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Imitatio Dei in the Bible, Especially Micah 7:18-20, and Cordovero's *The Palm Tree of Deborah*

Rita Sherwin

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for ordination.

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Referee, Professor David Weisberg

For Zachary

Rabbi Akiba used to say: How greatly God must have loved us to create us in God's image; yet even greater love did God show us in making us conscious that we are created in God's image.

from Chapters of the Fathers, 3:18

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CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

This thesis is a study of the theological concept of Imitatio Dei, the imitation of God. In the first chapter, I define the term and look briefly at the concept as it appears in Christianity and in Greek thought. Then I present a survey of Imitatio Dei in the Bible, in rabbinic literature, and in medieval philosophy, with an emphasis on Maimonides.

The second chapter examines in greater depth the concept of Imitatio Dei as it appears in the Bible. I approach this part of my study via the notion of the creation of humankind in God's image, with Genesis 1:26-27 as the key text. Other important biblical texts discussed are Exodus 34 (the *middoth*) and Leviticus 19 (the Holiness Code). Much of this chapter is devoted to the scholarship of Eliezer Berkovits, particularly his theory of the divine *mishpat* as the cosmic principle of harmony in the universe, which human beings are commanded to further develop within themselves.

In the third chapter, I discuss Micah 7:18-20 in light of the concept of Imitatio Dei. The Micah passage is shown to be unprecedented in its description of a God whose quintessence and uniqueness consist of the divine attribute of mercy, and it is shown that Imitatio Dei is human imitation of that attribute.

The fourth chapter examines the concept of Imitatio Dei in kabbalistic thought. The major part of the chapter is a close reading of chapter one of *The Palm Tree of Deborah* by Moses Cordovero, a treatise on Imitatio Dei based on Micah 7:18-20. The reading of *The Palm Tree of Deborah* is preceded by an explanation of the kabbalistic doctrine of the *Sefiroth*, and biographical material on Cordovero.

The fifth chapter discusses the relevance of Imitatio Dei in modern and contemporary Jewish thought. Imitatio Dei is shown to be an important concept in the theologies of Martin Buber and Abraham Joshua Heschel, as well as for other contemporary thinkers.

A NOTE ON TRANSLATION

Translations from the Bible are from *Tanakh: A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures According to the Traditional Hebrew Text* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1985) or my own translation.

Translations from *The Palm Tree of Deborah* are from Louis Jacobs.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BIBLICAL BOOKS

Dan.	Daniel
Deut.	Deuteronomy
Ex.	Exodus
Ez.	Ezekiel
Gen.	Genesis
Is.	Isaiah
Jer.	Jeremiah
Lev.	Leviticus
Ps.	Psalms

TALMUDIC TRACTATES

Av.	Avoth
Ber.	Berakhot
Bekh.	Bekhorot
Hag.	Hagigah
Kidd.	Kiddushin
Mish. Makk.	Mishnah Makkot
Ned.	Nedarim
Pes.	Pesaḥim
San.	Sanhedrin
Sot.	Sota

MIDRASHIM

Ex. R.	Exodus Rabbah
Gen. R.	Genesis Rabbah
Lev. R.	Leviticus Rabbah
Mekh.	Mekhilta

CHAPTER I

THE DOCTRINE OF IMITATIO DEI: INQUIRY AND OVERVIEW

Definition and Historical Information

Imitatio Dei, the imitation of God, is a theological term which refers to human imitation of certain actions which God is perceived as performing. The Latin term originated within Christianity, where it means the modelling of one's actions after those of Jesus Christ. This may be understood as the Christian's obligation to love others, just as Jesus loved, and as such is found in the New Testament (e.g., Epistle to the Ephesians 5:1f.) and elsewhere in the literature of the early Church (e.g., Polycarp's Letter to the Philippians).[1] Taken to the extreme, it sometimes has been understood as the Christian's actual participation in the passion and sufferings of Jesus, perhaps even to the extent of the experience of stigmata, a kind of concrete physical imitation.[2] In Christian theology, then, the actions, and sometimes the experiences, of Jesus become the model; Imitatio Dei is Imitatio Christi.

Looking back even further, the concept of imitation of the divine can be traced to Greek thought. The Pythagorean school speaks of "following after God," and Plato too makes repeated reference to this idea. In Plato's *Theaetetus*, Socrates states that human beings must become as much like God as possible by becoming just and pious through knowledge, and in the *Phaedrus* Plato writes that only one who follows after God can

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[1]Martin Buber, *Israel and the World: Essays in a Time of Crisis* (New York: Shocken, 1963), pp. 68-69.

[2]*Ibid.*, pp. 69-70.

experience true being.[3]

Plato developed the Pythagorean idea of metempsychosis, according to which the soul is a fallen godlike being imprisoned within the flesh. The soul must migrate through a series of bodies until it becomes purified, at which point it must no longer return to corporeal form but can reenter the godlike state. Thus God is viewed as "the model of the soul that purifies itself in order to return home."[4]

Whereas in Christian theology the person and actions of Jesus are exemplary, Greek theology has no such example. The capricious, all-too-human Zeus is no analogue to Jesus. Buber writes of the Greek longing for perfection, whereby the Zeus figure evolves from a person to a philosophical ideal, and the imitation of God remains a problematical and ultimately unsatisfactory concept within Greek thought. "The Greek," Buber states, "can only imitate the wish that he himself has given a visible form."[5]

IN JUDAISM

There is no one term in Judaism which stands as exact equivalent to "Imitatio Dei." Likewise, the concept of imitation of God in Judaism, while similar in some respects to that concept as it appears in Christianity and in Greek thought, in most other respects must be radically different. There is no equivalent in Judaism to the Jesus figure, who in Christianity functions as a bridge and an intermediary between the human and the divine. Christian theology has addressed itself to tensions inherent in the

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[3]*Ibid.*, p. 66.

[4]*Ibid.*

[5]*Ibid.*, p. 68.

relationship of the human to the divine, as has Greek thought. Within Judaism, due to certain aspects of the very nature of its theology, which will be discussed, the concept of imitation of God is perhaps even more problematical. Yet it is a doctrine of fundamental importance throughout Jewish thought. What can be said about Imitatio Dei as it exists within Judaism?

Judaism is a religion fraught with paradox. One of the greatest of these paradoxes concerns the nature of God and the nature of humankind, and their relationship to each other. How can a religion which professes that God is unknowable and unattainable, and which enjoins against making images of God, at the same time expect -- indeed command -- human beings to "be like" God? Rabbi Hama bar Hanina (third century, Palestinian *amorah*) poses the question thus:

> What is the meaning of that which is written "After the Lord your God ye shall walk" (Deut 13:5). Is it then possible for man to walk after the *Shekinah* (the Holy Presence)? Is it not said: "For the Lord thy God is a devouring fire" (Deut. 4:24).[6]

The problem here is implicit within the vast, seemingly unbreachable chasm separating human beings from the divine. In Buber's words, God is "invisible, incomprehensible, unformed, not-to-be formed."[7] Human beings, of course, are creatures, possessing all the creaturely characteristics and limitations. Yet human beings must somehow imitate God. And it is not, as Buber points out, a human conception of God that human beings are required to emulate, but God *per se* -- and Buber calls this

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[6]Samuel Belkin, *In His Image: The Jewish Philosophy of Man as Expressed in Rabbinic Tradition* (New York: Abelard-Schuman, 1960), p. 29.

[7]Buber, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

the "central paradox of Judaism."[8]

IN THE BIBLE

The biblical text wherein Jewish thought has traditionally discerned the "thirteen *middoth*" -- the thirteen measurements, characteristics, or modes of behavior of God -- is Exodus 34:6ff.[9] The thirteen *middoth* comprise an answer to Moses' request, in Exodus 33:13, to be shown God's "ways." It is noteworthy that, whereas Moses' request to be shown God's "glory" (Ex. 33:18) is denied, the request to be shown God's "ways" is granted.[10] Although Moses is unable to see what God *is*, he is permitted to see God's ways, or the manifestations of God in action. These are presented as follows:

> The Lord passed before him and proclaimed: 'The Lord! the Lord! a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; yet He does not remit all punishment, but visits iniquity of parents upon children and upon children's children, upon the third and fourth generations. Moses hastened to bow low to the ground in homage, and said, "If I have gained Your favor, O Lord, pray let the Lord go in our midst, even though this is a stiff necked people. Pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for Your own!" (Ex. 34:6-9)

Brocke points out that the intention of the thirteen *middoth* is to "define the area within which imitation can occur,"[11] and the fact that the list includes negative elements as well as positive is not problematical. The negative elements are intentionally omitted

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[8]*Ibid.*

[9]Michael Brocke, "The 'Imitation of God' in Judaism." In A. Falaturi, J.J. Petuchowski, W. Strolz, eds., *Three Ways to the One God* (New York: Crossroads, 1987), p. 58.

[10]*Ibid.*, p. 56.

[11]*Ibid.*, p. 58.

from liturgical usage, and only the positive elements are considered imitable by human beings, who are necessarily limited by their mortality and thus incapable of imitation of all of the ways of God.[12] Human beings are to model themselves on God, and particularly on specific moral "ways" of God.

Another biblical text dealing with imitation is the so-called Holiness Code (Lev. 17-26), with its numerous variations on the theme stated succinctly in 19:2: "you shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." A salient feature of this material is its demand that Israel be holy and thereby imitate God.[13] The operative term here is *kadosh*, "holy." What exactly does it mean to be *kadosh*? The word can best be translated as "set apart." As God is other, so too must Israel be, at least in some respects, other. For Israel, otherness is accomplished by fulfilling the commandments. The ethical commandments are understood as being modelled on God's ways. Indeed, Schechter has call Deuteronomy, that book of the Torah which reiterates the entire Mosaic teaching with an emphasis on the commandments, "Israel's book of *imitatio dei*."[14]

God's ways appear throughout Scripture. In the Prophets and in the Psalms, especially, God's dynamic moral qualities are mentioned, with the understanding that these are the qualities to be emulated by human beings.

Certain categories of actions, then, when performed by human beings, elevate those human beings towards attainment of a greater degree of similarity to the divine.

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[12]*Ibid.*

[13]Menahem Haran, "Holiness Code." In *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1975), vol. 8, p. 820.

[14]Buber, *op. cit.*, p. 75, quoting Solomon Schechter.

Denoting more than moral qualities, they imply moral actions.[15] The imitation of God involves actual practice of specific behaviors, and moves from the realm of abstract theological concept to the realm of the actual and the practical.

IN RABBINIC THOUGHT

Imitatio Dei has been described as the foundation, the motive, and the inspiration for rabbinic ethics. God is the model for humankind. In rabbinic literature, God possesses those qualities which should be foremost in human behavior, and the imitation of God is advanced as the ideal after which human beings should strive.[16]

There exists a great body of Talmud and midrash which explicates the doctrine of Imitatio Dei. The major thrust of this material is that it is not the abstract ethical attributes of God which human beings must emulate, but rather the ethical actions of God. God becomes an anthropomorphic example whose *middoth* reveal those divine aspects which are imitable, in order that human beings can learn how they should behave humanely toward others. The most prominent divine attributes are graciousness and mercy, from them issuing the works of lovingkindness.[17]

As a model for human behavior, God is represented as personally observing the precepts which human beings are expected to observe. The midrash states:

> The attributes of the Holy One blessed be He are unlike those of a human being. The latter instructs others what they are to do but may not practice it himself. Not so is the Holy One Blessed be He; whatever He does He commands Israel to

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[15]R. Travers Herford, *Talmud and Apocrypha* (London: Soncino Press, 1933), p. 29ff.

[16]Abraham Cohen, *Everyman's Talmud* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1949), p. 211.

[17]Brocke, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

perform. (*Ex. R.* 30:9)[18]

God, then, becomes the ethical actor who teaches human beings moral behavior; God does not merely lay down the norms, but actually does personally what God requires, showing via human actions what that is.[19]

God as ethical example is found in Targum texts. The authors of the Palestinian Targum inserted accounts of God's performance of *gemiluth hesed*. These exemplary deeds include the clothing of the naked (garments of skin for Adam and Eve in Gen. 3:21), bringing together of bride and bridegroom (Gen. 2:21), visiting the sick (Gen. 18:1), comforting the mourner (Gen. 35:9), feeding the hungry (Ex. 16:4), and burying the dead (Deut. 34:5). Brocke notes that what is found in the Targum reflects existing interpretation, the message being that human beings are to treat their neighbors just as God did, and does.[20]

This idea is prevalent in the rabbinic literature. The rabbis interpreted the expression "to walk in the ways of God" to mean the imitation of the *middoth*.[21] In this interpretation, the contradiction of God as a consuming fire, to whose ways human beings must cling, disappears. The *middoth* become the effective "ways" of God in which

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[18]Cohen, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

[19]Brocke, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

[20]*Ibid.*, pp. 61-62.

[21]Arthur Marmorstein, "The Imitation of God (Imitatio Dei) in the Hagaddah." In J. Rabinowitz, M.S. Lew, eds. A. Marmorstein, *Studies in Jewish Theology* (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), pp. 115-116.

human beings are to "walk."[22] A Tannaitic midrash on Deuteronomy 11:22 makes this point:

> "To walk in all His ways" (Deut. 11:22). These are the ways of God: "God, a merciful and gracious God" (Ex. 34:6) and "All who are called with the name of the Lord will be delivered" (Joel 2:30). But how is it possible for man to be called by the name of God? Rather, as God is called merciful -- may you too be called merciful. As God is called gracious -- may you too be gracious. As it is written: "God is gracious and merciful" (Ps. 145:8) – may you too give free gifts. God is called righteous, as it is written: "For God is righteous, He loves righteousness" (Ps. 11:7) -- may you too be righteous. God is called compassionate, as it is written "For I am compassionate, says the Lord" (Jer. 3:12) -- may you too be compassionate. Therefore it is written: "All who are called with the name of the Lord will be delivered. (*Sifre* on Deut. 11:22)

Again, in the Talmud it stated:

> What means the text, "You shall walk after the Lord your God" (Deut. 13:4). Is it, then, possible for a man to walk after the Shekinah of which it is written, "The Lord your God is a devouring fire" (Deut. 4:24)? But the meaning is to follow the attributes of the Holy One blessed be He: as He clothed the naked (Gen. 3:21), so do you clothe the naked; as He visited the sick (Gen. 18:1), so do you visit the sick; as He comforted mourners (Gen. 25:11), so do you comfort those who mourn; as He buried the dead (Deut. 34:6), so do you bury the dead. (Sot. 14a)

This doctrine appears in several other places as well. For example:

> This is my God and I will adorn (sic) Him" (Ex. 15:2). It is, then, possible to adorn God? Yes, by resembling Him; as He is compassionate and gracious, be also compassionate and gracious. (*Mekh.* 37a)[23]

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[22]Brocke, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

[23]Cohen, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

> The King has a retinue; what is its duty? To imitate the King. (*Sifra* on Lev. 19:2)[24]
>
> Be like Me; as I repay good for evil, so do you repay good for evil. (*Ex. R.* 26:2)[25]

In ancient Israelite societies, public service, while continuously stressed, was not a profession as such. Judges and other public officials received little pay for their services, while all qualified individuals were urged to take upon themselves social responsibility. "Quite probably it was precisely because public service was not looked upon as a 'profession' that Imitatio Dei became one of the fundamental principles in Judaism."[26]

In the Talmud it is stated that the verse "Behold, I have taught you statutes and ordinances, even as the Lord my God commanded me" (Deut. 4:5) shows that as God teaches without remuneration, so too shall human beings teach without remuneration (Ned. 37a, Bech. 29a).[27] Upon this dictum, which applies to teachers, judges, and other public officials, is the entire structure of Jewish public service grounded; it goes far beyond idealistic homily and takes on the force of law.[28]

There are numerous rabbinic texts which convey the notion of a kind of indirect Imitatio Dei, instructing people not to behave in conformity with the ways of the world. Often these texts are similes wherein God is compared with a mortal ruler, and shown to

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[24]*Ibid.*

[25]*Ibid.*

[26]Belkin, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

[27]*Ibid.*

[28]*Ibid.*

be different, to transcend the conditions and the conventions of mundane society.[29]

The liturgy makes use of texts dealing with imitation. Included in the daily morning worship is the prayer: "Praised be Thou, Lord our God, King of the world, who makes the blind to see ... who clothes the naked ... who frees the captives." Three times a day is recited Psalm 145, wherein God "opens His hand."[30] The observance of the Sabbath can be viewed as a kind of Imitatio Dei; just as God rested, so are human beings commanded to rest (see Ex. 20:11 and 31:17).[31]

As touched upon above, the list of God's *middoth* includes negative attributes as well as positive. In rabbinic literature, God always exemplifies the positive ethical model; for most negative injunctions, the literature does not employ the personal model of God.[32] The rabbis did not overlook the fact that there are certain qualities attributed to God which human beings must not emulate.[33] The verse "Come and see the works of the Lord, He is terrible in His doing to the children of men" (Ps. 66:5) is said to refer to the mysterious and devious ways in which God rules the world.[34] According to rabbinic interpretation, deviousness is one of four divine attributes which human beings are not to copy, the others being jealousy, vengeance, and exaltation.[35] Midrashim

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[29]Brocke, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

[30]*Ibid.*

[31]*Ibid.*, pp. 63-64.

