



## RABBI AARON GOLDSCHIEDER

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# Emulating the Almighty

“You shall follow the Lord your God...” (Deuteronomy 13:5). Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik made the striking assertion that emulation of God, often referred to by the Latin phrase *imitatio Dei*, is the guiding principle of Jewish life.<sup>1</sup> He was possibly inspired by the fact that the Rambam enumerated this as one of the 613 mitzvot, and further stressed it in his halachic code: “A person must act in accordance with these paths and emulate Him to the extent of his ability.”<sup>2</sup> This, in turn, is based on two

1. Schachter, *Nefesh ha-Rav*, 59.
2. *Sefer ha-Mitzvot*, mitzvot aseih §8, and *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilchot Deot*, 1:6.



Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik zt”l

Talmudic sources:

“Rabbi Chama be-Rabbi Chanina said: What does the verse mean, “You shall follow the Lord your God”? Is it possible to follow the *Shechinah* (divine presence)? Does it not say “for the Lord your God is a consuming fire” (Deuteronomy 4:24)? Rather, it means that one should emulate

the Holy One’s attributes. Just as He clothes the naked, as it is written, “and the Lord God made clothes for Adam and his wife and clothed them” (Genesis 3:21), so should you clothe the naked. The Holy One visited the sick, as it is written, “The Lord appeared to him in the plains of Mamre” (Genesis 18:1), so should you visit the sick. The

Holy One comforted mourners, as it is written, “It was after Avraham died that God blessed his son Yitzchak” (Genesis 25:11), so should you comfort mourners. The Holy One buried the dead, as it is written, “and He buried [Moshe] in the valley” (Deuteronomy 34:6), so should you bury the dead.”<sup>3</sup>

“Abba Shaul says: *Ve-anvehu* (Exodus 15:2)—be like Him. Just as God is gracious and compassionate, so should you be gracious and compassionate.”<sup>4</sup>

Children often look to their parents in

3. *Sotah* 14a.

4. *Shabbat* 133b. See Rashi ad loc. who explains that *ve-anvehu* (“beautify him”) is being read as *ani ve-hu* (“I and he”).

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learning how to behave. Jews have a Father in Heaven who has set for them the ultimate example to follow.

### HOLINESS OF THIS WORLD

*Imitatio Dei* holds out the promise of holiness to us. If God is holy, and by emulating Him we become more like Him, then we partake of His holiness. If one pauses to think about it, this kind of holiness is markedly different from the usual conception of it.

God's call to "Be holy for I... am holy" (Leviticus 19:2) has been translated by an entire school of thought into terms of separation.<sup>5</sup> From time immemorial, asceticism and isolation have been considered primary methods for attaining holiness. *Imitatio Dei* offers a different, more populated path to holiness. One lives in the world and engages with other people in ways modeled for us by God: clothing the poor, comforting the bereaved, burying the dead, acting with compassion. These examples stand in stark contrast to the monastic conception of holiness that focuses on unburdening oneself of the world and of all the people in it, so that one can meditate and achieve communion with God.<sup>6</sup> The Rav referred to the emulatory model as the "holiness of the concrete." The Rav expressed it wonderfully in his *Halakhic Man*:

An individual does not become holy through mystical adhesion to the absolute nor through mysterious union with infinite... but, rather, through his whole biological life, through his animal actions, and through actualization of the Halachah

in the empirical world.<sup>7</sup>

### THE CREATIVE ACT

The very beginning of *Parashat Bereshit* is devoted to the creation narrative, but so many of the details are inscrutable or left unsaid. What, then, are we intended to glean from it?

The Rav answered beautifully that "this elaborate emphasis... on God's creation was meant to be converted into a moral challenge to man, that as God created, so should man."<sup>8</sup> The directive of *imitatio Dei* does not limit itself to the actions enumerated by the Sages, but encompasses the act of creation as well.

Man must be creative in both the material and spiritual realms. There are diseases to conquer..., rivers to control, miseries to extirpate.... Conquering and settling *Eretz Yisrael* are also mitzvot of *yetzirah* (creativity). [...] To build a yeshivah in inhospitable territory.... Indeed, education in fulfillment of "and you shall teach them diligently to your children" (Deuteronomy 6:7) is creativity par excellence.<sup>9</sup>

Creation does not exhaust itself in bringing something new into being. Again, let

7. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, 46.

8. Besdin, *Reflections of the Rav*, 26.

9. Ibid.

5. See, e.g., Rashi on Leviticus 19:2 and 20:26.

6. See further Shatz, "Separation or Engagement."



us look to and learn from how God acts. The Midrash tells us that God created, destroyed, and recreated worlds.<sup>10</sup> Man's responsibility, said the Rav, extends to rebuilding after destruction. As individuals and as a people, we are called on to never throw up our hands after failure, but to pitch in and get our hands dirty. In doing as God does, we become a holy people and actualize the divine quality of *yetzirah*.<sup>11</sup>

By emulating God, even mortal man can touch the heavenly realm.<sup>12</sup> Our forefather Yaakov, after a turbulent time in his life, erected an altar. In its conventional translation, the verse says, "and he named it 'God is the God of Yisrael' (וַיִּקְרָא לוֹ אֵל) (Gen 28:19). The Talmud, however, parses it differently: "and the God of Yisrael called him 'Lord.'"<sup>13</sup> What does this mean? The Rav answered simply that Yaakov emulated God. In his actions, he identified with God so strongly that one could actually see a reflection of the divine within Yaakov. This identification goes in both directions. The image of Yaakov, "Lord," is engraved on the divine throne.<sup>14</sup> ■

10. *Genesis Rabbah*, 3:9.

11. Besdin, *Reflections of the Rav*, 28–29.

12. In his volume on *chesed*, the *Chafetz Chayim* began by noting the eight places where the Torah commands us to follow in God's path. Beyond signaling its importance, the number eight in mystical thought also indicates what is above nature. See his *Ahavat Chesed*.

13. *Megilah* 18a, cited by Rashi ad loc.

14. Schacter, *Nefesh ha-Rav*, 280–281.

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