



What Are Human Beings Worth?: A Jewish Theology of Human Dignity and Self-Worth

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Westchester Yom Iyun 2014

1. משנה סנהדרין ד:ה

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

1. Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5

Therefore was Adam created singly: (1) to teach you that if anyone destroys a single soul,* Scripture charges him as though he had destroyed an entire world, and if anyone saves a single soul,* 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”*

2. משנה אבות ג:יד

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

2. Mishnah Avot 3:14

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 know 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' (Genesis 9:6)."

3. רמב"ם, פירוש המשניות, אבות ב:יח

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

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

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

4. ר' צדוק הכהן מלובלין, צדקת הצדיק קנז

כשם שצריך אדם להאמין בהשם יתברך כך צריך אחר כך להאמין בעצמו.

4. R. Zadok HaKohen of Lublin (1823-1900), Tzidkat HaTzaddik, #154

Just as a person believes in God, one must afterwards also believe in oneself.

5. 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 Musar regularly often comes up against her bad qualities and tendencies. “Turn from evil” (*Sur MeiRa*)—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 Musar, 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!