[32]*Ibid.*, p. 63.

[33]Cohen, *op. cit.*, pp. 211-212.

[34]Herford, *op. cit.*, p. 131, quoting Solomon Schechter.

[35]*Ibid.*, p. 131.

referring to these attributes include:

> "I the Lord your God am a jealous God" (Ex. 20:5). I am the master of jealousy and jealousy is not master of Me. (*Mekh.* 68a).[36]

> With a human king wrath controls him, but the Holy One blessed be He controls His wrath, as it is said, "The Lord avenges and is full of wrath" (the Hebrew literally is "master of wrath" Nahum 1:2). (*Gen. R.* 49:8)[37]

The theology involved in discussion of the negative divine attributes needs to be sophisticated. It is necessary to ponder the concept of God's essential unity, to struggle with the idea that, in God, all attributes are one. With regard to the attributes of justice and mercy, Belkin writes that to assume that they are separate powers within God amounts to a heresy. He warns, too, against identification of God with mercy alone, as this assumes another power for justice. Rather, God's exercise of justice and mercy is simultaneous, in a way which passes human comprehension. God's essence is a unity, but the essential nature of humankind is dual, composed of body and soul, of an impulse for good and an impulse for evil. In fact, the human sense of justice is sometimes at odds with the human feeling for mercy. How is it possible, then, for human beings to imitate God *vis-a-vis* God's attributes of justice and mercy? The traditional answer to this question is in part practical -- that strict justice is the province of the court system, and part ethical -- that individuals should try to rise above strict justice, for in so doing they will truly be imitating God in God's attribute of mercy.[38]

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[36]Cohen, *op. cit.*, p. 212.

[37]*Ibid.*

[38]Belkin, *op. cit.*, p. 218.

A somewhat divergent line of thought in rabbinic literature consists of almost a refutation of Imitatio Dei. This approach is evident in midrashic statements like the following:

> "You shall be holy" (Lev. 19:2). Do you think that you can be as holy as I am? No, I alone am holy." (*Lev. R.* 24:9)[39]

> "Only he who can accomplish My works is like Me," says God. Once a king lit two torches and proclaimed, "Whoever performs the like shall be called Augustus and I will not begrudge him the title. God has created heaven and earth. Do the same, and then can you also be called God, then will you be like Him." (*Deut. R.* 1:10)[40]

Comparable to the line of thought contesting the capability of the individual to imitate God is the notion that the possibility for imitation rests only in the collectivity of Israel as a people. According to Marmorstein, the theory is that "Israel in its unity, uniqueness, and harmony, in its separation from sin and impurity, and sanctification by doctrine and precept, comes nearest to God."[41] A midrash illustrating this idea takes the form of a dialogue between God and Israel, who proclaim each other's unity, extol each other's uniqueness, recognize their interdependency, and so on. The dialogue sets forth the clear resemblance perceived between God and Israel. (*Sifre* on Deut. 348a, *Midrash Tanhuma* p. 221, and *Midrash Shir Ha-Shirim* c.p. 16)[42]

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[39]Marmorstein, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

[40]*Ibid.*

[41]*Ibid.*, p. 118.

[42]*Ibid.*, pp. 118-119.

This resemblance between God and Israel is to some extent divinely preordained, and in this sense is different from imitation as an activity per se. Rather, it constitutes a more static condition of similarity. From this state of resemblance has arisen "a rhetoric of polarity and reciprocity, and all-inclusive antithesis of God and Israel."[43] Grounded in the Bible and influenced by Hellenism, these statements are to be found in the *piyuttim*.[44] One poem expresses the similarity of God and Israel as follows:

> Who is like you and who is like your people?
> Who is similar to you -- but they are similar to you!
> You have chosen them for yourself, they have chosen you for themselves
> They for you and you for them
> Ordained for you and them alike
> The same names for you and them
> They are called by your name, the 'holiness of Israel'
> You are called by their name, 'Holy Israel'
> You say: I am your sanctifier and your sanctification
> You are my sanctified and my sanctification
> Worthy the sanctification of the Holy by the holy!
> (*Piyutte Yannai* on Lev. 19:2)[45]

Here, and elsewhere in the genre, the election of Israel presupposes a state of similarity to God, which is distinguished from and yet which complements Israel's desire to imitate God via ethical action.[46]

A somewhat different train of thought encountered in the rabbinic material is that human beings cannot hope to become like God in this world, but that it is only

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[43]Brocke, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

[44]*Ibid.*, pp. 65-66.

[45]*Ibid.*, p. 66.

[46]*Ibid.*

after death that humans can attain a closeness to the divine.[47] A midrash to this effect reads:

> In the future world you will resemble and be like God. Here in this world a man cannot be like God, neither the ordinary man, nor the pious man, nor Israel. A new world, an aeon of quite another character, must arise in order to render possible this mighty transformation. (*Pesikta R.* on Deut. 4:4)[48]

The doctrine of Imitatio Dei, then, must be considered as a major motive and inspiration of rabbinic ethics. A person whose conduct is morally upright establishes kinship with God through this conduct.[49] Throughout rabbinic teaching is manifest an endeavor to bridge the gap between the human and the divine, "to make the recognition of God clearer to the human understanding and to cultivate in man a resemblance to God."[50]

IN MEDIEVAL PHILOSOPHY: MAIMONIDES

Moses Ben Maimon, or Maimonides (1135-1204), is the great medieval Jewish philosopher in whose works can be seen a tension between the God of philosophy and the God of religion. Dealing with Imitatio Dei the most extensively of all the medieval Jewish philosophers, Maimonides numbers it as one of the commandments, stating in *Sefer ha-Mitzvoth* that one is "to emulate God in His beneficent and

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[47]Marmorstein, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

[48]*Ibid.*, pp. 120-121.

[49]Cohen, *op. cit.*, p. 212.

[50]Marmorstein, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

righteous ways to the best of one's ability.[51] Maimonides understood this as being related to the admonition to follow the middle way.[52] Its importance for Maimonides can be seen in his taking the injunction to be holy of Leviticus 19 not as a single commandment, but as a commandment to fulfill all of the 613 commandments.[53]

In his struggle against anthropomorphism, Maimonides developed a "negative theology" which avoided any positive statements concerning God. According to Maimonides, God does not possess ethical characteristics. God does, however, act in such a manner to which human actions, deriving as they do from ethical qualities, are comparable. Maimonides writes:

> The highest human virtue is to become like unto Him, in so far as man is capable of that: that is, we must make our behavior like His, as the sages have indicated with the explanation of "You shall be holy": He is gracious, be gracious also; He is merciful, be merciful also. The purpose of all this is to show that the attributes ascribed to Him are those of His activity and do not signify that He possesses characteristics. (*Guide of the Perplexed* I, 54)[54]

In his books of Jewish practice, Maimonides' intent was to convey the traditional teachings of the active imitation of God, leaving no room for possible misinterpretations of a deity with attributes. Elsewhere in his work, Maimonides

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[51]Seymour Siegel, "Imitation of God (Imitatio Dei)." In *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1975), vol. 8, p. 1292.

[52]*Ibid.*

[53]Brocke, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

[54]*Ibid.*, p. 68.

states that the path to God is the acquisition of speculative knowledge, particularly knowledge of God, and that this leads to the imitation of God. He states:

> The perfection in which man can truly glory is attained by him when he has acquired -- as far as this is possible for man -- the knowledge of God, the knowledge of His providence, and of the manner in which it influences His creatures in their production and continued existence. Having acquired this knowledge he will then be determined always to seek lovingkindness, justice, and righteousness and thus to imitate the ways of God. (*Guide of the Perplexed* III, 54)[55]

Reflecting his concern to synthesize or to harmonize religion and philosophy, this formulation of the Maimonidean concept of Imitatio Dei is elegant and powerful. Humankind, who is most like God when it exercises its rational capacity to the fullest, thus becomes inspired to be even more like God in its capacity of love, justice, and righteousness.

SUMMARY

This initial chapter has been an attempt to define Imitatio Dei, first by viewing it in its Christian and Greek contexts, where it is problematical but less so than in its Jewish context. Within the vast, rich complexity of Jewish thought, the concept of imitation of God presents unique difficulties. If God is totally other, how are human beings to fulfill the commandment to be like God? We have seen how the rabbis, in their effort to deal with this paradox, developed from the biblical verses an entire ethical system. For the rabbis, to "walk in God's ways" essentially means to follows God's example by performing prescribed, specific morally upright actions when

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[55]Siegel, *op. cit.*, p. 1293.

relating to fellow human beings. In the medieval period, Maimonides understood the imitation of God as relating to the exercise of the intellect, which in turn leads a person to emulate those ethical actions of the divine.

A brief treatment of some aspects of the imitation of God, this chapter has raised many questions. It is to one of those questions that we now turn. What can we say about Imitatio Dei in the Bible?

CHAPTER II
IMITATIO DEI IN THE BIBLE

IMITATIO DEI IN GENESIS 1:26-27

A study of the concept of Imitatio Dei as it appears in the Bible can be approached from several directions. In this chapter, I shall approach Imitatio Dei in the Bible through the notion of *b'tselem Elohim*, the creation of humankind in God's image, as it appears in Genesis 1:26-27. It is my opinion that this text is central to the entire biblical concept of the imitation of God.

We read: "Let us make *adam* [humankind] in our image, after our likeness ... And God created *adam* in His image, in the image of God He created him" (Gen. 1:26-27). Here we confront perhaps the initial paradox of Judaism. For, in the opening of the Torah, within the selfsame passages which present God as cosmic creator, as omnipotent, ineffably above and wholly other than the creation which God brings into being, we encounter God's creature *adam* as somehow bearing some essential similarity to its creator.

Let us backtrack and look at the very beginning of the Bible. We see, of course, that the Bible begins with God. God's existence is a given, unquestioned and taken for granted.[1] God here is the creator God, seen in the opening verses of Genesis as the force which creates according to a master plan and which imbues all of creation with purpose. The narrative describes God's creation of order from chaos, God's creation of all aspects of nature -- light, land and sea, vegetation, sun and moon, the

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[1]W. Gunther Plaut, ed., *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations [UAHC], 1981), p. 21.

sea animals and the land animals -- until finally the stage is set for the creation of *adam*.

The creation of *adam* differs from all preceding acts of creation in that it is recorded in two stages: God voices the intent to create, and then actually creates, *Adam*. This highlights the unique status of human beings as the aim and the crown of creation.[2] Moreover, we read concerning God's intent: "Let us make *adam* in our image, after our likeness" (Gen. 1:26). And when we read of the ensuing creation, we learn: "And God created *adam* in His image, in the image of God He created him" (Gen. 1:27). Leibowitz notes the "poetic and elevated" style of verse 27, she remarks that the creation of *adam* is referred to three times, and she writes: "The chasm separating man from the rest of creation is stressed twice in the statement that he was created in the image of God."[3]

Reading the text in this way leads us to an appreciation of how the Torah sets up for us a theological base. The very first and the essential fact which we learn about human beings is that they are created by God *b'tsalmo, b'tselem Elohim* -- in His image, in God's image. According to Plaut, "[t]hese words reflect the Torah's abiding wonder over man's special status in creation ..."[4] Plaut writes that human beings thus possess both a unique intellectual capacity and a unique moral capacity, and a fundamental holiness and dignity. Although human nature is radically different from

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[2]Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Bereshit (Genesis)* Aryeh Newman, tr. (Jerusalem: The World Zionist Organization, 1980), pp. 1-2.

[3]*Ibid.*, p. 2.

[4]Plaut, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

divine nature, human beings are in some respects potentially capable of approaching the divine.[5]

Yet as has been remarked, this theological notion of *b'tsalmo* is not without a certain tension. In discussing this tension, Brocke writes:

> Biblically speaking, it is painfully clear how partial and fragmentary the imitation of God must be. The fact that man is made in God's image and likeness (Gen. 1:26f.) has no consequence in this regard; to wish to imitate the Creator of worlds, to work such miracles as the liberation from Egypt, to raise the dead, would be not only presumptuous but ridiculous. Where, then, is the specifically divine element of human imitation of God?
>
> How, in view of the foregoing, is it possible to reach the certainty of Judaism that God requires us to imitate Him, indeed that He longs for us to do so, and hence that imitatio dei is an essential characteristic of Judaism?
>
> The possibility of the imitation of God is in fact to be found in the Bible, in an area of life where the contradictions of inaccessibility and approachability are unmistakable.[6]

IMITATIO DEI IN EXODUS 34 AND LEVITICUS 19

Brocke sees the thirteen *middoth* of Exodus 34 as a central text in his argument that Imitatio Dei is a biblical injunction. As we have seen in chapter one of this thesis, Brocke understands the *middoth* as setting parameters within which human imitation of the divine can occur. He points out that the b part of Exodus 34:9, asking for God's pardon from punishment, indicates awareness that, while divine ways are

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[5]*Ibid.*

[6]Michael Brocke, "The 'Imitation of God' in Judaism". In A. Falaturi, J. J. Petuchowski, W. Strolz, eds., *Three Ways to the One God* (New York: Crossroads, 1987), p. 57.

imitable, they are not human ways. Mortals are incapable of complete imitation. God's ways, says Brocke, cannot be found in the ordinary human condition of error and confusion; we must look for God's ways as God imparts them in the Bible.[7]

Furthermore, Brocke writes that the "ways" of God as referred to in the Bible are the *middoth*, and not the commandments. As clarification of this statement, he brings Deuteronomy 11:27: "For if you will be careful to do all this commandment which I command you to do, loving the Lord your God, walking in all His ways, and cleaving to Him . . ." The verse may seem redundant, but the understanding here is that God's ways must not be equated with the commandments. They are the commandments and more -- to walk in "all" God's ways means to imitate God.[8]

The argument progresses to a consideration of Leviticus 19:2. The injunction that "You shall be holy for I the Lord your God am holy" does not imply that humans are to be holy *just as* God is holy. Rather, it affirms the possibility that humans can be holy. The ensuing list of commandments and proscribed behaviors are God-given vehicles for approaching this holiness. Once we have identified God's "ways" with the *middoth*, concludes Brocke, many biblical statements may be understood as references to Imitatio Dei.[9]

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[7]*Ibid.*, p. 58.

[8]*Ibid.*, pp. 58-59.

[9]*Ibid.*, p. 59.

IMITATIO DEI IN THE THEOLOGY OF ELIEZER BERKOVITS

In his comprehensive study of biblical theology,[10] Eliezer Berkovits, too, is concerned with fundamental questions about the relationship between human beings and God. Although much of his work does not address Imitatio Dei directly, most of it does deal with the intimate divine-human relationship which is necessary in order for the imitation of God to become a possibility. Berkovits deals extensively with the nature of this relationship. His method involves the culling of prooftexts from throughout the Bible, a careful application of these prooftexts and a meticulous examination of their language. Employing these prooftexts, Berkovits attempts to show that, in the Bible, human beings may come to know God via different ways.

Berkovits writes that God may be revealed as YHVH. In this aspect, God is known as sovereign and judge, through the manifestations of power and judgment over people and nations, nature and history. As such, God transcends nature and humankind.[11] In what seems to be direct contrast, God also may be revealed as YHVH Elohim. As YHVH Elohim, God is known as providential caregiver, exerting love towards humankind. God in this aspect is very near to human beings.[12] According to Berkovits' theory, then, one can experience God as YHVH, in the manifestation of divine transcendence, and one can experience God as YHVH Elohim, in the manifestation of divine immanence.

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[10]Eliezer Berkovits, *Man and God: Studies in Biblical Theology* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1969).

[11]*Ibid.*, pp. 13-15.

[12]*Ibid.*, p. 15.

