

Parshat Breishit: Being human

Of all the strange and fantastical elements of the creation story, one stands out: who is God talking to when deciding to make humans?

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כְּדְמוּתֵנוּ

Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. (Genesis 1:26)

Who, exactly, is “us”? Who is sitting around with the Divine? Rabbinic understanding of this varies. Maybe God is just using the royal “we,” planning to make humans in the image of the One. Or, perhaps, God is speaking to a heavenly assembly of angels, which would imply, strangely, that humans are created in the image of angels.

Rabbi Yochanan in the Talmud ([Sanhedrin 38b](#)) pushes back strongly against this second possibility. The sage points out that while the verse says “Let us make man,” the very next line (Genesis 1:27) immediately switches back to the singular: “*And God created man in God's own image.*” In other words, we are made solely in the image of the One God.

The Babylonian Talmud reinforces this human focus with an important principle: לֹא נִתְּנָה תּוֹרָה לְמַלְאכֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם. *The Torah was not given to ministering angels.* For example, in [Tractate Kiddushin](#), the Talmud addresses whether *Kohanim* (priests) are permitted to wear their sacred vestments outside the exact moment of Temple service. How could they be expected to wear their sacred garments only in the sacred spaces? The sages conclude that expecting the priests to change instantaneously without overlap into ordinary time is unreasonable. Priests aren’t magical beings; they’re human.

This is good news for those of us who are actually human. As scholar Christine Hayes points out, “the Torah wasn’t given to angels” isn’t an excuse to slack off or say, “*Hey, I’m only human, leave me alone.*” It is actually deeply aspirational. (I recommend purchasing her academic article [Rabbinic Aspirationalism](#) or watching her [lecture](#).) Instead of a free pass to do whatever we want, this rabbinic ethic is actually pushing us to do better.

We are not angels; we don’t just automatically do the right thing. We have free will! We have complex desires and inclinations to do all sorts of things we shouldn’t. Angels have it easy. They don’t have to struggle to be good. It’s actually harder to be human; being human means we have to struggle to live within the boundaries of an ethical life. Not being angels is both a blessing and a challenge; we have to choose every day to live with meaning and purpose.