

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

We have the ability to perceive and study the most difficult subjects, to plumb the depths of the most intricate areas of science. When it comes to self-knowledge, however, some individuals still believe in the heresy of Darwinism. *Horav Nissim Yagen, zl*, explains it practically: “Because man thinks that he is himself a form of animal, therefore he believes that he descends from a monkey. If he would only recognize his actual inner essence, his extraordinary potential, he would be incapable of ever believing that he has descended from apes!” One who does not know or understand the value and essence of a diamond might be convinced that it is formed from an orange. One who understands what a diamond is – its beauty and value – would never accept the notion that a jewel so perfect and splendid could ever have evolved from an orange. A secular philosopher once hypothesized that Hitler’s Nazism was the result of his belief in Darwinism. Thus, as the larger creature overpowers the smaller creature (following the theory of survival of the fittest), it gives members of the master race (in their distorted minds) license to conquer those whom they have deemed inferior.

When Hashem created man, He said, “Let us make man in Our image, after Our likeness.” Hashem wanted man to be G-d-like. *Rambam* understands this to mean that, from among all of Hashem’s creations, it is man that is endowed, like his Creator, with morality, reason and free will. Man can know and love G-d; he can hold spiritual communion with Him; and he can guide his actions by using his G-d-given ability to reason. Being created in His Image and in His likeness grants man enormous, infinite, amazing possibilities to achieve greatness. Being created in Hashem’s image means that we are all endowed with many qualities of Hashem. *Sforno* expounds on the concept of *Tzelem Elokim* and its meaning vis-à-vis man.

“The term *Elokim*, used in a comparable sense, may be applied to every intelligent force that is capable of action, that is perfect and is separate from man, and, as such, is everlasting. Thus, this term is applied to Hashem and His *Malachim*, Angels. It is, likewise, used with regard to judges, because of their worthy power of reasoning. Human reason functions without any material medium. It has the ability to extend even to the abstract, and, to a limited extent, it even can process the future. It does not weaken through over-use or with age, but rather, it becomes stronger – all of which demonstrate that man’s reason can be distinguished from matter. (Therefore, Adam should also be called *Elokim*.) Nonetheless, until Adam/human being, achieves perfection, the term *Elokim* alludes him, and he remains only *b’tzelem*, in the image of *Elokim*.”

Sforno teaches us that anything that is permanent, intelligent and abstract – like angels and judges who carry out Hashem’s will – may be described as *Elokim* (because they are G-d-like). Man, however, is described only as being in His image, because potential does not necessarily translate into achievement. Hashem has endowed us with incredible, amazing potential, but, until this potential is realized through development, we stand close, but not yet able to achieve the pinnacle

of creation – *Elokim*.

David *Hamelech* says in *Sefer Tehillim* (49:21): *Adam bikar bal yavin, nimshal kabeheimos nidmu*, “Man is glorious, but understands not; he is likened to the silenced animals.” *Sforno* explains: “Since man has this extraordinary potential through which he tries to understand the aforementioned wisdom (which could grant him *Elokim* status), but chooses (either actively or by default) not to do so, his intellectual ability remains in the realm of the potential, lacking all perfection in the actual, thus leaving himself devoid and empty.” Hashem gave him the acumen, the ability to achieve – but he did not utilize it. Thus, he is no different from an animal.

Being born in the “image of G-d,” having the ability to reach the Heavenly Throne, to be even greater than the Angels, is a gift – only if one uses this ability to transition potential into perfection. Otherwise, *V’lo yavin*, “He does not understand!” He remains beast-like. An animal cannot become a *Tzelem Elokim* – but you, man, can. If you have the potential and do not actualize it – you are worse than an animal.

These are strong words, but we see it demonstrated time and again by men who “could, but do not.” Thus, they revert to being inferior to those creatures who “could not.” *Nimshal ka’beheimos nidmu*, “He is likened to the silenced animals:” We talk about good intentions. Failure to realize our intentions determines whether or not we are bringing out the *Elokim* within ourselves. “At least he meant well” is a common adage, which is our way of belittling the greatness of man’s potential. It is like saying, “Well, instead of bringing out the image of G-d within him, he, instead, was satisfied to remain on the level akin to an animal. This may sound like an oversimplification, but, when we view this through the perspective afforded us by *Sforno*, it is what it is – an enormous waste.

I believe it was *Horav Aizik Sher, zl, Rosh Yeshivas Slabodka*, who once stood by the window of his home and stared out at the passersby on the street. His *talmid*, student, with whom he was learning, asked, “What is the *Rosh Yeshivah* looking at that warrants such contemplation?” *Rav Aizik* looked at him and said, “I am looking at the cemetery in front of my window.” Obviously, his student was taken aback. “What cemetery?” he asked. “I am looking at the ‘living cemetery,’ at the people walking by my window who have not achieved their potential. Above each of their heads is an individual tombstone stating, ‘Here lies so and so,’ which is actually the title or position which this person could/should have realized – but did not. This is his epitaph. Now, you realize why I call it a cemetery?”

In summation, the potential for greatness is placed within everyone from the moment of birth. We are created in the image of Hashem, so that greatness is our destiny. Sadly, there are moments and incidents in life that attempt to convince us otherwise. Some fall victim to abuse, rejection, shame and depression. Others rise above the speed bumps of life with indomitable strength, achieving restoration and, finally, finding and connecting with their personal greatness. Some do it on their own, others have had the help of someone who believed in them. We all have the potential; we just need to see it – and do something to work towards it. We resist doing so for a

variety of reasons, fear being the most common. We claim to be looking for the “right time.” The “right time” is now. We must make the “right time.”

Some think that greatness is defined by what we become, when, in fact (I feel), it is defined by what we are. Maintaining a status quo in the face of adversity is a sign of personal greatness. True, the individual did not change the world, but the ability to remain stoic and committed, keeping his head “above water” despite a sea of troubles, indicates that one is firmly anchored in his/her faith in Hashem. That is greatness.

An American woman and her friend dreamed for the day when they could stand at the *Kosef* and pray to Hashem. The mere thought of being able to pour out their inner feelings to the Almighty at this holy sight was a dream come true for them. As they stood in silent contemplation, gazing at the stones of the wall, understanding what they represented, their significance, and the power of the moment, they noticed a woman approaching, carrying two worn-out shopping bags. From the appearance of her clothes and the manner in which she dragged her feet, they assumed that she was homeless and dependent on the charity which she was able to beg. This was affirmed when she held her hand out to them for alms. They gave – she took, and went on her way.

The afternoon was passing, so the two women decided to *daven Minchah*. They looked around and noticed that the poor woman had also begun to *daven Minchah*. When they concluded their prayers, they stood for a few moments just staring at the woman, who had also just completed her prayers. They saw her put her hand into one of her bags, rummage around and take out the stub of a pencil. She then ripped off a piece of her bag and began to write a note. After finishing, she folded the paper (of the bag) and wedged it between the bricks of the wall and left.

The woman did not notice, but her note fell out of the crevice and onto the floor. Another woman who saw this bent down to retrieve the note and put it back into the stones. As she held it in her hand, the note unfolded. The American women took all this in and noticed the child-like scrawl (made by the stub of a pencil on the wrinkled paper bag). The letters were ill-formed, but legible. She was shocked to read the words that were written on it: “Hashem, I love you!” The woman had little to nothing in material possessions. She probably did not even have a bed to sleep on. Yet, she was completely content in her relationship with Hashem! I think this personifies greatness.