



# The Thirteen Petalled Rose

A DISCOURSE ON THE ESSENCE  
OF JEWISH EXISTENCE & BELIEF

Rabbi Adin  
**STEINSALTZ**

## Chapter seven: **The Human Image**

**ONE** of the things that shaped the ritual forms of Judaism is the absolute prohibition against fashioning a statue or a mask. This prohibition goes back to the Second Commandment, forbidding the making of an image. It should be emphasized that this commandment was interpreted not as prohibiting the creation of any and every kind of picture or figure, but only as prohibiting an image that could in any way be used in ritual. The prohibition, then, covered not only the fashioning of a false god or an idolatrous object of worship but also any statue or image of the true God himself or any of His angels, or even a statue (but not a painting) of the human figure.

On the surface, the prohibition simply reiterates the fundamental opposition to idolatry on all its levels. And in so doing it implies a repudiation of all material representation of the Divine in any form whatever. This prohibition may be better understood, however, in the context of its use in the terminology and expressions of prophecy. For not only the style of the prophets but the very nature of the Hebrew language itself leans away from the use of abstraction and prefers instead symbolic and figurative terms.

Thus the bible and other literary creations of the Jews, such as *Aggada* and the Kabbala, abound with anthropomorphisms of all kinds, not only in relation to the deity but in every sort of description. This humanization of the world's reality, both of the objects and creatures lower than man and those higher, are among the profoundly consistent aspects of the use of the holy tongue. As one of the sages expressed it: The soul describes everything according to the configuration of its mansions, which is the body. In other words, the world is conceptualized and its objects described by a system of metaphors based on the human body. The language thus "raises the lowly" by images like "the head [top] of the mountain" and "the foot of the mountain:" and it "brings down the high" by descriptions such as the "seat" of the Almighty, the "hand" of God, the "eye" of the Lord, and the like.

This use of plastic imagery and symbols is so characteristic of the language that it is hard to find a sentence in the Scriptures that is not constructed on the basis of metaphorical description rather than of abstract conceptualization. Imagery-bound concepts are to be found everywhere, in almost every paragraph of the books of law and jurisprudence as well as in poetry and literature, and serve primarily, and most strikingly, to describe all that pertains to the holy.

Precisely because of this prevalence of metaphorical statement, and the widespread use of the figures of speech drawn from the human image, it becomes all the more necessary to emphasize that they are allegorical truths and not actual descriptions of reality. For there was a certain danger that the word pictures, or imagistic descriptions, of sacred symbols in the Bible - and even more so in the Kabbala - could lead to a crude material apprehension of the divine essence and of the higher reality. Hence the prohibition against all depiction of holiness through physical, plastic means. Accompanying it, and perhaps stemming from this extreme revulsion to plastic semblance of the Divine, Jewish tradition also maintains a certain suspicion of man's tendency to design, elaborate, and portray himself.

This inclination, to keep the greatest possible distance between man and God, has led to a more abstract comprehension of divine truth and of the ability to distinguish falsehood in the various descriptions of God. To be sure, there is a basic reason for the historical fact that the Jews, with their cultural or linguistic inclination to describe everything in terms of the human, shrink from depicting the spiritual in gross, physical terms. To understand this reason, a few points have to be elucidated. One has to recall that our whole material world is only a part of a greater system of worlds; whatever happens and offers itself to our apprehension is also time and with that which is above and below our world.

Which is to say, the nonphysical essences of other worlds are projected into our material world, adjusting to its limits and to its physical time and space. Thus, despite the limits of our material world, the higher worlds are present in it and may even be distinguished in one form or another. Indeed, every detail of the material world is a kind of projection of a nonphysical reality that has chosen to reveal itself physically in this particular way.

