

THE MEASURE OF A MAN

by Nechama Stampler

The Measure of a Man¹

Inquire regarding the early days that preceded you, from the day when G-d created Man on the earth, and from one end of the heaven to the other end of the heaven.

Rashi: "Inquire" effectively modifies two different phrases of this pasuk. Inquire of the earlier days, and inquire from one end of the heaven to the other. This is the plain meaning of the text. The midrashic approach sees the last phrase referring not to the inquiry, but to Adam. It describes him at the time of his creation as extending from the earth to the heaven, which is the same distance as from one end of the heaven to the other.

Gur Aryeh: Rashi's comment is taken from the gemara.² One way to look at this passage is to note Man's special role in the physical world. While all other components of this world are entirely physical, Man's creation injects a spiritual element into Creation. That elevates and offers a form of completion and fulfillment to the world. Because the world would be so terribly deficient without Man's contribution, Man - at least before he himself became deficient - can be seen as the necessary complementary element - indeed the defining element - to all of Creation. It is in that sense that he reached from one end of it to another, and to the very border of Heaven.

In the process of sinning, however, Man gave up his spiritual position, and began attaching himself to the physical. Having done so, he could no longer be regarded as the defining element, giving shape, form and purpose to the physical. Having become somewhat of a physical being, he could no longer function as a molder of that world, standing outside and over it. He had become too much part of it himself.

There is a second way to understand the passage, and it is preferable to the first. Man is created in the Divine image. Through this tzelem Elokim, Man was given dominion over everything in the physical world that does not possess this image. Before Adam sinned, this dominion was clear. It manifested itself in the entirety of Creation, from one end of the world to the other, and up to the very boundary of the Heavens. Man not only completed Creation (as explained in the first approach above), his influence could be felt and detected wherever one looked. Hashem exercises absolute control over all phenomena in the universe - the metaphysical universe, as well as the physical one. Man's dominion over the physical world derives from, is a refraction of, Hashem's dominion. Man's

Divine image makes him the ruler over all things in this world, as surely as Hashem stands over all worlds.

According to Chazal,³ HKBH called Yaakov "El." As the model human being, Yaakov captured the majesty of Man that had once been the possession of Adam HaRishon. This made him an el, a ruler over the world below the Heavens.

We could object that if Man's role derives from his sharing a Divine image, then why stop at the material world? Let his Divine image give him dominion over the entirety of the universe, just like that of G-d! This, of course, is an error. Possessing a Divine image is not the same as being Divine. A tzelem Elokim is not Elokus. Man shares a capacity with Hashem, but only insofar as it can apply to Man's bailiwick - the limited, bound-in-time-and-space, physical world. Only there does this image show itself as establishing human hegemony over all parts of the physical world.

This glorious role of Man came to an end, we would think, with Adam's sin in Gan Eden. Man distanced himself from His Creator; from here on in, Man would no longer function completely in synch with the Will of his Master. The image of G-d within Man would be diminished, to the point of leaving him without essential worth, and without any advantage over the rest of Creation.

This is not so. Man's special place was diminished, but not eliminated. Although Rashi doesn't quote it, the maamar Chazal continues with describing the aftermath of Man's sin. As a consequence of Man's rebellion, Hashem scaled him down, reducing him to a mere 100 amos by 100 amos. This is a crucial statement. We might have easily come to the mistaken conclusion that once Man distanced himself from Hashem, he lost all pretense to natural greatness. Worse yet, we could have imagined him in a new state of abject distance from G-d, of become worthless and cursed.

Chazal tell us otherwise. Man's Divine image was maintained, albeit in lesser form, even after this sin. Where he previously made his presence known throughout the physical world, it would now be felt in a much smaller area, localized to his presence. No human being is 100 amos square. The description of a post-chet Adam of 100 amos on a side can only mean that Man continues to influence the world through his tzelem Elokim beyond the reaches of his physical self. Man's spiritual reach exceeds his physical grasp.