

DOES JUDAISM ALLOW HUMAN CLONING?

Before venturing into so complicated a subject as human cloning, I would like to make two points. The first is that I am most certainly not a *posek halakha* – a decisor of Jewish religious law. (And even if I were, most Reconstructionist and Conservative Jews do not view the *halakha* as legally binding – whatever their movements might say to the contrary.) My reason for sharing these thoughts on cloning with you is to begin a process whereby we can think about the subject in Jewish terms. Secondly, I was surprised to find that, notwithstanding the many issues that divide them, both Orthodox and liberal Judaism share the same basic approach to the issue of cloning.

For example, Rabbi Shraga Simmons, an Orthodox rabbi associated with the *Aish ha-Torah yeshivah*, mentions that – unlike other religions which may issue across-the-board rejections of progressive medical techniques – Judaism takes a pragmatic (yet holy) approach to these issues. For example, some religions forbid abortion even in the case of rape and incest; Judaism considers it on a case-by-case basis. Additionally, the Roman Catholic Church opposes all forms of artificial human conception, including test-tube fertilization, surrogate motherhood and now, human cloning. Judaism, while advocating propagation in the context of a loving, intimate relationship, nevertheless affirms the value of life through a variety of halakhically acceptable methods and procedures. In the past decade, *halakha* has dealt successfully with issues of artificial insemination, *in vitro* fertilization, and surrogate motherhood.

Is Creation a Completed Act ... Or a Transformative Process?

For his part, Jonathan R. Cohen, a senior fellow of the Program on Negotiation, Harvard Law School, writes in the magazine *Reform Judaism*, that the answer to whether human cloning is forbidden depends on how we read the first line of Genesis. The Hebrew Bible begins, “*Bereshit bara Elohim et ha-shamayim v’et ha-aretz ...*” This famous phrase is often translated as a declarative sentence: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” According to this understanding of Genesis, God created the universe out of nothing, *ex nihilo*, by engaging in two primary activities: forming various elements and then dividing them from one another, each to have a distinct role. Light was separated from darkness; land was separated from sea; birds were to fly in the sky while fish were to swim in the sea. Each form of vegetation (i.e., plants and fruit-bearing trees) produced offspring of its own type (Genesis 1:11-12). God created two genders of humans; reproduction occurred through the union of a male and a female. And by the seventh day, “the heavens and the earth and all their hosts were complete” (Genesis 2:1). The structure of the universe had been established for all time. If God created our world as a completed act, who are we to tamper with it? Who are we to create a better plan? If humans were created “in God’s image” (Genesis 1:27), i.e., after God’s likeness, how could that likeness be improved upon? From this perspective, tampering with God’s creation appears wrong.

But there is a second interpretation of the first line in Genesis, one which suggests the opposite position on human cloning. Following the example of Rashi, the greatest of all medieval commentators, the opening phrase can be rendered as “When God began creating the heavens and the earth ...” or “At the beginning of God’s creation of the heavens and the earth ...” Instead of seeing creation as a completed act with a particular structure lying at its heart, creation may be viewed as a continuing and transformative process. In this light, the miracle of creation is not limited

to the product of six days of God's creation; it is also the process of God's moving the world from a chaotic nothingness to an ordered, life-bearing place. The Bible repeatedly emphasizes that God created things called "good" and "very good." In other words, God improved upon what had previously existed. Good purpose, and not a particular product, lies at the heart of creation. And if good purpose lies at the heart of God's creation and we are fashioned in God's image, might we ourselves have a role to play as creators? Our tradition views Abraham as praiseworthy when he independently exercises his moral powers by arguing with God over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. Might we too be viewed as praiseworthy if we exercise our technological powers for the good? Jewish tradition teaches that it is permissible, even obligatory, to cure people of natural illnesses by medical means born of human ingenuity. Jews are called to worship God, not nature.

Could Cloning Ever be a Religious Obligation?

Indeed, might there even be situations that would morally oblige the use of human cloning? Cohen, the Reform Jew, cites Moshe Tendler, a leading Orthodox *posek*: "Show me a young man who is sterile, whose family was wiped out in the Holocaust, and he is the last of a genetic line [and] I would certainly clone him." More commonly discussed cases include that of infertile parents who could not otherwise reproduce seeking to clone tissue from their recently deceased newborn who has been killed in an accident, or the possibility of saving an existing life (e.g., cloning from an infant who has suffered severe kidney damage with the hope that the clone might someday willingly donate a kidney to the clonee).

