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# The Essence of Being Human

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In describing the creation of Humankind, the Torah provides two different narratives, each one identifying a key feature of humanity that distinguishes us from the remainder of the animal kingdom: *tzelem Elohim*, “the image of God,” in Chapter 1 and *nishmat hayyim*, “a soul of life,” in Chapter 2. What is the difference between the two, and what does this tell us about the essence of being human?

Several classical commentaries divide the two characteristics between physical and nonphysical: Humans are literally created in “the physical form of their Creator” (Rashi), or of the angels (Rashbam). Humans’ souls, in contrast, are their superior intellectual and spiritual capabilities. According to this view, being human entails a qualitative advantage over animals granted by God.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, in his famous essay *The Lonely Man of Faith*, provides an alternate reading. *Tzelem Elohim* speaks to the creative power of humanity, granting people an elevated status because they are the only creatures with whom God shares God’s creative abilities. The *nishmat hayyim* refers to the human search for closeness with God and spiritual fulfillment. No other animal has this drive for a relationship with the transcendental.

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Both explanations provide the framework for the essential Jewish value that all humans are created equal and holy, that every person deserves unalienable rights and respect. As the Mishnah in Sanhedrin states, “Anyone who destroys a life is like he destroyed the world.” Every human life has infinite value because of the *tzelem Elohim* and *nishmat hayyim* imbued in him/her by God.

This explanation works extremely well with the Biblical account of creation, but can we derive these values when we accept the theory of evolution as proposed by Darwin and continued by scientists to this day? According to evolution, all life began with a unicellular organism that, through a process of random mutation and natural selection, evolved into all the creatures that exist, one of which being *Homo sapiens*. At what evolutionary point do we say that an organism has *tzelem Elohim* and a *nishmat hayyim*? When did human beings become “human”?

On a philosophical level, perhaps the fundamental distinction between humans and animals is our ability to look beneath the surface of our reality. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks calls humans “meaning-seeking animals.” We are not satisfied with merely the “What?” and “How?” but also with the “Why?” of our existence. The point of the creation of humanity might then be the stage of intellectual development where we became capable of asking “Why?” and searching for a purpose beyond ourselves.

From a more biological perspective, humans possess the intellectual capabilities that separate us from animals because of our exceptionally large neocortex (the part of our brain involved in higher reasoning and decision making). Research has shown that humans possess a protein that promotes neuron growth during early development that is 10-30 times stronger than its counterpart in chimpanzees. Thus, human neurons grow much faster and divide more rapidly than animal neurons, giving us our large neocortices. It's possible to argue that the mutation that strengthened this protein allowed Humanity to develop higher order reasoning and the ability to ask existential questions, a core part of our *tzelem Elohim* and *nishmat hayyim* according to Rabbi Sacks and others.

Evolution provides a complicated twist to the Biblical narrative of the creation of Humankind because it directly contradicts the *ab initio* narrative described by the

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Torah. However, just because we believe in evolution does not mean that we can or should disregard the Torah. Science and religion can work together to explain the reality in which we exist. Science explains the natural processes of life while religion explains the purpose for these processes. By working to reconcile the two, we can gain a clearer understanding of the essence of being human without betraying our fundamental beliefs.

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