

Pursuing Tzelem Elohim
How I Ended Up Where I Started
A Translator/Traitor's Perilous Voyage
Jack H Bloom PhD © 2008

Italians say; “*Traduttore Traditore*” “Translators are traitors,” And I, a practitioner of this arcane art agree; the only question is degree.

As a translator/ traitor who set himself the task of writing poems¹ for 3000 High Holyday cards sent to friends, colleagues and acquaintances for over twenty years, I wanted to include and sometimes end with a blessing that affirmed the ultimate worth of each recipient. There seemed nothing better than the prevalent English translation of *Tzelem Elohim*, affirming that humankind was created in the “image” of God. Though I sensed early on that “image” was an inadequate even distorted translation of “*Tzelem*”, I all too often used “Image” language in those blessing poems.

In my first book, I also shamelessly translated *Tzelem* as “Image”² Working on “image” dovetailed with my struggle to take seriously and place in relationship the two very different creation myths of Genesis. As I developed my [Tzelem↔N’shamah]³ model of human relationship, I struggled with translating *Tzelem* into a more accurate English that was more Jewishly authentic in nuance and overtone.

The astute reader recognizes that there are two radically different myths. An editor in antiquity has retained what a predecessor had or inserted something else, sensing that both were useful.

¹ The poems appear in Jewish Relational Care A-Z; We Are Our Others Keeper; pp.401-433

² The Rabbi as Symbolic Exemplar; By the Power Vested in Me. Haworth Press 2002 p.157-167 et al.

³ The brackets [] indicate the interrelated unity of the two elements. The double-sided arrow ↔ signifies reciprocal relationship. This holds true wherever they appear in my work.

The first myth makes use of the root “*Tzelem*” three times in two verses. The second myth describes God infusing the first human with the breath of life, and omits any mention of “*tzelem*”. What was the “*tzelem*” which was not even alluded to in the second myth and how was it to be in relation with the *n’shamah* (the breathing corporeal human). My translation of the two myths follows.

1

God said: "Let us model humankind (b'tzalemenu) after us, according to our likeness'...God created humankind modeled (b'tzalmo) after Himself, in the model (Tzelem) of God He created it, male and female He created them⁴.

I chose “model” to translate the Hebrew root *Tzelem* and by that change, attempted to resolve the difficulties the King James translator created for us Jews by using “image” for the Hebrew “*Tzelem*”.

The second myth seemed much simpler. There was no *Tzelem* to translate. The Hebrew “Vayitzer” had been translated “*formed*”, and I thought that molded, which after all is what people do when they work with clay, served just as well.

2

YHWH, God, molded the human of dust from the soil, He blew into his nostrils the breath of life; and the human became a living being.⁵

By the time I got to editing Jewish Relational Care A-Z’ We Are Our Others Keeper,⁶ I had framed a “new” translation.⁷ It was commonplace for virtually every contributor to that book, somewhere in his or her segment to use “made in the image”. They were informed that the editor would not accept despite his own “sinful” past, any

⁴ Genesis. 1:26&27 The Five Books of Moses; A Translation with Commentary.W.W. Norton & Co New York, London 2004

⁵ Genesis 2; 5-7 *ibid*;

⁶ The Haworth Press, Binghamton NY 2006 *viz*; p. 4 and pp.10-17

⁷ *ibid*; p.10-11

“made/created in the image” language. Each graciously without a murmur acceded to my wishes.

My first attempt at a newly framed pithy way of focusing on the relationship between both myths and eliminating “*image*” was that humankind is;

“modeled after and molded by Divinity”.

I was quite pleased with myself. To me a model was;

“a system of postulates, data, and inferences presented as a mathematical description of an entity or state of affairs; also: a computer simulation based on such a system⁸ “

The dictionary definition met my test of incorporeality (about which more anon). You couldn’t get much more disembodied.

And there was a bonus-modeled/molded provided pleasant alliteration.⁹

People soon let me know that to them a model was something both visible and/or tangible, i.e. a model airplane, or a fashion model, or a late model car, rather than something without shape or form,

My translation was lacking. More work needed to be done.

As I returned to translating, I noticed that I had totally ignored something essential to the verses, the Divine breath that sustains our very human corporeality from beginning to end.

