

# God Never Came Down, Moses Never Went Up: On Priests & Other Images of God

Jacob Shapiro '12 | BronfmanTorah | Tetzaveh 2016

Jacob is currently studying History and Education at McGill University, and works as co-director of youth programming at TBDJ, a vibrant Modern Orthodox synagogue founded by Rabbi David Hartman. Jacob enjoys listening to and telling good stories, and thanks to global warming has surprisingly spent more time bouldering than skiing this winter.

Studying *The Iliad* in class, I found myself comparing the “[embassy to Achilles](#)”, where three Achians come to petition Achilles, to the [visit of the three angels to Abraham](#) in the Torah. In many ways, Achilles’ tent is practically the opposite of Abraham’s. Both feed their guests generously, yet only Abraham genuinely wanted to have guests, or cared to respect their opinions. As I continued to compare Achilles’ Xenia with Abraham’s *hachnasat orchim*, I was struck by a classmate who answered a question with a bit too much arrogance for my liking. After giving the classmate a look of disapproval (in my head of course), I turned to actually look at the classmate, and had a thought I never had before. It was the kind of thought that I felt I should have had before, but didn’t. (And the kind of thought that meant I was going to have to get notes from someone after class.) The thought was simply: this person was created with just as much *Tzlem*

*Elohim* [[Image of God](#)] as me. It was the first time, as I looked around the class, contemplating this thought, that I recognized that this means something different and greater than “we are all equal”, or “all life is sacred”. The idea of all of us being created in *Tzelem Elohim* has little to do with universal principles of equality or the sacredness of life, I realized, but is all about the particular: each and every life is infinitely sacred. It is because we are all infinitely sacred and the fact that infinities cannot be ranked (unless of course you are a mathematician, and well... I’m not) that we are also, by definition, equal.

So back to Achilles and Abraham: Achilles does share Abraham’s appreciation of the infinite sacredness of each and every human life. Other humans are allowed (and treated quite well) in Achilles’ tent, but it is Abraham’s tent which is a welcoming, shared space. Achilles uses his connection and closeness to the gods to have his compatriots killed, whereas Abraham petitions God to save the lives of strangers. Achilles’ actions are grounded in the fact that he perceives himself, and is perceived by others, to have a greater predetermined value and greater favour among the gods. While I am not interested in comparing worldviews and I’m not sure it’s a very useful exercise, I do think there is at least some validity to Auerbach’s claim that Homeric heroes undergo “no development, and their life stories are clearly set forth” (“Odysseus’s Scar”, 17). Achilles, as the child of a god, seems to consistently act and feel as though he has more godliness within him.

In our Tradition, we don’t believe that certain people can have more godliness within them simply by virtue of who their parents are, unless, of course, we look in this week’s parsha, or any of the portions that speak of the sanctity of the Kohanim. The role of Kohen has always seemed to me to rather lackluster: a spiritual-custodian at best - shoveling ashes, baking bread, dealing with blood - nothing too glamorous. Integral work for the maintenance of the Tradition, but certainly nothing to make me feel that these people enjoy more of God’s favour or contain within them more *Tzelem Elohim*.

And then there is the Kohen HaGadol’s [High Priest’s] Urim V’tumim. All we are told in this week’s parsha is:

“Urim and the Tummim ...will be over Aaron's heart when he comes before the Lord, and Aaron will carry the judgment of the children of Israel over his heart before the Lord at all times.” ([Shemot 28:30](#))

וְנִתְּנָה אֶל הַשֵּׁן הַמְשֻׁפֵּט אֶת הָאוּרִים וְאֶת הַתּוּמִּים וְהָיוּ עַל לֵב אַהֲרֹן בְּבֹאוֹ לִפְנֵי ה' וְנִשְׂאָה אַהֲרֹן אֶת מִשְׁפַּט בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל עַל לְבָבוֹ לִפְנֵי ה' אֶתְמִיד). שְׁמוֹת כַּהֲנֵי:

