

Parashat Shemini 5785

Shabbat Shalom! More than two years ago, in December 2022, thousands and thousands of migrants began making their way to this city. Each of them held their own story of how and why they sought out safety and shelter in this country. Even with hopeful dreams, they were used as political footballs by cynical leaders, bussed from the border to various cities in the north. And as these individuals, young and old, from a variety of countries, with a myriad of stories, began settling into this city and our neighborhood, members of this community rose to the occasion. Beginning with simple sandwiches, fruit, granola bars, and water, we showed up for our new neighbors, attempting to make their lives just a little bit easier, and provide some sense of welcome and community. Now, more than two years later, every Sunday afternoon, members of this community continue to show up for our neighbors, and we have partners to help make it happen. We coordinate all of our efforts with Gowanus Mutual Aid, and we have been able to provide hot meals from East Village Loves, a small non-profit in Manhattan. Perhaps you have been part of these efforts, volunteering on a Sunday afternoon, or donating clothes and toiletries during one of our winter drives, or you've joined the Refugee Task Force's Action Network, being on call to use your skills to assist our new neighbors.

Quite simply, in this community, but in Jewish communities around the world, Jews welcome the stranger. In many ways, this kind of response feels natural, almost automatic, like it is entrenched in our bones. And for many of us, it absolutely is, feeling our family's history of discrimination and oppression and wishing that someone had done something, anything to keep us safe too. And yet, while this response feels automatic, it would serve us well to investigate the Jewish ideals that serve as the underpinning for these actions. In particular, we must approach this concept of welcoming the stranger from a theological perspective and ask the question, "What's God got to do with this?" And we must do this because of the dangerous and deadly circumstances we find ourselves in right now. With each callous and cruel policy that comes out of this White House, we can see the ways in which they are articulating their own theology. It is a theology of extreme particularism, uplifting White Christianity above all else. It is a theology of domination, in which certain human beings are expendable, degradable, even worthless. It is a theology in which the cruelty is the point, using the phrase coined by Adam Serwer at The Atlantic. Unfettered power reigns above the preciousness of humanity, according to this theology.

And so we must in this moment identify a more robust, a more theologically rooted way in which to describe our commitment to welcoming the stranger and building a more just, loving, and peaceful world. In our Torah portion this week, Shemini, we find this short yet powerful attempt at just that:

כִּי אֲנִי יְהוָה הַמַּעֲלֶה אֶתְכֶם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לְהִיְתָ לָכֶם לֵאלֹהִים

For I יהוה am the One who brought you up from the land of Egypt to be your God...

וְהִיִּיתֶם קְדוֹשִׁים כִּי קְדוֹשׁ אֲנִי:

You shall be holy, for I am holy.¹

Our Torah is filled with the voice of God commanding the Israelites to fulfill commandments upon commandments, and yet here we find a command from God that, on its face, is more theological than action-oriented: “You shall be holy, for I am holy.” It appears to be more theoretical, perhaps a pretext of sorts to try and convince the Israelites to follow the rules of kashrut, or to take seriously God’s commands about sacrifices. And yet, tonight I’d like to argue that this command is everything but theoretical. This statement about God’s holiness and our holiness can provide us with one way, one path to understand and respond to the dangerous theological motivations of this White House and others around the world who also subscribe to this theology. So if you’ll allow me, let’s get theological for a moment.

¹ Leviticus 11:45

“You shall be holy, for I am holy.” In this command, God is calling upon us to mirror God. And we have the ability to mirror God, each of us, because of what we learn about the essence of humanity in Genesis, in the very beginning of our Torah. After God has completed the creation of the world, God turns to human beings:

וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצַלְמֵ אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ

“And God created humankind in the divine image, creating them in the image of God...”²

From our Torah, we receive this radical idea, that each and every person in the world, each and every person, ourselves included, has some godliness, some divinity, a reflection of God within them. Being created in the image, semblance, or reflection of God allows us then to mirror God’s holiness, for us to be holy because God is holy. The Midrash provides us with a clear visual of this concept: “R' Yehoshua ben Levi said: A procession of angels walks before a person wherever they go. And what are they saying? They're crying out: ‘Make way, for an image of the Holy One is approaching!’”³

² Genesis 1:27

³ Devarim Rabbah 4:4

Imagine each of us, every day, walking around with angels making this pronouncement, affirming our inherent godliness and goodness in the world; and then, us witnessing other angels making a similar pronouncement for other people, from all different backgrounds and traditions. How we respond to these pronouncements, how we respond to the divinity of each and every person is how we can mirror God and follow God's command to be holy. God calls upon us to be holy because God is holy. And if each person is created in the image, semblance, or reflection of God, those pieces of divinity within each of us, within each person, also call out to us, hoping that we will demonstrate holiness toward them. In this way, just as God makes a moral claim upon us to act holy, people make a moral claim upon us to act holy toward them.

