

“AND HASHEM CREATED MAN IN HIS IMAGE ...” (BEREISHIS 1:27)

Each person is created in the image of Hashem

THE QUALITY OF *tzelem Elokim* is the defining aspect that describes man's creation. Every one of us has been endowed with a divine quality that separates us from the rest of Hashem's creations: an ability to understand, and grow in spirituality. In fact, the S'forno (ibid. 9:6) points to man's *tzelem Elokim* as the critical factor that differentiates between humans and animals regarding the permissibility of taking a life. We are allowed to take the life of an animal, for food or other necessary purposes, but taking the life of a human being is a terrible crime, deserving the most serious retribution. Why? The S'forno explains: Each person is created in the image of Hashem, Who gives us life, and therefore anyone who takes a human life must be held accountable.

Hashem's system is perfect and just. Anyone who is held responsible for a crime must, by definition, be able to understand both the wrongfulness and the severity of the crime. It would be unfair to inflict any punishment if he was oblivious to his misdeed, and equally unjust to mete out a harsher consequence if he was incapable of appreciating that degree of evil in his act.

Would it even enter his mind at this emotionally charged moment?

Let us examine our protagonist – a murderer. Let us give him the benefit of the doubt that he is not a coldblooded pathological killer. If so, he must be overwhelmed by his passions: anger, jealousy, hatred, or other powerful drives that motivate him to kill another human being. Can such a person, consumed by his desires, think about the lofty concept of *tzelem Elokim*? Would it even enter his mind at this emotionally charged moment? Furthermore, besides the basic difficulty of focusing on an abstract concept, could it really be effective in stopping him from his headlong rush to commit murder?

The Torah is teaching us the grandeur of the human being. Included in the priceless gift of *tzelem Elokim* is the universal ability of every person on the face of this earth to appreciate not only his own greatness, but even more so, the greatness of his fellow man. This capacity extends to the most pressured and stressful situations, and can influence our actions even when we are seized by the most violent and irrational emotions.

It will help us treat others with dignity and respect

One of the most valuable skills we can cultivate is to train ourselves to see the *tzelem Elokim* in others and to ignore their flaws. (The Da'as Z'keinim [Bereishis 5:1] says that the recognition of *tzelem Elokim* in others is more powerful than the fundamental concept of *v'ahavta l'rayacha kamocho* – love your neighbor as yourself.) If it can stop someone in a murderous rage, it can surely help us overlook all kinds of slights and insults, both real and imagined. If we use this powerful gift properly, it will help us treat others with dignity and respect, and simultaneously, appreciate our own greatness and our potential to reach the loftiest heights of achievement.