



## Week 4

### צלם אלוקים

This guided learning sheet explores the *middah* of *Tzelem Elokim*—self esteem and human greatness. Sources are accompanied by commentary and discussion questions to facilitate personal reflection and group dialogue.

In addition to the main questions included with each source, you will find a box of boxes below. This set of questions are general questions about participants' experience of working on *middot* and remain the same from week to week. These questions are a helpful tool to check in and reflect on growth over time in a consistent manner. Even though the questions remain the same, the answers will naturally change depending on which *middah* is being explored. You may choose to start or end your learning session with these questions.

### General questions when reflecting on the *middah* of the week:

General questions remain the same from week to week and are helpful tools to reflect on growth over time. The answers will vastly change depending on the *middah* of the week.

1. What did I learn about myself this week?
2. What felt difficult when working on this *middah*?
3. What felt natural or easy when working on this *middah*?
4. How has practicing this *middah* improved your life or how does it have the potential to impact your life?
5. Does anyone in the group have a story of how this *middah* came up in a real situation (this week or beyond)? How did you respond?
6. Does anyone in the group have insights, advice, or tips to keep in mind when working on this *middah* going forward?

### Source #1

*This week we have been talking about Tzelem Elokim, living mindfully with an awareness of our own incredible value and worth. Let's remember what Chazal told us about the concept of Tzelem Elokim:*

#### משנה אבות ג:יז

הוא ה'ה אומר, חביב אדם שנברא בצלם. חכה יתרה נודעת לו שנברא בצלם, שנאמר (בראשית ט) כי בצלם אלהים עשה את האדם.

[Rebbe Akiva] says: Beloved is man for he was created in the image of G-d. Especially beloved is he for it was made known to him that he had been created in the image of G-d, as it is said: "for in the image of G-d He made man" (Genesis 9:6).

**Takeaway:** *We, mankind, are literally created in Hashem's image. Just as we cannot begin to fathom the greatness of Hashem, we cannot imagine how limitless our own potential is. We have immense inherent worth. Awareness of your Tzelem Elokim means living with self-worth, dignity, purpose, and respect—for yourself and others.*

#### **Discuss:**

1. How has thinking about your *Tzelem Elokim* impacted your self-perception this week?
2. How has your awareness of *Tzelem Elokim* impacted the way you treat others? How might remembering that *everyone* is created *b'Tzelem Elokim* change the way you respond to someone who frustrates or disappoints you? How does it impact your view of people in the greater world at large?
3. Is there someone you know who embodies living with awareness of their *Tzelem Elokim*? What about them and their behavior implies this?
4. Rebbe Akiva says it's a greater love that we *know* we are created *b'Tzelem Elokim*. Why do you think being *aware* of this is so significant?
5. In what ways do you think society either supports or challenges your sense of being infinitely valuable just for who you are?
6. Has there been a time when you forgot your *Tzelem Elokim*? What happened?
7. If you believed fully in your greatness, how would your actions or choices look different?

## Source #2

*Internalizing that we are created b'Tzelem Elokim is not just a nice idea but is actually the opposite of idolatry, as Rav Avraham Grodzinski explains:*

### תורת אברהם

אין האיסור של ע"ז צריך להיות מצד הצווי של תורה או נבואה, אלא מצד שכלו הפשוט, אחר אשר יוכח לדעת את גודל האדם וכוחותיו הרוחניים. אדם הרואה את כחות האדם וגדלו, אין ביכולתו לעבוד אותה, להכנע מפניה כי הוא גדול ממנה והיא נכנעת אליו, סרה היא הבריאה כלה למשמעת האדם, כאשר יצוה כן תעשה. אין מקום בשכל שיהיה האדם נכנע למי שהוא מהנבראים בלתי להבורא לכד. איסור של ע"ז לפי מובן השכל הוא, שיזהר האדם מלהיות שפל בעיני עצמו שזוהי שטות היותר גדולה. בורא עולם אומר לו כל אשר אתה רואה לך נתתי, כלם לא בראתי רק בשבילך כדי לשמש אותך, והאדם עונה- לא, אני הוא השמש והם האדונים לי. היש שוטה גדול מזה? זוהי עבודה זרה. כלל הדברים: צריך האדם רק להכיר את מהותו וגדלו, ואז תהיה לו עבודתו ית' למצוה שכלית גלויה ופשוטה.

