

And G-d said, “Let us make man in Our image, as Our likeness.” (1:26)

Man was created in Hashem’s image. This means that every humanbeing, regardless of his or her position, shares a unique quality with Hashem. This is the Tzelem Elokim, image of G-d. While man’s physical appearance does not mirror G-d, he has a quality which is uniquely endemic to man – his ability to exercise free will, which relates him in some way to Hashem. While Hashem always chooses correctly – man does not. Man errs and is subject to his inclinations which very often reign over him. Thus, man’s ability to choose between good and evil is what makes him G-d-like. He has the potential to choose correctly and thereby elevate his G-d-like status, or he can defer to his evil inclination and descend to the nadir of depravity, thus destroying his essential G-d-like image.

When one realizes that his ultimate self-worth is based upon his incredible potential to become G-d-like, he is encouraged. Certainly, one who recognizes his potential for greatness does not have any issues concerning self-esteem. After all, for what more can one ask? The ability to achieve Tzelem Elokim status – to rise above a morally bankrupt world filled with spiritual baseness – should be sufficient to catapult one’s self-esteem. Indeed, it is stated in the Shaarei HaAvodah: “The first gateway to serving Hashem is the realization of one’s own worth.” How can one act inappropriately when he realizes that he will be debasing himself?

The next step is to realize that this same gift has been given to all other human beings. Therefore, the awareness that my fellowman also possesses a Tzelem Elokim should engender a healthy respect for others. Indeed, as Horav A. Henschel Leibowitz, zl, explains, one who claims to have self-respect, but does not respect others, probably has little respect for himself. He cites the Baalei Tosfos who posit that one recognizes and is reminded of the Tzelem Elokim in others to a greater degree than in himself. Therefore, if one honestly respects his own nobility and potential, he should be even more aware of his fellow’s greatness. Furthermore, if Hashem decided to create a person, He obviously did so for a reason. Who are we to disagree? Respect for others is equivalent to respect for ourselves. When we do not manifest respect for others, it indicates that we are ourselves troubled.