Cloning: Advantages and Disadvantages

If we believe that transforming what exists for the better lies at the heart of God's creation, then our view of human cloning will likely depend on whether we use human cloning to accomplish good or evil. But even if our motive for producing human clones is for the good, are we in some way running the risk of creating second-class humans? Both Cohen and Simmons can imagine certain scenarios where cloning could help save a human life. But they also see a possibly more sinister side to cloning. For example, in 1997 Dr. Ian Wilmut's goal in cloning "Dolly" the sheep was to replicate farm animals with selected characteristics oriented toward agricultural needs. Similarly, all the other animals that have been cloned after Dolly, including goats, cows and pigs, were cloned to create entire series of animals with unique genetic messages: Goats have been cloned and genetically engineered for the purpose of producing milk containing medications, while pigs have been cloned so that their organs would be suitable for human transplants. So, both Cohen and Simmons concede that the potential for abuse is enormous. The most frightening idea – straight out of science fiction – is "growing" humans in cages, in order to "harvest" their bodies for spare parts. It is not far-fetched to imagine an unscrupulous multimillionaire cloning himself in this manner in case he should ever need a spare kidney, heart, or eye, or some bone marrow.

Another potential abuse might be the creation of a class of mindless worker-clones. This, essentially is slavery, and it is morally repugnant, and in America, constitutionally illegal. If the goal of cloning is to mold a being who mindlessly follows prescribed dictates, this is also antithetical to Judaism. Our tradition encourages independent thought. In fact, the goal of a Jewish parent, teacher or rabbi is to create independence. That is why the Talmud states that parents are responsible for teaching their

children how to read and write, to learn Torah (i.e., to gain wisdom for living), to earn a livelihood, to get married, and to swim.

Immortality

Rabbi Simmons points out that human beings (at least those in power) have often sought to compensate for the impermanence of flesh. Accordingly, the Pharaohs built pyramids, the Emperors built Rome, and Donald Trump builds skyscrapers. There is a danger that to some cloning is a way to achieve “immortality” long after they are gone by manufacturing and leaving genetic copies of themselves. One example that Simmons cites of parents’ imposing their will inappropriately on their offspring is that of NFL quarterback Todd Marinovich. His father, a former NFL linebacker, decided from the time Todd was a baby that he would be trained and groomed for NFL stardom. Every moment of Todd’s life was geared toward this goal. In one sense, his parents succeeded – and Todd landed a pro contract. But on an emotional level, Todd never met those expectations. He lost his pro contract and became caught in a myriad of personal problems including an arrest on drug charges.

“In God’s Image”

Cohen and Simmons both emphasize that perhaps no idea in history has done as much to protect and elevate the status of humans as the biblical view that humans were created by God “in God’s image” (Genesis 1:27). As such, each human being is seen as priceless, unique, and of equal worth. Commenting on Creation, the rabbis who compiled the Mishnah in c. 200 CE taught:

For this reason was the first human created alone, to teach you that whoever destroys a single soul of Israel, Scripture imputes guilt to him as though he had destroyed a complete world; and whosoever preserves a single soul of Israel, Scripture ascribes merit to him as though he had preserved a complete world. Furthermore, the first human was created alone for the sake of peace among humanity, that one might not say to his or her fellow, ‘My ancestors were greater than yours,’ ... and to proclaim the greatness of The Holy One, Blessed be God: for if a human strikes many coins from one mold, they all resemble one another, but The Supreme King of Kings, The Holy One, Blessed be God, fashioned every person in the stamp of the first human, and yet not one of them resembles his or her fellow

B.T. *Sanhedrin* 37a

If all humans are created in God’s image, then each human life has infinite worth; every individual created in God’s image is priceless, indeed sacred. Whether reflected in laws as basic as prohibitions against murder and slavery or in efforts as heroic as organ transplantation, the pricelessness of every human life has long been a cornerstone of civilized society. In contrast, the devaluation of human life has too often resulted in tragedy.

The possibility of cloning challenges this belief in the preciousness of human life. If we clone our offspring, rather than seeing that offspring as created in the Divine image, we may increasingly view people as genetically replaceable objects of production. The art market provides analogies. An

original oil painting may have great value, but copies of it (clones) generally have little worth. Objects that can be readily duplicated, such as photographs, usually sell for far less than those that cannot. In economic language, one might say that cloning increases the potential “supply” of each of us. Will the value of each of us fall? Perhaps the value of a human clone will depend on the number of copies made. If two genetically identical people are standing together, it is not difficult to think of each as having infinite worth; they do not appear any different from natural genetic twins. But if we were to view a thousand clones standing together, it might be more difficult to regard each as a priceless human being.

Uniqueness and Equality

The very thought that one could be cloned is frightening to many. If I can be copied, what is so special about me? One response is to deny that a naturally born individual and his or her clone are identical. Many point out that the clone would be raised in a different environment and at a different time from his or her clonee, and thus become a different person with a unique character. While some may find comfort in this response, it ignores the question of how important one’s genetic structure is to one’s particular behavior and to one’s sense of self. The less one bases one’s sense of identity upon one’s physical characteristics, the less threatening the possibility of cloning becomes. Put differently, if I look in the mirror and see only my physical being, then my genetic duplicate – a physical copy – may destroy my sense of uniqueness. If, instead, I see something more than a physical being, then cloning will seem less alarming.

