs to welcome them.

We can see a subtle but important distinction between Abraham and *The Odyssey*. In the Greek imagination, you honor the stranger because Zeus protects the stranger — and because, for all you know, the stranger may secretly be a god.

Judaism says: you don't have to wonder whether there is something divine about the person standing before you. There is.

Not because the stranger might secretly be God. But because the stranger is, like all of us, created *b'tzelem Elohim*.

Our rabbis understood how radical that claim was.

In Mishnah Sanhedrin, they ask a fascinating question: Why did God begin humanity with one human being? Why Adam? Why not create a whole city? Why not make a thousand people simultaneously?

The Mishnah answers this with a beautiful metaphor:

When a human ruler creates coins, the ruler takes one mold and stamps coin after coin. And every coin comes out the same.

God does precisely the opposite. God begins with one human mold, and somehow every coin, every human, comes out different.

Eight billion people are alive today. Billions more who have lived before us. And there has never been another you. [pause] There never will be.

Rabbi Yitz Greenberg explains this Mishna as articulating three fundamental facets of *tzelem Elohim*:

Every human being is infinitely valuable.

Every human being is unique.

And every human being is equal.

That is the breathtaking moral vision of Genesis.

But there is a problem. The Hebrew Bible introduces this extraordinary narrative of equality, yet fails to actualize a legal reality that moves beyond traditional hierarchies. The Bible permits kings. And slaves. There are profound distinctions of status and power. The idea of *tzelem Elohim* was necessary, but not sufficient, to overcome our natural inclination to stratification. It will take thousands of years for that theological claim to migrate more fully into political language.

In the seventeenth century, the political philosopher John Locke created a theory of natural rights grounded in the very same idea of *tzelem Elohim* found in the beginning of Genesis. Being made in the divine image, Locke writes in his Two Treatises Of Government, is what gives us human dignity, equality, and a set of natural rights to life, liberty, health, and property.

Locke elucidates that governments exist to secure and protect these rights and to safeguard our human dignity.

Which brings us, finally, to Philadelphia in 1776. Thomas Jefferson adopts Locke's concept of natural rights and inserts it at the heart of the Declaration of Independence. That's what makes the Declaration so revolutionary. Even after Locke, natural rights and the idea of humans as made in the divine image had never been enshrined within a legal or political system. America, through the Declaration, becomes the first society in which its *nomos*, its vision of the law, actually mirrored the narrative of Genesis Chapter 1. Now, for the first time, *tzelem Elohim* will become the baseline for how a society structures itself.

Of course, the Declaration contains a staggering irony. The men declaring that all human beings were created equal lived in a country in which only white male landowners actually acquired citizenship. In which millions remained enslaved. Women were denied political equality. Native Americans were dispossessed. The words were more universal than the people writing them were prepared to be.

But perhaps there is something strangely hopeful in that. Because sometimes a moral ideal gets ahead of us. Sometimes we manage to articulate a truth before we have developed the courage to live it. The words stretch beyond their authors.

And then every generation faces a choice: Will we shrink the ideal until it fits our behavior? Or will we stretch our behavior until it begins to fit the ideal?

And that question brings us to Rosh Hashanah.

Because this morning we read one of the Torah's most difficult and unsettling stories: The Akedah. The binding of Isaac. And throughout this story, one tiny word keeps appearing. *Hineni*.

God calls: "Abraham!" And Abraham answers: *Hineni*. Here I am.

Isaac calls: "My father?" And Abraham says: *Hineni, b'ni*. Here I am, my son.

And at the climactic moment, the angel cries: "Abraham! Abraham!" And once again: *Hineni*. Here I am.

*Hineni* does not mean merely: "Here are my geographic coordinates."

It means: I am present. I am listening. I am available. I am willing to respond. I will not turn away. [pause]

*Hineni* is exactly the response demanded of a person who believes in *tzelem Elohim*.

Because believing in human dignity is easy in the abstract. The hard part is actually seeing the human being standing in front of us.

Here I am before God.

Here I am before my spouse.

Here I am before my child.

Here I am before my parent.

Here I am before the friend who has been trying to tell me something I have been too distracted to hear.

Here I am before the person who needs something from me at the exact moment when I have absolutely no patience left.

