

Education as Formation: *Bildung*, Equality and the Book of Genesis

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As we hear nowadays so much about ongoing discrimination, whether based on sexual or racial stereotypes, I have decided to devote this paper to show how education as formation – or *Bildung* - can and should constantly serve as a reminder that all human beings, even in all their differences, are equal. While I truly believe that there should be no need to have to present an argument for this, I will do so, based on my understanding of *Bildung* in accordance with Heidegger and Buber as well as Jewish Thought. Along the way of my argumentation, we shall come to see the importance of the complexity of the word *Bildung*, and gain a deeper understanding of its meaning.

In order to make it easier to understand this paper, let me in short explain upfront the connection between education as formation or *Bildung* and Jewish Thought: it lies in the similarity of the complexities of the words used. The ambiguity of the German word *Bildung* – which allows for interesting speculations and reflections – has a parallel in the complexity of the word used in the biblical account of the formation of the human being in “the image of God”. And, to top it, while in the English versions, “God formed Adam in His Own image”, the Hebrew word used, צֶלֶם (*tselem*), is usually rendered into *Bild* or *Ebenbild* in German translations. This paper will show how the similarities and complexity in the usage of these words, overarching languages and traditions, can teach a lesson that so many unfortunately seem in need to be reminded of.

Luckily enough, I am not the first to see and point out a connection between the term *Bildung* as used in educational context and the biblical passage in the book of Genesis.¹ Käte Meyer-Drawe writes that *Bildung* points to *Bild* (i.e. image) and thereby back to the passage in Genesis where God created humans in His image (*Bild*).² However, before jumping all the way back to the biblical

text, let us first look at what some modern thinkers have written about *Bildung*. Gert Biesta writes that *Bildung* is a process in which one is engaged with culture and with existing meaning in order to become oneself.³ For him it is the formation of oneself, or of one's identity "through engagement with culture."⁴ Biesta points out that the term *Bildung* thereby goes back to the Greek idea of *paideia*.

Heidegger, too, in his *Platons Lehre von der Wahrheit*, highlights the similarity between *paideia* and *Bildung*. While explaining the wisdom behind Plato's cave analogy, he interprets *paideia* as "*Die Um- und Eingewöhnung des Menschenwesens in dem ihm jeweils zugewiesenen Bereich*"⁵ – "the acclimatization of the humankind towards and into the area towards which it is being directed." This process is led by one's soul, which as a whole diverts its aims foundationally back to its own roots.⁶ What exactly the aims of our souls are is ambiguous. Yet the idea that *Bildung* allows for us to connect to our souls seems interesting to say the least.

Furthermore, Heidegger points out, this is a slow process as this *Umwendung* - turning around or change - occurs in the essence of one's being. Yet, more importantly, Heidegger points out that in order for such a change or turn to occur, there needs to be a new direction. This new direction in return is towards the *Vor-Bild*, which means both role model and pre-set image, – i.e. is the being we strive to become or turn into.⁷ And Heidegger ends this section by repeating that there is no exact word in German for *paideia*, but *Bildung* comes closest to it.⁸

Heidegger is quick to point out that the word *Bildung*, too, is not a simple but a complex word, as there are two meanings to it, one connected to knowledge and coming to know something, whereas the other is related to the creation of something.⁹ His main point in relation to the double meaning of *Bildung*, is that the acquiring of knowledge demands for and thereby simultaneously creates a *Vor-Bild*, an ideal archetype that one strives to become – *sich nach dem Vorbild bilden* – *to fashion oneself according to the pre-set image*.¹⁰ Heidegger concludes that it is the encounter with the "idea of ideas" or "highest idea," which outside Plato's cave is represented by the sun, that allows for the *Bildung* of such a *Vor-Bild* to come into being¹¹ - i.e., for the formation of such an archetype. Therefore, in order to have a direction in which one aims to form oneself towards, *sich*

bilden, we need a *Vor-Bild*, which emerges from our knowledge or experience of the “first cause.” Pointing out that both, Plato and Aristotle relate this highest idea, or “*erste Ursache*” – the first cause – to God or the godly, Heidegger calls it himself “*das Seiendste des Seienden*” – “the most being of the being”¹² or “Being of beings,” as Biesta translates it.¹³