In the middle of one night, because breath seemed so crucial; I substituted for “Molded”

⁸ Merriam-Webster’s 11th Collegiate Dictionary (2003) 12th definition of “model”

⁹ The repetition of usually initial consonant sounds in two or more neighboring words or syllables (as wild and woolly, threatening throngs) Merriam-Webster’s 11th Collegiate Dictionary 2003

[Breath-taking ⇔ Model of Divinity].¹⁰

Or without the hyphen;

[Breathtaking ⇔ Model of Divinity],

I was again quite pleased with this version because its double entendre expressed the beauty of humanity's creation.

I was still not satisfied with model as the translation of *Tzelem*.

A Thesaurus search for model came up with "paradigm".

Merriam Webster's 11th Collegiate Dictionary (2003) defines paradigm as;

EXAMPLE, PATTERN; -: an outstandingly clear or typical example or archetype: -: a philosophical or theoretical framework of any kind.

So my current (2008) translation of [Tzelem ⇔ N'shamah] in somewhat awkward English is that each human is a

[Breath-taking ⇔ Paradigm of Divinity]

It was closer to the original meaning though not very poetic. It didn't ring as beautifully as the familiar "image" nor was it as alliterative as "*modeled after and molded by Divinity*, but it seemed appropriate enough for self-respecting use by Jews.

Both the informed and the uninformed reader may say; "what difference does all this obsessing about the correct translation of *Tzelem Elohim* make. So what if God is without Image and therefore

¹⁰ Crucial to my model of human relatedness is the creation of humanity as [Tzelem ⇔ N'shamah] The Tzelem being our mindfulness or cognitive intelligence and the N'shamah-our breathing corporeal part where input from the world around us is initially experienced. For further info; see Jewish Relational Care A-Z; We Are Our Other's Keeper, Haworth Press Binghamton New York Chapter on Key Premises.

we can't be created in God's image? Created in the image of God, sounds so nice and is close to universally accepted."

Habits of speech are powerful, especially when experienced as deep rooted, profound, and meaningful. They are especially hard to change when they are well-intentioned affirmations to which everyone vigorously nods agreement. English speaking Jews are heirs to a mistranslation of a Biblical Hebrew idiom. A mistranslation perhaps inadvertently grafted onto Jewish thought and theology by devout Christians. "Image" is a translation which makes a major difference.

The pervasive Jewish understanding is that God is incorporeal, without body or image, without physical form or shape.¹¹ Most 21st century Jews don't believe that anyone has literally with one's eyes seen God, or heard God speak words in a specific language, especially one other than one's native tongue. We do not affirm that God articulated the divine will in Biblical Hebrew (what else?) with a decidedly Anglo-Saxon inflection. When we say God "sees", "listens", "feels" or is "seen" or "heard", we moderns understand that we are uttering a metaphor and have no better way of speaking about our God-experience. As our ancestors did we literally put words in God's mouth. What those words meant to our ancestors and mean to us is an important question. One of those words prominent in our creation myth is *Tzelem*.

When we proclaim creation in the "Image of God," ("*Tzelem Elohim*") as the definitive proof text of each person's ultimate worth, as well intentioned as we may be, we say this unaware that the nuance of our words affirm a meaning antithetical to normative Judaism. We use a phrase ("image") crucial to Christian theology, which affirms unequivocally the corporeality (which can be literally seen and heard) and simultaneous divinity of Christianity's founder and his relationship to God.¹² When we Jews ignore that overtone and use "image", in

¹¹ Article on Moses ben Maimon and the 13 principles of Jewish belief. In Encyclopedia Judaica 2nd Edition, Ed. Michael Berenbaum. 2006

¹² Viz; Jesus Through the Centuries; His Place in the History of Culture. Jaroslav Pelikan Yale University Press; New Haven and London 1999 Chapter 5; The Cosmic Christ a& Chapter Six; The Son of Man

Jewish terms we border on idolatry, Yet “Image of God” falls trippingly, regularly and piously off our Anglicized Jewish tongues.

Being in a covenant relationship with an incorporeal God any translation of *Tzelem*, which supports or even intimates corporeality or any physical dimension is not representative of what we Jews overwhelmingly hold. “Image of God” no matter how well intentioned is a distortion of our biblical and Jewish religious underpinnings.

As Jewish participants in a Judeo-Christian tradition, we share many concepts with our Christian siblings, and we differ on many others. Where we agree and where we disagree makes a huge difference. Beyond violating the third commandment,¹³ using “Image” for our Hebrew *Tzelem*” blurs a crucial theological boundary that demarcates us from our Christian neighbors.

