

Parshas Breishis 5762

In this week's parsha we read about the week of creation, and the ten מאמרות with which G-d created the world. And up to a point each of these מאמרות is in the imperative voice: Let there be - light, vegetation, fish, birds, animals and so forth. Until it comes time to the create man. And then, rather than say - as we would have expected - יהי אדם, the רבשי"ע says: נעשה אדם בצלמנו כדמותנו: let us make man in our image, in our likeness. And the obvious question is: Who is "us"?

This is an old question. It is raised by חז"ל and by all of the commentators. And there are many answers to this question. I want to share with you one particular answer that is offered by the ישמח משה; I have also seen this answer ascribed to the בעשי"ט. In any event, whatever its provenance, it is a very beautiful and important answer:

When G-d says: Let us make man in our image, He is talking to man himself. Because every other creature was created complete; without any further assembly required. No one has yet improved on the design of a bird or a fish. And one animal is pretty much like another: One monkey is more or less like another.

But in man we find such tremendous divergence; there are men who sink to the lowest level of depravity, and others who rise to the highest and most sublime levels of self-sacrifice and righteousness. And it is difficult to understand how both could belong to the same species.

The answer is that man was created to be a צלם אלוקים, an image of G-d. Not, of course, in his physical features, but rather in his moral stature. Man has the potential to imitate the מידות of הקב"ה Himself; היה רחום, etc. But he is not born that way; on the contrary, the pasuk in איוב says: עיר פרא אדם יולד, man is born a wild animal, a savage. And it is up to man to complete his own creation, by raising himself to become a צלם אלוקים.

G-d does not do it for us. Nor can we do it alone; for חז"ל tell us that יצרו של אדם מתגבר, man's יצר הרע, his animal nature, is so powerful that without the רבשי"ע's help he could never overcome it. So G-d will not, and man cannot, alone create a צלם אלוקים. Rather, it is a partnership; G-d and man together can make man into a צלם אלוקים. And therefore the רבשי"ע says to man: נעשה אדם בצלמנו, let us - together - make man in our image and likeness.

We have seen in this past century to what depths man can descend when he turns his back on that call. And that discovery has shaken western civilization. Several perceptive thinkers have suggested that the nihilism that has gripped western society in the past decades - the urge to tear down every ideal and debunk every myth and every hero - stems from the trauma that followed the revelation of the holocaust. For having sounded the depth of depravity of which the human heart is capable, men came to the conclusion that man is nothing but a savage animal, and everything that seems to raise him above that

level is simply bunk.

The mishnah says: חביב אדם שנברא בצלם, חיבה יתירה נודעת לו שנברא בצלם. Man is precious because he has the potential to be a צלם אלוקים. And he is precious especially if he knows that he has that potential; for else he will never achieve it. The Jewish people are unique in their intimate knowledge of what heights man can reach when he heeds the call of נעשה אדם בצלמנו. The world knows what a savage looks like; but only we, *lehavdil*, know what a Chofetz Chaim looks like. And it is our historic mission to show the world that it is possible for man to become, indeed, a צלם אלוקים.

And ultimately the world will learn that lesson. On that day when ויעשו כולם אגודה אחת, when mankind will unite to fulfill the will of the רבונו של עולם, and to complete His purpose in creating man בצלמנו כדמותנו.