We thus come to understand that for Heidegger it is precisely this first cause that creates the *Vor-Bild* by which and towards one aspires to form oneself. However, the understanding or acquiring of such a *Vor-Bild* emerges and forms itself through our encounter with “the most being of being,” which comes into being through being. Hence, for Heidegger, the meaning of *Bildung* is rather a passive emerging state of knowledge or knowing than one of actively acquiring knowledge. It is a sort of knowledge or understanding that evolves through or by itself – almost as a supplement to being. In this sense it is a coming to know something without actively having to acquire additional knowledge. However, the new insight allows for one to come to new understandings – just as happens with the individual in Plato’s cave who is freed from his chains and ventures out to see the sun. In return this acquired insight, which occurs by itself by mere exposure to the “first cause,” creates the *Vor-Bild* for which we actively aim for when trying to form ourselves into whom we want to be. One may therefore say, *Die Bildung bildet das Vorbild des Gebildeten und des Bildenden* – *Bildung* forms the *Vor-bild* for the educated/formed one and for the learning individual/the one to be formed. This ultimately means that it is an ongoing process, in which we constantly acquire another insight and thereby further form ourselves into who we are. The image of our goals or archetype constantly slightly changes as it is influenced by new knowledge and understandings. This in return makes *Bildung* an endless and thereby infinite process.

The other Martin, Buber, wrestles with some very similar questions when he writes in *Unser Bildungsziel*: “*Bildung kommt von bilden und bilden von Bild.*”¹⁴ *Bildung* derives from forming/educating and forming/educating derives from image. Here, too, one is in need of a *Bild*, some sort of an image of what one wants to become like, an archetype or an idea towards which one aims to educate oneself. As he writes: “*Bilden’ heisst ein geschautes Bild im irdischen Stoff*

verwirklichen, so dass es in die Welt der Dinge tritt."¹⁵ *Bilden* means realizing a seen image into earthly material in order for it to step into the world of things. It is like materializing an idea from the realm of ideas into the material world. And he goes on to write: "*Menschen bilden heisst ein geschautes Menschenbild in lebenden Personen verwirklichen,*"¹⁶ "Educating/forming humans means to realize a seen image of man into living people." *Bildung* as a process of coming into being, i.e. the formation of oneself, relies on an already existing image or archetype, which is the *Bild* and becomes the *Vor-Bild* for *Bildung*. One's own formation is directed by an aspiration of a form that one wants to form oneself into. The big question of course still stays how and from where we are supposed to get or receive the image that we aspire to become. Or in Heidegger's language, how can we be sure to encounter the Being of beings?

Within the Jewish tradition the first cause or the Being of beings is of course God. However, this does not necessarily make it easier to answer the question. Yet the very same words that have been discussed so far might be able to help. As previously mentioned, when looking at the German Bible translations we find the word *Bild* already in the very first chapter. Martin Luther (16th century) uses *Bild* and *zum Bilde Gottes* when translating "צלם אלהים" (*tselem elohim*) in English usually "image of God," while Moses Mendelssohn (18th century) uses *Ebenbilde*. Both words of course derive from *Bild*, as does *Bildung*. Now, apart from the apparent contradiction with the monotheistic traditions that God has neither a form nor can He be seen, the idea of translating *tselem* into *Bild* raises some very interesting and noteworthy questions and consequences: For what do we actually mean when we say "human was created in the image of God."

Mendelssohn, in his commentary to the Bible, gives an interesting explanation. Basing himself on a Talmudic passage, he writes that for the creation of mankind the Bible introduces a special word of creation because of the human's greatness in rank, as the human species resembles God and is beyond any other species because of its wisdom, intellect, awareness, and practical skills. The word *tselem* he translates as *Ebenbild*, an identical/equivalent image,¹⁷ and says it means as much as *tsura*, i.e. form.¹⁸ The formation of the image of the human then, here too, is the result of an encounter with the first cause, i.e.

God. However, what is it that we should learn from all this?

As briefly mentioned above, according to the monotheistic religions an image of God cannot exist, since God cannot be seen. What then is the meaning of us being created in His image? For over 2000 years, Jewish thinkers have grappled with exactly this question and I therefore want to look at some of the answers that have been suggested. The great Rashi (11th century) comments on “and God created the Human in His image”¹⁹ as follows:

And God created the Human in His image: [means] in the form that was made for him. Everything [else] was created by command whereas, he was created by hand, as it is said, “And You place Your hand upon me.” [Man] was made by a die as a coin that is made by impression that is called *coin*.