But how are these two manifestations to be reconciled? Berkovits seeks to reconcile them by bringing prooftexts to illustrate a third biblical formulation regarding human acquisition of knowledge of God: *"ki YHVH hu ha-Elohim,"* that YHVH is the Elohim.[13] In this context, he discusses the confrontation between Elijah, the people, and the prophets of Baal, wherein Elijah commands: "If YHVH be the Elohim, follow Him ..." (1 Kings 18-21).[14] For Berkovits, this narrative parallels that of the Golden Calf. In Exodus 32, the Calf represents the Elohim, as opposed to YHVH, so that the worship of the Calf (Elohim) is not a rejection of, but a means of honoring, YHVH. In both narratives, the Elohim, as that aspect of deity whose immediate concern is for the people, becomes a kind of intermediary between them and YHVH. Berkovits argues that a goal of the Elijah material is to show that YHVH and the Elohim are two aspects of the one God.[15] Likewise, states Berkovits, the Shema: "Hear, O Israel, YHVH is our Elohim; YHVH is one." This comes to teach us that the transcendent creator is also the immanent preserver.[16]

Here Berkovits reaches an understanding as to the paradox of the divine-human relationship. He finds a biblical emphasis on God's simultaneous immanence and transcendence. This emphasis seems to constitute, in part, an insistence that, yes, it is possible for human beings to stand in a certain kind of relationship to God, and

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[13]*Ibid.*, p. 29.

[14]*Ibid.*, p. 23.

[15]*Ibid.*, p. 26.

[16]*Ibid.*, p. 29.

thus to be able to imitate God.

Berkovits deals with this idea in an examination of Leviticus 20:7-8: "You shall sanctify yourselves and be holy, for I am YHVH your Elohim. You shall faithfully observe My laws; I am YHVH who makes you holy." Here we see that human beings are commanded to be holy not because YHVH is holy, but because YHVH the Elohim is holy. Berkovits states:

> Only because YHVH is Elohim, because notwithstanding his absoluteness, he relates himself to man and reveals himself as the providential father, is *imitatio dei* possible; only because of that may one say to a mere man: be thou holy, for God too is holy.[17]

In the fourth chapter of his book, wherein Berkovits deals at length with the concept of holiness, he continues to devote much of his scholarship to the idea of the close relationship between God and humankind. He brings biblical passages to illustrate his point that *Kadosh Yisrael*, the "Holy One of Israel," is an aspect of God which rests with the people. Unlike the transcendent manifestation of God as Lord of Hosts, *Kadosh Yisrael* is immanent. To this aspect of God, which is in their midst, can the people turn for help and comfort.[18] God is understood as a deity of compassion and love, with whom human beings can experience an intimate relationship.

We have seen how Leviticus 19:2 -- "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am Holy" -- has been perceived in biblical, rabbinic, and medieval (Maimonidean) theology as a key passage for the concept of Imitatio Dei. In looking

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[17]*Ibid.*, p. 44.

[18]*Ibid.*, pp. 143-144.

at this text, Berkovits asks what might the connection be between Israel's obligation to be holy and the fact of God's holiness. His answer is that a person may become actively holy through the effort of seeking God's nearness and thereby developing a relationship with God. Exactly how can human beings sanctify themselves by moving closer to God? In many passages wherein Israel is commanded to be holy, this is connected with doing God's will. Not only by fulfilling the rituals or the law, but by doing God's will in all ways -- this is how human beings draw nearer to God.[19] Holiness means immanence, not transcendence; it alludes to closeness to God.[20]

Nearness to God through the doing of God's will has certain ethical implications. Berkovits writes about what it might entail, in this context, to "know God." He quotes 1 Samuel 2:12, wherein we learn that the sons of Eli were "base men, they knew not the Lord." Had they known God, they would not have been base. Likewise, we learn in Jeremiah 9:1-2 that evil men do not know God, and Isaiah 11:9 describes a peaceful world wherein "the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord."[21] When a human being "knows God," that individual perforce behaves ethically and morally. As Berkovits continues to emphasize, knowledge of God does not mean intellectual knowledge alone, but direct experience -- a personal relationship.[22]

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[19]*Ibid.*, pp. 184-186.

[20]*Ibid.*, p. 223.

[21]*Ibid.*, pp. 54-55.

[22]*Ibid.*, pp. 56-57.

Jeremiah 31:31-34 reads:

> See, a time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah ... this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel ... I will put My teaching into their inmost being and inscribe it upon their hearts. Then I will be their Elohim, and they will be My people. No longer will they need to teach one another and say to one another, "Heed the Lord;" for all of them, from the least of them to the greatest, shall heed Me, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquities, and remember their sins no more.

As Berkovits points out, the above passage informs us that "knowing God" means that God's teaching becomes part of one's inmost being, and consequently one begins to do God's will out of love, as a manifestation of one's true self. Berkovits states: "To enter into the knowing relationship with God is the great transforming experience in human life, which changes human nature itself. This is the root of the causal connection between this knowledge of God and ethical conduct ..."[23] Here, the relevance to Imitatio Dei is that knowledge of God brings human beings to a state wherein they are able to imitate God's ethical actions.

We have seen that, according to the theology of Berkovits, God may be revealed to human beings as YHVH Elohim, which name refers to an immanent manifestation. When an individual comes to the realization that YHVH (transcendent) and Elohim (immanent) are one and the same, this bridges the gap, as it were, between the human and the divine. Once this occurs, numerous possibilities exist. People can enter into a personal relationship with God, people can sanctify

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[23]*Ibid.*, p. 59.

themselves and become holy by doing God's will in all ways, people can know God directly.

It seems to me that the theology here, while not referring to Imitatio Dei *per se*, is nevertheless laying the ground for it. For much of the problem we have encountered with the concept of Imitatio Dei is the paradox of the relationship between the omnipotent creator God who is wholly other, and the mortal being who is God's creation. How can the latter possibly imitate the former, about whom nothing can be known? Berkovits sees in the Bible a response to this dilemma. The Bible is teaching us, Berkovits says, that human beings are fully capable of a certain knowledge of and intimacy with God. Therefore, Imitatio Dei turns out to be well within the realm of human possibility.

One of the more intriguing of Berkovits' theories, and one which deals more directly with the notion of Imitatio Dei, involves his analysis of the word *mishpat*. He devotes the fifth chapter of his book to a careful examination of this word in context. Berkovits shows quite convincingly how the usual translation of the word *mishpat* as "justice" is erroneous, and that "according to the *mishpat*" really means "after the manner."

Berkovits finds many instances in the Bible of this usage of the word. For example, when Joseph interprets the dream of Pharaoh's butler, he tells him: "you will place Pharaoh's cup in his hand, as was your former custom (*mishpat*) when you were his cupbearer" (Gen. 40:13).[24]

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[24]*Ibid.*, p. 238.

Regarding the *mishpat* of God, Berkovits cites Jeremiah 5:4-6:

> This I thought: These are just poor folk;
> They act foolishly;
> For they do not know the way of the Lord,
> The *mishpat* of their God.
> So I will go to the wealthy
> And speak with them:
> Surely they know the way of the Lord,
> The *mishpat* of their God.

In this passage, he maintains, *mishpat* is equivalent to *derekh*, i.e., "way" or "manner."[25]

Another text which speaks of the *mishpat* of God is Psalms 119:149, 156, as follows:

> Hear my voice as befits Your lovingkindness;
> O Lord, preserve me, as is Your *mishpat*.
> ...
> You mercies are great, O Lord;
> As is Your *mishpat* preserve me.

Berkovits says that from this text we learn that God's *mishpat* is lovingkindness and compassion.[26]

Thus, for Jeremiah and in the Psalms, God's *mishpat* is God's way, the manner in which God loves and cares for human beings. This constitutes the right way, in which human beings, too, ought to act. Berkovits writes:

> God's way with his creation is God's law for his creation. God's law for man emanates from God's way with man. All law is God's way, appropriately reflected onto the realm of human existence. All biblical law, in a sense, is *imitatio dei*. To practice *hesed* and *rahamin*, which is way

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[25]*Ibid.*, pp. 239-240.

[26]*Ibid.*, p. 241.

[sic] for God, thus itself is God's law for man.[27]

The above quotation is in keeping with those biblical passages requiring human beings to act with compassion, mercy, and so on. But *mishpat* is also used in the specific sense of referring to an aspect of divine conduct which, in the realm of the human, means justice and right.[28]

Berkovits expand this theory by going on to state that God's *mishpat* is none other than that cosmic principle of balance and harmony which sustains creation. More than an ethical or a legal concept, *mishpat* is the harmonious creation of the cosmos, as presented in Isaiah 40:12-14, where God's *mishpat* is the perfect order in the universe.[29] According to Berkovits:

> This *mishpat*, because it is the sustaining law of the universe, embraces the whole of existence, all created reality. Whatever exists is due to its functioning and man encounters it continually. If man desires to live, he must take cognizance of the ramifications of cosmic *mishpat* in his own sphere of existence and cooperate with them.[30]

How is it possible to translate divine *mishpat* into human terms? On the human level, too, declares Berkovits, *mishpat* is a balancing and harmonization of the whole with regard to its preservation and its God-intended functioning. Justice and law among human beings are analogous to God's *mishpat* in the act of creation. Not abstract considerations, they arise from a reality, and their purpose is to sustain life.

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[27]*Ibid.*, p. 242.

[28]*Ibid.*

[29]*Ibid.*, pp. 242-243.

[30]*Ibid.*, p. 243.

In both the divine and the human realms, *mishpat* is a principle of preservation and the restoration of balance.[31]

Berkovits writes that in Deuteronomy 32:4 -- "The Rock! His deeds are perfect, / Yea, all His ways are *mishpat*" -- *mishpat* cannot refer to strict justice, for that definition would render the statement untrue. On the contrary, God's ways include mercy, compassion, and love. It is these qualities, then, which constitute the harmonious appropriateness of the universal order.[32]

Addressing the problem of theodicy as it is presented in Job, Berkovits maintains that when God asks, "Would you impugn My *mishpat*?" (Job 40:6), God is saying, "Would you invalidate the way I run the universe?"[33] Of the implications of this *vis à vis* Imitatio Dei, Berkovits writes:

> If we have said earlier that the ways of God with men become the laws of God for men, it applies only to the extent to which those ways may be projected to the human scene. Insofar, however, God's way is God's *mishpat* as the cosmic order of God-envisaged appropriateness, no *imitatio dei* is possible. Thus, in history, a chasm may open between the way of God that is just and the one that, though not justice, yet is *mishpat*. And the heart of faith which alone may bridge the chasm, plays with the thought that in the end, when all is known, even God's inscrutable *mishpat* may turn out to be one of those paths of God, of which it has been said that they are all *hesed* and *emeth*, lovingkindness and faithfulness.[34]

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[31]*Ibid.*, p. 245-246.

[32]*Ibid.*, p. 247.

[33]*Ibid.*, p. 251.

[34]*Ibid.*, p. 251-252.

This extremely positive statement suggests that even this aspect of God, i.e., divine *mishpat*, which exists beyond the realm of human knowledge and experience, can somehow serve as a way towards God. Over and over again, Berkovits speaks of the infinite possibilities between God and humankind, of the ultimately open quality of their relationship. By logical definition, human imitation of the cosmic creator God is impossible; and yet, through God's omnibenevolence and through the divine-human relationship which is a true and eternal possibility, all things -- including Imitatio Dei -- become possible.

This work of Berkovits is both lucid scholarship and life-affirming theology. He perceives a pervading inclination in human beings towards Imitatio Dei, an inclination inherent in the very nature of humankind. Imitatio Dei becomes something much more profound than a moral injunction. Certain possibilities for the good are almost encoded in the genetic material of human beings. As human beings are part of God's created universe, the cosmic principles which are its fibre live within us.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we have examined the concept of Imitatio Dei as it appears in the Bible, approaching it via a central texts: *b'tselem Elohim* in Genesis 1:26-27. We saw how the placement of the text, its structure, language, and style, all contribute to the theological statement it makes: that the essence of humankind is its creation in God's image and hence its potential for approaching and being like God. We looked at the scholarship of Brocke, who addresses the paradox implicit in the Genesis text

and indeed throughout the Bible and subsequent Jewish theology: how is it possible for human beings to imitate God? He posits that, although God wholly transcends human understanding, God's ways (which he identifies with the *middoth* of Exodus 34) are knowable. When human beings emulate the ways of God, they are on the path to fulfilling the potential expressed in Genesis 1:26-27, as creatures created *b'tselem Elohim*.

Berkovits, too, is concerned with this paradox. In this chapter, I have given a synopsis of Berkovits' biblical theology in order to lay the groundwork for his position re Imitatio Dei. His theology on this point suggests that there are specific cosmic principles which emanate from God and which are found within all creation, including humankind. It is the striving by human beings to further develop these principles within themselves which constitutes Imitatio Dei.

At this juncture we may feel confident in affirming that Imitatio Dei is a theological concept present in the Bible. Next we will turn to an examination of three biblical verses, Micah 7:18-20.

CHAPTER III

A READING OF MICAH 7:18-20

[18]Who is a God like you,
Forgiving iniquity
And remitting transgression
Of the remnant of his heritage;
Who has not maintained his wrath forever
Because he loves mercy?

[19]He will take us back in love;
He will vanquish our iniquities,
You will hurl all their sins
Into the depths of the sea.

[20]You will keep faith with Jacob,
Mercy to Abraham,
As you promised on oath to our ancestors
In days gone by.

The above verses constitute the culminating pericope of the book of Micah. As the focus of our study is Imitatio Dei, our task in this chapter will be to examine these verses in the light of that theological concept. Our inspiration for this line of inquiry is Moses Cordovero's choice of this text as the grounding for his great treatise on Imitatio Dei, *The Palm Tree of Deborah*. What relationship may we discern between these verses and the notion of imitation of God? In pondering this question, we will look briefly at the significance of the verses within the context of Micah as a whole. Then we will analyze each of the three verses individually, with attention to its language, structure, and meaning. Where applicable, we will bring to bear the commentator Malbim's interpretation of the text. Finally, we will try to draw conclusions as to what about this text is outstanding and unique, that Cordovero perceived therein the scriptural foundation upon which his *Palm Tree of Deborah* is

based.

Micah 7:18-20 concludes a work which consists of some of the harshest and most uncompromising oracles of judgment encountered in the entire prophetic genre. Following the classic prophetic pattern of the alternation of oracles of doom and denunciation with oracles of hope and salvation,[1] the book emphasizes the cruel oppression of the poor.[2] Micah saw that the officials and the wealthy feared no divine reprisal; they felt secure and confident that God was with them.[3] Micah's passionate response to this complacency went even beyond that of Isaiah, even to declaring the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple (Micah (3:12).[4]

Scholars view the last three verses of Micah as part of a larger sequence, 7:8–20, a collection of liturgical pieces with antecedents in the hymn of 1:3f., the confessional passages of 4:5 and 7:7, and the prayer of 5:8.[5] Wolff terms these liturgical pieces "psalm texts," and presents the scholarly opinion that they were added by redactors with liturgical interests to function as a response of the worshiping community.[6] The last three verses of the book comprise a hymn which suggests themes present in the preceding chapters. For example, the references in

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[1]Juan I. Alfaro, *Justice and Loyalty: A Commentary on the Book of Micah* (Grand Rapids: William E. Eerdmans, 1989), p. 8.

[2]John Bright, *A History of Israel* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1981), p. 293.

[3]Alfaro, *op. cit.*, p. 7; Bright, *op. cit.*, p. 293.

[4]Bright, *op. cit.*, p. 294.

[5]Hans Walter Wolff, *Micah: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990), p. 232.

[6]*Ibid.*, pp. 25-27.

verses 18 and 19 to the sins which will be removed and to the wrath which is not retained forever are reminiscent of Micah's proclamation in chapters 1 through 3, and the forgiveness of sins implied in the proclamation of salvation in chapters 4 and 5. While 7:18-20 does not connect directly with any of the main strata of the book, it echoes all of them.[7]

What, then, is special about 7:18-20? What causes these verses to stand out so vividly? For, according to Wolff, these verses, despite their antecedents in the book, are a novum.[8] They include no more prophecies of judgment, no accusations, no announcements of punishment. In unsurpassingly beautiful language, this short concluding hymn alone extols the forgiveness of all guilt.[9] After all the harsh judgments in the book of Micah comes this hymn of hope. It is precisely this declaration of total and complete redemption, of absolute salvation, which renders these verses unique. In an attempt to understand how the poet achieves this, we will now read the verses closely, one by one.

> [18]Who is a God like you,
> Forgiving iniquity
> And remitting transgression
> Of the remnant of his heritage;
> Who has not maintained his wrath forever
> Because he loves mercy?

What, asks verse 18, is unique about God? Before we go any further into the Micah text, we can state that there are many aspects of God which are unique. God is

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[7]*Ibid.*, p. 25.

[8]*Ibid.*, p. 232.

