Introduction (5 minutes)

Welcome to the Global Day of Jewish Learning!

Today we will look more closely at how the Jewish text tradition of midrash (rabbinic interpretation) opens up phrases and ideas in the Bible to a variety of possible meanings. We’ll read different interpretations side by side and consider how each one can shape our understanding of the source text.

Let’s begin with a thought from Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz on how the Jewish text tradition is sustained by generations of readers and thinkers who continually wrestle with the sources. One of the leading scholars of this century, Rabbi Steinsaltz is best known for his commentaries on the Bible and Talmud, and for his work on Jewish mysticism.

Read Text #1 aloud.


The Jewish tradition is full and complete — not because it relies only on an ancient single source, the Bible, but because it is open to additions. All the accumulated oral traditions are considered part of the original written Torah. Even details of the oral Torah, obviously belonging to a much later period, are considered to be continuations of the original revelation. It is all the same revelation, written or oral, and includes the ancient text and the ever-changing unwritten social form and custom.

Ask:

1. What does it mean for a text like the Bible to be “open to additions”?
2. Can you think of any examples of art or literature that are based on or responding to earlier works? (e.g. novels, plays, songs, movies, essays...) In what ways could they be continuations or extensions of the original?
3. What might it mean to consider interpretations of the Bible to be continuations of the original revelation?

When we consume media or art that reacts to an older source, such as historical events, musical traditions, or a canonical work of literature, we engage with both the source material and the work of interpretation. That engagement can range from having a debate with friends over whether we like or dislike an interpretation, to creating entirely new works of art in order to express our newfound understanding. While our individual opinions are part of keeping the canon relevant, creating new works that affect others' interpretations more broadly is a way of adding to the canon.

How might such a process of interpretation and re-interpretation also apply to how we read the Bible?
Part One: The Source Text (10 minutes)

Let’s do a close reading together of the Bible’s description of the creation of humankind.

> Read Text #2 aloud.


26 God said: Let Us make Man in Our image, in Our likeness. And let them dominate over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the heavens, and over the animals, and over all the earth, and over every crawling creature that crawls upon the earth. 27 God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him: Male and female He created them.

Ask:

1. What are some of the verbs used to describe the way Man is created? Are there any other unusual linguistic or literary devices?
2. What are the ways that human beings are connected to animals? What are the ways that the verses set up a relationship of difference?
3. How are human beings expected to relate to each other? How are we expected to relate to God?

In Genesis 1:26, humans are the only ones who are described as being created ב’צלם אלוקים, translated here as “in the image of God”. But what does that mean, and why is it important to know the meaning? And who is it who does the interpreting?

The Sages — generations of rabbis who have discussed, written about and commented on the core Jewish texts for thousands of years — invite us into a kind of reading experience that widens our attention span for words, their meanings, and possible interpretations. These discussions and commentaries are each known as a midrash, and are collectively referred to as The Midrash.

For the rabbis, readers activate the Bible, draw latent meaning from it, apply it, personalize it, connect with it. This does not mean that anything goes, or that there are no rules to interpretation. There are rules. And the rabbis of the Midrash regularly contest each other’s interpretations. But their claim is this: the words of the Bible are not meant to be read once, explained, and put away.

Let’s look more closely at the phrase ב’צלם אלוקים, through the works of scholars and commentators. As we explore, think about how you would interpret the meaning of “in the image of God.”
Part Two: Reading into B’tselem Elokim (40 minutes)

We begin with the Mishna, which here addresses the question of why the human population began with one person. The Mishna is the written collection of the Jewish oral law, edited in the 3rd century CE.

Text #3: Mishna Sanhedrin 4:5. English translation [bold text] and commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in the Koren Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 37a.

The mishna cites another reason Adam the first man was created alone: And this was done due to the importance of maintaining peace among people, so that one person will not say to another: My father, i.e., progenitor, is greater than your father. And it was also so that the heretics who believe in multiple gods will not say: There are many authorities in Heaven, and each created a different person.

And this serves to tell of the greatness of the Holy One, Blessed be He, as when a person stamps several coins with one seal, they are all similar to each other. But the supreme King of kings, the Holy One, Blessed be He, stamped all people with the seal of Adam the first man, as all of them are his offspring, and not one of them is similar to another. Therefore, since all humanity descends from one person, each and every person is obligated to say: The world was created for me, as one person can be the source of all humanity, and recognize the significance of his actions.

Ask:

1. If humans are stamped with the seal of Adam, who was created “in the image of God”, then in whose image do you think humans are made — God’s or Adam’s? Why?

2. Whether created in the image of God or in the image of Adam, what does the Mishna say about how the descendants of Adam should view themselves? Does that change if you make a distinction between God’s image and Adam’s image? Why or why not?