Translating our Hebrew Bible so that the nuances and overtones remain true to the original is not a new phenomenon.

Rashi¹⁴, assuming the single authorship of the two creation myths asserts that both describe a single act of creation. Undertaking to translate *Tzelem* from Hebrew into Hebrew, Rashi offers that “Tzalmo” (his i.e. mankind’s *tzelem*, means “*bid’fuso* - in the mold made for him”-(note author’s translation anon), ... “in the die cast for him as in the French “coin”.

Though Rashi’s Hebrew indicates something quite different, the English translators of Rashi’s work¹⁵ use the ubiquitous “image” for *tzelem*,

Modern Jewish translators of Biblical text, follow suit by adopting without much questioning, this fashionable mistranslation and

¹³ Exodus 20: 4

¹⁴ Acronym for Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki. Rashi was the outstanding Biblical commentator of the middle Ages. He was born in Troyes, France, and lived from 1040 to 1105

¹⁵ M. Rosenbaum and A.M. Silberman, Pentateuch with Targum Onkelos, Haphtaroth and Prayers for Sabbath and Rashi's Commentary, Translated into English and Annotated (London: Shapiro, Vallentine and Co., 1946), vol. 1, pp. 2-3.

unintentionally join in distorting the religious meaning of “*Tzelem*”, a word in our mother tongue, home language,¹⁶ bedrock of our Judaism. The New JPS translations¹⁷, used by so many, those done under Orthodox imprimatur,¹⁸ and even the treasured superb works of Robert Alter¹⁹ and Everett Fox²⁰, all render *Tzelem* as “Image”.

If scholarly well-intentioned Jewish translators cannot do it, getting ordinary Jews to change this usage seems insurmountably difficult.

The authoritative dictionaries we turn to, experts about the derivation and meaning of English words, confound the issue further. Their understanding of the source and meaning of the word "image" overwhelmingly fudge the boundary between Christian and Jewish belief. The excerpts which follow, though not exhilarating to plow through are imperative to a fuller understanding of what the fuss is all about. Those that are less problematic are also included.

The *Septuagint*²¹ was the first translation of our Hebrew Bible. In the Greek, *Tzelem* is eikon theou: the "eikon" of God.

“The exact translation in my Greek lexicon is:

An object shaped to resemble the form or appearance of something; likeness; portrait
That which has the same form as something else (not a crafted object as in 1 above); living image

¹⁶ Viz; William Cutter; A Language for Zionist Reciprocity; p.16 CCAR Journal A Reform Jewish Quarterly Spring 2007

¹⁷ The Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia PA. 1917 and its successor new translations, from 1962 onward.

¹⁸ Stone edition of the Tanach (The Artscroll Series published by Mesorah Publications, 1998) p.9. and Davka, Judaic Classics Library Version 2.2, March 2001, Translation D. Mandel, and variations thereof.

¹⁹ The Five Books of Moses; A Translation with Commentary W.W. Norton & Co New York, London 2004

²⁰ The Five Books of Moses; A New Translation with Introductions, Commentary & Notes by Everett Fox Shoken Books Inc. Random House NY 1995

²¹ The Septuagint (sometimes abbreviated LXX) is the name given to the Greek translation of the Jewish Scriptures. The Septuagint has its origin in Alexandria, Egypt and was translated between 300-200 BCE

That which represents something else in terms of basic form and features; form; appearance^{22,23}

The full *Merriam-Webster* offers that “image” is Latin, derived from the Greek eik*n, from eikenai -to resemble. And reports these meanings;

A usually pictorial representation: IMAGE

A sign (as a word or graphic symbol) whose form suggests its meaning

A graphic symbol on a computer display screen that usually suggests the type of object represented or the purpose of an available function.

The *American Heritage Dictionary* includes these among its definitions of **Image** (im'ij) *n*.

A reproduction of the form of someone or something, esp. a sculptured likeness.

A *n* optically formed duplicate, counterpart, or other representative reproduction of an object, esp. an optical reproduction of an object formed by a lens or mirror.

A close or exact resemblance to another; double: *He is the image of his uncle.*

The concept of someone or something that is held by the public.

The character projected by someone or something to the public, esp. by the mass media.

A personification of something specified: *He is the image of health.*

A mental picture of something not real or present.²³

²² From Tara Maguire Knopick, my friend and office administrator and Masters level student of Bible at Yale University.