[9]*Ibid.*, p. 233.

unique in having created the universe; God's attributes of omnipresence and omnipotence are unique; God enters into history and performs unique acts of redemption; God loves Israel and indeed all of humankind with a unique love; and so on. This we may know in some measure from personal experience, or at any rate we are taught as much in the Bible. But which aspect in particular of God's uniqueness will verse 18 emphasize -- and why?

Reading further, we have our answer. That attribute of God, that aspect of God's uniqueness, which the poet stresses, which matters most to him in this context, is the incomparability of divine forgiveness of human sins.

The first participial clause makes reference to God's forgiving of iniquity. This phrase (*noseh avon*) is the most frequent expression for forgiveness in the Bible.[10] The language appears in the description of the Yom Kippur ritual wherein the scapegoat bears away all of Israel's transgressions (Lev. 16:22), and is employed to describe the action of God's servant who bears away the sins of many (Is. 53:12). From the root meaning to diverge, *avon* is one of the three major words for sin.[11]

Employed in the second participial clause, *peshah* means apostasy or rebellion, and is the most severe of the three words for sin.[12] Here God is said to be *over al-peshah*, remitting transgression, which usage also occurs in Proverbs 9:11, where the best thing about a person is said to be that he remits transgression, or overlooks

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[10]*Ibid.*, p. 229.

[11]*Ibid.*

[12]*Ibid.*

offense.[13]

In Micah 7:18, it is "the remnant of his heritage" whose transgression God remits. Although the word "remnant" (*she'erit*) is found repeatedly in Micah's prophecies (2:12, 4:7, 5:6-7), it is in 7:18 alone that it occurs as part of the phrase "remnant of his heritage," which usage emphasizes the intimate relationship between the remnant and God.[14] The same phrase occurs in 2 Kings 21:14, when God says that "the remnant of my heritage" will be given into the hand of the enemy, the ramifications of which are complete destruction of the present and future of Israel. In direct contrast, when it is stated that God will remit the transgression of the remnant of his heritage, it means a total revocation of divine judgment, and thus a renewal of existence and the promise of a future for Israel.[15]

This verse, then, combines the powerful statement that God "remits transgression," i.e., forgives the most severe of sins, the *peshah*, with the objective clause "of the remnant of his heritage," i.e., of those with whom God has a most intimate connection and who are the sole hope for Israel's future. In this way, in a remarkably powerful economy of language, the first participial clause wherein God is stated as "forgiving iniquity" is magnified and intensified.

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[13]*Ibid.*

[14]*Ibid.*

[15]*Ibid.*, pp. 229-230.

The third unit of verse 18 introduces the idea that God's anger is limited in time, an idea found too in Psalms (Ps. 30:6, 103:9, etc.) and in Isaiah 57:16.[16] The cause of cessation of divine wrath, as we learn in the Micah verse and also in Isaiah 54:8, is that God loves and desires mercy. Wolff makes an interesting point when he understands what he terms the "*ki*-clause" in the fourth sentence as functioning theologically, providing the motivation for the three preceding sentences concerning forgiveness.[17]

The phrase "he loves (desires) mercy" (*hofetz hesed hu*) is a beautiful one. Striking in its simplicity, it conveys a wealth of meaning. The Hebrew is alliterative and metrically effective. The word *hesed* is an inspired choice, denoting an intimate lovingkindness. In a way, this humble yet lofty phrase is the fulcrum upon which the Micah hymn turns, for it is from this very attribute of God, God's delight in *hesed*, that arises God's readiness to let go of anger and to forgive sin. Divine wrath, the poet tells us, is temporary, while divine lovingkindness is ultimate and permanent.

Malbim (Meir Loeb ben Jehiel Michael, 1809-1879) comments on Micah 7:18-20 from a perspective which makes it relevant to our study of Imitatio Dei. His approach to the Micah verses is intertextual, the other text which he brings being Exodus 34:6-7 -- the thirteen *middoth*. Malbim's intent is to explain ostensible contradictions between the Micah text and the Exodus text, and within the Micah text itself. While many of the details of Malbim's commentary are not directly applicable

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[16]*Ibid.*, p. 230.

[17]*Ibid.*

to our study here, it is worthwhile to note some ways in which his interpretation emphasizes certain qualities of the Micah text which we have already discussed. For example, in his commentary on verse 18, Malbim says that the *middoth* of compassion and mercy are operative when God's wrath is not maintained forever. Malbim's use of the *middoth* here serves to further the sense that God's readiness to forgive is an essential divine attribute.

> [19]He will take us back in love;
> He will vanquish our iniquities.
> You will hurl all their sins
> Into the depths of the sea.

While verse 18 describes God's actions in general, verse 19, with its imperfect verb forms, deals with specific divine actions yet to occur. This shift indicates an even greater confidence in God.[18] Likewise, verse 19 is more personalized, the statements referring back to the speakers of the hymn themselves.[19]

The next sentence, "he will vanquish (tread down) our iniquities," Wolff calls "absolutely unparalleled."[20] As the word *kavash* is generally used with people (slaves subdued by force in Jer. 34:11, 16; women assaulted in Esther 7:8), here Israel's iniquities are personified as enemies whom God will destroy. This personification of Israel's sins continues in the next sentence, where they are hurled into the depths of the sea, just as were the Egyptian army (Ex. 15:4f.).[21]

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[18]*Ibid.*

[19]*Ibid.*

[20]*Ibid.*

[21]*Ibid.*, p. 231; Alfaro, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

Verse 19 adds the third major word for sin: *hatoth*. Both *avon* and *hatoth* appear here in a plural form, and concerning *hatoth* the verse reads: "*all* our sins." Wolff writes that the intent is "to present in a comprehensive manner the profusion of transgressions for which Israel has been indicted by the prophetic word; then it places them under the power of Yahweh's love and forgiveness which destroys them."[22] Once again, then, the purport is to show that God's forgiveness is totally triumphant, unequivocally triumphing over all sin.

> [20]You will keep faith with Jacob,
> Mercy to Abraham,
> As you promised on oath to our ancestors
> In days gone by.

The last verse maintains the mood of confidence of the preceding verse. Here, confidence is expressed in the reliability of God's promise to the patriarchs. The oath promised to the ancestors in days gone by is Deuteronomic in concept and in phraseology (cf. Deut. 1:8, 35; 4:31; 6:10, 18, 23; etc.), and always refers to the divine promise of the land. Except here, God promises *emeth* (faithfulness, loyalty) and, once again, *hesed*, the foundation for the forgiveness of all sins.[23]

The naming of "Jacob" and "Abraham" as recipients of God's faithfulness and mercy does not refer, of course, to the actual patriarchs, but to the present and future generations. Israel understands its future in light of God's forgiveness of all its sins, thus calling itself Jacob and Abraham. In this way, Israel attests that, despite its own shortcomings in these areas, it is certain of God's unconditional faithfulness and

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[22]Wolff, *op. cit.*, p. 231.

[23]*Ibid.*

mercy.[24] This certainty becomes anchored in history with the naming of the patriarchs. The promises God gave to them are still valid, and will be eternally valid for their descendants.[25]

Malbim interprets similarly. Continuing his intertextual approach, he notes in Exodus 34:6-7 the *middoth* of faithfulness and of "extending mercy to the thousandth generation." Malbim adds the definite article to the words "faith" and "mercy" in the Micah text, thereby particularizing them. The sense is that, while the promise of faithfulness and mercy was made to our ancestors, God will fulfill the promise not in them, but in us. As the present generation, we are the thousandth generation (Ex. 34:7) who can be assured of divine salvation.

One of the functions of verse 20 is to personalize and particularize the message of the hymn. By bringing God's ancient promise into the present, the poet infuses it with a newness and an immediacy. This is in keeping with the note of confidence and assurance which has been building throughout the hymn.

Having looked at the three verses individually, let us now see what conclusions we can reach regarding the pericope as a whole. What is its message, and what connection is there between that message and the concept of Imitatio Dei?

This short hymn celebrates, to a degree found nowhere else, the incomparability of God's forgiveness of sins.[26] The descriptions of the act of

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[24]*Ibid.*

[25]Alfaro, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

[26]Wolff, *op. cit.*, p. 229.

forgiveness are graphic and diverse;[27] the act is described with relish, almost lovingly. Among all of God's unique deeds and attributes, it is the divine capacity for forgiveness which is singled out for praise.

As Alfaro states, God is great

> not so much because of his awe-inspiring and spectacular deeds in nature and history, but because of his total victory over sin and transgression, and because of his loving mercy through which he proves his fidelity to his promises. The justice or "anger" of God is not inflexible and heartless, since he delights in steadfast love. His very nature inclines him to pardon much more than the repentance of the sinner merits.[28]

It is a consequence of God's forgiveness alone that Israel can hope for a new beginning and a future, for in the absence of divine mercy, sin would triumph. But God's mercy is greater than God's wrath, and thus the message of Micah is one of eternal hope.

The individual human being is commanded and desires to imitate God. Does that individual imitate God's acts of might and power? No, because might and power are not the greatest of God's attributes, nor are they what constitutes God's uniqueness. Rather, the individual must imitate God's acts of forgiveness. Just as God's mercy is what sets God apart (Micah 7:18), so it is the emulation of that divine mercy which would enable human beings to approach God, to approach what is greatest in themselves, that which sets them apart as human beings.

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[27] *Ibid.*, p. 234.

[28] Alfaro, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

To see God's greatness as being God's readiness to forgive seems to me a powerful insight, and a highly sophisticated piece of psychology. For it is human nature that forgiveness of the sins of others, and of our own sins, is overwhelmingly difficult. We struggle every day of our lives to overcome anger. We wish to cultivate within ourselves a love of mercy, and the capacity to accept and to pardon. How magnificent to be able to perceive those very qualities within God!

Micah 7:18-20 has been called by many scholars the greatest doxology in the Bible.[29] The poet describes a God who is infinitely forgiving, loving, merciful, faithful, and compassionate. Here, God's victory over sin through forgiveness is the divine attribute par excellence, and the attribute most worthy of human imitation. Speaking as it does with such urgency and clarity to the human condition, this short but powerful hymn inspired Moses Cordovero and became the text on which he based his work *The Palm Tree of Deborah*.

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[29]*Ibid*.

CHAPTER IV

IMITATIO DEI IN MOSES CORDOVERO'S *THE PALM TREE OF DEBORAH*

In this chapter, we will look at the doctrine of Imitatio Dei as it appears in *The Palm Tree of Deborah* by Moses Cordovero. We will pay special attention to Cordovero's first chapter, wherein he lists thirteen attributes of mercy which are given to humankind to emulate. Not the thirteen *middoth* of Exodus 34, as one might expect, these are even higher attributes which Cordovero perceives in Micah 7:18-20.

THE KABBALISTIC DOCTRINE OF THE TEN *SEFIROTH*

Before we go to Cordovero's work, it will be helpful for us to familiarize ourselves with the kabbalistic doctrine of the ten *Sefiroth*, which underlies *The Palm Tree of Deborah*. According to this highly esoteric and complex system, the divine nature is of two aspects. The first is termed the *En Sof* ("infinite," "without limit"), and represents the hidden God, utterly unknowable and inaccessible, concealed beyond all human apprehension. In the view of the kabbalists, the *En Sof* is not even mentioned in the Bible. With its insistence on human inability to comprehend God's essence, the Doctrine of *En Sof* resembles the "negative theology" of Maimonides and other medieval philosophers.[1]

The second aspect of God is God the open and the accessible, manifest in the Bible, who relates to humankind, exhibiting compassion and practicing justice.[2] Once again we encounter the paradox: how can the *En Sof* be the God of creation,

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[1]Lawrence Fine, "Kabbalistic Texts." In *Back to the Sources: Reading the Classical Jewish Texts* (New York: Summit Books, 1984), p. 318.

[2]Louis Jacobs, *The Palm Tree of Deborah* (New York: Sepher-Hermon Press, 1974), p. 23.

accessible to humankind? How are these two apparently contradictory God concepts reconciled by the kabbalists? This is accomplished through the agent of the *Sefiroth*, the ten emanations through which the *En Sof* is revealed.

The concept of the *Sefiroth* is the most prominent and distinctive feature of the kabbalistic system. Related to the Hebrew word *sappir* ("sapphire"), the term *Sefirah* suggests divine radiance and illumination. The ten *Sefiroth* are emanations flowing out of the hidden essence of *En Sof*, so that the concealed aspect of God gives birth, as it were, to more manifest parts of itself.[3]

Along with this kabbalistic teaching of two aspects of the divine nature -- the *En Sof* and God as revealed through the *Sefiroth* -- is necessitated a great concern lest the teaching be construed as in any way dualistic.[4] The kabbalists were consistently adamant in affirming the unity of the divine, despite the two aspects. They taught that the emanation of the *Sefiroth* was a kind of process which occurred entirely within the divine itself. (This is contrast to the neoplatonic system of the medieval philosophers, where the emanations are not seen as activity taking place within the Godhead, but outside of it.)[5] Not mere external traits, the *Sefiroth* must be understood as the organic parts of God, as symbols pointing to the spiritual realities comprising the life of the deity.[6] For the kabbalists, the God manifested in the

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[3]Fine, *op. cit.*, p. 218.

[4]Jacobs, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

[5]Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1974), p. 98.

[6]Fine, *op. cit.*, p. 319.

Sefiroth is the same God as found in traditional religious belief. The hidden God in the aspect of *En Sof* and the God of the *Sefiroth* are one and the same, viewed from two different perspectives.[7]

The *En Sof*, then, manifests itself outward via the ten *Sefiroth*, which emanate in succession, "as if one candle were lit from another without the Emanator being diminished in any way," and in a specific order.[8] Although there exist alternate depictions of the *Sefiroth*, the names and order most generally used are as follows:[9]

The first and highest of the *Sefiroth* is *Keter Elyon* ("supernal or supreme crown"), or simply *Keter* ("crown"). *Keter* represents the first impulse of *En Sof*, the movement of an emerging will. Associated with *Keter* is "divine Nothingness; constituting the point beyond which the human imagination cannot penetrate, *Keter* is the barrier between God's concealment and manifestation.[10] At the beginning of the first chapter of *The Palm Tree of Deborah*, Cordovero makes reference to this first *Sefirah* when he writes: "[I]t is proper for man to imitate the acts of the Supernal Crown, which are the thirteen highest attributes of mercy hinted at in [Micah 7:18-20]." Because *Keter* is free from all judgment, its attributes are the highest that humankind can emulate, higher even than the *middoth* of Exodus 34."[11]

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[7]Scholem, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

[8]*Ibid.*, p. 102.

[9]Scholem, *op. cit.*, p. 106; Jacobs, *op. cit.*, pp. 23-27; Fine, *op. cit.*, pp. 319-323.

[10]Fine, *op. cit.*, p. 322.

[11]Jacobs, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

From *Keter* flows the second *Sefirah*, called *Hokhmah* ("wisdom"). *Hokhmah* is known as the "beginning" because it is the first truly discernible aspect of the Godhead. It represents the creative will of God. An active masculine principle, it is understood as impregnating the third *Sefirah*, called *Binah* ("understanding" or "intelligence"), the female counterpart of *Hokhmah*. In *Binah*, the details of creation are actualized in the divine thought. From the union of *Hokhmah* and *Binah* issue the seven lower *Sefiroth*.

The fourth *Sefirah* is sometimes called *Gedullah* ("greatness"), but more commonly, *Hesed* ("mercy"). *Hesed* is the divine grace which effects creation, that aspect of the divine which is wholly filled with God's love. Through *Hesed*, God's unrestrained love flows down into the world. But the superabundance of this divine love would prove overwhelming to humankind, so must be limited or confined in order for humankind to exist. This limitation is made possible by the fifth *Sefirah*, called *Gevurah* ("power") [or alternately, *Din* ("judgment")]. *Gevurah* is the source of divine control and justice. *Hesed* and *Gevurah* are complementary *Sefiroth* which temper each other, resulting in the sixth *Sefirah*, called *Tifereth* ("beauty") [or *Rahamim* ("compassion")]. *Tifereth* is the source of all beauty in the world. A harmonizing principle, it blends the forces of *Hesed* and *Gevurah*, and maintains equilibrium among all the *Sefiroth*.

Hesed is supported by the seventh *Sefirah*, called *Netzah* ("lasting endurance") and *Gevurah* by the eighth *Sefirah*, called *Hod* ("majesty"). Together they express two aspects of divine sovereignty: *Netzah* symbolizes God as compassionate ruler and *Hod*

symbolizes God as regal king. They combine to form the ninth *Sefirah*, called *Yesod Olam* ("foundation of the world"), or simply *Yesod* ("foundation"). [A variant name is *Tzaddik* ("righteous one").]

