



Parashat Bereshit
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In the opening section of his *Guide for the Perplexed*, Maimonides addresses the question that arises from the verses in Parashat Bereishit (1:1:26-7) that describe man as created in the *tzelem* (“image”) and *demut* (“form”) of God. He notes that this description led some to the grave misconception that Judaism attributes physical properties to God:

Some have been of opinion that by the Hebrew *tzelem*, the shape and figure of a thing is to be understood, and this explanation led men to believe in the corporeality [of the Divine Being]: for they thought that the words “Let us make man in our *tzelem*” implied that God had the form of a human being, i.e., that He had figure and shape, and that, consequently, He was corporeal. They adhered faithfully to this view, and thought that if they were to relinquish it they would *eo ipso* reject the truth of the Bible; and further, if they did not conceive God as having a body possessed of face and limbs, similar to their own in appearance, they would have to deny even the existence of God.

Maimonides responds to this argument by contending that it arose out of a misinterpretation of the words *tzelem* and *demut*. *Tzelem*, in his view, “signifies the specific form...which constitutes the essence of a thing, whereby the thing is what it is.” Meaning, this word denotes not the physical appearance of the entity described, but rather its essence, the primary quality that makes it what it is. *Demut*, meanwhile, evolves from the Hebrew root *d.m.h.*, which means resemblance or similarity. Something that “resembles” something else does not necessarily share all its properties; rather, it features a point or several points of resemblance with that other thing.

The concept of man’s creation in the *tzelem* and *demut* of God, then, does not yield the conclusion that God shares man’s physical characteristics. Rather, it means that man’s essence resembles that of God in that he is granted the singular capacity of thought and intellect. Maimonides writes:

As man’s distinction consists in a property which no other creature on earth possesses, viz., intellectual perception, in the exercise of which he does not employ his senses, nor move his hand or his foot, this perception has been compared – though only apparently, not in truth – to the Divine perception, which requires no corporeal organ. On this account, i.e., on account of the Divine intellect with which man has been endowed, he is said to have been made in the form and likeness of the Almighty, but far from it be the notion that the Supreme Being is corporeal, having a material form.

Of course God's wisdom is fundamentally different from man's, but the fact that man – unlike all other creatures – possesses intellectual abilities, and is characterized by this quality, means that he is made in the *tzelem* of God, in that they share the same defining feature. God's defining characteristic is specifically the absence of physical properties, His being pure intellect, and the quality that sets man apart from other creatures is his ability to think and understand.

Maimonides' son, Rabbi Avraham, in his Torah commentary, enlists his father's understanding of *tzelem Elokim* in explaining the plural form in which the Torah reports God's decision to create man: "God said: Let us make man in our image and in our form" (*"Na'aseh adam be-tzalmeinu ki-dmoteinu"* – Bereishit 1:26). *Chazal*, as Rashi cites, explained that God consulted, as it were, with the heavenly angels before creating man. Rabbi Avraham notes that quite obviously, the angels did not participate in the creation of man. Rather, the Sages mean by this interpretation that the divine "image" in which man was created originates from the same spiritual, incorporeal realm in which the angels were created. Regarding angels, Maimonides writes (*Guide*, 1:49), "The angels are likewise incorporeal; they are intelligences without matter, but they are nevertheless created beings, and God created them..." As opposed to man, who is the product of a combination between matter and intelligence, angels are pure intelligence, without matter. When God declared, "Let us make man," He meant that man's unique, defining characteristic will originate from the same source as the angels, that the human being will resemble the angels by possessing intelligence. While man's physical being originates from the ground, from the same source as the animals, his defining feature, his intellectual capacity, stems from the heavenly, spiritual realm, from the same realm from which the angels were created.