Idolatry does not need to be forbidden merely because of a commandment from the Torah or prophecy, but rather should be rejected based on simple human reasoning. Once a person understands the greatness of humanity and its spiritual powers, it is obvious why idol worship is forbidden. A person who sees the strength and greatness of humankind cannot bring themselves to worship idols or submit to them, for the human being is greater than they are, and they are subject to the human, subordinate to human will. All of creation is meant to serve human beings and obey their commands.

It is unreasonable to think that a person would submit to one of the created beings, only to Hashem. The prohibition of idolatry, from the perspective of reason, is that a person must be careful not to belittle themselves in their own eyes—this is the greatest foolishness. The Creator of the universe tells the human, “All that you see I have given to you; I created everything only for your sake, to serve you,” and the person responds, “No, I am the servant, and they are my masters.” Could there be a greater fool than this? This is idolatry.

**Takeaway:** *Idolatry is fundamentally irrational—a person who sees the greatness of the human being cannot lower themselves to worship created things. When one recognizes the unique greatness and spiritual power of humanity, it becomes clear that worshipping created objects is a deep misunderstanding of our own dignity. To bow to something lesser than oneself—something meant to serve humanity—is to deny one's inherent worth and role in creation. A person must only recognize their own essence and greatness, and then serving G-d alone will become a clear and simple rational obligation.*

### **Discuss:**

1. Why do you think Rav Avraham Grodzinski equates lack of self-belief with idolatry? How can low self-esteem lead to such serious spiritual error?
2. Do you ever “worship” external measures of worth (e.g., others’ approval, productivity, perfectionism)? What are the “idols” you sometimes submit to (e.g., external validations, opinions, metrics of success) that steal your sense of worth?
3. What would it look like to live with more trust in your inherent greatness as opposed to worshipping things outside of you?

*Let's be honest: it's easy for us to believe in our inherent greatness when we're acting well... greatly! But what about when we fall short—when something tests our patience, wears us out, and we respond in ways that don't reflect who we truly want to be? What happens when we let ourselves down? How can we see and connect to our Tzelem Elokim when all we see is disappointment in ourselves?*

*Perhaps, this is where another middah, סבלנות—patience—comes in. Not just patience with others, but patience with ourselves. Patience is not just for others—it's actually a core requirement for believing in yourself. Patience is essential for holding on to belief in our own worth, even when we don't live up to it in the moment.*

**Discuss:**

What moments on a typical day require you to tap into your inner patience?

**Source #3**

*The Hebrew word for patience is סבלנות is derived from the word סבל. Rav Hirsch in his etymological dictionary of Biblical Hebrew translates its various meanings:*

**Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch**

**סבל** *burden; carry a load*

**e/c:** 1: loading; burdening (*Ex 5:4 לסבלותיכם*)\*

2: assuming duties (*Ex 1:11 למען עונתו בסבלותם*)

3: porter (*KI 5:29/mh סבל נושא אלה שבעים* also *Gn 30:20*)

**cm:** descend [*pc (E6): שבל press down; זבל prepare for settlement; סבל contain; שפל lower; צול descend; שול lower; זול degenerate*]

**Takeaway:** *It seems that the Jewish idea of סבלנות is more like endurance—the ability to be burdened (or in modern lingo, triggered) and still maintain or carry that “burden”. To be patient is to bear the weight of discomfort or challenge without collapsing.*

**Discuss:**

1. Using this new translation of סבל is, what how would you now describe the middah of סבלנות (which we translated previously as patience)?
2. How does redefining patience as bearing a weight (rather than simply “not reacting”) shift your understanding of what true patience requires? If סבלנות means carrying a burden—not just holding back a reaction—how does this deeper definition reshape what it truly means to be patient?

