Tselem: Toward an Anthropopathic Theology of Image

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"If we are created in God's image (tselem), what is God like?" Theologians and psychologists alike ask this question, but their answers couldn't be more different.

The Problem: God's Image and God-Language

Secular psychologists, together with secular philosophers, say that we humans create God in our own image. They maintain that we confront the unforgiving reality of the universe and society, and slowly realize that we simply cannot control the world in which we live. This impotence leaves us feeling angry. To compensate, we evolve a fantasy in which there is a good and powerful figure who makes love triumph over hate, peace over war, and right over might. We are in dire need of this powerful and good figure because He (for some, She) brings lived reality back into balance, restoring our sense of proportion and, hence, our faith in the world and in our selves. The name of Freud is most prominently associated with this analysis, but he is not the only psychologist or philosopher to have argued that God is a fantasy. [1]

By contrast, theologians say that it is we humans who are created in God's image, not the other way around. We do not create God; God creates us, as indeed the Genesis passages indicate.

Some theologians say that our personal and physical characteristics are the image of God in us -- an approach that I shall call the "anthropopathic," preferring this word, which suggests "having characteristics of the human personality," over "anthropomorphic," which suggests "having actual human form and shape." Anthropopathic theologians argue that it is not we who project ourselves onto God, but God Who projects Godself onto humanity. Put differently: Since personhood is the core of our being and since we are created in God's image, God must also have personhood. In anthropopathic theology, God has a Face and a real Personal Presence or Personality. To put it formally: Personhood, with its expression as face, presence, and personality, is God's and we have that capacity because God has created us in God's image. This view has serious legal implications, not the least of which is that murder is an unforgivable offense and, even more, that it is impossible to use execution as a punishment for any bodily or monetary crime. This view is also at the core of the disagreement over whether the death penalty is a fit punishment even for murder.

How do anthropopathic theologians arrive at a view of God's image so different from philosophers and psychologists like Freud? For anthropopathic theologians, there are two methods for answering the question about the relationship between God and God's image. First, we can examine Scripture to see how God describes Godself. To do this, we admit that Scripture represents the way God wishes to communicate with us and, hence, we induce from scriptural language what it is that God says God is. Second, we can find something deeply personal about ourselves as humanity and draw an analogy backward to God. To do this, we examine human nature and choose certain human qualities. We then reason backward to say that God must possess these characteristics since we are in God's image. Either method is theologically acceptable, the one recognizing God's communication to us and the other following the inner logic of "in the image of." The results will be much the same.

There are, however other theologians who wish to avoid anthropomorphism as much as possible. They look not to our personal and physical characteristics but one or more of our inner capacities for the image of God is us: intelligence, spirituality, and/or morality. For this group, then, it is not personality or face, but mind, soul, or spirit that is the aspect of God in us. Indeed, since intelligence, spirituality, and morality that is the aspect of God in us. Indeed, since intelligence, spirituality, and morality are core to our being and since we are created in God's image, God must also have these qualities. To put it formally: Intelligence, spirituality, and/or morality are God's, and we have those capacities because God has created us in God's image.

The issue of God's gender illustrates this conflict over God-language nicely: Do we refer to God as He or as She or in some more neutral way such as The Radiant One? Secular psychologists and philosophers say that gendered language is clearly a projection; that is, an attempt on our part to imagine into being a figure that is strong and kind, powerful and loving. Given the male-female stereotypes of our culture, the need for a strong and powerful figure leads toward a preference for He, whereas the need for a kind and loving figure leads toward a preference for She. To achieve both, according to these thinkers, one needs either two entities who participate in the divine or a single entity with both capacities. Thus, many Christians understand Jesus as an intercessory, loving figure contrasted with the sterner figure of God; and, in Catholic tradition, Mary represents a further extension of the loving figure in intercession with the more demanding Father-Son. Jews, by contrast, say that the one God is both loving and just. Either way, for the secularists, God Godself is neither He nor She, if there is a God at all.

There are, however, some psychologists and philosophers who say that one can best refer to God as the Power or Force or Energy behind the universe. Such designations are rooted in what Freud called the "oceanic feeling" for what lies beyond physical reality as we know it. This view is close to many eastern understandings of the divine. These psychologists and philosophers favor neutral, non-gendered terminology for God.

Theologians who tend toward de-anthropomorphization and certain abstract mystical conceptions of God agree with the psychologists and philosophers who acknowledge God as the Power behind and beyond the universe. They, too, favor neutral, non-gendered terminology for God. In contemporary Jewish practice, this is well illustrated by the series of prayerbooks published recently by the Reconstructionist movement in American Judaism. [2] These use a stunning series of words for God, most of which catch the ineffable yet transcendent quality of holy being, without implying gender or, for the most part, personhood: The Faithful One, The Radiant One, The Eternal One, The Abundant One, The Veiled One, and so on.

