

“In the Divine Image (*b'tzelem elokim*) did G-d create humankind...” (Gen. 1:27)

As I write this article at the end of July, contemplating this verse from Genesis while the sounds of the Olympics waft through the air, I can't help but wonder if there are Olympic athletes who were created in the image of parents who themselves were Olympic athletes. One Google search later, I discover that there are eleven such U.S. Olympians, including one cyclist, Taylor Phinney, both of whose parents not only participated in the 1984 games in Los Angeles but won medals! (If you're so inclined, check out this article: <http://www.teamusa.org/Olympic-Games/2012/Headlines/2012/July/26/Second-Generation-Olympians-26-July-2012.aspx>.) Can you imagine growing up as the child of an Olympic athlete, let alone two medalists? The expectations, either imposed from the outside or generated within one's own psyche, must be pretty high.

Now, consider that on day six of creation, according to the Torah's account in the first of the five books of Moses, G-d created man and woman in G-d's own image, in G-d's likeness. Talk about pressure! Our “Father, Our King,” as our High Holy Day liturgy reminds us, is also the Creator of the Universe, the Divine Judge, and the Most Merciful. My grandmother, may her memory be for a blessing, would have said “This is some *yichis!* Some lineage!” True. And with this *yichis* comes a boat load of expectations. Will we live up to this image (*tzelem*) of Greatness or merely exist in Its shadow (*tzel*)? Though the latter would be easier, it is the former Olympian feat to which Judaism calls us.

Over the course of this school year, our teachers and students together will explore what it means to be made in and to live in G-d's image. What are the implications for how we understand our place in the world and how we judge ourselves? How are we to approach our neighbor, whether stranger, friend or enemy, knowing that this person, too, is created *b'tzelem elokim*? How are we to behave in the world-at-large with an understanding of the enormity of the shoes we are to fill?

One way in which we'll not only mine *b'tzelem elokim* for meaning but also realize its implications is through the Inclusion B'Kavod Initiative. Over the course of the spring and summer, a small group of congregants has worked tirelessly to make Ohev Shalom a community in which all people feel not only welcomed but embraced, included *b'kavod*, with honor. The Inclusion Committee took on the name “Inclusion B'Kavod Committee” to reflect their belief that people with disabilities, special needs, and other differences ought to be celebrated as much as anyone else because, if for no other reason, they are created in G-d's Image, and we treat that Image with honor, respect and sometimes deference. We touch the Torah as it passes us in procession because we revere the teachings of G-d. How much more so should we honor that which is made in G-d's very image, our fellow human beings!

The work of the Inclusion B'Kavod Committee has led us to hire a full-time Coordinator of Special Needs for our Religious School program. Arlene Roman, a long-time member of Ohev Shalom and someone who devoted her career to people with special needs, will fill this position, working with teachers, students, parents and me to ensure that all of us

realize our full potential. Arlene will consult with families requesting Special Needs Action Plans for their children and then monitor how these plans become implemented in the learning environment. Arlene will become a regular presence in the hallways and classrooms and will be available by appointment for consultation. We look forward to having Arlene help us approach each student with the *kavod* they deserve and with the recognition that all are created *b'tzelem elokim*.

The Inclusion B'Kavod Committee has also secured an assistant for Vivi Sadel, our Director of Tutoring and Enrichment, to provide further assistance to those students who need help in developing their skills in reading and declaiming Hebrew or who need enhancements to the standard curriculum. I am thrilled that Scott Fields, Temple student and a graduate of our own *madrichim*/teen counselor program, will play that important role.

Finally, the Committee has also brought to Ohev Shalom the acclaimed Celebrations! program, a monthly Shabbat experience for children whose needs we are not able to meet in our current Religious School program and who, along with their families, often feel estranged from the Jewish community. You can learn more about Celebrations! as it was implemented at Congregation Mishkan Shalom by visiting [mishkan.org/celebrations](http://mishkan.org/celebrations).

Thanks to the hard work of Joanne Adar, Shelley Rubin, Lindsay Miller and Arlene Roman, leaders of the Inclusion B'Kavod Initiative, G-d's Image will become even more celebrated here at Ohev Shalom.

In addition to the Inclusion B'Kavod Initiative, opportunities will abound for the Religious School community to explore the idea that we're all created in G-d's Image. Most notably, this year we will have three family Shabbat school events (known as "Shabbat S'cool!") each of which will be dedicated to some aspect of *b'tzelem elokim*. On these two Saturday mornings and one Saturday night, families will gather at Ohev for special programs featuring guest presenters, instead of coming to Religious School on Sunday. The first of these programs will take place on Saturday, October 13, when Howard Blas, Director of Camp Ramah New England's Tikvah Program for children with disabilities, will come and lead us in a special service and in activities to help us better understand both the challenges and the opportunities of living with disabilities.

Finally, Rabbi Perlstein, the children's teachers and I will offer lessons throughout the year to all our students on the meaning of "*b'tzelem elokim*." In classrooms and in school assemblies we will engage the children in thinking about *mitzvot*, commandments, that come about as the result of seeing ourselves and others as made in the Divine Image. I have no doubt that we, the teachers, will find ourselves learning from the students just as much as, if not more than, they will learn from us.

I invite you to join our school community in our "quest for the gold" as we strive to see ourselves as living in G-d's Image while extending *kavod* to all others who bear this same responsibility.

*B'kavod,*  
Rabbi Dan Aronson  
Director of Congregational Learning