

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BH

IMITATION IS THE GREATEST FORM OF FLATTERY

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One of the universal guiding principles of almost all faiths is that the members of that faith try to imitate the deity, however it is defined in that faith. In the language of secular biblical scholarship, this idea is called "Imitatio Dei," literally, "the imitation of God." Judaism is no exception to this rule:

Rav Hama son of Rabbi Hanina further said: What means the text: You shall walk after the Lord your God (Deuteronomy 8:5)? Is it, then, possible for a human being to walk after the Shechinah? For has it not been said: For the Lord your God is a devouring fire (Deuteronomy 4:24)?

But [the meaning of the verse is to teach you] to walk after the attributes of the Holy One, blessed be He. As He clothes the naked, for it is written: And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife coats of skin, and clothed them (Genesis 3:21), so you should also clothe the naked.

The Holy One, blessed be He, visited the sick, for it is written: And the Lord appeared unto him [Abraham, just after he had been circumcised] by the oaks of Mamre (Genesis 18:1), so you should also visit the sick.

The Holy One, blessed be He, comforted mourners, for it is written: And it came to pass after the death of Abraham, that God blessed Isaac his son (Genesis 25:11) so you should also comfort mourners.

The Holy one, blessed be He, buried the dead, for it is written: And He buried him [Moses] in the valley (Deuteronomy 34:6) so you should also bury the dead. (B. Sotah 14a)

We imitate God by helping other individuals. It is interesting that imitating God is not defined as wearing a tallit or keeping kosher. Actually trying to be like God-to walk the path that God walks-is to care about human beings (Jews and non-Jews) when they are at their most vulnerable: naked, sick, sorrowful or dead.

Discussion Questions:

1. What would it take for an individual to truly imitate God as outlined above? What would a community have to do to be able to live up to the standards laid out in this passage?
2. What are some of the walls we put up (literal walls and/or psychological barriers) so that we do not have to see the naked, the sick, the sad or the dead? What sort of gradual program might you suggest to help a person and/or community to ease into this sort of vision of how to help those who need it most?
3. Do you know of any person or community (Jewish or non-Jewish) that actualizes these ideals? Please describe them for us.