13 PRINCIPLES: The right way of thinking about God

שהבורא יתברך אינו גוף , ולא ישיגוהו משיגי הגוף ואין לו שום
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Last week we began to study the third of the 13 principles of the Jewish faith: “God has no body, and we should not attribute to God human characteristics or conditions.” In antiquity, this belief was as , or perhaps more, revolutionary than monotheism. Since for the pagan world gods were represented with human figures. The gods were born, died, fought, had insatiable appetites and a tremendous thirst for power. In a way, these gods were conceived at the imagine and likeness of those who worshipped them. For the pagan mind, an invisible god was an inconceivable god.

Now, the Tora repeatedly speaks of God in human terms. For example, the hand of God; God’s arm, God’s eyes, etc. Jewish tradition explains, however, that these are merely metaphors, expressions which’s purpose is to make Biblical ideas accessible even to the simplest human minds, for whom is very difficult to grasp abstract concepts.

There are many translations of the Tora into all languages. Do you know what is the official translation of the Tora, according to Jewish tradition? It is the Aramaic translation written by Onkelos haGuer (“Onkelos the proselyte” 35-120 of the Common Era), made under the supervision of one of the greatest rabbis of the Talmudic period, Rabbi Eliezer HaGadol. This translation is called “Targum” (“the translation”, par excellence), “Targum Onkelos” or “Targum Didan”, this latter name means “Our official translation”.

The Targum’s first objective is to debunk anthropomorphism, that is, explaining what those expressions, which apparently attributed to God a human image, really mean. For example, the arm of God can refer to His power; the hand of God, to His miracles; the eyes of God, to His permanent supervision on humans, etc. In this way, and through the Targum, our rabbis taught us to refrain from attributing to God images, or any human likeness, despite the apparent Biblical references.

Another important point: in the Tora says that God created man

“in His image and likeness.” Loyal to its rejection of anthropomorphism, Jewish tradition explains that the image and likeness of God which man possesses, is no the human body. It means that human beings, unlike other living creatures, are endowed with free will. We have impulses, but we can dominate them. We can choose between doing good and doing evil. This power, our moral freedom, is what makes us similar to God, Who is the epitome of freedom (“Almighty”= the One Who can do anything).

Before ending this topic, I would like to briefly refer to a question that I have been asked many times: If God does not have an image, how can I think of God when I pray to Him? Is it wrong to “imagine” God?

Imagining or visualizing God like an angel, an old man or a giant, is typical of paganism. Personifying God is a misleading reflection of our imagination, which projects into God human attributes, in a superlative level. What to do then when you communicate with God, when you pray to Him, and somehow you need to hold on to an image in your mind? I think the answer is simple. When we Jews refer to God, we say “HaShem”, which in Hebrew means “The Name”. (As if saying “He, whose name is ineffable.”). Hence, if it is impossible to abstract, or concentrate while talking to God, without bringing a specific image into our minds, we could visualize the name of HaShem, i.e., the Hebrew letters of His name.

In short, it is a fundamental principle of the Jewish faith to know that God has no body, image, or any human likeness. Human attributes described in the Tora are mere metaphors, expressions, that make ideas about God more accessible to the most basic levels of human understanding.

Such is the distance between the human and the Divine reality that the way in which we Jews refer God is by calling Him, “The Name”. When we pray, we should abstain from projecting any images or figures that would □”□ personify God. However, visualizing in our minds the name of HaShem, the Hebrew letters of His Name, is an acceptable way of thinking about God.