

**"The Many Faces"
Parashat Bereshit
October 28, 2005**

**Rabbi Lisa Edwards
D'var Torah in the Jewish Journal**

The explanation was simple enough – no matter that 7-year-old Rachel has white skin and her 21-month-old sister, Angela, has black skin.

I just spent the weekend with more than 125 people (including 50 children) who came together because they are Jews with widely varying ethnicities and skin colors. They stay together because the intention of Bechol Lashon (In Every Tongue) – the initiative on ethnic and racial diversity in the Jewish community and the sponsor of the weekend – is to provide a time of learning and play in a Jewish atmosphere offering more than welcome. It is a weekend that offers embrace and delight, an opportunity for Jews to look around at Jewish faces who look different from stereotypes; Jewish faces who look as different as their own. These Jewish families belong to different synagogues or none at all and so often find themselves in (or feeling excluded from) American Jewish communities where they stand out from others in skin color or in accent, in background or in appearance. At Bechol Lashon events, stereotypes of what it means to look Jewish disappear within moments of one's arrival, and instead, people see what really matters – sympathetic hearts and minds, the blessing of diversity, love of Torah and a desire for Jewish community.

Would that every Jew the world over were already so free from prejudice and fear that all Jews (let alone non-Jews) could expect and find a welcome no matter which Jewish community we walked into. The experiences of Jews throughout our history has not taught us how to be open-hearted. But our tradition does invite us to be, and perhaps our Torah begins with all human beings descended from the same first human beings for just that reason.

This week we begin our annual cycle of Torah – when God began to create the world in all its splendid variety.

"God created the human in 'His' image [b'tzalmo], in the image of God [b'etzelem Elohim], God created it; male and female God created them," we are told in the first chapter of Torah (Genesis 1:27). And the Midrash plays with the concept: Each person is created in that person's own individual, singular image (b'tzalmo), and also in the image of the Holy One (b'etzelem Elohim). So each one of us is unique, and also a reflection of God in the world. And why are all humans descended from the first person(s)? That none of us may claim, "My

ancestors are superior to yours." (see BT Sanhedrin 38a).

The history of Jews in the world has seen to it that we live in every corner of the world, and come in every color, but only in recent decades have we been given the opportunity to live together, to truly embrace that diversity of the Jewish people.

The National Jewish Population Survey 2000-2001, sponsored by the Institute for Jewish & Community Research, tells us that 20 percent (1.2 million) of the Jewish population of the United States is "diverse," including converts to Judaism, children adopted into Jewish families and raised as Jews, multiracial children of partnerships between Ashkenazi Jews and people of color and those who are themselves the generational descendants of Jews of color and those of Sephardic and Mizrahic heritage. (For more on that read "In Every Tongue: The Racial & Ethnic Diversity of the Jewish People" by Diane Tobin, Gary Tobin and Scott Rubin, or visit www.jewishresearch.org/socialchange.htm.) Most importantly, the number is growing – now more than ever. As corners of the world come together, we are being offered the opportunity not to blend in, but to embrace the diversity of God's creations, right here, in our own city, in our Jewish community and in our own individual congregations.

There is another teaching I love based on the statement in Bereshit that all human beings are created *bezel Elohim*, in the image of the Holy One. In this Midrash, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi comments on the verse of Psalm 55 that reads, "There are many with me."

And who are they? Rabbi Yehoshua asks. "They are the angels who watch over people. An entourage of angels always walks in front of people, with messengers calling out. What do they say? 'Make way for the image of the Holy Blessed One'" (Deuteronomy Rabbah, Re'eh 4).

As the participants of the Bechol Lashon retreat gathered for a farewell shalom circle, I looked around at all the dimples on all the gorgeous, smiling, colorful Jewish faces and I heard the angels calling out, "Make way for the image of the Holy Blessed One."

It's a new year, a new opportunity to study the Torah from Bereshit though to its very end in the company of friends and study partners – old and new. May our Torah circles and our Torah study be filled with beautiful and diverse images of the Holy Blessed One.