



## GEULAS YISRAEL

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RAM, YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

# Tzelem Elokim in the Land of Israel

Sometimes, a transgression is so grave that a death sentence issued by Beit Din is inadequate both as punishment and deterrent. Additional measures are required to underscore the seriousness and detestability of the offense. Two prime examples are blasphemy and idol worship.

Although such crimes are met with stoning or סקילה, further action is taken to highlight the magnitude of the offense. To emphasize the severity of these aveirot, the body is publicly hung after execution.

Yet, the dead body is only displayed for a few fleeting moments. It is raised a few minutes before sunset and lowered immediately after. In explaining this swift ceremony, the Torah notes that hanging a body is demeaning to the image of Hashem.

לא תלין נבלתו כי קללת אלקים תלוי

Since human beings are created in the image of Hashem, disfiguring or dishonoring the human body is seen as an affront to Hashem Himself. Thus, the body is taken down quickly. Protecting human dignity as a reflection of divine nobility is paramount, outweighing

whatever moral message may be conveyed by prolonging the display of the body.

### TZELEM ELOKIM AND RELIGIOUS BELIEF

Respecting the divine image in other human beings is not merely a moral norm but a fundamental principle of faith. For thousands of years, humanity could not conceive of a singular G-d responsible for the teeming diversity of this planet. Additionally, they could not fathom a One G-d responsible for the dichotomy of our world. How could one G-d be responsible for both good and evil, light and darkness, water and fire? This led them to assume the existence of a vast pantheon of gods who resided in heavenly abodes.

Finally, Avraham discovered the first principle of monotheism: *from One comes many. Ein Od Milvado.*

Even after grasping this foundational concept, it remained difficult for some to imagine that G-d was *distinct* from the system. The vastness of the universe led them to believe that G-d was *part* of the system itself.

The notion that Hashem is part of the natural order is not only misguided but fundamentally heretical. He exists wholly beyond and separate from the universe, transcending any aspect of creation. The word “*kadosh*” or קדוש as it applies to Hashem doesn’t merely signify that Hashem is *holy* in the sense of a saintly or righteous person; it means that Hashem is *different* and *transcendent*. He is distinct from the system, not bound by physicality, and no physical references can be applied to Him. This is the second principle

of monotheism: not only does the One bring forth many, but the *One is fundamentally different* from the system He created.

Additionally, Hashem endowed humanity with this distinct trait. Just as He is transcendent, He granted a surpassing quality to human beings. While *His* essence is non-physical and separate from the physical world, we are physical beings closely linked to nature. Our uniqueness, though, lies in what separates us from nature: free will, self-awareness, conscience, creativity, cognitive speech, reason, emotions, and intricate relationships. This constellation of traits constitutes our tzelem Elokim. Our traits of tzelem Elokim echo His own distinctiveness.

Recognizing the divine reflection in others acknowledges Hashem's divine gift to us. Respecting human dignity honors the divine aspect within us.

### WE ARE ONE

Tzelem Elokim is not confined to our souls but encompasses our physical forms as well. The Torah emphasizes that the creation of the human body was a deliberate process involving divine calculation:

נעשה אדם בצלמינו כדמותינו

(Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.)

The phrase “na’aseh,” meaning “Let us,” implies a heavenly discussion. The Midrash elaborates that:

כביכול מלך מלכי המלכים הקדוש ברוך הוא  
ובית דינו נמנין על כל אבר ואבר

It is as if Hashem and the Heavenly court deliberated over each limb of the human body.

This heavenly dialogue about each limb underscores that the human form itself embodies the divine image. Tzelem Elokim

extends to both our souls and our physical bodies, rejecting the dualistic notion of a stark separation between the physical and spiritual realms. Dualistic religions divide existence into opposing categories—body and soul, light and darkness, good and evil—creating a sharp dichotomy.

In contrast, we view experience *holistically*. (technically the term *Monism* is the opposite of *Dualism*). Though some might categorize their lives into *ruchniyut* (spirituality) and *gashmiyut* (materiality), our lived experience reveals our indivisible unity, where every aspect of our existence is woven into a seamless, sacred whole. The divine presence is reflected in both our souls *and* our physical forms.