However, theologians who favor anthropopathic language must, in some way, opt for He and/or She, for gender is quintessentially human. Maleness and femaleness are part of our being. Since we are created in the image of God, God too must have gender. "How does one write a liturgy that accommodates both human genders," you may ask. This is a serious questions for the anthropopathic theologians. Some alternate exclusive male-gendered with exclusive female-gendered liturgy. Others use inclusive language, alternating gender by paragraph or by sentence, and adding references to matriarchs as well as patriarchs. Still others use single-gendered liturgy but think double-gendered. No matter what the practical solution, the option for gendered language is rooted in the theology of image in its anthropopathic sense.

Positive Anthropopathic Attributes

My own inclination, rooted in the biblical and rabbinic tradition and following Abraham Joshua Heschel's "theology of pathos," is toward the anthropopathic approach. [3] So, I must ask the questions: "If we are created in God's image, what is God like? What personality characteristics does God have, reasoning from those that humans have, and judging from the way God describes

Godself in Scripture?" I would say God has the following six positive personal characteristics: [4]

First, God must be fair. In American English, the word "just" is too strong, for it conjures up the stereotype of a God of law who punishes severely, except insofar as God's mercy overrules the strict requirement of the law. It conjures up, too, the person compulsively pursuing the letter of the law, ignoring the spirit thereof. "Fairness" has just the right connotation in American English. God must act fairly, appropriately punishing the wicked, including ourselves, and appropriately rewarding the faithful, including our enemies. Traditional texts support the teaching of God's fairness, and hence, God's commitment to moral dialogue. For morality is an integral part of all personality; it is integral to the being of God and, then, to God's creation.

Second, God addresses, and can be addressed by, humankind. Although God is totally autonomous, God is in contact with humanity. God can be angered, or pleased, by what humans do. Ultimately, this means that God can be induced by human words and behavior to change God's mind, to reverse a decision, to alter a judgement. This insight is sometimes formulated as "the efficacy of prayer" or "original repentance."

Because creation is morally neutral, there is no "natural moral law." Hence, God addressed humankind to give it guidance. God's presence continues to draw humanity onto the path God wishes. Furthermore, God's guidance causes humans anguish, joy, guilt, and satisfaction.

This com-munication, this mutual addressing of one another, is central to the dialogic nature of creation-revelation-piety. It constitutes the interrelatedness of humankind and God.

Third, God is powerful but not perfect. God makes mistakes and admits it, as after the flood of Noah (Gen. 8:21-2). God can be seduced by Satan, as in the prologue of Job. God is unnecessarily short-tempered with the Jewish people, [5] and God repents. [6] Some argue that all such incidents are just a testing of humankind, but that does not seem to be the simpler meaning of the texts. Zoharic and Lurianic mysticism, too, left room for God's imperfection.

God, however, does have power. God's power is absolute, but God cannot use it absolutely. For, having created a being also capable of moral judgement, God must limit God's own power so as to empower the being God created. Humankind, too thus, has power, though not as much as God. Power is dialectical. It is the interrelatedness of God's and humankind's expectations. [7]

Fourth, God is loving. There are many ways to love. There is erotic love, virtuous love, and parental love. Love can be unilateral or dialogic. Sometimes love is sacrificial; sometimes it is commanding, imperial. Love can be open, articulated clearly; love can be hidden. Love is a glance into another's eyes, the embrace of a child, the gratitude of an elderly person not forgotten. Love is the affirmation of the other, given and received in wholeness. And forgiveness. Love is the presence of moral truth and goodness. Love is commitment to lead a life dedicated to truth and goodness. It is stubborn perseverance on the way, not matter what the temptation. Love does not tolerate injustice; it impels one to action. Love frustrates; it causes deep anger. How does one love one's parent without superimposing that image on the child? How does one love one's child who rebels forcefully? Love is exclusive, dedicated to special persons in special ways. And love is inclusive, reaching from one to an-other, seeking to embrace the stranger. Love is not monolithic. It cannot be rationalized into a coherent whole, into a system or a single theology. Love is much more complex than its metaphors.

God loves all humanity, and individual human beings, in all these ways -- just as human beings love others and seek to be loved, in all these ways. Human beings touch the text of God's love and of human love. We enter it. We read it and ponder it. And it touches us, permeates us, puzzles and pains us, gives us life and demands death. Love, in all its complexity, makes us blossom and become that which we are destined to be.