In Text #3, the idea of man being created as one (as opposed to in a community) is combined with B’tselem Elokim to suggest that each person is unique and fundamentally equal to every other human being. The Mishna presents a metaphor of a seal used to stamp a coin, and offers two ways to interpret that metaphor: that each human is stamped with the same seal of God, or that each human is stamped with the seal of Adam, who was the one made in the image of God.

What makes the stamped image B’tselem Elokim is that God makes every human being totally different from every other one — and at the same time, we each come from the same place, have the same value. Each of us is, in effect, the entire world.

Let’s examine three commentaries with different perspectives and approaches, and compare their interpretations of B’tselem Elokim.
Our first commentary is from Maimonides (also known as Rambam), who lived in Spain and Egypt in the 12th century. He was a physician and philosopher whose extensive works have been an essential influence within Judaism. The second commentary comes from the Meshekh Hokhma, a philosophical commentary on the Torah by Rabbi Meir Simcha HaKohen (1843–1926). A Lithuanian scholar who became the chief rabbi of Dvinsk, he was renowned for his knowledge of the Talmud. The third commentary is from Rabbi Steinsaltz.

► Ask participants to read and discuss Texts #4, #5 and #6 in chavruta, and discuss the questions that follow.

Chavruta is partnered learning. Learning with a friend or two allows you to share ideas and insights with one another as you read and discuss texts together.


Some have been of the opinion that by the Hebrew ẓelem, the shape and figure of a thing is to be understood, and this explanation led men to believe in the corporeality [of the Divine Being]: for they thought that the words “Let us make man in our ẓelem” (Genesis 1:26), implied that God had the form of a human being, i.e., that He had figure and shape, and that, consequently, He was corporeal...

As man’s distinction consists in a property which no other creature on earth possesses, viz., intellectual perception, in the exercise of which he does not employ his senses, nor move his hand or his foot, this perception has been compared — though only apparently, not in truth — to the Divine perception, which requires no corporeal organ. On this account, i.e., on account of the Divine intellect with which man has been endowed, he is said to have been made in the form and likeness of the Almighty, but far from it be the notion that the Supreme Being is corporeal, having a material form.


Let us make man in our image: The image of God refers to man’s ability to choose freely without his nature coercing him, to act out of free will and intellect. It is this alone that we know, that free will results from divine constriction, that God, may He be blessed, leaves room for His creatures to act in the manner of their choosing... He therefore said to Himself, “Let us make man in Our image,” that is to say, the Torah speaks in the language of men, for He said, “Let us leave room for man to choose, that he not be forced in his actions and obligated in his thoughts, and that he have the free will to do good or evil as he desires, and that he be able to do things against his nature and against what is regarded as upright in the eyes of God.

Let Us make man: Many explanations have been offered for the verse’s use of the plural form “Us.” One explanation is that in addition to man’s living soul, which gives him his will, the creation of man introduced a new concept into the universe, namely, the ability to choose freely and affect the world. Creation, which until this point was a delicately balanced ecosystem, was suddenly exposed to a free, independent being, man. In considering the introduction of this foreign element, whose unique character will be revealed later, the Midrash suggests that God sought the advice of His angels, as it were, and asked their opinion with regard to the creation of man (see Bereshit Rabba 17:19). A more poetic explanation appears in an early midrash: God turned to the entire world and said: Let us all make man. Since man incorporates all of Creation, all creatures have some connection to him. For the creation of man, the lion donated some of its might, the fox gave part of its cunning, the snake its poison, the lamb its innocence, and the butterfly its flight. According to this midrash, man was created in the image and likeness of all the creatures of the world (see Zohar 3:238b; Yalkut Shimoni, Bereshit 13).

In Our image, in Our likeness Although in a physiological sense man is very similar to other living creatures, he is nevertheless a category of being to himself. Unlike other creations, man was fashioned in the image of God, not in terms of his appearance, but in terms of his essence. Aside from man’s superior intelligence, this likeness is expressed principally in man’s freedom to choose. This quality is unique to man and God. The rest of creation moves within its respective circles, always subject to a long chain of cause and effect. Humans are not bound by these chains.

Ask in chavruta:

1. What does each text give as the meaning of B’tselem Elokim? Do they say what B’tselem Elokim is not?
2. How are these commentaries similar and different? Does one particularly resonate with you?
3. How does it change how you originally understood the phrase B’tselem Elokim when you read Text #2?
4. What is the impact of their interpretation on your understanding of humankind? How does it capture the essence of being a human?

Bring the group back together and ask some pairs to share their thoughts.

