



Is Self Love a Virtue or a Vice?

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Framing the Question of Self-love:

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, *Shemonah Kevatzim*, 3:6

“Some see self-love as the beginning of sin, others as the foundation of ethics”

Timothy P. Jackson, *Love Disconsolated: Meditations on Christian Charity* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1999), p. 95

“For conservatives ‘self-love’ is often the very paradigm of transgression, while for liberals it is the sine qua non for moral maturity”

Source 1: Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5

לפיכך נברא אדם יחידי ללמדך שכל המאבד נפש אחד* מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו איבד עולם מלא וכל המקיים נפש אחת* מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו קיים עולם מלא ומפני שלום הבריות שלא יאמר אדם לחבירו אבא גדול מאביך ושלא יהו מינין אומרים הרבה רשויות בשמים ולהגיד גדולתו של הקדוש ברוך הוא שאדם טובע כמה מטבעות בחותם אחד וכולן 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.

*נוסחא אחרת: מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל

Therefore was Adam created singly: (1) to teach you that if anyone destroys a single life,* Scripture charges him as though he had destroyed an entire world, and if anyone saves a single life,* Scripture credits her as though she had saved an entire world. (2) And [Adam was created singly] for the sake of peace in the human race, so that no one might say to his fellow, ‘My ancestor was greater than your ancestor,’ (2b) and that the heretics should not say, ‘There are many powers in heaven.’ (3) And [Adam was created singly] to proclaim the greatness of the Blessed Holy One, for a human being stamps many coins with one die and they are all



alike one with the other, but the King of the kings of kings, the Blessed Holy One, has stamped all of humanity with the die of the first man, and yet not one of them is like his fellow. (4) Therefore each and every person is obligated to say, 'For my sake was the world created.'

**Some versions say "from Israel"*

Source 2: Mishnah Avot 3:14

הוא היה אומר חביב אדם שנברא בצלם חבה יתירה נודעת לו שנברא בצלם שנאמר (בראשית ט) בצלם אלהים עשה את האדם.

Rabbi Akiva used to say: Beloved is the human being, for s/he was created in the image of God. Even more beloved is s/he for it was made known to her/him that s/he was created in the image of God, as it says, "For in the image of God, God made the human being."

Source 3: Rambam, Commentary to the Mishnah, Avot 2:18

אם ידמה האדם עצמו פחות - לא תהיה חמורה בעיניו פחיתות שיעשה

If one has a base view of oneself, one will readily do base things.

Source 4: R. Shlomo Wolbe (1914-2005), *Alei Shur*, vol. 1

A. Every person must know that s/he is significant, not significant in the false sense of thinking highly of oneself... but significant in a deep, indeed earth-shattering way...

Rashi states that every person is as significant as a whole world. A "whole world"—this is the experience of a person's absolute uniqueness, that no one has ever been like him and no one will ever be like him for all eternity. I, with my unique combination of capacities, child of the same parents, born in a particular time and place—undoubtedly a unique task is set before me, my own portion in the Torah. And all creation is waiting for me to repair what I have been tasked with, because my service (*avodah*) I can't trade with anyone else in the world!

Without awareness of this significance I can't do the service mandated by Torah...

B. A person working on herself must deal with her deficiencies. A person who studies Mussar regularly often comes up against her bad qualities and tendencies. "Turn from evil" (*Sur MeRa*)—seemingly, this is the first and only requirement when it comes to working on ourselves. The idea is widespread that this is the whole project of learning Mussar, to uncover and condemn the bad. Alas, this is only a half-truth.



The beginning of all individual work is specifically the experience of man's exaltedness. Anyone who has never focused on man's exaltedness from his very creation, and whose only self-work is to know more and more about the bad sides of himself and to make himself suffer as a result—that person will sink deeper and deeper into despair, and in the end will make peace with the bad out of sheer lack of hope of ever changing it.