Yesod is the source of all active forces of God, a vehicle conveying the flow of the first eight *Sefiroth* into the tenth and lowest *Sefirah*, called *Malkhuth* ("kingdom") [or *Atarah* ("diadem")]. Because it is through *Malkhuth* that the abundance of divine grace is diffused into the world, thereby enabling it to exist, *Malkhuth* represents the creative force at work in the world.

Malkhuth is also called *Shekhinah*. In rabbinic literature, "*Shekhinah*" is the term applied to the indwelling presence of God in the world. In kabbalistic thought, it becomes the female principle which is the last attribute through which the Creator acts in the lower world.[12]

In their entirety, the *Sefiroth* make up the "tree of the *Sefiroth*," a cosmic tree which grows downward from its roots, spreading out from its trunk to its branches. Another image is of the *Sefiroth* in the form of a man, with each *Sefirah* representing a particular part of the anatomy. Different symbolic systems and various divisions of the *Sefiroth* existed. The following diagram represents the *Sefiroth* as they are most commonly depicted, and as they are understood by Moses Cordovero:

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[12]Scholem, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

Keter

Binah Ḥokhmah

Gevurah Ḥesed

Tifereth

Hod Netzah

Yesod

Malkhuth

The above is an extremely simplified explanation of the kabbalistic doctrine of the *Sefiroth*. The kabbalists themselves understood this system as representing a reality, to be sure, but as a subjective response to that reality. Since the reality of the hidden God revealing itself through emanations is beyond human perception, it defies description and can be expressed only symbolically.[13] Symbology employed by the kabbalists to express the structural system of the *Sefiroth* includes, as mentioned above, the "tree of the *Sefiroth*" and the *Sefiroth* in the form of a man, and also the *Sefiroth* as analogous to the ten names of God, to the seven days of the week, to cosmological elements, to biblical figures (the *ushpizin*), and so on.[14] The *ushpizin* are particularly interesting with regard to Imitatio Dei in that the symbolism involved conveys a moral content of the *Sefiroth*. Each biblical figure represents a specific ethical attribute, whereby the righteous are inspired and thus embody those divine

[13]*Ibid.*, p. 105.

[14]*Ibid.*, pp. 105-111.

attributes in the world.[15]

Other symbolism attached to the *Sefiroth* which will be helpful for us to examine in the context of Imitatio Dei are those of *Adam Kadmon*, and *Kneset Yisrael* and the *Shekhinah*. *Adam Kadmon*, "Supernal Man," is another name for the system of the ten *Sefiroth*. According to the kabbalists, to say that humankind was created in the image of God is to say that is was created in the image of the Supernal Man. To the divine nature as revealed in the Supernal Man belong the qualities of mercy, compassion, power, beauty, and so on. When human beings realize these qualities in their own lives, they cause them to function in the upper worlds.[16] The concept of the Supernal man is one way by which the kabbalists understand the interdependence between the divine and human realms.

Another such concept is that of *Kneset Yisrael*, the community of Israel, and the *Shekhinah*, one of the ten manifestations of the Godhead and identified with *Malkhuth*, the tenth *Sefirah*. Scholem calls these the most important of the symbolism of the *Sefiroth*.[17] The community plays a vital role in kabbalistic thought. The mundane community of Israel is counterpart to the mystical Israel in the upper realm, the latter represented by the *Shekhinah*. Israel is assigned a leading role in the cosmic drama. This teaching is both an attempt to compensate for the degraded condition of

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[15]*Ibid.*, p. 111.

[16]Jacobs, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

[17]Scholem, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

medieval Jewry and a justification for Jewry's continued existence.[18]

Regarding the kabbalistic understanding of Israel's part in the cosmic scheme, Brocke writes that Israel's suffering in the world reflects a fissure in the life of God. Every thought and action of the community on earth was understood as being greatly significant. By their influence on the delicate relationships within the realm of the *Sefiroth*, they either increase the fissure and thereby prolong the exile of Israel, or work toward healing the fissure and thereby hastening redemption. Hence, Brocke states, utmost importance was ascribed to Imitatio Dei in all area of life.[19]

Indeed, the significance of humankind is essential to kabbalistic thought. Human beings are the crown of creation. Whatever they do on earth, whether good or ill, influences the body of the Supernal Man, that is, the *Sefiroth*. If human beings perform sinful deeds, the harmonious balance of the *Sefiroth* is disturbed. If, on the other hand, human beings act virtuously, the relationship between the upper and lower realms is strengthened, and divine grace flows freely from above. A right action performed below has the power to rectify an imbalance, and this is the process of *tikkun*. In the words of the kabbalistic literature, "the impulse from below calls forth that from above." (*Zohar* I, 64a)[20]

The intricate, finely-tuned relationship between the divine and the human, whereby the *Sefiroth* constitute that area within which God reveals itself to

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[18]Jacobs, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

[19]Michael Brocke, "The 'Imitation of God' in Judaism." In A. Falaturi, J. J, Petuchowski, W. Strolz, eds., *Three Ways to the One God* (New York: Crossroads, 1987), pp. 69-70.

[20]Fine, *op. cit.*, p. 328.

humankind and humankind's thoughts and actions in turn influence God, makes Imitation Dei a key concept within kabbalistic thought. Jacobs has this to say regarding the kabbalistic doctrine:

> It considers the Imitation of God to be an actual imitation of the divine nature as revealed in the *Sefirot* and it considers the relationship between God and man to be a reciprocal one so that by imitating God man brings down God's grace from above....God created man in his image and when man, in turn, imitates God he causes, as it were, God to imitate man.[21]

The Palm Tree of Deborah directly addresses this teaching. Before we engage in a reading of this book, we shall look at the life and work of its author, Moses Cordovero.

THE LIFE AND WORK OF MOSES CORDOVERO[22]

Moses ben Jacob Cordovero (ReMaK) was born in 1552, possibly in Safed. As indicated by his name, his family was of Spanish origin. He lived in Safed, was married and the father of a son. Cordovero's teachers were Joseph Caro for the "revealed things" (Bible, Talmud, commentaries, codes) and Solomon Alkabetz for the "hidden things" (kabbalah).

Cordovero participated in a mystic fellowship with Alkabetz and other disciples. Composed of austerely pious men, this fellowship followed an exceedingly rigorous regimen which they believed would prepare them to approach their studies of the kabbalah with the requisite purity. Following is Jacobs' description of some of

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[21]Jacobs, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

[22]Sources for this biographical sketch are J. Ben-Shlomo in Scholem, *op. cit.*, pp. 401-404 and Jacobs, *op. cit.*, pp. 9-18.

the rules of that regimen.

> [T]hese rules enjoin them to make their hearts the abode of the *Shekhinah*, the Divine Presence, by banishing all profane thoughts and concentrating on the words of Torah and holy things. They were not to speak evil of any creature, they were not to be betrayed into anger nor to curse any being. They were to speak only the truth, never allowing falsehood of any kind to escape their lips. They were to behave in a kindly spirit to their fellowmen, even though they be transgressors. They were to confess their sins before every meal and before retiring to bed. Only Hebrew, the sacred tongue, was to be used in their conversations with one another. They were not to drink wine during the day except on the Sabbath and on the Festivals. At night they were allowed to drink a little wine but only if diluted. Each night they were to sit on the ground to mourn the destruction of the Temple and to weep over their sins which postpone the redemption. Each week at least two chapters of the *Mishnah* should be learned by heart. Charity should be given every day.[23]

This passage is particularly interesting in conjunction with *The Palm Tree of Deborah*. A kind of practice manual of Imitatio Dei, Cordovero's book seems idealistic and even stringent. However, when we see the standards to which the mystic fellowship held themselves, we realize that the practitioners understood the prescribed conduct to be within the grasp of those who would take it seriously. We realize to what great extent the kabbalists understood Imitatio Dei to be their primary daily concern and their life goal.

Cordovero was a prolific writer, held in high esteem by the foremost kabbalists. He influenced other writers and was famous even in his own lifetime. His opus is an attempt to synthesize the different previous trends of kabbalah, and to

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[23]*Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

construct a speculative mystical system. This is especially evident in his theological works, which are based on the *Zohar*.[24] His two principle systematic books are *Pardes Rimmonim* and *Elimah Rabbati*

Cordovero's theology has been touched upon above in this chapter. Now we will define it further. Following the medieval philosophers, Maimonides in particular, and also the *Zohar*, Cordovero conceives of God as transcendent being and First Cause. Like the philosophers, he maintains that no positive attributes are ascribable to God. But Cordovero differs from the philosophers in his conception of the *Sefiroth*, which enable him to unify the notion of transcendent God (*En Sof*) with that of revealed God. We discussed above the kabbalistic view, held by Cordovero, that while the *Sefiroth* emanate outward from God, God is immanent in them. For Cordovero, the *Sefiroth* are the instruments by which God exercises divine providence in the world.

While Cordovero's theology underlies *The Palm Tree of Deborah*, it is not exposited systematically in that work. Rather, the book is an ethical treatise in the form of guidelines and prescriptions on how to live a life of sanctity through practical application of the doctrine of Imitatio Dei.

The Palm Tree of Deborah (*Tomer Devorah*) was first published in Venice in 1588, and since then has gone through many editions. Its enigmatic title has aroused scholarly speculation, but has not been satisfactorily explained. The book has been extremely popular and influential, serving as a model to later writers. In the

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[24]Ben-Shlomo in Scholem, *op. cit.*, p. 401.

nineteenth century, Israel Salanter, founder of the Musar movement, urged the study of *The Palm Tree of Deborah*. Salanter is reported to have said that one who studies the book assiduously will be able to reach the high spiritual state of "the love of Israel."[25]

As with many of the great sages and teachers, legends have arisen around the life of Cordovero. He died in Safed in 1570.

We are now ready to begin our reading of chapter one of *The Palm Tree of Deborah*.

A READING OF CHAPTER ONE OF *THE PALM TREE OF DEBORAH*

Chapter one opens with the admonition that it is proper for human beings to engage in Imitatio Dei. Here Cordovero refers to God in God's role as creator of humankind, and reminds us that human beings resemble God in both likeness and image. This is a direct reference to Genesis 1:26: "And God said, 'Let us make *adam* [humankind] in our image, after our likeness...'" As we have posited in chapter two of this thesis, this text (Gen. 1:26-27) is central to the concept of Imitatio Dei as it is presented in the Bible.

It is noteworthy that Cordovero begins with a biblical allusion, as this is in keeping with the kabbalistic view that the Torah is the direct word of God, possessing, besides its exterior aspect, an interior aspect in which there exists an esoteric reality.[26] In this first sentence of his book, Cordovero continues with an

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[25]Jacobs, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

[26]Scholem, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

allusion to the *Zohar* when he equates the likeness and image of God with the Supernal Form, i.e., *Adam Kadmon* or the Supernal Man. This too is in keeping with kabbalistic thought in the sense that there is no conflict perceived between the "revealed things" of the Bible and the "hidden things" of the mystical literature and practice.

We can also make a connection between Cordovero's equation of the transcendent God of creation with the immanent God of the Supernal Form as revealed in the *Sefiroth* with the biblical theology of Berkovits, as discussed in chapter two of this thesis. In Berkovits' view, as we have seen, god exists in both the aspect of YHVH the transcendent and the aspect of Elohim the immanent. Berkovits shows by the use of prooftexts that YHVH and Elohim are one and the same. We find the same unity in Cordovero, where to resemble God the creator is to resemble the Supernal Form. For both Berkovits and Cordovero, human beings enter into a relationship with the divine by responding to and imitating that aspect of the divine which is immanent and accessible to them.

Returning to the Cordovero text, we read that the chief supernal image and likeness is in deeds. The purport here is that, according to the kabbalists, the *Sefiroth* are mainly attributes, or ways in which the divine manifests itself.[27] Therefore, writes Cordovero, for a human being to resemble the Supernal Form in bodily appearance but not in deeds is a debasement of the Supernal Form.

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[27]Jacobs, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

Two kabbalistic concepts are apparent in this statement. One is that the *Sefiroth* follow a human pattern, and that not only are the human will, intellect, and emotions present therein, but even the human body reflects the realities of the upper world. In the realm of the *Sefiroth* there do actually exist such realities as the hand of God, for example, of which the human hand is a kind of pale counterpart in the finite world.[28] Therefore, anthropomorphism poses no problem for Cordovero, and, for him, human beings are created literally in the physical image of God. However, mere physical resemblance is a debasement if it is not accompanied by resemblance in deeds.

This brings us to the second kabbalistic concept apparent in Cordovero's statement, namely, that there is an interdependence between the upper and the lower worlds. Human actions influence the *Sefiroth*. If human actions are deficient in virtue -- in this case, if they are not imitative of the Supernal Form -- they have a direct negative effect on the upper world.

Cordovero describes the person who resembles the Supernal Form merely in body as "a handsome form whose deeds are ugly," which is reminiscent of the proverb that "beauty is only skin deep." With regard to such a person, maintains Cordovero, physical resemblance alone is of no value. Consequently, he states, it is proper for human beings to imitate the acts of the Supernal Crown, i.e., *Keter*, the highest of the *Sefiroth*. He says that these acts are the thirteen highest attributes of mercy which are hinted at in Micah 7:18-20 and which, as we have noted above in

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[28]*Ibid.*, p. 27.

this chapter, are higher even than the *middoth* of Exodus 34.

This introductory paragraph to *The Palm Tree of Deborah* is striking in the simplicity with which it conveys its powerful ethical message. In a few sentences, Cordovero offers a moving and convincing argument for the centrality of Imitatio Dei in human life.

Following the introduction, Cordovero begins his exposition of the thirteen attributes which he discovers in the Micah text. The first attribute he discusses, he finds in the words "Who is a God like you?" He sees this as a reference to God as "a patient King Who bears insult in a manner that is above human understanding," for nothing is hidden from God's providence. At every moment, God causes life-sustaining divine power to flow down into human beings. Even when human beings misuse this power by sinning against God, God never ceases from nourishing them, even from enabling them to remain alive.

Cordovero reminds us that it is well within God's power to arrest this divine flow, as God did in the case of Jeroboam when his hand grew withered (1 Kings 13:4). Yet God, whose patience is infinite, empowers the sinner with the very goodness which the sinner in turn perverts and uses against God. This is the all-encompassing extent of God's patience referred to in the phrase "Who is a God like you?"

Concluding his exposition of the first attribute, Cordovero maintains that this virtue is one that human beings should make their own. A person should "be patient and allow himself to be insulted even to this extent and yet not refuse to bestow of

his goodness to the recipients."

What has Cordovero achieved here? He has taken a brief phrase and extrapolated from it a wealth of meaning. He has penetrated to the very heart of the Micah text. As we have discussed in chapter three of this thesis, interpretation of the Micah text holds that it is God's qualities of forgiveness and mercy which constitute God's uniqueness and which are God's quintessence. Cordovero would stand in agreement, but he takes it one step further. From the vantage point of the kabbalistic doctrine of the *Sefiroth*, he envisions God pouring life-sustaining power into human beings even at the moment they sin. Not only does God forgive sinners, God nourishes them and loves them while they are sinning, even when their sinful actions create a fissure in the Supernal Form. This latter attribute of God conveys a deeper meaning, reached by means of the application of kabbalistic thought.

At this juncture, an inquiry into the notion of free will seems in order. If God continues to empower sinners, then God is enabling them, as it were, to sin. And God does this out of patience and out of love. One analogy that comes to mind is that of the devoted parent allowing the child to misbehave, to make mistakes, even though the child's behavior hurts the parent. Thus does God bear the actions of sinners. God could prevent their misdeeds, but instead God lets them act as they will. For human beings must be free to sin, if they are to be equally free to act virtuously and thus contribute to the harmonious balance of the *Sefiroth*.

We see here the pattern that Cordovero will follow throughout chapter one. For each phrase of the Micah text wherein Cordovero perceives a divine attribute, he

quotes the phrase, discourses on it, and ends the section with a statement that it is fitting for human beings to make that attribute their own, with some words on how that might be accomplished. Also, we see another characteristic of the chapter as a whole, namely, Cordovero's use of quotations from and allusions to the Bible, Talmud, midrash, and kabbalistic works.

In the next phrase from Micah, "forgiving iniquity," Cordovero perceives an attribute which he calls even greater than the preceding one -- the attribute of tolerance. More specifically, Cordovero speaks of God's tolerance of a "destroying angel" which is created whenever a person sins. The destroying angel comes from the literal kabbalistic interpretation of a talmudic text: "He who commits a sin acquires a prosecutor for himself" (Av. 4:13).[29] Here Cordovero understands it to mean a demon which stands before God and tells God who it was whose sin created him. Then God has the opportunity to send the destroying angel back to the sinner, to torment the sinner. But God does not do this. Instead, God bears the sin by nourishing and sustaining the destroying angel, just as God nourishes and sustains all the world. By doing so, God is giving the sinner the chance to repent.