Here I am before the person whose politics infuriate me.

Here I am before the person I have reduced to a stereotype.

Perhaps the opposite of *hineni* is not absence, but indifference. It's looking directly at another human being and somehow failing to see them. It's encountering an image of God and seeing only a category. Democrat. Republican. Rich. Poor. Citizen. Immigrant. Jew. Christian. Muslim. Friend. Enemy.

Human beings love sorting people into categories. It saves time and mental complexity. You do not need to know somebody if you already know which box they belong in.

Social media is built around categories. Politics is built around categories.

Algorithms know our age, our ZIP code, our shopping habits, what shows we watch, what restaurants we like, what feeds we are willing to doomscroll at 1 in the morning.

We are constantly being sorted. Targeted. Grouped. Defined.

Rosh Hashanah comes to teach us:

Go back. Before the algorithms. Before the political affiliations. Before the tribes. Before all the categories we have created for one another.

Go back to Genesis. Go back to *ha-adam*. The human being. Created *b'tzelem Elohim*.

And perhaps that is one reason Rosh Hashanah is such a profoundly universal Jewish holiday.

Today we don't commemorate the Exodus from Egypt. We don't celebrate Sinai.

We don't remember a particular victory of the Jewish people. Rosh Hashanah takes us all the way back to creation.

Before Jew and non-Jew.

Before nation and religion.

To the creation of the human being.

And so perhaps part of our *heshbon hanefesh* this year calls on us to ask:

Whose divine image did I fail to see this year?

Whom did I turn into a category instead of encountering as a person?

Whose suffering did I find easy to dismiss because they were not part of my group?

Whose opinion did I mock rather than try to understand?

Whom did I decide was unworthy of my compassion?

And perhaps the hardest question:

Where did I fail to recognize the image of God in myself?

Because *tzelem Elohim* does not only tell us how to treat other people.

It also tells us something about our own worth.

And that matters enormously on Rosh Hashanah. Because some of us enter these days carrying disappointment. Things we wish we had done differently. Words we wish we could take back. Relationships we neglected. Opportunities we squandered. Moments when we were selfish or impatient or unkind. Promises we made last Rosh Hashanah that, if we are being candid, we couldn't even keep through September.

Teshuvah demands honesty about all of that.

But Judaism also refuses to confuse what we have done with the totality of who we are. The person who failed still bears *tzelem Elohim*. The person who needs to apologize still contains the Divine image within them.

And so maybe Rosh Hashanah asks us to say *hineni* in two directions.

First, to God, and by extension, to ourselves: *Hineni*. Here I am. Not the person I pretend to be. Not the résumé. Not the carefully edited or curated version I present to the world.

Here I am. With my strengths and my weaknesses. With what I accomplished and what I avoided. With what I am proud of and what I deeply regret. With the apologies I need to make. With the habits I need to change. With the goodness in me that I sometimes forget is there.

*Hineni*. Here I am. Ready to begin again.

And then Rosh Hashanah asks us to turn toward one another and say:

*Hineni*. I am here and ready to see you. Not merely as useful or inconvenient. Not merely as an ally or opponent. Not as a label. Not as an

abstraction. But as a singular human being. A divine coin that has never been minted before and will never be minted again. [pause]

Two hundred and fifty years after Jefferson wrote that all people are created equal, that promise is not yet realized. Thousands of years after Genesis proclaimed that every human being is created in the divine image, that promise remains unfinished too.

But Judaism has never demanded that we finish the work in a single day. It asks us to take responsibility for our part of it. One relationship. One conversation. One apology. One act of generosity. One moment in which we resist the temptation to reduce a human being to a label. One moment in which somebody calls to us and, instead of looking away, we answer:

*Hineni.*

May this be a year in which we see more carefully. May it be a year in which we listen more generously. May it be a year in which we recognize the divine image in those we love, in those we do not know, and even in those we struggle to understand.

And may it also be a year in which we recognize the divine image within ourselves — not as an excuse for our failures, but as the sacred reason we know we can do better.

May the ancient wisdom of Torah, and the still-unfinished promise that all people are created equal, become not merely truths that we proclaim...but truths that we live.

*Hinenu.*

Here we are.

Shanah tovah.