C. A person who does not know the preciousness of her own soul—it is forbidden for her to search her faults and to make herself suffer over her bad qualities. Our Rabbi, Master, and Teacher, Rabbi Yeruham Levovits, said: "Woe to a person who does not know her faults, because she doesn't know what work on. But even greater woe to a person who doesn't know her strengths, because she doesn't even know the materials she has to work with."

D. How wrong-headed are the simple-minded who imagine that there are different approaches to this issue [of human significance], as though one school believes in "man's greatness," whereas another rejects it. There are no disagreements where the basics of Torah (*gufei Torah*) are concerned!

Source 5: R. Joseph Soloveitchik (1903-1993), "Shelihut" ("Assignment")

האדם נברא בתור שליח, עצם היצירה, הלידה, מכילה בתוכה בהכרח את דבר מינוי השליחות... את העובדה שמישהו חי בזמן מסוים, בתקופה מיוחדת ובמקום מוגדר, ולא נולד בתקופה אחרת ובנסיבות אחרות, נוכל להבין אך ורק אם נקבל את עצם הרעיון בדבר שליחותו של האדם. ההשגחה יודעת היכן וכיצד יכול הפרט היחיד על חסרונותיו וכוחות הנפש האצורים בו, לקיים את שליחותו, באילו נסיבות ותנאים ובאיזו חברה יהא בכוחו של אדם למלא את שליחותו. בורא עולם פועל בהתאם להלכה האומרת, כי לא ייתכן למנות שליח כדי לבצע תפקיד, שהוא למעלה מכוחותיו של השליח. זוהי שליחות, שאי אפשר לקיימה, והיא מחוסרת כל ערך, מאחר שאם ממנים אדם למלא שליחות, מן הראוי ליתן לו את היכולת לפעול כשליח. משום כך נברא האדם היחיד בתקופה ובמקום, שבהם יוכל לקיים את פעולתו לשם קיום שליחותו. שליחותו של הקב"ה לאדם היא בבחינת דבר שאינו קצוב בזמן- היא שליחות מתמדת. מזמן לזמן מקבל האדם תפקידים ומעשים חדשים. זוהי שליחות לכל החיים.

The fact that someone lives in a particular time and a particular place, and not in some other time, under different circumstances, can only be understood if we accept the idea of the human being having a distinctive mission. Providence knows how and where each individual, with her capacities and weaknesses, can best fulfill her mission.



Source 6: R. Abraham Isaac Kook (1865-1935), *Olat Re'iyah*, vol. 2, p. 356

אלהי, עד שלא נוצרתי איני כדאי, ועכשיו שנוצרתי כאלו לא נוצרתי.
לפני שנוצרתי, כל אותו הזמן הבלתי מוגבל שמעולם עד שנוצרתי, ודאי לא היה דבר בעולם שהיה צריך לי. כי אם הייתי חסר בשביל איזו תכלית והשלמה הייתי נוצר, וכיון שלא נוצרתי עד אותו הזמן הוא אות, שלא הייתי כדאי עד אז להבראות, ולא היה בי צורך כי אם לעת כזאת שנבראתי, מפני שהגיעה השעה שאני צריך למלא איזה דבר להשלמת המציאות.
ואילו הייתי מיחד מעשי אל תכלית בריאתי הנני עכשיו כדאי, אבל כיון שאין מעשי מכוונים לטוב התכלית הרי לא הגעתי אל תכלית בריאתי ואיני עדיין כדאי, כמו קודם לכן.

“Before I was created, I was of no worth.” Before I was born, in that unlimited expanse from the beginning of time until I was created, there was nothing in this world that needed me. Because if I had been needed for some purpose or completion, I would have been created then. But since I was not created until this time, that is a sign that at that time, I was “of no worth” [or: it would not have been worthwhile to create me]. There was no need of me. But now, at this very moment that I have been created, the time has come when I need to participate in some aspect of completing the world.

Were I to dedicate my life towards fulfilling the purpose for which I was created, I would indeed now be worthy. But since my actions are not in accordance with my true goal, I am not accomplishing my life’s mission, and I am still not worthy. Things have changed; I am now needed. And yet I go on living as if nothing had changed and I were not needed.