In such a view of the world there is bound to be a double distortion. First, there is the distortion that results from the projection of something nonphysical on a physical reality: since in essence these two are so different, it is impossible for anything in our world to be a complete replica of a nonphysical reality. Then there is the distortion resulting from the fact that our world is no longer in its first stage of pristine purity and health. The various creatures in this world do what they have to do as best they can, thereby making certain changes in the structure of the world - the most auspicious changes and distortions, of course, being those that result from the actions of man.

By virtue of his free will and the ability to impose his will on other creatures in the material world, man is, to a certain degree, independent of the forces of the other world, higher and lower. Consequently, the thoughts and actions of man, especially his sins and his mistakes, can derange the simpler forms of nature and the world and can even affect reality in other worlds.

This world is therefore no longer a true replica or a true projection of the higher worlds. Only in its original state, that of the Garden of Eden, was it structured as a more or less perfect duplication of the physical world and the spiritual worlds. Since then all the worlds, and our world in particular, have become increasingly distorted, and much of the original essence has changed in various ways. Only those persons who know the secret of existence in the universe can know the extent to which the duplication between the worlds still exists and can perceive the essential analogy between the physical world and the spiritual worlds. They can make out the hidden paths in the concrete reality of the world leading to the upper worlds, and they read into whatever is apprehended as real the symbols and models of a higher world taking us step by step upward to the very pinnacle and source of all the levels.

And just as all of the worlds are reflected, to some extent, in the physical world in which we live, so to an even greater extent - indeed, in principle up to the utmost heights of divine revelation - is the inner image of the worlds reflected in the image of man. To be sure, all the creatures in the world, the great and the small, constitute copies and symbols of aspects in the existences of higher worlds, but in man there is also reflected the relationships among various aspects of existence. Thus man is, on the one hand, a part of the general creation of the world, and on the other hand, as the possessor of the special attribute of free will, he is the unique concrete expression of divine reality in the worlds. For all the other worlds are ordered according to the fixed laws of cause and effect, whether of a physical or non-physical nature. Only man can willfully change the framework somewhat and activate the "vicious circles" in various ways.

Therefore, man alone is the expression of the creative will in the world. By virtue of the spark that is his soul, man manifests the divine plenty existing in all the worlds unto their most sublime heights. So that the whole semblance of man is, in a certain sense, the image of God. Which is to say, man is both the projection of the creative divine plenty into physical reality and the divine form revealed to the higher worlds as it appears in our world.

Clearly the divine representation of man is far from complete; neither the body nor the soul of man faithfully expresses the supreme essence. And yet man, in all his spiritual and physical aspects, is to be viewed as a symbolic order oriented to the order of sovereignty in the world, the order of the ten *Sefirot* of the world of emanation.

One of the definitions of the name “Man” or “Adam” is likeness (*domeh*) to the Supreme. For, like God, man creates the worlds in the image of himself. His physical form, in the assemblage of its several parts, also constitutes a system that is a sort of model of the inner network of all the worlds. The structure of man is a paradigm of the structure of the worlds; it is the key to the order of the *mitzvot*; and it is also the configuration that symbolizes the system of relationships among the worlds. All of the organs of man correspond to higher essences in other worlds. The general structure of the human body is homologous with the order of the ten *Sefirot*, every part of the body of a man being congruous with a particular *Sefira*.

Thus when the prophets speak of the “hand” or the “eyes” of the Lord, it is understood that they are not speaking of essences in any way physically similar to the human hand or eye. At the same time there *is* some essential connection to the body of man. The relation between the right hand and the left hand, for instance, is a matter of a profound principle, which is derived from the difference between the *Sefirot* of *Hesed* and *Gevura*. And so, too, with all the parts of the human body, in their general configuration and down to the smallest detail.

Man may, therefore, be viewed as a symbol or a model of the divine essence, his entire outer and inner structure manifesting relationships and different aspects existing in that supreme essence.