For this reason, the body of an idolator or a blasphemer is left to hang only for a fleeting moment. To let the body linger, subject to decay, drawn by maggots and flies, or subjected to the curious gazes of passersby, would tarnish the divine image that is woven into the human body. Even in the depths of sin, a tzelem Elokim remains—a sacred reflection of the divine that, though marred, continues to reside in the ephemeral body.

### GRAVES OF BEITAR

In 135 CE, during the Bar Kochba revolt, the Jewish city of Beitar fell, after a brutal siege lasting three and a half years. Furious at the Jewish resistance which had defied the mighty Roman legions, Emperor Hadrian ordered the complete annihilation of the city's inhabitants—men, women, children, and animals alike. To further demoralize the Jews, he decreed that the bodies remain exposed and unburied.

After several years, Hadrian's successor eventually allowed the bodies to be interred.

Miraculously, despite the prolonged exposure, the bodies had not decomposed, and they were buried with the honor and respect they deserved. In recognition of this divine intervention and the preservation of the bodies, Chazal instituted the 4th beracha of Birkat Hamazon known as *Hatov V'hameitiv*, expressing gratitude for the miracle of the bodies being preserved and eventually buried.

In one of the darkest periods of Jewish history, as the long exile was about to begin, this miracle served as a powerful reminder of the divine image inherent in humanity. Despite the overwhelming darkness and the severe trials facing the Jewish people, this miracle signaled that they still possessed the divine potential to transform the world and build a better society.

### POLLUTING ISRAEL

While cautioning against leaving a body exposed for too long, the Torah asserts that such desecration contaminates the Land of Israel.

ולא תטמא את אדמתך אשר ה' אלקיך נתן לך  
נחלה

By dishonoring tzelem Elokim the Land of Israel becomes polluted, and our presence in this Land is compromised.

Respecting the divine image is fundamental to creating a healthy and forward-moving

society. A culture with no concern for human dignity provides little incentive for change, growth or progress. When life is cheap, suffering is acceptable. When suffering is acceptable, progress is stunted. A society that fails to honor the sanctity of human life, that does not perceive the individual as a reflection of the divine, is destined to fall into chaos and moral decay. The preservation of human dignity is not merely a moral obligation; it is the foundation of a thriving, just, and compassionate society.

However, by emphasizing that the desecration of the divine image taints the Land, the Torah highlights the toxic contamination of the Land itself. Upholding the sanctity of human life is vital not only for societal harmony but also for the purity and integrity of the Land.

The preservation of tzelem Elokim imbues the Land with its sacred quality, just as its desecration defiles it.

Israel, the soil where Hashem first breathed life into humanity and kindled the divine spark, is especially sensitive. To assault tzelem Elokim within the Land of Israel is to defy Hashem's will and to desecrate the ground that witnessed the inception of human dignity. The Land cannot sustain those who disregard the sacred image of Hashem in every individual.

### THE BATTLE OF IDEOLOGIES

Over the past year, we have been locked in a battle against a culture that scorns the dignity of human life. Their heinous acts—mutilating and burning bodies, leaving the remains of their victims disfigured and discarded in dark caves—reveal a profound rejection of tzelem Elokim. This is a culture devoid of G-d, unable to recognize the divine within themselves or

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in others. Such a culture cannot endure on the soil where Hashem first fashioned humanity. The Land will not tolerate them.

By contrast, our own people have displayed heroic commitment to tzelem Elokim and especially to those who were brutally murdered. There were so many silent heroes who identified and buried the victims of the massacre and afforded one final semblance of dignity to the dehumanized bodies which had once cradled human souls.

In providing this honor, many subjected themselves to hideous sights and unforgettable images which will forever mar their inner conscience. These heroes of human dignity paid a steep price in their sacred calling of providing honor to those beyond the veil of life. It is precisely when the dignity of human life is most vulnerable that it must be strongly reinforced.

This heroism has etched us deeply into the Land where human dignity was first bestowed. The Land of Israel will expel those who desecrate human dignity and will be inhabited only by those who uphold it.

Our barbaric foes blight the Land with their brutality, while we elevate it through our sanctity. We will endure. They will fade. ■



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