Shawn Copeland, a womanist theologian, expands upon this theology by identifying three core theological pillars: First, that human beings, created in the image of God, have a distinct ability to connect with God; second, human beings have a unique place in the world; and third, that human beings are innately made for connection with other human beings.⁴ When we look around at the cruelty of the immigration system in the United States, especially under this administration, we can see the ways in which it destroys these pillars. Mass deportations, degrading processing sites, confusing legal systems, dehumanizing language, and tortuous detention environments all attack the image of God in the victims of this system. The cruelty of the system works against our ability to connect with one another, across lines of difference.

⁴ M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, & Being* (Fortress Press, Minneapolis: 2010), pp. 23-24.

Ultimately, the dangerous immigration system blurs the image of God that is deeply rooted within each and every immigrant, refugee, and asylum seeker. By creating systems that break down relationships between individuals from different countries, force individuals to hide from the government, and callously deport individuals, the United States is attacking the image, semblance, or reflection of God within each of us. The people who are on the move into this country, crossing borders, absolutely bear the brunt of this cruelty; however, each one of us is also hurt by the inability for our reflection of God within us to reach out and be in relationship with the reflection of God found within each person on the move. These reflections of godliness in each of us call out to us, across human-made national borders, to welcome the stranger, to be with one another, and to love one another. And any system put in place that disrupts and prevents these connections is acting against God's call for us to be holy. Just like God makes a moral claim upon us, humans make a moral claim upon us.

Just as God struggles in the wilderness, migrants who walk thousands of miles, crossing the Darien Gap, attempting to survive on little food and water, these migrants also struggle in the wilderness.

Just as God cries out to us from far away, Kilmar Abrego Garcia, the Maryland father abducted and being held in El Salvador without any due process, alongside hundreds of others, cries out to us.

Just as God seeks relationship with us, our new neighbors in Brooklyn are seeking relationship, comfort, and connection.

Just as God needs a sanctuary, refugees in our midst are seeking sanctuary, a place to feel safe and secure and loved.

“You shall be holy for I am holy.” That seeking of holiness, the doing of holiness, requires us to see each and every immigrant, refugee, and asylum seeker for who they are: a precious person created in the image of God. We must not allow this administration, or any administration, to blur these images of God on earth. As Jews, that is our duty; that is our moral obligation; that is our path forward. May the time come in which all God’s children know safety, love, joy, justice, and peace, and may it come swiftly and in our days. Shabbat Shalom.

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and third, that human beings are innately made for connection with other human beings.⁸ When we look around at the cruelty of the immigration system in the United States, especially under this administration, we can see the ways in which it destroys these pillars. Mass deportations, degrading processing sites, confusing legal systems, dehumanizing language, and tortuous detention environments all attack the image of God in the victims of this system. The cruelty of the system works against our ability to connect with one another, across lines of difference. Ultimately, the dangerous immigration system blurs the image of God that is deeply rooted within each and every immigrant, refugee, and asylum seeker. By creating systems that break down relationships between individuals from different countries, force individuals to hide from the government, and callously deport individuals, the United States is attacking the image, semblance, or reflection of God within each of us. The people who are on the move into this country, crossing borders, absolutely bear the brunt of this cruelty; however, each one of us is also hurt by the inability for our reflection of God within us to reach out and be in relationship with the reflection of God found within each person on the move. These reflections of godliness in each of us call out to us, across human-made national borders, to welcome the stranger, to be with one another, and to love one another. And any system put in place that disrupts and prevents these connections is acting against God's call for us to be holy. Just like God makes a moral claim upon us, humans make a moral claim upon us.

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“Blur the image of God....”

Intro - 10th Grade, Challenged me to identify more fully my own theology

Theology for this moment in the history of the world

Found in this weeks’ parsha...

Connect with B’tzelem Elohim

Commentary on B’tzelem Elohim

Theology - God makes a claim upon, calling upon us to be holy because God is holy; the pieces of divinity within each person also call out to us; people make a claim upon us

Examples of this current moment (Kilmar, Hostages, Palestinians, Ukrainians, People in NYC, etc.)