The secret of the positive *mitzvot*, the commandments to perform certain actions, lies, in a manner of speaking, in the activation of the limbs of the body, in certain movements and certain ways of doing things which are congruous with higher realities and higher relationships in other worlds. In fact, every movement, every gesture, every habitual pattern, and every isolated act that man does with his body has an effect in whole systems of essences in other dimensions with and against one another.

Clearly, and ordinary person does not know anything of this; at best he is conscious only to a very small degree of the things he does and of their higher significance. Even among those few who are able to unravel the riddle and know the meaning of these secrets, only select individuals reach that state of being where knowledge is automatically lived out and manifested. It is a state where very act of a *mitzva* or an impulsive movement or a dance, expresses, knowingly and unknowingly, the higher relationships - following on analogous parts of the body, in their separate as well as in their total effects.

Thus, it may be understood why fashioning and exhibiting the image of a man was also prohibited. Since man was, according to one of the sages, “an effigy of the king,” anyone who tried to make something in his image was creating a statue, an idol. For man was supposed to know that his body was not only the temple and the abode of the soul, but in itself an expression of the supreme essence; and therefore, he had to maintain a special relation to the body, acknowledging that its gestures, movements, and actions involved manifestations of the higher order.

Since, like his soul, the body of a man is oriented to higher essences, the idiom of the Kabbala often makes use of organs of the body to depict conditions and higher relations in the other worlds. In practical kabbalistic works there are to be found indications of various, sometimes impossible, movements of the limbs and parts of the body which serve to shed light on the complex occult ways of the Chariot on different planes and in different worlds.

And as has been said, precisely because there is such a voluminous and frequent use of symbolic structures and models, most of them connected with external forms, it is necessary to be extremely cautious about any attempt to give a concrete physical interpretation to higher essences.

From all of which it may be understood why, in actual fact, there is no Jewish iconography to speak of. True, in the Holy Temple there were a few symbolic elements - not image of the Holy One, blessed be He, but of the cherubim who bear the Chariot. Even these symbols were hidden away in the inner recesses of the Temple, so that they should not become part of the ritual - for it has often happened in history that things once having no more than a symbolic or reminiscent value have been turned into ritual objects or idolatrous worship. That is why, throughout the generations, Jewish tradition has stringently resisted anything like defined iconographic imagery.

Instead, the tradition developed the whole order of *mitzvot*, which may be seen as a stylization of a system of pictures and symbols, using the body and mind of man. For in a certain sense, the *mitzvot*, in all their minutiae, constitute an endless, moving series of images depicting a vision of supreme revelation. These images are expressed in the objective actions but are not to be identified with them; and if the action is a correct action in terms of the original revelation, then it will have significance within other systems of reality. Thus, precisely because the whole world is so full of symbols and meanings, pictures and forms, there is a repudiation of any attempt to make any one special image; for the existing reality is itself so entirely made up of, and by, one single organized picture.

This grasp of symbols, then, applies not only to the human figure but to every reality in the world. To those who know this meaning, reality is more clear and comprehensible. Thus, for instance, there is significance to the various colors and their relationships, each one expressing a certain *Sefira*; fruits and flowers, kinds of living creatures, forms of vegetable life and minerals, all have individual meaning and at the same time make up a great unified system in which the whole of reality acts and is acted upon; and this is the vast picture, the great work of plastic art of a moment in time.

In Jewish thought, the concept of beauty is linked to the central *Sefira* of *Tiferet* which in itself is actually an expression of several basic elements of existence, each of them manifesting the same fundamental quality in different ways such as: truth, Torah, beauty, compassion. The common denominator may be seen as harmony. And since this apprehension of harmony is so many-sided and variegated, it cannot be reduced to only one aesthetic meaning. Even in the Hebrew language there is a constant interchange and substitution between the concepts of the good and the beautiful, the good being called beautiful and the beautiful good, because both are grasped as a harmony between thing. *Tiferet* is thus the basis of the good, the beautiful, and the true, without ever being manifested or capable of being directly expressed in an "image."