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Fifth, God gets angry. There is anger that is righteous indignation in the face of moral iniquity. This is God's anger spoken by the prophets and the prophets' anger spoken on behalf of God: "Shall one steal, kill, fornicate, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and follow other gods whom you do not even know; and then come and stand before Me, in this house upon which My Name is called, and say 'We are saved,' only to go and do again those abominations?!" (Jer. 7:9-10).

There is also an anger that flows from bitterness. God creates humankind and humanity turns rotten, "the instincts of the heart of humanity being evil from its earliest days" (Gen. 8:21). God brings the Jewish people out of Egypt with signs and wonders, and they rebel again and again. and God punishes them. [8] The people also get angry. Rooted in the mutuality of covenant, [9] they experience righteous indignation toward God. [10] They also respond in bitterness. [11]

There is nothing wrong with these kinds of anger. If one loves passionately, zealously, one expects great things. God loves humanity, and humanity loves God. The anger of righteous indignation and the anger of bitterness and vengeance have their place.

Sixth, God chooses; God is partisan. No one likes to hear this, but God chooses and, having chosen, God jealously guards that which is God's; and God demands loyalty from those whom God chooses.

God chose to create the world. It is God's possession. For exactly that reason, no one may abuse it or lay absolute claim to it. God chose the Jewish people. They too, in their flesh, are God's possession; they belong to God. For exactly that reason, no one may abuse them or lay claim to absolute authority over them. God chose the holy land. God resides in it. God's people reside in it. For exactly that reason, no one may abuse the land or the people's right to it. The people must respect God's land because the land is theirs, from God.

The election of the Jews was always a scandal. How could a universal God elect one people from among the myriads of creation? But, if God has personality, of course God has preferences. Personality means having a character and a history, and character and history mean having preferences. One need not always act on one's preferences. And, one must always carefully consider one's preferences and the consequences of acting on them. But preference is core to personality. Therefore, the scandal of particularity is core to anthropopathic theology. [12]

In addition to these six anthropopathic attributes, God's personality, like ours, contains holiness, sacredness. [13]

Negative Anthropopathic Attributes

But does God's personality not also have "negative" characteristics? Reasoning from the human image and judging from God's own language about Godself in Scripture, one would argue that God indeed does have negative characteristics. We are hesitant, suspicious, selfish, impulsive, impatient, demanding, and rigid. Sometimes, we are even punitive and irrational. As noted above, God makes mistakes and admits it. God also gets angry at God's stiff-necked people and acts punitively against them. Further, God's preference for God's people is irrational.

In the period after the shoah, [14] Jews have asked themselves "How can God have allowed the shoah to happen?" The usual answers to this question are as follows: [15] (1) God did not let it happen but gave humans free will, and humans caused it; this answer denies God's providential action in history during the shoah. (2) God was in eclipse or hiding God's Face; this answer is a good metaphor, but it dodges the question. (3) God's ways are not our ways, and hence we cannot know why God allowed the shoah; this answer, too, evades the question. And so on. It seems to me better to assert the shoah for what it was, to affirm God's ongoing presence in history, and then

to seek an answer as best we can. I have, therefore, argued that the shoah was an act of abuse, that is, that it was a punitive action against the Jews that they did not deserve. Abuse is punishment that does not fit the crime. The Jewish people, I and most others maintain, did not deserve the shoah; hence, it was an act of abuse. God is not the only abuser, to be sure; humans effectuated the shoah. But God is co-responsible and, hence, an Abuser. This means that God's personality also has this irrational, one might even say evil, side to it. [16] The study of the history of God's action and inaction in our time support this conclusion; Scripture, too, has many passages in this vein. [17]

What is the proper response to the abusive dimension of God's personality? Drawing on the very long tradition of protest, I have argued that challenging God, protesting God's wrong behavior is the proper response. Basing myself on ample precedent within the Jewish tradition, I have called for thinking the truth and praying the truth to God. This approach, rooted as it is the moral mutuality of covenant, is, to my mind, the only redeeming move left to us. [18]

This move, however, is not enough; one must also take constructive steps to resist evil and to bind ourselves to community: [19] "To have faith in God in a post-holocaust, abuse-sensitive world, we must: (1) acknowledge the awful truth of God's abusing behavior; (2) adopt a theology of protest and sustained suspicion; and (3) develop the religious affections of distrust and unrelenting challenge. And yet we will also: (4) engage the process of re-new-ed spiritual healing with all that entails of confrontation, mourning, and empowerment; (5) resist all evil mightily, supporting resistance to abuse wherever it is found; (6) open ourselves to the good side of God, painful though that is; and (7) we will turn to address God, face to Face, presence to Presence.

