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CREATED IN THE IMAGE OF GOD: WHAT DOES JUDAISM TELL US ABOUT DISABILITIES?

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Almost any Jewish child has at some point been told that they are created in the image of God, but we seldom unpack what that means. What does it mean to be created, and what does it mean to be created intentionally in the image of God? That topic is more than we can cover in a single text study, but this text study will build from the fact that we are taught that we are intentionally created in the divine image and use that to explore how we think about disability.

I. Ideas to explore in this text study

- A. Each of us, in all of our splendor, beauty, and difference, is created by God to be exactly as we are.
- B. Since this is the case, the differences that we term “disability” cannot be inherently bad. Instead, the challenges posed by disability must be independent of our own created perfection.
- C. When we treat disability as an object of pity or ridicule, it is as though we are criticizing God.

II. What exactly did god create

- A. What can our texts tell us about God’s creation of us?
 1. *“So God created mankind in His own image, in the image of God He created them;”*
Genesis 1:27
 - a. What does this mean?
 - b. In what ways are we created in the image of God?
 - c. What might that teach us about the potential and the value of each person?



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2. *“An individual person was created to show the greatness of God. While a human being mints many coins from a single cast, and they are all identical. But the Holy One, blessed be God, strikes us all from the mold of the first human, and each one of us is unique.” Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5*

- a. Doesn't this mean that we are all different?
- b. What do we think about the idea that our differences, our uniqueness, is still in the image of God?
- c. If God differentiated us while still making us in God's image, what do we think of the idea that our differences are also made in God's image?

B. Reality check – is disability really part of the plan? Let's look at a familiar story that sheds some light on this question:

1. *“And Moses said to God: ‘Please God, I am not a man of words, nor have I ever been, even since You have spoken to Your servant; for I am of a heavy mouth and a heavy tongue.’ And God said to him: ‘Who makes a man's mouth? Or makes him dumb, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, God? Now go, and I will be with your mouth, and teach you what you will say.’” Exodus 4:10–12*

- a. Just to be clear, God is saying to Moses: *“I built this. I know you.”*
- b. God not only chose to make Moses slow of speech, but also, having made that decision, believes that he is the perfect mouthpiece. What does this tell us? Do we think that God sees Moses's disability as an obstacle to overcome?
- c. Is it possible, in fact, that God felt that the unique combination that was Moses, a man who was humble in his speech, was the perfect person to take instruction because of his disability?
- d. Does this reinforce the earlier idea that, in making us each different, God made us perfectly as we are?



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C. The ancient rabbis seem to understand this, and they are quite comfortable with discussing God as the origin for disability. Let's explore some text.

1. *"One who sees a Cushite or an albino, or [a man] red-spotted in the face, or [a man] white-spotted in the face [a man afflicted with psoriasis or elephantiasis], or a hunchback, or a dwarf (or a deaf man, or an imbecile, or a drunk) says, "Blessed is the One who created such varied creatures." [One who sees] an amputee, or a lame man, or a blind man, or a man afflicted with boils says, "Blessed be the True Judge." Tosefta Brachot 6:6*
 - a. By way of background, let's define a few of these terms. A Cushite would have been someone from Africa, with darker skin and different features than those to which the communities of these rabbis were accustomed. "Blessed be the True Judge" is the traditional blessing to offer to one who has undergone a loss.
 - b. Also, though blindness appears to be in the second list, contemporaneous rabbinic texts agree that the actual distinction between these two lists is that the first comprises various factors with which you are born, and second comprises things which happen to you over the course of your life.
 - c. What do we think of the fact that, in the case of the list of these disabilities that people are born with, the rabbis praise God for making people different?
 - d. If we are praising God for creating these differences, does it mean that these differences aren't a bad thing,?
 - e. Why do we think that acquired conditions evoke the sympathy due to someone who has suffered a loss?
 - f. Why would these conditions be bad if the others are praiseworthy?
 - g. Is it possible that we are expressing sympathy not for the state of disability, but instead for the need to adjust to a negatively changed circumstance? We don't question God's plan, which is the nature of blessing God's judgment, but nor do we strictly celebrate because we understand that the change is difficult for the individual.
 - h. Does this tell us something about the conditional nature of disabilities?



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2. *“Ben Azzai taught: “Treat no one lightly and think nothing is useless, for everyone has a moment and everything has a place.” Pirkei Avot, Ethics of our Fathers, 4:3*
 - a. What do we think is going on here?
 - b. How is this informed if we look back at the idea that Moses’s disability made him perfect to receive God’s instruction? Do we allow that the rabbis understood it to be true?
 - c. Might that apply to every disability?

III. Difficulty and disability

- A. If we accept that those conditions that we are used to calling disabilities are in fact simply expressions of God’s infinite creation, what does that tell us about the difficulties of disability?
- B. Social model of disability
 1. In a world where everything is designed to be wheelchair accessible, is it really disabling to use a wheelchair?
 2. In a world where every type of data is available in both visual and auditory form, is it disabling to be blind?
 3. Social scientists call this the social model of disability. This means that certain conditions or differences become disabling because of the choices that our society that create a world that is easier or more difficult to navigate with these conditions.
 4. If we look back on the discussion we just had, what do we think about this idea?
 5. Is it perhaps better to think that the difficulties posed by the way that God chose to create us stem from imperfections in the world as it exists rather than from inherent problems?



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C. What does this mean for us?

1. *“You shall not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind. You shall fear your God: I am Adonai.” Leviticus 19:14*
 - a. We usually think about these famous words as an admonition not to mistreat deaf and blind people. In light of everything that we’ve just discussed, do you think that there could be more to it than that?
 - b. Can we agree that being blind could be a neutral thing, but it becomes a serious problem when someone puts a stumbling block in front of us?
 - c. Can we agree that being deaf might be a neutral thing, but when you’re being cursed and lack the ability to defend yourself because you don’t even know that it’s happening, that it could be a bad thing?
 - d. What if our obligation isn’t just to be nice and treat people well, but rather to make sure that we don’t make collective or individual decisions that make their state of being disabling?
2. *“Once, when Rabbi Elazar the son of Rabbi Shimon [bar Yohai] left Migdal Gadur, his teacher’s house, he rode on his donkey, moving along the bank of the river, extremely happy, and in a strutting frame of mind, because he had learnt so much Torah. He happened across an extremely ugly man. The man said, ‘Shalom, my teacher.’ Rabbi Elazar did not answer him; instead, he said, ‘Idiot! How ugly that man [i.e. you] is! Could it be that everyone in your city is as ugly as you?!’ The man said, ‘I do not know; why don’t you go to the artisan who made me and say, ‘How ugly that vessel You made is..!’ When Rabbi Simeon realized that he had done wrong, he dismounted from his donkey and fell down at the man’s feet, saying, ‘I fully accept – please forgive me.’ ‘I will not forgive you,’ said the man, ‘until you go to that Artist who made me and tell him, ‘How ugly that vessel is that You made.’” Taanit 19b-20a*
 - a. How does this text synthesize everything that we have learned so far?
 - b. What does it mean to acknowledge that every time we do something to a person with a disability, whether it is curse them, bully them, or exclude them, we are criticizing something that God created?



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- c. How much more so is that the case if we assume that God did in fact create each person with a specific value and destiny? Are we criticizing and minimizing that plan?
- d. Conversely, what should we be doing when we encounter people with disabilities? Should we include them so that we can take advantage of the special value with which God created them?