The Talmud explains ([Yoma 73b](#)) that through the Urim V'Tumim the Kohen HaGadol was able to ask of and receive answers from God. In fact, the Kohen HaGadol seems to have an inherited direct line to God. (And while, sure, the Kohen HaGadol could theoretically use this direct line to [ask God about the existence of fleas](#), the Talmud explains that this generally to be used for certain questions of national importance, like the waging of war.) While prophets are chosen based on merit, the Kohen HaGadol's ability to communicate through the Urim V'Tumim is hereditary. Ramban, in his commentary on the parsha, explains, however, that communication through the Urim V'Tumim was not so direct. The Kohen HaGadol received certain letters, and it was his responsibility to properly decipher and order those letters so as to obtain the intended message. The Vilna Gaon (Kol Eliyahu se'if 153) actually cites an example of a time the Kohen HaGadol misunderstood the intended message: In the book of Samuel, Eli the Priest improperly understood the message he received about Hannah through the Urim V'Tumim, mistakenly interpreting the following letters “הכשר” to mean that she was a drunkard (שכרה), whereas the intended message was that she is like Sarah “כשרה”. What, then, is the value of a direct line to God that still contains significant room for error, and, well, isn't so direct?

To answer this question, I would like to share another text I have learnt from my teacher, Rabbi David Bigman. In the Talmud (Sukkah 5a) there is a discussion that begins with a statement from R. Yose:

“The Shechinah never descended to earth, nor did Moses or Elijah ever ascend to Heaven”

ותניא ר' יוסי אומר מעולם לא ירדה שכינה למטה ולא עלו משה ואליהו למרום

This position, that God never enters the realm of humans, troubles the rabbis, and instances are brought to challenge it. However, for each challenge the response is simply that he closest God's Presence ever gets to humanity is 10 handbreadths, never actually entering our realm. Even in the case of Moshe, the Talmud suggests that God lowered his throne (whatever that might mean) so that Moshe could grasp its bottom, without God having ever to have entered. The Infinite is infinitely transcendent.

There is a line, according to the Talmud, which we cannot ever pass. There is, forever, a gap between the finite and the Infinite. We may be created with *Tzelem Elohim*, and our individual lives may be infinitely sacred, but they are not like the Infinite. Prophecy, the Urim V'Tumim, prayer, kindness, or any other status or action cannot imbue us with a greater sense of *Tzelem Elohim* than that with which we were originally created. We can never be turned into gods, or have a greater amount of godliness within us than our fellow, as is the case with Achilles. There will forever be a gap, even between Moshe and the Infinite, of at least 10 handbreadths.

With this understanding, The Kohen HaGadol's use of the Urim V'Tumim, much like his other responsibilities, suggests no greater inherent worth. He is the only person designated to use the Urim V'Tumim, but this does not mean that he has a greater understanding of God, which perhaps is the reason why “ממזר תלמיד חכם קודם” (the product of a forbidden relation who is a sage supersedes the high priest who is am Am Ha'Aretz). No person, including the Kohen HaGadol is closer to grasping and understanding the Infinite. The Urim V'Tumim are not like Achilles' Shield, fashioned by gods, made for a child of a god.

In conclusion, I think it is worth suggesting a reason as to why Eli the Priest failed to properly decipher the Urim V'Tumim. As the Kohen HaGadol, he was charged with responsibility of making the Mishkan a sacred place for all the Jewish people, an Abraham's tent of equals, and yet the bible tells us that Eli only become aware that his sons were sinning once he was very old (Samuel 1. 2:22). Emmanuel Levinas explains their sin was the "abuse of power", which is a grave offence against God (Nine Talmudic Readings, 22). The Kohen HaGadol and the members of the community need to understand that they are all equally imbued with God's Image. For Eli to properly communicate with God through the Urim V'Tumim, he first need to address the power dynamics around the Mishkan, where his children, the kohanim, were effectively saying "we have more *Tzlem* than you". It does not seem outlandish to suggest that Bible finds some fault in Eli for not properly maintaining the sacredness of the space, and that this ultimately contributed to the loss of the Mishkan (Samuel 1. 4:17-18) and his inability to properly decipher the Urim V'Tumim.

The lesson, at least for me, is that I am responsible for making sure that I relate to people, not only with an acceptance and awareness of the fact that we are all unique, or equal, but with a profound and deliberate consciousness that I have no more, or less, *Tzlem Elohim* within me. Regardless of that person's role, status, opinions, actions, or attitudes, I need to try to engage in conversation and create spaces, like the Mishkan, where that deeper understanding pervades and forms the basis of any relationship or interaction.



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