

Each One of Us: *b'Tzelem Elohim*  
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Two roads diverged in a wood, and I  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.  
*Robert Frost*

On the first Monday of each month, National Public Radio broadcasts a three minute essay called, "This I believe." It is a series that offer Americans from all walks of life the opportunity to share the personal philosophies and core values that guide their daily lives. You can hear essays expressing a huge range of beliefs, everything from belief in service to others to counting your blessings from believing in sports to the significance of barbecue. All are things, by the way, in which I have a profound and unwavering belief.

While some of these essays are written by individuals of prominence more impressive and more moving are the essays of folks just like you and me, expressing the beliefs and ideals that guide their individual journeys through life.

As I listen, I always find myself saying: "I need to submit an essay." Well, I haven't yet, but over these High Holy Days I want to take the opportunity to share with you some of what I believe. Maybe this will be a start.

Let me begin with the true story of a disaffected 9<sup>th</sup> grader, sitting in the back of a confirmation class. He sits there quietly watching the second hand on the clock, wondering if it really is moving as slowly as it appears. 7:14, 7:14 and a half, 7:14 and forty five seconds ... He glances at his watch. Yes, unfortunately, the second hand on his watch is moving at the same speed as the one on the wall. "Maybe there is some sort of time warp in here," he wonders. An eternity later the hands reach 8p.m. and the bell rings.

As he climbs into the front seat next to his mother and they start to drive home she nonchalantly announces: "I signed you up for a youth group convention next weekend," The boy shakes his head in disbelief. "What?" So, she repeats, "I signed you up for a Nifty retreat next weekend." "I'm not going," he announces. "Yes, you are," mom insists. "You have no choice. The fee is non-refundable." Being a bit naïve, he buys into this little white lie and though angry and upset, eventually resigns himself to the fact that he is, indeed going to go to the weekend.

Friday afternoon, bags packed, the young man arrives at the bus and climbs on. As he climbs on he looks around, "Some of them are kind of cute. Maybe this won't be so terrible."

A few hours later they arrive. As the teen exits the bus he is warmly greeted and escorted to the room he will share with three other boys, all from different congregations around

the region. His hesitance and discomfort with this rooming arrangement fades as they all settle in and begin to chat, introducing themselves, telling jokes, sharing stories and experiences. A camaraderie quickly forms. It is the foundation of a friendship that will extend across the decades. These four boys, from four different cities all attending their first regional NFTY event, will eventually all become members of the regional board. Two will become regional songleaders and rabbis, they will participate in each other's weddings and, although their life's journeys will take them to different corners of the country, they continue to be an integral part of each others lives.

But, this is only the beginning. The boy finds himself surrounded by youth who celebrate their Judaism, who bring energy and exuberance and celebration; and who, most importantly bring connection. For the most important thing that the boy encounters on the weekend is a group of people who welcome him with open arms, who validate him and make him feel accepted, appreciated and valuable. They are lessons that will remain with him, becoming a driving force in his own journey – as he continues to share with others the sense of welcome, validation, purpose and meaning that he discovered on that life changing weekend.

Okay, so if you are not yet sure – that disaffected teen, forced to go on that life changing journey is standing here in front of you. And it is the lessons of that weekend that continue to motivate and inform me. Here are three lessons I learned and **this is what I believe**:

First, children, even the most wise and mature of them, needs their parents *to be their parents*. That means, sometimes, making tough and unpopular decisions. There are some decisions that they are just not yet ready or able to make for themselves. If my mother had not insisted, indeed forced me, to attend confirmation and that NFTY convention I would not be who I am today. We need to provide our children with every opportunity – yes, even those that at times they vehemently and loudly protest against.

Second, as an extension of this belief, we are the parents of all of our children. If you will forgive the cliché, it *does* take a village. I learned a great deal about the importance of community on that weekend. But, as I have grown beyond my youth group years, moving from youth leader, to teacher, to educator to rabbi I have become increasingly appreciative of the of concentric circles of community that made that weekend possible. If there had not been a community of adults in my little corner of the world, and beyond them a community of adults who believed in the future, who believed in *me*, even though they had no idea who I was; and who felt they had a moral and yes, financial obligation to future generations, I would not be here. Nor, for that matter, would any of us. The fact that we are here is testimony to the commitment of those made this place and this moment possible, dedicated individuals who could only imagine this moment. Who, with hope in their hearts and commitment to the future made it possible for us to be here to share in this sacred community.

There is a well known story about a the young man walking along the road when he sees an elderly gentleman planting a tree. Shaking his head, the young man walks up and

asks, "Excuse me sir, with all due respect, it will be many years until this tree matures enough to bear fruit. Certainly you will not live long enough to see this happen. So why do you bother?" The elderly man turns from his task, looks up at the young man and responds, "Those who came before me planted trees for me and so, I too, as an expression of gratitude to them and of responsibility to the future plant trees as a gift to the generations who will follow me."

As I watch my children become adults and begin to walk their own path I become more keenly aware of the future, my children's and my grandchildren's future. What will their Jewish community look like? Will they have a place to join together as community? Will there be houses of study and youth group conventions for my grandchildren? I take none of this for granted. I am now, more than ever, aware of my need to plant for the future. I am now, more than ever grateful for the gift that was given to me by members of my immediate family, members of my congregational family and members of my larger Reform community who never stopped planting seeds, so that I might be nurtured by their fruit.