Similarly it is written, “The die can be varied as clay.”²⁰

Interestingly, Rashi transfers in this comment the possessive from His (God’s) to his (Adam’s) image, i.e., God created us in His image according to our form. The source of Rashi’s comparison between a coin and human beings is a well-known rabbinic passage from the *Mishna Sanhedrin* (2nd century)²¹:

And to teach the greatness of the Holy One, Blessed is He: For a man mints several coins from one mold and they all look alike; but the King of kings, the Holy One, Blessed is He, mints everyone from the mold of the first Adam and not one resembles his fellow. Therefore, each and every one is obligated to say, “For my sake was the world created.”²²

What can be learned from this text is that not only is there a Godly imprint within each and every human being, but just as each and every coin has exactly the same value as another although they might look a little different, so it is with human beings. We cannot know what exactly is meant by *בצלם אלוהים* (in the image of God). However, I believe that we can learn that according to the first book of Moses human beings have certain special characters and capabilities that receive a Godly tag. This then of course turns human beings into something special and unique. Therefore no matter what color, sex, religion,

political opinion, or what not, we are all of equal value by being made in the image of God no matter how different from each other. Furthermore, the first cause, or Being of being, cannot only be found in our own existence but more so in the existence of others.

This way of understanding the matter of course aligns with the thinking of Levinas and even Meister Eckhart.²³ There is therefore a lot more that can be written or discussed: from finding the Godly spark in us to being able to see it in the other. This is however beyond my goal since all I am asking for is to recognize the other as equal and for that matter we could even leave God out of the equation. Yet there are two more points that I do want to make. The first one is about the infinite value of each human. One example for the value of the individual according to Jewish text can be found in the biblical story of Kain and Abel. There we find the following sentences right after we learn that Kain murdered his brother Abel:

God said to Kain, “Where is your brother Abel?” “I don’t know,” he replied. “Am I my brother’s keeper?” And God said: “What have you done? Your brother’s bloods are crying out to me from the ground!”²⁴

One question that comes up when reading those sentences is, why is it written “bloods” (דָּמַיִם), in plural form, and not “blood” (דָּם) in its singular form, as it would seem grammatically correct. A common explanation for this curiosity is that the plural is used to state it is not only the blood of Hevel that is meant but it is the blood of all his generations that were supposed to come from him but will now not get the possibility to exist. A similar argument, pointing to the potential and value of the individual, can be found in the *Mishna of Sanhedrin* where the sentences appear that have been made famous throughout the world by Spielberg’s movie about Oskar Schindler:

It is for this reason that a human was created unique, to teach you that anyone who destroys a single life is considered to have destroyed a whole world, and whoever saves a single life is considered to have saved a whole world.²⁵

According to this, each one of us is a whole world in itself. Ultimately this means that nobody is replaceable or that anyone is more valuable than another. We are all made uniquely, i.e., in God's image, thereby allowing for the highest of Being to dwell within ourselves and adding the aspect of the infinite to us. For becoming or *Bildung* is a never-ending process. And this brings me to my last point since we are talking about *Bildung*, formation, and be-coming: we have seen that a big part of it is about who we should aim to become, i.e., the *Vor-Bild*, and I therefore want to recount the well-known story of Rabbi Zusya, which Buber also quotes:²⁶

Before his death, Rabbi Zusya said "In the coming world, God will not ask me: 'Why did you not behave like an angel or why were you not like Moses?' He will ask me: 'Why were you not Zusya?'"

The reason I mention this story is because it comes to show that the greatness of each one of us is precisely in who we are and become. It is about understanding this as well as acknowledging it in the others that surround us. This means it is each and everyone's own personal task to become who we want to be – a quest that although never ending is an end in itself. What is asked of us as individuals is to find this sort of Being or Godly spark in ourselves in order to see it in every other human too. This is especially important because, as we have seen, the needed *Vor-Bild* emerges from an encounter that is not present in our own being. We are in need of the other and an encounter with its being for our *Bildung* to occur. Looking at the other and understanding that not only are we equal – both in being different as well as in infinite value – but that we need each other in order to live up to our potential, as it is by seeing the Godly or Being in the other that we are capable of imagining or form a *Vor-bild* for ourselves. Ultimately, this may explain why *Bildung* is a rather personal and individual process. Directed or triggered by the other, one comes to understand and find one's very own Godly imprint, which, even though shared with everyone, stays one's very own personal treasure. It is then by realizing and appreciating the equality along with the differences and uniqueness of each and every one that we are capable of aspiring and creating the *Vor-Bild* that we want to form ourselves into.