Cordovero brings a midrashic exegesis of a biblical prooftext to illustrate his point. The prooftext is Cain's words to God in Genesis 4:13: "My sin is too great to bear." The midrash is from *Gen. R.* 22:11 which has Cain saying: "You bear (that is to say, you nourish and sustain) the whole world; is my sin so heavy that you cannot bear it (that is, sustain it until I repent)?" For Cordovero, the "sin" refers to the

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[29]*Ibid.*, p. 49.

destroying angel. Again we see a kabbalistic interpretation of rabbinic material.

How does Cordovero apply this to the human condition? He writes that people should learn to patiently tolerate the offenses of others, even while others continue to offend, until they repent or the wrongs are somehow righted. Cordovero indirectly distinguishes between a single, ex post facto act of forgiveness, and an ongoing forgiveness in the face of continuous offense. To strive to develop the latter capacity within oneself is, of course, much more difficult. This is an excellent definition of tolerance.

Cordovero's concept of the destroying angel is interesting from a psychological standpoint in that it implies that a sin can be so powerful that it takes on a life of its own. That Cordovero sees it as a demonic figure makes it powerful indeed. This personification of a sin as a demon is typically kabbalistic, and a vivid literary device.

Cordovero finds the third attribute within the Micah phrase: "and remits [or, passes by the] transgression." He brings three biblical prooftexts: "For with You is forgiveness" (Ps. 130:4), "When the Lord shall have washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion" (Is. 4:4), and "And I [God] will sprinkle clean water upon you" (Ez. 36:25). Cordovero employs these texts to emphasize that it is not a deputy of god who pardons and washes away sin, but God personally. With respect to human beings, Cordovero writes, the significance is that people must not refuse to right wrongs caused by others, with the excuse that, after all, they were someone else's fault. Rather, individuals must take it upon themselves personally to rectify harmful situations, whomever may have caused them.

In addition, Cordovero states that from these prooftexts one learns the depth of shame inherent in sinning, "for the King himself is obliged to cleanse the filthy garments." Cordovero's statement here reminds us of the truism that a sin against humankind is a sin against God. It reflects the kabbalistic teaching that wrongful human actions produce a destructive effect on the higher worlds. Accepting this premise, human beings must recognize the great extent of their responsibility; to help preserve the cosmic balance, they must work to rectify all wrongs, irregardless of what or who is their cause.

Water is a mighty elemental force and a potent symbol of purification. Cordovero's use in this passage of the cleansing properties of water is highly effective.

The fourth attribute from Micah appears in the phrase: "of the remnant of his heritage." This, of course, is a traditional reference to the community of Israel. What Cordovero does in this section is to make the loving relationship between God and Israel a paradigm for relationships within Israel. He wants to show that all souls are united both with God and, consequently, with each other, and therefore each is responsible for acting toward the other with love.

Cordovero begins with God's asking, how can I punish Israel, who are my relatives of the flesh? Cordovero shows via midrashic reference (*Shir Ha-Shirim R.* 9:4) that God calls Israel spouse, sister, daughter, mother, children. Through wordplay, he states that the verse reads "*she'erith* [remnant] of his inheritance" because it comes from the term *she'er basar*, or relationship of the flesh, the word *she'er* meaning both

"remnant" and "relationship."

At this point, Cordovero intensifies God's question, having God ask, what shall I do if I punish Israel, for the pain will be mine? He engages in more wordplay in dealing with the biblical text: "In all their sorrows He was afflicted" (Is. 63:9). He deals here with the *keri* (the biblical word which is read, although it differs from the word as it is written) and the *ketibh* (the biblical word as it is written). In the Isaiah verse, the *keri* of "He" is *lo* with the letter *vav*, meaning "He" ("In all their sorrow He was afflicted") The *ketibh*, however, is *l'o* with the letter *aleph*, meaning "not" ("In all their sorrows He did not afflict them").[30] Cordovero attempts to reconcile the *keri* with the *ketibh* as follows.

The *ketibh* form of the word, writes Cordovero, refers to "that which is not," i.e., the *Sefirah* of *Keter*, which is also called "the Highest Wonder" because nothing can be known about it.[31] In other words, when Israel, suffers, God (as *Keter*) suffers, so if God were to punish Israel for their sins, God would feel Israel's pain. And even more so would the "Two Faces," i.e., *Binah* and *Hokhmah*, suffer, for in them is the divine providence concentrated.

With the *keri* form of the word, Cordovero follows the traditional meaning that God suffers along with Israel. But here, once again, the kabbalistic reading would have God's suffering be even more intense, as God and Israel are one. We recall here, too, the kabbalistic equation of *Kneset Yisrael*, *Malkhuth*, and the *Shekhinah*.

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[30]*Ibid.*, p. 51.

[31]*Ibid.*, pp. 51-52.

Cordovero brings it down to the human level when he says that, just as God suffers when Israel suffers, so do Jews feel one another's pain. This is because "all Israel are related one to the other, for their souls are united and in each soul there is a portion of all the others." He backs up his argument by citing rabbinic statements that many people observing the commandments carry more weight than do a few people observing the commandments, because the many possess a combined strength, and that the situation is similar with the initial *minyan* who come to the synagogue. In this way are the souls of all Jews bound up with one another.

All that has preceded in this section leads up to its culminating paragraph, a moving case for Imitatio Dei as the path for loving one's fellow human being as oneself. Here, empathy is understood to be the ultimate goal in interpersonal human relationships. The passage is simple, strong, and beautiful, and here we quote it in full.

> And since all Israelites are related to each other, it is only right that a man desire his neighbour's well-being, that he eye benevolently the good fortune of his neighbour and that his neighbour's honour be as dear to him as his own; for he and his neighbour are one. This is why we are commanded to love our neighbour as ourself [Leviticus 19:18]. It is proper that a man desire the well-being of his neighbour and that he speak no evil of him nor desire that evil befall him. Just as the Holy One, Blessed is He, desires neither our disgrace nor our suffering because we are His relatives so, too, a man should not desire to witness evil befalling his neighbour nor to see his neighbour suffer or disgraced. And these things should cause him the same pain as if he were the victim. The same applies to his neighbour's good fortune.

In my opinion, this passage is one of the high points of *The Palm Tree of Deborah*.

The Micah phrase "who has not maintained his wrath forever" contains the fifth attribute, that of not persisting in one's anger, but putting it aside. Cordovero gives examples of God's exhibiting this attribute when God restores the borders of Israel, despite the fact that the people are idolaters (2 Kings 14:25), and when God says "For I will not contend for ever, neither will I bear grudge" (Is. 57:16, variant of). Cordovero comments on these verses by saying that they illustrate God's allowing God's anger to abate, ever longing compassionately for human repentance, and that God's severity is always tempered by tenderness.

In a like manner, writes Cordovero, should people deal with others. Even when rebuke, of one's fellows or one's children, is appropriate, people should not hold on to anger, but should make an end of it. Bringing material from the Talmud (Pes. 113b) and the Torah ("You shall surely help him," Ex. 23:5), Cordovero shows that it is permitted to hate a sinner for the offense the sinner has committed, but that one must help the sinner, which the rabbis explain as: "You shall leave aside that which is in your heart," i.e., one's anger (*'azobh* meaning both "help" and "leave"). That is to say, it is one's duty to deal lovingly with a sinner, as perhaps this way of dealing with the sinner will prove successful.

Cordovero's mention of children in this context is interesting because it is in complete accord with the philosophy of contemporary child-rearing practices. When it becomes necessary to reprimand or punish children, it should be undertaken out of love, and the parents mst be prepared to relinquish their anger. This is also true regarding relationships with spouses, family members, friends, and colleagues.

Cordovero's suggestion that this is a more effective way of dealing with one's own anger, and with people who may have offended us, is strikingly modern. It is one example of many where *The Palm Tree of Deborah* is remarkably sophisticated from a psychological standpoint.

In discussing the next attribute, which he finds in the Micah phrase "because he loves [or, delights in] mercy," Cordovero makes references to his earlier work *Pardes Rimmonim*. The earlier work explains that there exist in a celestial palace angels whose function is to take note of acts of human kindness. When the divine quality of justice pleads against Israel before God, these angels bring Israel's kind acts to God's attention. Cordovero says that God, who delights in mercy, is merciful towards a backsliding Israel if they are kind to one another.

To elucidate the kabbalistic material, Cordovero brings a biblical prooftext (Ex. 10:2, 8) and a midrash on it (*Lev. R.* 26). According to these texts, Gabriel, the prince of justice was given permission to receive the powers of justice from between the wheelwork from under the cherubim from the fire of the altar -- in kabbalistic terms, the judgment of the power of *malkhuth*. When Gabriel did so, judgment became so strong that it would have utterly destroyed the sinful community of Israel. But in the cherubim there appeared the form of a human hand. And God told Gabriel that Israel must be spared because, notwithstanding the fact that they are guilty, they perform deeds of kindness towards each other.

So too, enjoins Cordovero, should human beings make the quality of mercy their own. They should not seek to condemn an offender totally, but should look for

the offender's positive qualities and appreciate them, saying, "It is enough for me that he has shown kindness, or possesses at least one good quality." This is particularly true, states Cordovero, with regard to one's wife. Cordovero's conception of mercy, then, is giving others the benefit of the doubt, seeking out the best in people, overlooking their negative qualities and concentrating on their positive ones.

In discussing Micah's phrase "he will again have compassion upon us [or, he will take us back in love]," Cordovero alludes to the rabbinic teaching that in the sight of God the penitent stands higher than the person who has never sinned (Ber. 34b). He says that this has been explained elsewhere in the Talmud, and embarks upon a lengthy discourse combining talmudic and kabbalistic ideas concerning repentance. The upshot of the discourse is that repentant sinners have had to mortify themselves and to struggle, and have sunk deep, so that their ascension is greater than that of people who have not sinned and therefore have not mortified themselves or struggled. God's love is increased towards the penitent, which is the meaning of "he will again have compassion upon us."

Cordovero writes that human beings, when approached by others who have wronged them in the past but who now desire to make amends, should not retain their former anger, but instead receive the penitents with kindness and love. Penitents should be encouraged to a far greater degree than those who have not sinned, presumably because the former are in need of help and support.

This discussion includes references to the "outside ones," demonic beings who inhabit the evil realm of the "other side," the *sitra ahra*. This is the domain of darkness

and of demonic powers, which, although its ultimate emergence is from the *Sefiroth*, is no longer an organic part of the *Sefiroth*.[32] As we have seen before, the kabbalistic personification of evil emphasizes the great power of sin, so great that it takes on a life of its own. Another kabbalistic reference is to the "fifth palace of the Garden of Eden," a very high state to which the perfectly repentant may ascend, but the perfectly righteous may not (*Zohar* I, 39a).[33] This is an example of the imaginative and vivid imagery of the mystical teachings.

The eighth phrase is "he will vanquish [subdue] our iniquities." Cordovero writes that God behaves in this manner towards Israel. He quotes Genesis 40:10 -- "and as it was budding, its blossoms shot forth" -- to make his point that the divine precepts enter God's presence without limit. But not so sins, which God prevents from entering. Another biblical quotation, Psalms 5:5 -- "evil shall not sojourn with You" -- Cordovero takes to mean that sins cannot dwell with God. He goes on to explain that this is the reason that the performance of a good deed is not rewarded in this world (Kidd. 39b), since good deeds are within the divine presence, and a spiritual reward cannot be part of the material world.

For the same reason, God does not accept good deeds as bribes, that is to say, good deeds do not cancel out sinful ones. Cordovero here refers to the talmudic dictum that even with the perfectly righteous person who commits a single sin, it is as if that person has burned the whole Torah, until that person repents and then

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[32]Scholem, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

[33]Jacobs, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

receives reward for the good deeds (Kidd. 39b).

Cordovero states that, while divine providence extends over both good and evil deeds, in God's great kindness God subdues the evil but allows the good to flourish. Thus, the evil deeds never enter into the innermost presence, but the good deeds flourish and mount upwards. They erect an edifice and an honorable robe which clothes the soul as it ascends to paradise (*Zohar* III, 169a).

In this section, there is a real sense of movement and of flow. Reading it, we feel something of the dynamic of the kabbalistic system. God and humankind are separate but interconnected, with God responding directly to good deeds and to sins. There is the organic imagery of good deeds growing upward and blossoming, like plants in the sunlight. The vertical movement of the good deeds as they build an edifice is a sort of obverse of the Tower of Babel, and it also brings to mind the construction of the Temple, the holiest earthly abode of God. The overall effect is that of a thrusting upwards, of the positive growth generated by the performance of good deeds.

Also in this section, we see good as belonging to the heavenly realm and evil as connected with hell, yet both as being encompassed within God's providence and both as choices available to human beings. This is relevant to the tension between duality and unity as seen in the kabbalistic notions of good and evil, and even in the nature of the divine.

Concerning the subduing of iniquities, Cordovero writes that human beings can make this divine attribute their own by forgetting and rejecting the evil actions of

others and instead remaining mindful of their good actions. In doing so, people can allow the good to dwell within themselves, just as it dwells within God. This is a sensitive analogy in that it recognizes how, when people look for the good in others, they tend to become better people themselves; Cordovero has stated this fact in a poetic manner. Cordovero says, too, that human beings should emulate God in not weighing good deeds against bad. They should readily forget the evil, hide themselves from it, and remember only the good.

Cordovero finds the next divine attribute in the phrase: "you will hurl all their sins into the depths of the sea." This section involves some rather complicated reasoning, and indeed Cordovero himself admits that it is very hard to understand. Here Cordovero tries to explain how it is that the scapegoat can bear away Israel's sins (Lev. 16:22), and how Israel's enemies (Pharaoh, Sennacharib, Haman, etc.) come to be punished when they are in effect God's instruments, to whom God delivers a sinful Israel.

To explain this, Cordovero begins by quoting the Yom Kippur prayer wherein the penitent pleads for sins committed to be purged away through God's compassion, but not by sore affliction. The idea here is that people must suffer in order to achieve atonement, but they wish their suffering to be light so as not to interfere with their study of Torah. Cordovero then refers to the *Zohar* (II, 262b) which states that, after people confess, their sins become, like the goat, a part of Sama'el, the kabbalistic figure who is the prince of demons. When God decrees that penitents shall suffer in atonement, Sama'el (or the goat) appears, the sins devolve upon him, and the

penitent becomes purified. The goat who now bears the sins must be killed, and likewise the stone which is used to stone the criminal or the sword which is used to execute the criminal must be buried in order to nullify their power.

Cordovero writes that in the same way are we to understand the secret of Nebuchadnezzar's image (Dan. 2). The image existed solely in order to be broken, and was refashioned in order to be broken.[34] It becomes a parable for Sama'el and the wicked, whom God will eventually resurrect in order to destroy. Cordovero equates the wicked with "the depths of the sea," according to the biblical verse: "But the wicked are like the troubled sea which cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt" (Is. 57:20). In this way does Cordovero link up his theology with the phrase from Micah.

When Israel is punished, writes Cordovero, God repents for what has occurred previously and makes demands on behalf of their shame. So should human beings aspire, by not hating those who have sinner, suffered, and repented, but by having mercy upon them. He alludes to the rabbinic interpretation (Mish. Makk. 3:15) of Deuteronomy 25:3, where after a criminal has received the prescribed punishment, the criminal becomes as one's own brother, and must be treated with the same respect and compassion. People internalize this divine attribute when they refrain from thinking that sinners suffer as a result of their sins, but rather exhibit mercy towards them and welcome them for having atoned.

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[34]*Ibid.*, p. 64.

Of all the individual sections based on Micah phrases, this one is perhaps the most fanciful in how it utilizes biblical texts in an almost farfetched way to impart kabbalistic ideas. An example is the use of the Daniel verses about Nebuchadnezzar's image to illustrate the future resurrection of Sama'el. While this section is at times difficult to follow, the application of the Micah phrase is ingenious and interesting, and Cordovero certainly succeeds in ultimately conveying his message.

"You will keep faith with[show truth to] Jacob" is the next phrase. Here Cordovero distinguishes between two types of human beings. Average people, who may conduct themselves truthfully but who do not go beyond the letter of the law, Cordovero calls by the name of the patriarch "Jacob." Exceptional people, who surpass the average in excellence, he calls by Jacob's other name, "Israel," the name God gave to him after he struggled with the angel and proved himself worthy. Those called "Israel" posses the divine attribute of truth plus justice and righteousness. Like them, and like God, they behave in truth and uprightness towards others, without perverting justice. Cordovero states that human beings should show compassion towards their fellows just as God is compassionate towards "Jacob," to those who are average. When people are treated in such a way, it helps them to become better, in accordance with the quality of truth.