*When we think of things that try our patience, things that we feel burdened to “carry” we often think about external triggers—kids bickering, being stuck behind a terrible driver, waiting in line at the store, being put on hold for hours. The list goes on and on...*

*What we don’t often remember is that our inner self also requires patience—not just our outer world and external environment. Often the hardest thing to patiently work through and endure is our own short-comings.*

*This week we have spoken at length about the things that make us amazing—our גדלות האדם and inner greatness. But, we aren’t always amazing. We all have flaws. How do we deal with ourselves when we let ourselves down? This is the ultimate test of סבלנות. As Rav Hirsch points out, סבלנות isn’t passive. It’s the quiet strength of bearing the weight of your humanity—including your shortcomings—with an inner calm, instead of collapsing.*

#### **Discuss:**

1. How does this ability to endure and bear the weight of challenge relate to *Tzelem Elokim* and our feelings of guilt when we fall short in tapping into our inner greatness and G-dliness?
2. In what situations is it easier to be patient with others than with yourself? Why do you think that is?
3. Can you recall a recent moment when you felt you let yourself down, or a time this week when you felt like you were failing? How might you reframe that experience through the lens of סבלנות, viewing it not as an absolute failure, but as a moment that calls for patience with yourself? And if you lost patience with yourself in that moment, how might you revisit it, speaking to yourself as someone who believes you were created *b'Tzelem Elokim*? What would you say differently?

#### **Source #4**

*The ability to have patience and endure is not just a retrospective strategy to be used once things have not gone according to our plan of growth. Rather, it is an essential component of our planning process prospectively, as Rav Wolbe explains:*

**רב שלמה וולבה: עלי שור חלק ב: ריז**

קשה להתפיס ענין הסבלות עם עצמנו בהתלמודות מעשית. אך דבריו האחרונים של הגר"א הנ"ל מאירים לנו דרך בזה: סבלות זו אינה רק מידה שבדיעבד, היינו לא להתייאש כאשר כבר נכשלנו, אלא היא מחייבת גם גישה לכתחילה: לפני שניגש לעבודה, נסדר עצמנו בישוב הדעת, ונקבע מה נוכל לדרוש מעצמנו, ונהיה מפוכחים לשער היטב שלא נוותר לעצמנו יותר מדי וגם לא נדרוש מעצמנו יותר מדי.

It is difficult to have one grasp the concept of patience with oneself and to work on acquiring it in a practical way. But the words of the Vilna Gaon enlighten us on how to do this: Patience [with oneself] is not just a trait that applies retrospectively (i.e., not to

despair after we've already failed) but it is also a required approach from the outset. We need to take a proactive approach. Before we begin working on ourselves we need to plan with clarity and recognize what we can achieve and what we cannot. We need to be careful not to demand too much of ourselves but also not to go too easy on ourselves.

**Takeaway:** *Patience with oneself isn't just a backup plan for failure. It's a strategy to begin with. We must set realistic expectations for ourselves—neither too lenient nor too unrealistically demanding. Before we begin any avodah (spiritual work), we need a calm, honest assessment of our limits and goals.*

**Discuss:**

1. Rav Wolbe says we need to be honest about both our strengths and our limits. What's harder for you—acknowledging your potential or acknowledging your limits?
2. Have you ever set goals for yourself that were too demanding or too vague?
3. Think about an area you are working on in *avodat Hashem*—are your expectations for yourself fair? Clear? Doable?
4. If you truly believed in both your greatness and your human limits, what would change about how you move through the day?
5. How might your relationship to growth change if you started with planning from a place of realistic self-understanding and patience (*Savlanut*), coupled with knowledge of your inherent greatness and potential (*Tzelem Elokim*)? What does it look like to approach personal growth with both ambition and self-compassion/patience?
6. How can you apply both *Tzelem Elokim* while engaging realistically with yourself using *Savlanut* to a current challenge in your life?

**Now that you have learned these sources, you can also use the questions from the question boxes at the beginning of the learning packet for further discussion and reflection.**