1 Käte Meyer-Drawe, "Zum metaphorischen Gehalt von Bildung" und "Erziehung," *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik* 45, no. 2 (1999): 161-175.

2 Ibid., 162.

3 Gert Biesta, "Who's Afraid of Teaching? Heidegger and the Question of Education ('Bildung'/'Erziehung')," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 48, no. 8 (2016): 834-835.

4 Ibid.

5 Martin Heidegger, *Platons Lehre von der Wahrheit*, Francke Verlag, Berlin, 1954), 23.

6 Ibid.: "dass allem voraus die Seele im Ganzen auf die Grundrichtung ihres Strebens umgewendet wird."

7 Ibid.: "... die Umwendung das Menschsein angeht und daher sich ihm Grunde seines Wesens vollzieht. Das bedeutet: Die massgebende Haltung, die durch eine Umwendung entspringen soll, muss aus einem das Menschenwesende schon tragenden Bezug in ein festes Verhalten entfalten werden. Diese Um- und Eingewöhnung des Menschenwesens in den ihm jeweils zugewiesenen Bereich ist das Wesen dessen, was Platon die 'padeia' nennt. ... das Geleit zur Umwendung des ganzen Menschen in seinem Wesen."

8 Ibid., 23-24.

9 Ibid., 24.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid., 48: "Diese höchste und erste Ursache wird von Platon und entsprechend von Aristoteles, das Goettliche genannt. ... weil sie das Seiendste des Seienden ist."

13 Biesta, "Who's Afraid of Teaching?," 832.

14 Martin Buber, *Der Jude und sein Judentum* (Gerlingen: Verlag Lambert Schneider GmbH, 1993), 583.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid., 583.

17 Moses Mendelssohn, *Schriften zum Judentum* (Stuttgart: frommann-holzboog Verlag, 2009), 23: "Dem Machen des Menschen ist ein besonderes Schoepfungswort bestimmt, der Groesse seines Ranges halber. ... Sie [die Schrift] sagt bei seiner Bildung: *nun wollen wir einen Mensch machen*, ... im Ebenbilde der Hoechsten."

18 Ibid.: "Und Tselem (ebenbild) bedeutet soviel wie 'Form' (tsura), dass er sich durch seine abgesoderte Form von der Form der uebrigen Lebewesen unterscheidet ..."

19 Rashi: *Commentary to the Bible* (Hebrew) (New York: Mesorah Publications, 1999);

"ויברא אלוהים את האדם בצלמו"

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"ויברא אלוהים את האדם בצלמו: בדפוס העשוי לו, שהכל נברא במאמר [באמצעות דיבור] והוא נברא בדיים, שנאמר (תהילים קלט, ה) 'ותשת עלי כפכה', נעשה בחותם כמטבע העשויה על ידי רשם שקורין קיי"ן בלעז (מטבע), וכן הוא אומר: 'תתהפך כחומר חותם'"

Rashi: *Commentary to the Bible* (Hebrew).

21 Mishna Sanh, 4: 5

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"ולהגיד גדולתו של הקדוש ברוך הוא, שאדם טובע כמה מטבעות בחותם אחד - כולן דומין זה לזה, ומלך מלכי המלכים הקדוש ברוך הוא טבע כל אדם בחותמו של אדם הראשון - ואין אחד מהן דומה לחבירו. לפיכך כל אחד ואחד חייב לומר: בשבילי נברא העולם."

23 Meyer-Drawe, 169, 173.

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"ויאמר ה' אל קין אי הבל אחיך ויאמר לא ידעתי השמר אחי אנכי: ויאמר מה עשית קול דמי אחיך צעקים אלי מן האדמה"

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"לפיכך נברא אדם יחידי ללמד שכל המאבד נפש אחת מעלים עליו כאילו איבד עולם מלא: וכל המקיים נפש אחת מעלים עליו כאילו קיים עולם מלא"

26 Martin Buber, *Die Erzählungen der Chassidim* (Munich: Manesse-Verlag, 2003).