In his interpretation of the next phrase, "mercy to Abraham," Cordovero defines a third type of human being. These are the good and saintly who themselves go beyond the letter of the law – perhaps we can say, who are living embodiments of Torah, such as the great sages -- and these Cordovero calls by the name of the

patriarch, "Abraham." To these people God shows a special mercy, behaving towards them as they themselves behave. Towards them, god acts neither in justice alone nor in strict uprightness alone, but with a very special mercy.

Although by no means parallel with Maimonidean theology, Cordovero's concept of an exceptional relationship between the Divine and "Abraham," the saintly, does seem to correspond to it on some level. Maimonides in the *Guide of the Perplexed* speaks of the fully developed and advanced human being as existing under divine providence, a state of being which the average person is not vouchsafed, or has not earned. He states that God's attributes of lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness -- attributes which human beings are to emulate -- are most evident in the providence which God bestowed on the patriarchs and on Moses. This is a special kind of providence bestowed upon those who have elevated themselves to a very high level of existence by perfecting themselves, to the extent that they have completely connected their intellects with the divine intellect. In doing so, they transcend their environment, assume a new identity, and become, like the angels, part of God. They become safe from evil, for their true being is with God.[35]

Cordovero seems here to be saying something similar, which would be in keeping with his understanding of the doctrine of the *Sefirot*. That is, if the more virtuous people are, the more their actions positively influence the upper worlds, then ipso facto do they receive back the divine influence in kind. This cannot be

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[35]Alfred L. Ivry, "Providence, Divine Omniscience and Possibility: The Case of Maimonides." In Tamar Rudavsky, ed., *Divine Omniscience and Omnipotence in Medieval Philosophy* (The Netherlands: D. Reidel, 1985), pp. 155-156.

understood as unfair or partial, but as lawful and inevitable, and reflective of the cosmic balance.

Cordovero writes that human beings should exhibit the quality of "mercy to Abraham" by going beyond the letter of the law when dealing with the good and saintly. People should take care to approach everyone with righteousness, justice, and uprightness, but even more so with regard to the good and saintly. Furthermore, the good and saintly should hold a great importance for people, who should be attracted to them and should seek out their company.

At first blush, Cordovero's teaching in this section might appear undemocratic and a contradiction to his stance that everyone, even (and especially) the sinner, merits human compassion. However, I do not believe this to be the case. Again, this can be understood in light of the doctrine of the *Sefiroth*, where good promotes good and evil, evil. Perhaps the key here is Cordovero's insistence that people befriend the exceedingly virtuous. In this way can their virtue influence those who seek them out. We know this to be true, which is why we wish to keep good company. Also, here Cordovero is referring to the love and respect which people feel towards great teachers and scholars, and suggesting how that love and respect can be encouraged and nurtured.

The twelfth Micah phrase wherein Cordovero discerns a divine attribute for human imitation is "as you promised on oath to our ancestors." He understands the biblical verse "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious" (Ex. 33:19) after its Talmudic interpretation (Ber. 7a), that God will be merciful even to those who may

not deserve it. Cordovero speaks of God's mercy in these cases as an unearned gift, bestowed upon the unworthy because of the oath God swore to the patriarchs. By virtue of their being descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, God will be merciful towards them, guiding them until they improve.

Cordovero writes that human beings should display this same mercy in their encounters even with the wicked, always bearing in mind that they too are children of the patriarchs. Although they may be wicked, their ancestors were exceedingly worthy and, states Cordovero, one who disgraces the children, disgraces the parents. Just as God guides the wicked so that they will have the opportunity to become better people, so too can human being influence others for the good by treating them with compassion, both for the sake of who they are as descendants of the patriarchs, and for the sake of the patriarchs themselves.

Cordovero's teaching in this section has much in common with the notion that all human beings possess within them a spark of the divine, inasmuch as all are created *b'tselem Elohim*. It is incumbent upon people to recognize the divine likeness in others, and to relate to them accordingly. In much the same way, all members of the household of Israel are kin, and the fact of their common ancestry must be remembered always, so that they learn to deal mercifully with one another.

The thirteenth and final Micah verse is "in days gone by." To Cordovero, this means that God will continue to love and show mercy to Israel, even after the merit of the ancestors has run its course. Cordovero brings the biblical prooftext "I accounted to your favor the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride" (Jer. 2:2) to

show that God remembers all the good deeds which Israel has performed since the very beginning.

In addition, says Cordovero, God recalls all the good qualities which Israel has ever exhibited, and by which God controls the world. Here Cordovero speaks of an all-embracing property which God creates from these good qualities, as is explained in the *Zohar* (III, 134b). With this property does God show mercy to Israel.

Human beings, too, even when they are unable to perceive anything worthy in others, should imitate this divine attribute by remembering that there must have been a time, no matter how distant, when these people were worthy. Cordovero instructs his readers to remember the love of "those newly weaned from milk, just taken away for the breast" (Is. 28:9). This is highly insightful of Cordovero, as most people feel tenderness towards babies and children. If people remember this, says Cordovero, they will find no one unworthy of their mercy.

Cordovero ends the first chapter of *The Palm Tree of Deborah* with a recapitulation and an admonition, which is quoted below in full.

> Until now, we have expounded the thirteen qualities by which man resembles his Maker. These are the qualities of higher mercy and their special property is that just as man conducts himself here below so will he be worthy of opening that higher quality from above. As he behaves, so will be the affluence from above and he will cause that quality to shine upon earth. Therefore, let not these thirteen qualities depart from the eyes of the mind and let not the verse [Micah 7:18-20] depart from the mouth, so that it be a permanent reminder. And whenever there is the opportunity of exercising one of these qualities one will remember, saying to oneself: "Behold, this depends on this particular quality. I shall not depart from it, so that the quality may not be hidden and depart from the world."

The above passage, which speaks for itself, is remarkable in how it speaks with simultaneous severity and gentleness of an awesome responsibility and privilege allocated to humankind.

This concludes our reading of chapter one of *The Palm Tree of Deborah*. This chapter, as we have seen, deals with the imitation of *Keter*, the highest *Sefiroth*. Chapter two also deals with the imitation of *Keter*, with an emphasis on humility, right thoughts, kindness to others, perfection of the senses, and the eradication of pride.

Chapters three through nine concern the imitation of the other *Sefiroth*. Chapter three deals with the imitation of *Hokhma*, and teaches that people who attain wisdom should influence others as much as possible. As wisdom preserves life, people are enjoined, in their wisdom, to extend kindness and mercy to all of God's creatures, both human and animal. Chapter four is concerned with the imitation of *Binah*, and teaches that the quality of understanding is attained through perfect repentance, which rectifies every flaw.

In chapter five, Cordovero writes about the imitation of the *Hesed*, stating that people learn the ways of lovingkindness by devoting themselves to the service of God, notwithstanding any suffering they may endure in their lives. The chapter describes in detail how to serve God by practicing benevolence. Practices include caring for the newborn child, proper circumcision of the male child, visiting and healing of the sick, giving charity, welcoming guests, attending to the dead, bringing the bride beneath the marriage canopy, and making peace between people.

Cordovero understands all these acts of benevolence performed in the lower world as acts on behalf of the upper world, which help the *Sefiroth* to function harmoniously.

Chapter six deals with the imitation of *Gevurah*, concentrating on how to properly channel the evil inclination so that it, too, serves God. Chapter seven is about the imitation of *Tifereth*. It states that the quality of beauty is to be found in the study of Torah, and goes on to describe the proper behavior befitting a Torah scholar. This behavior involves being an effective and compassionate teacher to one's students, modesty, the study of Torah free from material reward, and the purification of one's thoughts.

Chapter eight concerns the imitation of *Netzah, Hod*, and *Yesod*. The practice of this imitation includes the support and encouragement of students of the Torah, and the proper purification of oneself during the study of Torah. Chapter nine, whose topic is the imitation of *Malkhuth*, emphasizes, again, the correct spirit in which to study Torah, including sacrifices one must make for the sake of this study. It also discusses marital relations in the spirit of holiness. In chapter ten, Cordovero writes about one's daily conduct, that is, how people are to conduct themselves in order that they may comprehend the functioning of the *Sefiroth* and be bound to the world of the *Sefiroth*. Much of this chapter has to do with synagogue observance.

We can see that *The Palm Tree of Deborah* continues the task it begins in chapter one. It is a practical guide and manual for those people wishing to improve themselves and their relationships with others, and consequently their relationship to God. Topics covered in the book are extensive; all areas of life are proper arenas for

the practice of Imitatio Dei, all aspects of life may be sanctified.

COMMENTS ON CHAPTER ONE OF *THE PALM TREE OF DEBORAH*

Perhaps one of the most striking characteristics of this text is, in my opinion, the way in which Cordovero expresses such complex ideas and high ideals in such simple language. While it is true that many of his allusions and much of his terminology may pose difficulties for those readers unfamiliar with rabbinic literature or with kabbalah, Cordovero for the most part is not difficult to follow. This is because Cordovero seems to speak from his own experience, directly to the reader. His dedication to his topic, his personal commitment to the teaching he espouses, and his obvious care and concern to communicate his beliefs to the reader, all contribute to an ease of understanding and a sense of intimacy.

Furthermore, Cordovero neither preaches nor condescends to the reader. As has been noted above, the standards Cordovero sets are lofty, and at times seem almost impossible. Yet we respond to Cordovero's own involvement with the material, and we respond to his gentleness and to his humility. These encourage us, as indeed does the nature of Cordovero's teaching itself. That is to say, when the lesson is Imitatio Dei – compassion, mercy, forgiveness, and love -- the students desire to learn and they have no fear. Cordovero is very strict with himself and he admonishes us to be very strict with ourselves, but he guides us gently and we understand that he would be patient with and forgiving of our failures.

Even for those people who do not subscribe to kabbalistic doctrine, Cordovero's teaching can be meaningful and even practical. Most of us would wish

to become better human beings, to treat others more kindly, to be able to forgive, to be able to love. Most of us would wish to believe that our good deeds carry some weight and that they have the power to influence the world. We might not wish the same of our bad deeds, but we do want to learn to be able to take responsibility for our actions. It is these universal issues which Cordovero addresses, and *The Palm Tree of Deborah* encourages us, inspires us, and instructs us how to deal with these issues in our own lives. It is truly a powerful book.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS, WITH SOME THOUGHTS ON THE RELEVANCE OF IMITATIO DEI TODAY

SUMMARY

We began this thesis by defining Imitatio Dei as a theological term referring to human imitation of God -- more specifically, of certain actions which God is perceived as performing. In looking at this concept relative to Judaism, we were confronted with a paradox. That is, how can a religion professing that God is wholly incomprehensible command human imitation? To this paradox has Jewish thought addressed itself throughout the ages.

The earliest body of work in which Jews have approached the concept of Imitatio Dei is, of course, the Bible, the Jewish text *sine qua non* upon which is based all subsequent Jewish thought. In this thesis, we have dealt with two biblical texts which we have understood to be central to the imitation of God as it appears in the Bible.

Genesis 26-27, wherein God creates humankind *b'tsalmo*, in God's own image, has been discussed as a key passage. In this text, we see God as cosmic creator endowing the creature *adam* with attributes which are in essence similar to, or even identical with, those of the divine. The implication of this passage is that human beings are created with the potential for approaching and being like God to some important degree.

The other biblical passage we have understood to be critical with regard to Imitatio Dei is Exodus 34:6ff. In this text, Jewish thought has discerned thirteen

middoth, or characteristic modes of behavior, of God. The positive *middoth* presented herein are traditionally understood as moral "ways" of God upon which human beings are enjoined to model their own behavior.

Another biblical passage dealing with Imitatio Dei is the Holiness Code of Leviticus 17-26, whose theme is stated in 19:2 as: "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." Here, the ethical commandments are seen as reflective of God's ways. Indeed, as we have discussed in chapter two of this thesis, many statements throughout the Bible may be understood as references to human imitation of the ways of God.

Also in chapter two, we have dealt extensively with the scholarship of biblical theologian Eliezer Berkovits, who suggests that there are specific cosmic principles, e.g., love and compassion, which are to be found in humankind, and which people must strive to develop within themselves. Berkovits understands the word *mishpat* as referring to the manner in which God acts, and brings many prooftexts to illustrate his point. *Mishpat* means that aspect of divine conduct which, in the human realm, requires people to act justly, righteously, and compassionately. God's *mishpat* is the cosmic principle of balance and harmony which sustains creation. By entering into an intimate relationship with God, human beings become capable of living their lives in accordance with this principle, and thus engage in Imitatio Dei.

The next stratum of Jewish thought is that of the rabbis, who further develop the biblical teaching that God is the model for humankind. Imitatio Dei is the foundation and the inspiration for rabbinic ethics. Here, as in biblical thought, and to

an even greater degree, it is God's ways or actions which are imitable and held as exemplary. God becomes a kind of anthropomorphic example who personally performs specific actions which human beings are enjoined to imitate.

According to the rabbis, God actually clothes the naked, visits the sick, comforts mourners, buries the dead, and so on. Over and over again in rabbinic literature do we meet this remarkable dialectic of God as ethical actor. In chapter two we have discussed this rabbinic teaching in detail, and have seen how the rabbis sought to address the paradox of the chasm between the human and the divine by clarifying human understanding of God and thereby enabling human beings to cultivate an ethical resemblance to God, particularly in the quality of their behavior towards their fellow human beings.

In discussing the notion of Imitatio Dei as it appears in medieval Jewish philosophy, we have concentrated on the thought of Maimonides, in whose works can be perceived a concern with the tension between the God of philosophy and the God of religion. Maimonides counted Imitatio Dei as one of the commandments, stating that people should emulate the beneficent and righteous ways of God to the best of their ability. He sees in Leviticus 19:2 ("You shall be holy ...") a commandment to fulfill all the commandments.

According to Maimonides' "negative theology," God possesses no attributes, yet God does act, and it is these divine actions which human beings must strive to imitate. Furthermore, since human beings are most fully human and closest to the divine when they exercise and develop their rational potential to the utmost, it is in

so doing that they become like God in the divine capacity of love, justice, and righteousness.

We next looked at Micah 7:18-20 in the light of the concept of Imitatio Dei, in preparation for our reading of chapter one of *The Palm Tree of Deborah*, which takes as its point of departure the Micah text. We noted how the verses conclude a prophetic book which contains some of the harshest oracles of judgment in the entire genre, and yet these concluding verses themselves are wholly devoid of judgment or accusation. On the contrary, they constitute a hymn unparalleled in its promise of absolute redemption and salvation, and of undying hope.

We asked how the "Micah poet" achieved the powerful effect of these verses, and how he made them credible. We came to see how he accomplished this by insisting on the divine attribute of mercy as that quality, among all the qualities of God, which constitutes the essence of God's uniqueness. To a degree found nowhere else in the Bible, this passage extols the incomparability of the divine forgiveness of human sin. Thus, and only thus, is there hope for Israel and hope for the individual.

Consequently, God's mercy -- not God's might or power or any other of God's attributes -- becomes that attribute most worthy of human imitation. Following the "Micah poet," we reason that if God's uniqueness lies in God's mercy, God's willingness to forgive, then that is the very divine attribute to which human beings must aspire when they engage in Imitatio Dei.

We then turned our attention to the concept of Imitatio Dei within kabbalistic thought. For the kabbalists, God is of two aspects: the *En Sof*, hidden and absolutely

unknowable, and the God who relates to humankind with justice and compassion. When the *En Sof* is revealed through the emanations of the ten *Sefiroth*, the two seemingly contradictory aspects of God are reconciled.

The *Sefiroth* themselves are intricately balanced in their relationship to each other. At the same time, they are continuously influenced by human behavior. When people sin, they exert a harmful influence on the finely-tuned balance of the *Sefiroth*. Conversely, when people act virtuously, the imbalance is rectified, and the relationship between the upper and the lower realms is strengthened via the healing process of *tikkun*. This notion of a reciprocal relationship between God and humankind makes the concept of Imitatio Dei fundamental to kabbalistic thought. When humans imitate God as revealed in the *Sefiroth*, they cause God's grace to flow freely from above, which is to say that God, as it were, imitates human beings. According to the kabbalists, the impulse from below calls forth the impulse from above.