²³ American Heritage Dictionary Houghton, Mifflin Co. 2 Park Street Boston Mass 02108 P.642

²⁴ One notes that Merriam-Webster explains the meaning from its English translation of Tzelem and the Hebrew meaning of the word

Merriam-Webster's 11th Collegiate Dictionary (2003) notes that image was used in the King James Bible of 1611 and is a Middle English word meaning:

“a reproduction or imitation of the form of a person or thing, especially: an imitation in solid form.” Or alternatively: “an exact likeness; Semblance as in God created man in His image.”²⁴

Certainly in modern usage “image” has a predominantly visual connotation. *One visually perceives some thing.* Whether solid or visual, “Image” does not mean what *Tzelem* meant, then or now.

Though Jewish tradition clearly maintains that God’s words are spoken and heard in multiple ways,²⁵ and suggests and affirms a world of multiple truths, not all truths are consonant with our Jewish integrity. To maintain our religious authenticity we have to choose among them.

Any translation of *Tzelem*, that intimates or supports God’s corporeality or any physical dimension, is inappropriate for use by committed knowledgeable Jews.

In contradistinction to God’s incorporeality, we humans are definitely corporeal. And in a textually based Jewish theology humanity’s corporeality must be taken into account. Since it is we humans who know through our senses, conceive of and write about the reality we perceive around us, it is inevitable that we will project our own thoughts and opinions onto the myths that detail our creation.

Once we accept that, we must affirm that God and our understanding of divinity is created and shaped by us even when we borrow piecemeal or word for word from other sources.

Yet the recalcitrant translator/traitor in me had not yet given up the ghost nor raised the white flag of surrender.

²⁵ Babylonian Talmud; Berachot 28B

In the middle of the night the persistent angel charged with hovering over translators, never satisfied with their work nor leaving things as they are, fine-tuning every word, one dark night interrupts my sleep with

[Molded Breathtaking ⇔ Paradigm of Divinity]

As I awakened with a start, I thought I heard a tender disembodied ever so loving voice say firmly;

Enough already! “You’ve done more than your share!
Stop trying to translate what cannot be translated!”

“So what should I do?” I asked in the dark, a translator/traitor suffused with loyalty for Jewish texts.

And the voice said more resonantly;

“Convince Jews to ***stop*** saying, writing, intoning
Created in the Image
In all its permutations

It won’t be easy, they’re hooked on it, but you can tell them to

Use Tzelem Elohim as if it were English!”

I realized almost immediately that if we say it often enough, in ever-wider contexts, “***tzelem***” will ***become*** English, and we will maintain our theological integrity without losing the overtones.

There is precedent for this, because all languages. English notably, change and grow. Common usage originally by Jews has resulted in the entry of “untranslatable” Hebrew words into the English lexicon. *Mitzvah, Torah, Yom Kippur, Shivah, Tzadik, Tzitzit*, among others are Hebrew words that as a result of repeated use by Jews and ultimately others, have passed into common English parlance. They unashamedly

appear in an English dictionary.²⁶ *Tikun Olam* seems on its way to this destiny, having become a common expression for English speaking Jews because it also loses its overtones when translated.

Rabbis especially, highly educated symbols of our tradition and its authenticity should immediately cease and desist from using “image”, in all its variegated forms, and should vigorously encourage those they serve and lead, to use *tzelem* instead.

All Jews, loyal to our great heritage, when finding themselves in respectful conversation with English speakers, should assert clearly and proudly that each and all of us; Jew and Gentile are created *b’Tzelem Elohim*. or more simply *b’tzelem*. Rooted in our religious mother-tongue, *Tzelem Elohim* has overtones that no translation can achieve.

Initially, this may evoke in the non-Hebrew speaker a quizzical look. You may be politely questioned as to the English translation of *tzelem*. Feel free to offer that you once read a woefully inadequate translation that doesn’t really capture the essence of *tzelem*, but was the best the translator could do, and that was that each human being is created a

[Breath-taking ⇔ Paradigm of Divinity].

But be sure to add that *nowadays* more and more committed well-informed English speaking Jews use “*tzelem*”.

And you can look it up in the dictionary!

The puzzled look may not simply vanish, but as a knowledgeable insider you can add that you’ve heard that the translator, who claimed loyalty to Jewish tradition often came dangerously close to being a traitor. And many times in the middle of the night behaved like one.

²⁶ *ibid.* Merriam-Webster’s 11th Collegiate Dictionary (2003)

For your response to the above and further information and/or writings and materials you may contact me at;

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