Healing from the shoah, like all healing from abuse, is a very complicated process. [20]

Taking Tselem Seriously

I will not pretend to be happy with this theology, though I do think that my own faith is deeper for it. [21] Resistance to it has come from many directions. [22] If we are to take the image of God seriously, however, we must learn to think of the "negative" as well as the "positive" dimensions of God's being. That is what "image" means. We must, it seems to me, consider that most persons reach the point of realizing that their parents are (or, were) not perfect; perhaps, that they are (or, were) not even really good, really loving. Some touch this realization and shy away from it as quickly as possible. Most come to it and go on to consider in what ways their parents are (or, were) also good. This is called "maturity," "growing up." The same is true of our relationship with God. Human beings do not need to have a perfect God. Rather, humans need to have a realistic view of, and appreciation for, God. Then, and only then, can human beings arrange their patterns of relatedness to God. One can accept the good and the evil, praising where fitting and protesting where appropriate. One can alternate between love and challenge, between acceptance and protest. Just as having a mature understanding of one's parents enables one to become a more mature person, so having a mature understanding of God enables one to become a more mature servant. [23]

The Doctrine of the Incarnation

When I teach Introduction to Judaism, I include early Christian thinking, and I have always found that the doctrine of the incarnation is not hard to explain, once one acknowledges the anthropopathic nature of God. If we are created in God's image, as Scripture says, then nothing human is alien to God. The idea that God might want to actually em-body God's image is only a few steps beyond the idea that God revealed God's will in some concrete way, or beyond the concept of God manifesting Godself in a vision or theophany.

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One way to better understand the anthropopathic dimension of God's being, then, is to contemplate the idea of the incarnation of God as taught in Christianity. I often ask the following question of Christians and Jews: "What did God learn when, according to Christianity, God became incarnate? What quintessentially human experiences enlarged God's mind and heart when God became a human body and lived among us?" There is no correct answer to this question; still, some responses are intriguing.

God learned about sin and temptation. Prior to being incarnated, God probably had only an intellectual understanding of just how deep the feeling of sin goes. God probably underestimated the compulsive power of sin, for sin is just that -- a compulsive need to do that which we know is wrong. Sin arises from rebellion and from addiction. God learned about this when God became human.

God also learned about fear. The divine fears nothing, but humans fear many things. We fear pain. We fear loneliness. Sometimes we fear things of which we are not even conscious. And we fear death, the stoppage of all life and connection. God did not know these things until God took on a body and came among us.

Finally, God knows two kinds of love: grace that is unconditional and not related to our deeds, and compassion that is linked to what we do. (Mercy, which is a forgiving of our sins and sinfulness, is motivated by compassion and/or by grace.) But God's love in all its forms is infinite. When God became incarnate, God learned the limits of love. God learned how hard it is to love even those who love us, much less those who hate us. God learned that humans are sometimes justifiably motivated by justice or even hate, and that we often have things to do other than love one another.

The doctrine of the incarnation is, thus, not beyond the Jewish theological imagination. It could be seen as an extension of the anthropopathic understanding of God. Thinking about it could help Jews, and Christians, understand the theology of the image of God in which we are created.

However, Jews cannot accept the doctrine of the incarnation for several reasons: First, it is too anthropomorphic. It is one thing to say that God has anthropopathic qualities, characteristics which we think of as human, and quite another to say that God has (or had) an actual body. The biblical, rabbinic, and mystical traditions resist this anthropomorphization of God even though they accept bodily terms as metaphorically descriptive of God. The prohibition against imaging God extends, in all these Jewish traditions, to giving God a real body though not a mind-bound body.

Second, the doctrine of the incarnation is inescapably linked to other Christian doctrines: to the suffering of the incarnated God, to his death on the cross, and to the atoning power of that death for those who participate in it through faith. Jewish tradition, in the main, rejects the doctrine of redemption through suffering and, again in its mainstream, rejects the idea of vicarious atonement. Furthermore, Judaism rejects the fact of the specific incarnation of God in Jesus of Nazareth because of the unfulfilled messianic claims made on his behalf by Christian tradition.

Finally, the bloody history of Christian-Jewish relations over two millennia does not allow the traditional Jew to identify with a doctrine that is specifically Christian, even if it were otherwise true. Christianity has simply been too cruel to Jews and Judaism even if, in very recent times, some Christians have taken a different attitude toward us. "How can one sing the songs of the Lord on alien soil?" It would be a betrayal of all our ancestors to do so. It would render the death of thousands of martyrs an act of futility. Rather: "Good fences make good neighbors."