Moses Cordovero's *The Palm Tree of Deborah* is an ethical treatise whose aim is to teach the reader how to live a life in accordance with Imitatio Dei as understood by the kabbalistic doctrine of the *Sefiroth*. Cordovero attempts to show how each of the *Sefiroth*, in the light of the qualities revealed therein, can be perfected by human thought and action.[1] In chapter one of his book, as we have seen, Cordovero addresses himself to the highest *Sefirah*, called *Keter*, finding therein thirteen attributes

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[1]Michael Brocke, "The 'Imitation of God' in Judaism." in A. Falaturi, J. J. Petuchowski, W. Strolz, eds., *Three Ways to the One God* (New York: Crossroads, 1987), p. 70.

of mercy which he perceives as alluded to in Micah 7:18-20. He systematically explains each attribute, first as it is exhibited in God's behavior towards human beings, and second as to how human beings can imitate God by making the attribute their own.

As we have discussed in chapter four of this thesis, Cordovero presents his teaching clearly and gently. His book is accessible even to modern readers unfamiliar with rabbinic literature or with kabbalah. *The Palm Tree of Deborah* serves as a relevant and inspirational guide for any persons concerned with working on their inner selves and learning how to live more humanely with their fellow human beings.

In our analysis of the concept of Imitatio Dei as it has been understood in biblical, rabbinic, medieval, and kabbalistic thought, we have noted both differences and similarities. Perhaps the most basic concern which all these schools of thought hold in common is the attempt to comprehend how, after all, it could be possible for human beings to imitate the unknowable, the transcendent God. At the beginning of this thesis, we deemed this to be the central paradox of Judaism: Can human beings enter into a relationship with God, who is wholly other? What we have come to see in the course of our study is that Judaism has posited various forms of mediation to bridge the gap separating humankind and God, in order to understand that relationship as possible.

In biblical thought, God is revealed in the *middoth*, divine attributes equated with the "ways" of God which human beings are to imitate. Berkovits sees God's

mishpat as the manner in which God acts, after which human behavior is to be modelled. The rabbis, too, attach great importance to the *middoth* as the "ways" of God in which human beings must walk. For the rabbis, God performs anthropomorphic exemplary actions. The Maimonidean concept is of a God of whom no attributes can be predicated, but who nevertheless acts, and whose acts are worthy of imitation. The doctrine of the *Sefiroth* is the kabbalistic system whereby the *En Sof* and human beings enter into a relationship.

Throughout its theology, then, has Judaism understood some form of mediation as necessary for there to be a relationship between the human and the divine, and hence for the possibility of Imitatio Dei. We can describe these forms of mediation as dynamic rather than static and, except perhaps in the case of Maimonides, we can describe the ensuing relationship as intimate rather than impersonal.

IMITATIO DEI FOR TWO MODERN JEWISH PHILOSOPHERS: MARTIN BUBER AND ABRAHAM JOSHUA HESCHEL

Thus we have come to see the centrality of the imitation of God in traditional Jewish thought. But what of its relevance for modern Judaism? In our investigation of this question, we turn first to the theology of Martin Buber (1878-1965).

For Buber, Imitatio Dei is the goal of human existence. Buber writes that when we perfect our souls to be like God, this does not mean that we can ever achieve equality with God, but that the soul has actualized its own particular likeness to God, its *yehidah* or uniqueness as God's image. He states the imitation of God to be founded on Genesis 1:27, wherein God creates *Adam* in God's image, and he takes

that verse to mean that human beings are destined to bring to perfection in our lives the image in which we were created, and which we carry within ourselves.[2]

According to Buber, Judaism, more than any other religion, has grasped the seriousness and the importance of the fact that humankind is created in the image of God. He says that Judaism stresses the role of individual human responsibility for work on oneself in order to achieve self-perfection. To show this, he quotes a rabbinic answer to the question of why the Torah states: "And God created *Adam* in His image" (Gen. 1:27), mentioning the image without the likeness. The interpretation (*Yalkuth Reubeni* on Gen. 1:27) is that the likeness, the process of becoming like, lies in the hand of humankind.[3]

Besides stressing the responsibility that the individual must assume in the process of Imitatio Dei, Buber also emphasizes the divine love involved. He brings examples of rabbinic and hasidic thought to illustrate that it is out of profound love for humankind that God has created human beings in the divine image. In the words of Rabbi Akiba: "How greatly God must have loved us to create us in His image; yet even greater love did He show us in making us conscious that we are created in his image" (*Abh.* 3:18).

Exactly how, then, asks Buber, can we imitate God? How can God, the unimaginable, be our model? Following the tradition, Buber finds the answer to his question in the *middoth*, the ways in which God works, as far as they are made

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[2]Martin Buber, *Israel and the World:Essays in a Time of Crisis* (New York: Schocken, 1963), pp. 72-73.

[3]*Ibid.*, p. 73.

known to humankind. He calls God's acts of clothing the naked, visiting the sick, and so on, "enacted *middoth*," or visible patterns for humankind, and he understands the *mitzvoth*, the commandments, to be "*middoth* made human."[4]

In addition, Buber writes of coming to know God in times of trial. Like Job, we learn that God does not show us mercy alone; we may undergo terrible suffering as well. When this occurs, we experience the hand of the transcendent God who is beyond all attributes; we experience the secret. And it is precisely at these moments, Buber avows, that we learn to know God and to imitate God.[5]

Next we turn to the work of another great modern theologian, Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972). Heschel states that it is of the utmost importance for human beings to be aware that we live in God's eternal presence, and that every one of our actions is an encounter between the human and the holy. For Heschel, performance of the *mitzvoth* is the means of evoking within ourselves this awareness.[6]

However, *mitzvoth* are not to be performed as a mere external compliance with the law. They are to be performed out of love. Heschel here quotes the rabbis: "All you do should be done out of love" (*Sifre* on Deut. 11:13). He maintains that *kavanah*, or inner devotion, is imperative, and that a good deed consists not just in what we do but also in how we do it. In order to ensure the flow of *kavanah*, says Heschel, we

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[4]*Ibid.*, p. 76.

[5]*Ibid.*, pp. 76-77.

[6]Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1956), p. 356.

must keep alive our sense of the ineffable, and we must remember that God "asks for the heart." For Heschei, then, proper observance of the *mitzvoth* is filled with joy and with love.[7] He directly relates this to Imitatio Dei when he states:

> The main function of observance is not in imposing a discipline but in keeping us spiritually perceptive. Judaism is not interested in automatons. In its essence obedience is a form of imitating God. *That* we observe is obedience; *what* we observe is imitation of God.[8]

According to Heschel, human beings must strive to be one with what they do. When good deeds are performed for the sake of God, then we become transformed and sanctified. The ultimate goal for human beings is to become incarnations of the Torah, for the Torah to exist within our souls and within our deeds. Heschel terms this the "immanence of God in deeds," and speaks of Judaism's concern to let God enter into the ways in which we act in the world. Our destiny, affirms Heschel, is to be partners with God. When we try to live in this way, "we discover the divine within ourselves and its accord with the divine beyond ourselves."[9]

IMITATIO DEI FOR SOME CONTEMPORARY JEWISH THINKERS

In a thought-provoking article,[10] contemporary rabbi Israel Kestenbaum discusses the place of Imitatio Dei in the rabbinic role of pastoral counsellor. As caregiver, he asks, what are the rabbi's obligations? He finds his answer in the

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[7]*Ibid.*, pp. 306-310.

[8]*Ibid.*, p. 310.

[9]*Ibid.*, pp. 310-313.

[10]Israel Kestenbaum, "The Rabbi as Caregiver." In Basil Herring, ed., *The Rabbinate as Calling and Vocation: Models of Rabbinic Leadership* (Northvale, NJ: J. Aronson, 1991), pp. 67-75.

Ninety-first Psalm, where God is envisioned as protector and redeemer, provider and savior, listener and empathizer. It is in the portrayal of God as listener and empathizer that Kestenbaum finds a model for the rabbi as caregiver.[11]

Kestenbaum supports his position with biblical and rabbinic texts. He reveals his sensitivity in choosing several apt quotations from Psalms to show that God is perceived as always present for people during times of trail. His quotations include: "When he calls upon Me, I will answer him: I will be with him in trouble" (Ps. 91:15) and "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil for You are with me" (Ps. 23:4). God's presence is clearly understood as an empathic one, writes Kestenbaum, feeling, as it were, human pain and suffering. Kestenbaum notes, too, that rabbinic tradition often speaks of the kabbalistic theme whereby, during periods when Israel is afflicted, the *Shekhinah* similarly experiences sensations of hurt.[12]

Kestenbaum writes:

> God is not apart from us: He is near and close and identified with us in our time of trouble. In that presence, independent of relief of our symptoms, we feel secure and uplifted. We call this empathy, that is, being with someone in his or her predicament. Empathy is the most important single component of effective caregiving. It is at the core of *Imitatio Dei*.
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> Empathy is at the center of the loving act; I suspect it is the real meaning of "And thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (Lev. 19:18). Moreover, as an imperative, it challenges us to chesed in the form of *Imitatio Dei*, its

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[11]*Ibid.*, pp. 70-71.

[12]*Ibid.*, pp. 71-72.

purest expression.[13]

According to Kestenbaum, rabbis must learn via work and discipline how to be empathic. They must be willing to forgo any distance between themselves and the persons requiring the care, becoming partners with them, making themselves available and making certain that they never become judgmental. Acting as caregivers, rabbis must work for self-knowledge in order that they may be fully open to those whom they would wish to help.[14]

Also, rabbis must learn that, when responding empathically, they are not to approach the situation with predetermined agendas or answers. Instead, they must connect with their own inner readiness to receive. To act in this way requires courage, admits Kestenbaum, but rabbis are freed in realizing that they need only be listening and caring, they need only be present. This is not an all-or-nothing proposition, but rather is expressed by degrees according to the rabbi's skills and current state of mind. And most important, "the more empathic the [rabbi's] response the more the love and presence of God will be felt, with all the healing of the spirit associated with it."[15]

Kestenbaum offers pragmatic suggestions on how to bring this model to life. Foremost among these is his insistence on supervised clinical training both for rabbinic students and for rabbis already in the field, so that they may hone their

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[13]*Ibid.*, p. 72.

[14]*Ibid.*, pp. 72-73.

[15]*Ibid.*

pastoral counselling skills.[16]

While Kestenbaum's concern is the rabbi per se, his findings are perhaps equally valid for any person, clergy or lay, who would wish to relate empathically to others. Kestenbaum's article is an excellent example of how *Imitatio Dei* becomes a practical approach to life as well as a theological doctrine.

Another contemporary rabbi, Robert L. Katz, has written extensively on empathy. In one article,[17] Katz defines empathy as the process by which people, here psychotherapists, "feel themselves into" the inner reality of another person, the goal being to communicate with that person in terms of his or her unique point of view in order to appreciate how he or she is sensing and experiencing.[18] Katz sees the essential elements of empathy as a sharing of feelings and ideas, a process of identification with another person, and as a mode of intimate and sensitive communication.[19]

Katz looks to traditional Jewish sources and infers a rabbinic understanding of empathy from the great body of material regarding God's concern for humankind and God's identification with the human condition. From these illustrations of God's anthropopathy, Katz concludes that the ascription of empathy to God signifies the

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[16]*Ibid.*, pp. 73-75.

[17]Robert L. Katz, "Empathy in Modern Psychotherapy and in the Aggadah." In Sheldon H. Blank, et al., eds., *Hebrew Union College Annual*, vol. xxx, pp. 191-215 (Philadelphia: Maurice Jacobs, 1959).

[18]*Ibid.*, p. 192.

[19]*Ibid.*, p. 194.

assigning of a high value to empathy in human beings.[20]

Although the aggadic context and language is anything but psychological, writes Katz, we can clearly see how the rabbis were expressing some of the same human needs and aspirations with which modern psychotherapy is concerned.[21] He understands the rabbinic term *hishvah* ("He made himself like or equal to") as analogous to the psychological process of identification. Employing this term, the rabbis ascribed human emotions to God and indicated their belief that God felt for human beings, even to the extent of directly participating in their suffering. Like Kestenbaum, Katz reads the verse "I will be with him in trouble" (Ps. 91:15) as suggesting divine empathy. He sees this, too, in Isaiah 63:9: "In all their afflictions He was afflicted."[22]

Katz discusses the rabbinic theme of the *Shekhinah* in exile, according to which God suffers along with Israel and becomes a "partner in their sorrow" (*Ex. R.* ch. 2). In a multitude of images, the profound involvement of God and Israel is dramatized. For example, the rabbis take up the image from Isaiah 66:13 of God who comforts as does a mother. In the Talmud, God is said to shed tears for the suffering Israel (Hag. 5b, Ber. 59), to be overcome with grief for them (San. 46a, Hag. 5b). Also in the literature is God portrayed as participating in the suffering of all human beings, even Israel's enemies. One well-known example of the latter is when God rebukes the

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[20]*Ibid.*

[21]*Ibid.*, p. 196.

[22]*Ibid.*, p. 196-197.

angels who are rejoicing in the drowning of the Egyptian army in the sea (San. 39b).[23]

By bringing a wealth of illustrations from traditional texts, Katz shows that empathy is a core Jewish value derived from the Jewish perception of a God who personally empathizes with human beings. Katz writes:

> In Judaism the sources for the ethics of empathy are to be derived largely from the conception of *imitatio Dei*. Empathy may be seen as a moral and practical quality which is demanded of the individual in his human relations by an omnipotent God.[24]

In this lucid and beautifully research article, Katz undertakes a comparative examination of empathy as it appears in the classic Jewish sources and in modern psychotherapy. He states that his study will suggest direction and guidance for the rabbinic counsellor.[25] As does Kestenbaum, Katz succeeds in providing a pragmatic model of empathy which is eminently useful to both the pastoral counsellor and to the responsive layperson. In light of this thesis, it is exciting that these contemporary thinkers understand empathy as originating within the concept of Imitatio Dei.

At this point, we may briefly mention the place of Imitatio Dei and closely related concepts in the works of other contemporary Jewish thinkers. Arthur Waskow is a "new age" writer involved in the havurah movement. In his creative celebration of Judaism, he draws on kabbalistic as well as other sources, and much of the tone of

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[23]*Ibid.*, pp. 198-200.

[24]*Ibid.*, p. 206-207.

[25]*Ibid.*, p. 191.

his work approaches the theology we have discussed in this thesis.[26] Lawrence Kushner is a rabbi whose books have renewed and popularized kabbalistic ideas, with Imitatio Dei being a recurrent theme.[27]

Feminist Jewish writers, such as Judith Plaskow, Aviva Cantor, Marcia Falk, Rita Gross, Naomi Janowitz, Ellen M. Umansky, and Maggie Wenig,[28] continue to explore female images of God. Challenging the sexism implicit in patriarchal theology, they define new ways in which we can identify ourselves as created in the image of a God who possesses both "masculine" and "feminine" attributes, and who is at the same time neither male nor female but transcends gender.

CONCLUSION

We have seen that from its inception over five thousand years ago to the present day, Judaism has wrestled with the paradox of the relationship between God and humankind. A resolution of that paradox has evolved, in part, into the concept of Imitatio Dei. According to this doctrine, God is wholly unknowable and yet God is

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[26]Works by Arthur Waskow include: *Godwrestling* (New York: Schocken, 1978); *Seasons of Our Joy* (New York: Bantam, 1982); *These Holy Sparks: The Rebirth of the Jewish People* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983).

[27]Books by Lawrence Kushner include: *The Book of Miracles: A Young Person's Guide to Jewish Spiritual Awareness* (New York: UAHC, 1987); *God Was in this Place and I, I Did Not Know: Finding Self, Spirituality, and Ultimate Meaning* (Woodstock, VT: Jewishlights Publishing, 1991); *Honey from the Rock: 10 Gates to Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977).

[28]Books and articles by these authors include: Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990); Aviva Cantor, "A Jewish's Woman's Haggadah," Rita Gross, "Female God Language in a Jewish Context," Naomi Janowitz and Maggie Wenig, "Sabbath Prayers for Women," all in Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow, eds., *Womanspirit Rising* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979); Marcia Falk, "Notes on Composing New Blessings" and Ellen M. Umansky, "Creating a Jewish Feminist Theology," both in Judith Plaskow and Carol P. Christ, eds., *Weaving the Visions* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989).

revealed to humankind via specific ethical actions which God performs – acts of mercy, compassion, and love. In imitating these acts in our own lives, we, who are created in God's image, approach the actualization of the divine within ourselves, and only thus do we become fully human.

What is the relevance of Imitatio Dei today? In our contemplation of this question, the most positive and life-affirming impressions arise. Day by day and moment by moment, our work is cut out for us. We are enjoined by our religion to constantly aspire to be like God, which means, when all is said and done, to be good. This is a message startling in its power and its simplicity. It is a message of awesome responsibility; it is a message of hope.

This is our struggle and our joy. For this are we created.

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