Cloning also forces us to ask how important uniqueness is to our sense of self. Do I become less of a person if copies of myself can be made? Martin Buber once argued that a person’s “foremost task” is the actualization of his or her “unique, unprecedented and never-recurring potentialities.” Will we become lesser human beings if others are born with capacities similar, if not identical, to our own? Perhaps we might revise this and say that a person’s foremost task is simply the actualization of his or her potentialities, whether or not others possess those potentialities as well.

The possibilities of human cloning and genetic engineering raise deep concerns about human equality. Will cloning be used to produce a basketball team of Michael Jordans or a university of Albert Einsteins? Will racist groups (e.g., neo-Nazis) use genetic engineering to produce a “master” race? Will governments decide to breed subservient citizens or aggressive soldiers? Will we regard persons produced by genetic engineering as better (with fewer “defects”) or worse (“artificially bred” or “mere duplicates”) than those produced by traditional reproduction? And how will they see themselves? Will they think of themselves as equal to others? Better? Worse? Ultimately, the value we attach to human life is a matter of morality, not genetics.

But it is a fallacy to think that “genetically identical” equals an identical human being. In the 1978 movie, “The Boys From Brazil,” an evil scientist conspires after the War to clone Hitler, in order to raise a new generation of Nazi leaders. The movie shows that without intense indoctrination, these “junior Hitlers” may be more inclined to become house-painters than they are to become dictators. Consider also the example of identical twins – who are genetically identical – but often grow up with vastly different personalities. This can be attributed to unique souls and different life experiences. So too, the cloned being has a unique soul, and different life experiences.

“Playing God”

Just as the possibility of human cloning challenges our belief that humans are created in God’s image, it also challenges our views of God. As the concept of God as our own creator is so important to our concept of God as Creator of the universe, it is likely that our views of God will change if we create clones in our own image.

Sensing God’s hand in the uncertain and mysterious is relatively easy, but sensing God in what we ourselves create and control may be difficult. By removing randomness, uncertainty, and mystery, cloning may weaken our belief that humans are created in the image of the Divine. On the other hand, cloning may increase our awe of God. Instead of viewing God as a distant Creator who formed our world long ago, perhaps we will see God as the Power of Creation and recognize that we too possess a share of that power. If asked whether we are “playing God” by engaging in cloning, we might reply: “Yes, for God is in us too.”

A shift in our notion of God from a distant one-time Creator to the ongoing source of Creative Power may also trigger a shift in our view of God as Sovereign (or “Ruler” or “King”). If God is seen as the Creator of human life, then God’s sovereignty over humans may be easy to accept, as we accept an artist’s ownership of the works he or she creates and a parent’s dominion over a child. But if we view ourselves as autocreative, will we still see God as Sovereign? If God’s sovereignty is derived not from the view of God as an external power demanding obedience, perhaps it will be seen as requiring the responsible exercise of the Godliness within ourselves. Though at first such a view may seem arrogant, I do not believe it is. Recognizing that responsibilities attach to the powers we have and accepting those responsibilities may form the basis of a more mature understanding of ourselves, of God, and of God’s sovereignty. The Baal Shem Tov taught that there are two types of fruit in the world: fruit that grows in vineyards, and fruit that grows in the wild. Vineyard-grown fruit is usually large, shapely, tasty, and consistent. Fruit grown in the wild tends to be blemished, but it is often sweet and flavorful. How do these two types of fruit compare? Both are pleasing in God’s eyes.

Conclusion

So ... is cloning good or bad? Surveys show that the majority of Americans oppose human cloning because of the great likelihood of abuse. Apparently, people perceive society as essentially irresponsible and untrustworthy. Judaism says there is nothing in the world that is inherently good or evil; there is only the potential for good and evil. Even outrage, something we typically associate as “bad,” can be used for good – outrage against injustice. Similarly, even giving, something we typically associate as “good,” can be used for bad – over-indulgence, or smothering. Talent, education and wisdom only have potential. Drugs can be a blessing when used for medicinal purposes, or a curse when taken by addicts. Nuclear energy can help preserve our world by reducing our reliance upon fossil fuels, or it can be deployed in weapons of mass destruction. Like the Golem, they are created by human intelligence, but at the same time may have a dangerous tendency to outgrow human control and become destructive. Rabbi Moshe Tendler says that “The real problem is whenever man has shown mastery over man, it has always meant the enslavement of man.” Rabbi Elliot Dorff, a member of the Conservative Movement’s Committee on Jewish Law and Standards, writes, “Cloning, like all other technologies, is morally neutral. Its moral valence depends on how we

use it.” Let us pray that the world will use its powers only for purposes which are good, holy, and truly human.

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