Of course, it is not just children who need the support and guidance of the village in order to learn how to be competent and useful members of the community. Young parents need the guidance of those who have traveled the path before them. Newly empty nesters the wisdom of those who have made the transition. Those suffering illness or loss need the blessings and support of the village to lift them up. At each point in our lives we find sustenance and comfort under the branches provided by those who traveled this path before us. In return, out of gratitude and obligation we must plant for those who will follow us. For especially when it comes to our particular tree, our Tree of Life if we are not willing to provide the care support and nurture, who will? Clearly the answer is no one. **This I believe:** my obligation to the future never ends. I have an ongoing obligation to provide *my* children and *your* children and *all* our children the opportunity that was afforded me. There is no point at which I can say: "I've done my part. The village no longer needs me, nor I them."

For me this common need is more than psychology or social anthropology, it is theology. I could never have recognized it as such at the time, but what I experienced on that fateful weekend was God's presence actualized in the warmth, acceptance and validation of community. You know, in the Torah there is one item that receives more attention in the than any other: the *Mishkan*, the Tent of Meeting. Chapters are dedicated to detailing its building and the rituals that are performed there. Why? Because it was there, in a place of meeting, in a place of shared experience and relationship, that they met God.

God's presence rested upon that place where the community came together. In relationship they created a sacred space in which God's presence came alive. I too am capable of creating such a moment when I believe that both I and the person I am interacting with are of intrinsic worth and value. That principle we will find expressed in tomorrow's Torah portion tomorrow as *b'tzelem Elohim*. We are, each one of us, created in the image of God.

Look around you. Really, look around you. Each person sitting here was created in God's image. Imagine what it means to hold that thought first and foremost in your mind each time you have an interaction with another. Of course, it is easy to think that way about those with whom we have good relationships: loved ones, friends, casual acquaintances. But the significance of this message is not to be found in our comfortable social circles. The import of this belief is how it affects those relationships that are more problematic: troublesome co-workers, the difficult boss, and those annoying individuals you have to tolerate every day. They too were created in the Divine image. That person, who dings your car in the parking lot, was created in the Divine image. That guy who cuts you off on the freeway, because somehow those extra 17 seconds are going to make or break his day ... was created in the Divine image. That homeless man at the end of the freeway entrance, that family on skid row ... created in the Divine image. Yes, even your enemies, *our enemies*, were created in the Divine image. It was Henry Wadsworth Longfellow who, certainly with this understanding once said, "If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we would find in each person's life sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all hostility." Even that person you see in the mirror every morning that you are so hard on sometimes, of whom you are, at times so critical, and of whom you are so demanding ... was created in the Divine image.

**This I believe:** we must treat each person we meet *as if* they were created in the Divine Image.

You know, I am a great believer in the power of mantras. We have plenty in our tradition: the *shema* for instance. If you repeat something to yourself often enough and long enough, it really does change the way you see and interact with the world around you. I would encourage you to join me in one such mantra that our children have learned as part of a song that you will hear the Cantor sing in just a few minutes. It goes like this: Each one of, *b'tzelem Elohim*. Say it with me: "Each one of us, *b'tzelem Elohim*. Next time you find yourself about to have a difficult interaction, don't count to ten, just say quietly to yourself: "Each one of us, *b'tzelem Elohim*." Then continue on.

Each Rosh Hashanah we look we stand on the edge of a new creation filled with opportunity and promise. Like our ancient Israelite ancestors, we pause here to look back; to hear once again the story of our family's journey. We stop to reflect, to consider how we arrived at this place, to look across at the land we are about to enter and to consider what we want that world to be. We have no idea what we will encounter in the coming year. We can not control the circumstances of our lives. But we *can* control how we respond to them. "And as we decide and choose, so are our lives formed." (Joseph Epstein) The great rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught with both his words and, more importantly, with the actions of his life what it means to be made in the image of God. "We must be a reminder of God," he wrote. "And that, in turn means that our imperative is to live our lives in such a way that if someone looks at us, they are reminded of God." The call of this day is to choose to respond to those we encounter on our journey as ones, like us created in God's image. This is my prayer and my fervent wish for the New Year: May each of us who gather together tonight in this Tent of Meeting called Ahavat Shalom, through the shared blessings of commitment to this community and in our

relationships with all we encounter along life's path, continually acknowledge, through word and deed, the Godly presence that resides within each human soul. Each one of us: *b'tzelem Elohim*.

We all got a life to live. We all got a gift to give.  
Just open your heart and let it out.  
We all got a peace to bring. We all got a song to sing.  
Just open your heart and let it out.  
When I reach out to you and you to me,  
We become b'tzelem Elohim.  
When we share our hopes and our dreams,  
Each one of us, b'tzelem Elohim.  
We all got a tale to tell. We all want to speak it well.  
Just open your heart and let it out.  
We all got a mountain to climb. We all got a truth to find.  
Just open your heart and let it out.

When I reach out to you...

B'reishit bara Elohim, all our hopes, all our dreams,  
B'reishit bara Elohim, each one of us, b'tzelem Elohim.

When I reach out to you...