

Ecology In The Divine Image Class One

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“A tree imitates God by being a tree.”

Thomas Merton

In the opening chapters of Bereisheet, Hashem famously creates humanity *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the divine image. For millennia Jews (and Christians) have been debating what that means. The word *tzelem* referred to an image of statue used in non-Jewish Temples, and Umberto Cassuto (1883-1951) argued from this that the writer was trying to imply that for Jews, worshiping God means serving other people.

Rabbi David Mevorach Seidenberg, in his voluminous *Kabbalah and Ecology*, asks whether it is *only* humans who are created in the divine image. When viewed in terms of Cassuto's understanding of the divine image, the urgency of R' Seidenberg's question is highlighted.

“All who wound God's works wound God's image,” says the Zohar (Ra'aya Mehemna 3:123b). What of those, then, who heal and revere God's works?

Seidenberg goes questing for evidence that the non-human world was also seen as part of the divine image and finds it, particularly in the Zoharic literature. He points out that in the Tikkuney Zohar it says, “The ten sefirot...are clothed in ten things that were created on the first day, and these are: heavens and earth, light and darkness, abyss and chaos, wind and water, the measure of the day and the measure of the night. (70, 120a-b).”

This means that the sefirot, which are God's manifest “personality” or “energies” are clothed in the energies of creation.

The Zohar Chadash says, “In the secret of the ten sefirot...all is included in this image of [the letter] *He'*....In this secret were created and affixed/ordered/it'taqnu all these lower ones. For this [reason] it's written: “Elohim said: Let us make/na'aseh Adam in our image as our likeness...all these that are existing below and are united in her, in her image, truly/mamash.” (Sitrey Otiyot, 2a)

These texts say that all of the creations of the physical world embody the sefirot and are created in the image of the Shechinah. Another strong indication of this tendency in Rabbinic thought is

the classic Hasidic equation of nature (teva) and God (elohim) due to their sharing the gematria of 86.

Despite my sympathy with R' Seidenberg's ethical goal, in traditional texts from the Tanakh onwards there is still a distinction between the way that creations and creatures are a divine image and the way humans are. All of creation is an expression of the divine name, an embodiment of the sefirot, and an image of the Shechina whose essence is divine, *yes*. Yet humans have the power to be "subcreators" and channelers of divine blessing (or unholy harm) in a way that a fox or pine tree can not. Humans are intended to be, in some way, priests over the rest of creation.

Do we need to abandon this distinction, or can it empower our ethological ethics? What do you think?