Over the past 8 months, I’ve had the great fortune of teaching our 10th graders each and every week. Our topic for the year? God. Anything and everything about God, the Divine, the universe, theology, philosophy, and Jewish thought. We’ve explored everything from Martin Buber to free will, prayer and liturgy to feminist and queer theology. All with the goal of having each student being able to articulate what they do believe - about God, the universe, Judaism, and religion. The conversations with these teens have been powerful, and through their own ideas and convictions, they’ve inspired me to more concretely identify my own theology. Importantly, it has not been lost on us that we are exploring God and belief during this year that has challenged many people’s conceptions of God, including teens and adults in this community. As we watch the war in Gaza reignite, the White House craft dangerous new policies, and fearfulness grow around the world, we are not only identifying what we believe, we are forming theologies that address this moment in the history of the world. And this moment makes us ask new questions: What do we make of God with so much suffering in the world? Does God care about the hurt and pain of so many? Do our prayers to God even matter?

<https://reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/torah-commentary/higher-holiness-through-connection-collective>

Our highest form of holiness is realized when an individual links herself (or himself) to a collective. In moving from isolation to integration, from distinction to connection, God comes to dwell. In world, in word, the primary purpose and highest holiness is that of connectedness.

Leviticus 11:45

כִּי אֲנִי יְהוָה הַמַּעֲלֶה אֶתְכֶם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לְהִיֵּת לָכֶם לֵאלֹהִים וְהֵייתֶם קְדוֹשִׁים כִּי קְדוֹשׁ אֲנִי:

For I am the One who brought you up from the land of Egypt to be your God: you shall be holy, for I am holy.

OrHaChaim on Leviticus 11:45

כי אני ה' המעלה אתכם מארץ מצרים, "For I am the Lord who has brought you out of the land of Egypt, etc." The Torah provides proof that G'd will protect the Jewish people from becoming enmeshed in the sin of contamination by impurity. He took the Israelites out of such a contaminated environment in which their souls were completely submerged. We have mentioned this concept on previous occasions. If the Israelites will now take active steps to preserve their isolation from such contamination, G'd will certainly do His share to see that it does not occur again. If, on the other hand, the Israelites were to absorb any of these forbidden **שקצים ורמשים** as nutrients, they would revert to the environment dominated by the spiritually negative forces of the world, the **קליפות**. In such a case G'd could not be their companion as He does not associate His name with such forces. This was the reason He never associated His name with the Israelites until after the people had left Egypt.

Our Cries for Justice

With these definitions of God, godliness, and God's command upon us explained, we can now turn our attention to the idea of these images, semblances, or reflections of God within each human being call out to one another across borders and divides of all kinds in the world. This section of this paper moves into the field of theological anthropology, rooted in three pillars as defined by M. Shawn Copeland:

(1) that human beings, created in the image and likeness of God (*imago Dei*), have a distinct capacity for communion with God; (2) that human beings have a unique place in the cosmos God created; and (3) that human beings are made for communion with other living beings."⁹

Copeland then explains how the institution of slavery and its immoral practices in the United States destroyed these central ideas that uphold the theologically-rooted humanity of all human beings. The cruelty of the immigration system in the United States, especially in the modern day - mass deportations, degrading processing sites, confusing legal systems, and dehumanizing language and actions - similarly destroy these pillars. By creating systems that break down relationships between individuals from different countries, force individuals to hide from the government, and callously deport individuals, the United States is attacking the image, semblance, or reflection of God within each of us. The people who are on the move, crossing borders, bear the brunt of this cruelty; however, each one of us is also hurt by the inability for our reflection of God within us to reach out and be in relationship with the reflection of God found within each person on the move. These reflections of godliness in each of us call out to us, across human-made national borders, to welcome the stranger, be with one another, and to

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love one another; any system put in place that disrupts and prevents these connections is acting against the will of God. In this way, humans have a claim upon us, just like God.

The unique nature of every human being necessitates us to articulate a theology that is rooted in understanding, appreciating, and connecting the images, semblances, or reflections of God that is found in each and every human being. These reflections of godliness call out to one another, begging and pleading for a world in which they will connect more freely. May that world come swiftly and in our days.

Epistle to the Hebrews - Emma Lazarus

In defiance of the hostile construction that may be put upon my words, I do not hesitate to say that our national defect is that we are not "tribal" enough; we have not sufficient solidarity to perceive that when the life and property of a Jew in the uttermost provinces of the Caucasus are attacked, the dignity of a Jew in free America is humiliated. We who are prosperous and independent have not sufficient homogeneity to champion on the ground of a common creed, common stock, a common history, a common heritage of misfortune, the rights of the lowest and poorest Jew-peddler who flees, for life and liberty of thought, from Slavonic mobs. Until we are all free, we are none of us free. But lest we should justify the taunts of our opponents, lest we should become "tribal" and narrow and Judaic rather than humane and cosmopolitan like the anti-Semites of Germany and Jew-baiters of Russia, we ignore and repudiate our unhappy brethren as having no part or share in their misfortunes- until the cup of anguish is held also to our own lips.

<https://jwa.org/media/quote-from-epistle-to-hebrews>