Maimonides rejects the literal interpretation of “tselem”: that if people were created in the image of God, then God must then have a human form. Instead, according to Maimonides, human beings are in the image of God because we are endowed with an intellect that resembles the Divine. Humans have a level of intellectual perception that has some resemblance to Divine perception; this intellectual likeness includes the ability to perceive and abstract. Humankind’s “likeness” is not physical but intellectual – our abilities are in the likeness of God, not our faces or bodies.

The Meshekh Hokhma interprets “the image of God” as having free will — the ability to choose — an ability given by God to humankind. Because God also has free will, this is a way in which human beings resemble God.

Maimonides and Rabbi HaKohen agree that B’tselem Elokim is incorporeal. Maimonides is talking about intelligence, Rabbi HaKohen about acting with free will. Rabbi Steinsaltz connects these two things by saying that free will is an expression of that intelligence. All of creation is represented in our personalities, in these collective likenesses.

Our next text is from Rabbi Joseph Ber Soleveitchik (1903–1993), who was an American Talmudist, scholar and philosopher. He is best known for his works synthesizing Jewish law and modern thought. In this text, Rabbi Soleveitchik considers what it means for humans to be creative.

The Torah describes the creation at length in order to teach us a very important lesson – “to walk in all His ways” — and to instruct man to imitate his Creator and be himself a creator. A person should not shake his head saying that this demand of man is impossible, for he cannot imitate his Creator in creativity...The Torah, nevertheless, demands of man and commands him to tirelessly exert himself to cling to the traits of the Holy One, blessed be He, and be a creator.

Ask:

1. How does the human trait of creativity inform your understanding of *B’tselem Elokim*?
2. Does this text change or enhance your reading of the previous texts or the process of midrash? How and why?

Part Three: Not One Empty Word (10 minutes)

Now that we’ve looked at the act of interpretation, how does this fit with our understanding of the tradition, and where we fit into that timeline? How does midrash connect to our lives?

Let’s read what Moses says to the People of Israel when he completes giving all the words and teachings to them and what Rashi derives from it. Rashi lived in France in the 11th century. He is an important commentator on the Bible and Talmud, and one of the most famous scholars in Jewish history.

Read Texts #8 and #9 aloud.


45 Moses finished speaking all these matters to all Israel. 46 He, Moses, again said to them: Set your heart to all the matters that I attest to you today. Diligently observe these matters, and ensure that you will command them to your children, to take care to perform all the words of this Torah in the future...47 For it is not an empty thing for you, as it is your life. And through this matter you will extend your days on the land that you are crossing the Jordan to take possession of it.

Rashi interprets the command in Deuteronomy as more than just “obey the law”. For Rashi, the labor of personally struggling with the Torah is a long and necessary process, because the reward is so great. On the other hand, the task of reading and interpreting the Torah is rewarding because there is so much meaning in every single word of the Torah, just waiting for you to explore. “Not one empty word” means that each and every word in the Torah has room for discovery and new understandings.

FOR IT IS NOT A VAIN [EMPTY] THING FOR YOU – it is not for nothing that you are to occupy yourselves laboriously with it, because much reward depends on it, FOR IT IS YOUR LIFE (life is the reward). Another explanation: There is not one empty (ירך i.e., apparently superfluous) word in the Torah that, if you properly expound it, has not a grant of reward attached to it for doing so.

Ask:

1. Rashi offers two reasons why the words of the Torah are not “empty.” Which resonates with you more? Why?
2. Does Rashi’s interpretation of the reader’s role change how you perceive the texts we’ve looked at together? Do the commentaries we’ve read on B’tselem Elokim influence how you interpret Rashi’s statement? How so?

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Conclusion (10 minutes)

Ask:

1. After today’s experience of exploring the commentaries on a single line of text, what insights have you gained into the way you excavate meaning from the layers of text? How has the idea of “not one empty word” changed or enhanced the way you approach reading?
2. In what ways does Bible study require the creativity Rabbi Soloveitchik describes? As a reader, what is your responsibility in the process of generating meaning?
3. Think back to our first text by Rabbi Steinsaltz. Having experienced this process of midrashic reading, what might “continuations of the original revelation” mean to you now?

Thinking back to what Rabbi Soloveitchik wrote, reading the Bible — striving to do so, and studying it yourself — is a holy act. Its holiness is reflected in the creativity it takes to find the meanings within each word. As Rashi reminds us, they are anything but “empty”. We can read, and speak to each other, and ask questions. When we say we are created B’tselem Elokim, it is not to say that our faces look like God’s own face, but that our minds are capable of the creativity shown by God. Therefore, we are given that same responsibility: that we actively engage with our texts, and bring to them our very selves. The volumes of text are full of words that each speak volumes — each word, each idea of the Bible generates even more interpretations of meaning and significance.

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Part One: The Source Text


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