All this having been said, Christians and Jews have much to learn from one another in taking tselem seriously -- not only ethically but also spiritually and intellectually. Exploring together the positive and negative attributes of God using all we know of Scripture and of human nature will enrich our knowledge of ourselves and of the God in Whose image we are created.

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[1] S. Freud, *The Future of an Ilusion* (available in many editions).

[2]*Kol Haneshamah,* four volumes (Wyncote, PA, The Reconstructionist Press: 1992-).

[3] A. J. Heschel,*The Prophets* (various editions).

[4] For a fuller explication of these personalist attributes, see D. Blumenthal, *Facing the Abusing God: A Theology of Protest* (Louisville, KY, Westminster / John Knox: 1993) chap. 2.

[5] E.g., Ex. 32:7-14; Num. 14:11-20.

[6] Gen. 6:6; Ex. 32:14; 1 Sam. 15:11,35; 2 Sam. 24:16.

[7] D. Blumenthal, *Understanding Jewish Mysticism* , vol. 1 (New York, Ktav Publishing: 1978) 101-184.

[8] See H. Fisch, *Poetry with a Purpose: Biblical Poetics and Interpretation* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press: 1988 / 1990) -- reviewed by me in *Midstream* (August-September 1992) 41-43 -- 140-42, that God wrestles with God's anger against Israel as it is undermined by God's love.

[9] There is a general covenant with all humanity, thorugh Adam and Noah, and a specific covenant with the Jewish people, through Sinai. Both are grounds for the appeal to God's fairness.

[10] See, for example, Ps. 88:15,19; Ps. 44:21-24; Lam. 5:20. As I show in *Facing* and will mention below, if there is a post-Shoah Jewish theology, it is this theology of anger and protest, of righteous indignation, rooted in the intertext of the covenant, in mutual expectations and obligations. See aslo D. Blumenthal, *The Place of Faith and Grace in Judaism* (Austin, Texas, The Center for Judaic-Christian Studies: 1985); *idem*., "Mercy," *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought* , ed. A. Cohen and P. Mendes-Flohr (New York, Scribners: 1987) 589-95; E. Wiesel, *The Trial of God* (New York, Schocken Books: 1979); and A. Laytner, *Arguing With God* (Northvale, NJ, Jason Aronson: 1990) -- reviewed by me in *Modern Judaism,* 12:1 (Feb. 1992) 105-10 -- 196ff.

[11] See, for example,Ps. 79:6 and Ps. 137:9.

[12] See M. Wyschogrod, The Body of Faith: Judaism as Corporeal Election (New York, Seabury: 1983), reviewed by me in *Association for Jewish Studies Review* , 11:116-21; and D. Hartman, *A Living Covenant* (New York, Free Press: 1985) -- reviewed by me *ibid*., 12:298-305. One can even read the book of Genesis as an essay in chosenness and rejection.

[13]*Facing,* chap. 3.

[14] The word "Shoah" is preferable to "holocaust" because the latter connotes a whole-burned sacrifice, certainly not a meaning to be signaled here. The former has the merit of being a Hebrew term and, hence, allows the Jewish people to name its own disaster.

[15] For a fuller discussion, see D. Blumenthal, "Theodicy: Dissonance in Theory and Praxis," *Concilium,* 1 (1998) 95-98; also available on my website (it is capital-sensitive): http://www.js.emory.edu/BLUMENTHAL/

[16] It may even be the case that God has an unconscious.

[17]*Facing,* 240-46.

[18]*Facing,* chaps. 17-18.

[19]*Facing,* 259, modified slightly.

[20] "Theodicy," 98, modified slightly.

[21] "My Faith is Deeper Now," *Jewish Spectator* (Spring) 40-43.

[22] "Theodicy," 100-103, emphasis original.

[23] To be sure, there are those who would argue the contrary: The fascination with evil results from a desire to undermine the legitimacy of the good God. Not resolving the theodical problem but holding onto it is itself a desire to keep the problem alive and, hence, to avoid total submission to the omnibenevolent God. I hear the argument but am not persuaded. Contending with God requires very deep faith and, in the final analysis, is rooted in a mature, loving relationship. See "My Faith is Deeper Now."

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Rabbi Blumenthal is Jay and Leslie Cohen Professor of Judaic Studies at Emory University, Atlanta. He is the author of *Facing the Abusing God: A Theology of Protest* (Westminster/John Knox), *God at the Center* (Jason Aronson), and *The Banality of Good and Evil: A Social, Psychological, and Ethical Reflection* (Georgetown University Press). For more see his website: http://www.js.emory.edu/BLUMENTHAL.