

**Created in God's Image**  
Rosh Hashanah – Day 2 – 2013  
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I want to ask you a question: There is a discussion in the Talmud about which verse in Torah is *the* most important one. The rabbis are trying to identify the verse that expresses the most important principle in Judaism. Since the pages of the Talmud are actually surrounded by commentaries – I propose that this morning we enter the page and add our own “two cents” to the conversation. What verse – just one verse, do you think deserves this position of honor?

As you might expect, when the rabbis engage in this exercise they don't come up with one answer, but rather, with a difference of opinions.

Rabbi Akiva tells us that the most important principle is expressed in the verse “love your neighbor as yourself.” However, Rabbi Azzai disagrees. He says that the central teaching in Torah comes from Genesis, from the story of creation. The verse he quotes is: “this is the record of Adam's line – when God created man, He made him in the likeness of God; male and female He created them.” This verse comes from our Torah portion this morning.

Why, you might ask, does Ben Azzai find such an obvious choice as “love your neighbor as yourself” inadequate?

Well – there are several possible answers. For one, perhaps it demands too much of us. Perhaps it's too high a bar to set – to expect that we should *love* our neighbor, not just *respect* him.

It reminds me of a famous line from Charles Shultz author of the Peanuts character, that says: *I love humanity; it's people I can't stand.* Loving your neighbor – challenges us to love not a concept of humanity – but flesh and blood people! Like the aunt, we invite every year for Rosh Hashanah dinner and despite being perfectly capable, never lifts a finger to help....

The verse raises another question: what does “neighbor” actually mean? Is it the person who lives close to us – a person within our community – someone like us? Is it a “fellow Israelite?”

It seems that in identifying the single most important principle in Torah, Ben Azzai was looking for a verse that didn't have these ambiguities. He was looking for a verse whose message had a universal application and whose goal was more basic than “love.” Saying that each of us male and female, is created in the image of God demands that we recognize the dignity in *every* person. Not that we *love* them – but that we recognize their “dignity.” It sensitizes us to the suffering of others and propels us towards building bridges with communities that are different from ours.

But what does it mean for us, in our own lives, to be created in God's image? I'd like to share with you a beautiful, poetic response given by Abraham Joshua Heschel, when commenting on the prohibition against making images of God. The second of the Ten Commandments tells us that we are prohibited to make any representations of God – right? Heschel explains: “it's not because God is beyond all images, so that no image could possibly depict God. If that were the case, images would merely be harmless. God *has* an image and that image is *you*. You may not make the image of God because *you* are the image of God. The only medium in which you can make God's image is the medium of your entire life, and that is precisely what we are commanded to do. Everything we do, everything we say, each moment and the way we use it are all part of the way we build God's image. To take anything less than a full living human being, like a canvas or a piece of marble and call it the image of God would be to diminish God, to lessen God's image.”

So, that's our job! And like the artist who steps back from his work, looks at the brush strokes on the canvas, evaluates where he is headed and considers the changes he wants to make – at this time of year, we too think about the bigger picture and the changes we seek.

How do we do this?

Well, when we think about *t'shuva* – about returning to our best and noblest selves, what we're actually doing is opening ourselves to once again fall in love with our deepest wishes and dreams. That is the first step. But as someone wisely said: “goals are dreams with a deadline.” Our next task is to translate our dreams into deadlines. And here, I quote Bill Gates who provides us with insight about deadlines. He said: “we often overestimate what we can achieve in a year and underestimate what we can achieve in a decade.”

I think about the Anniversary that we just celebrated this past August: fifty years since Martin Luther King spoke about his dream of equality for African Americans in this country. Despite what remains to be done to truly achieve King's dream, so much has been accomplished since he passionately shared his dream with the nation. Change takes time but we should not underestimate the change that we can indeed bring about.

The possibility of change is deeply rooted in our tradition. In fact the *first* commandment that God gives the Israelite nation reminds us that each of us has the ability to renew ourselves. This first mitzvah says: “this month shall mark for you the beginning of the months – *ha chodesh hazeh lachem rosh chodashim...* Since *chodesh* can mean both month or new – it is also read as “this month shall be to you the first of all newness.” Our tradition insists that we always have the ability to renew ourselves; that we are never stuck. Rav Nachman, the early 19<sup>th</sup> century Hasidic Master, put it this way: “*mi sherotzeh, oseh.*” If we want to, we can do it. It sounds a bit like the rabbinic version of the Nike commercial – doesn't it? And while it might also sound a bit punitive – “just do it” – it *can* be truly motivating.

I recently read an article in the New York Times that presents an amazing case of a man who truly turns his life around. Shon Hopwood was convicted and sentenced to 13 years in prison for bank robbery. He was 23 years old at the time. When he left prison, he received a fellowship to the Washington University School of Law in Seattle. And upon graduation he was awarded a prestigious clerkship on the US Court of Appeals for the DC Circuit. Commenting on his life Hopwood says: "I was a reckless and selfish young man back then. I changed." The story is undoubtedly about "second chances" but it also reminds us that changing course is indeed possible. I venture to say that for most of us, the changes we seek are less dramatic but the "take away" is the same.

Let us remind ourselves of this first mitzvah which points to the possibility of renewal. And let us remember the teaching from this morning's torah portion, challenging us to dream expansively, to dream about the changes we seek in our own lives and those we seek for the benefit of our fellow travelers.