



Humanity and Divinity

Genesis 1: 27

God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him, male and female, He created them. : וַיְבָרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצַלְמֵ אֱלֹהִים : בָּרָא אֹתוֹ זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא אֹתָם

Yalkut Shimoni on Genesis 1:13

God gathered the dust [of the first human] from the four corners of the world - red, black, white and green. Red is the blood, black is the innards and green for the body. Why from the four corners of the earth? So that if one comes from the east to the west and arrives at the end of his life as he near departing from the world, it will not be said to him, "This land is not the dust of your body, it's of mine. Go back to where you were created." Rather, every place that a person walks, from there he was created and from there he will return.

התחיל לקבץ עפרו מד' פנות העולם אדום שחור לבן ירקרק. אדום זה הדם שחור אלו הקרבים ירקרק זה הגוף. ולמה מד' פנות העולם שאם יבא מן המזרח למערב ויגיע קצו להפטר מן העולם שלא תאמר הארץ אין עפר גופך משלי חזור למקום שנבראת אלא כל מקום שאדם הולך משם הוא גופו ולשם הוא חוזר.

Midrash Tehillim 17:8

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: When a person is walking on the road, he is accompanied by angels, which are going before him. They proclaim, "Make way for the image of the Holy One!"

אמר ר' יהושע בן לוי בשעה שאדם הולך בדרך, איקוניא של מלאכים מהלכין לפניו, ומכריזין ואומרים תנו מקום לאיקוניא של הקב"ה

- What is the connection between creation and human dignity?
- In what ways do these texts allow for differences between people? Is there a tension between universal humanity being created in the image of God, and each individual's place in the world?

Now take a look at the following text, which was read to witnesses in death penalty cases back in the time of the Mishnah. As you read, try to identify different reasons given for the importance of honesty in testimony. (Also, keep in mind that the rabbis liked to do everything possible to avoid using the death penalty.)

Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5

How do they exhort witnesses testifying in capital cases? They brought them in and admonished them: Perhaps you will speak from supposition, and from hearsay, evidence from the mouth of a witness, or "We heard it from the mouth of a trustworthy person"; or, perhaps you do not know that afterwards we will test you by inquiry and examination. Know that capital cases are not as monetary suits: monetary suits - a person may give his property and effect atonement; capital cases - his blood and the blood of his offspring depend on him until the end of the world, for we find concerning Cain who killed his brother, it is written, "the bloods of your brother cry" (Genesis 4:10); it does not say, "your brother's blood" but "bloods" - his blood and the blood of his offspring. Another interpretation of "brother's bloods" - his blood was dashed on the trees and on the stones. Therefore man was created singly, to teach you that whoever destroys a single soul of Israel, Scripture accounts it as if he had destroyed a full world; and whoever saves one soul of Israel, Scripture accounts it as if he had saved a full world. And for the sake of peace among men, that one should not say to his fellow, "My father is greater than yours;" and that heretics should not say, "There are many powers in Heaven." Again, to declare the greatness of the Holy One, blessed be He, for man stamps out many coins with one die, and they are all alike, but the King, the King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He, stamped each man with the seal of Adam, and not one of them is like his fellow. Therefore each and every one is obliged to say, "For my sake the world was created." And lest you say, "What do we need with this trouble?" Has it not already been said, "He being a witness, whether he has seen or known, if he does not utter it..." (Leviticus 5:1). And should you say, "What need is there for us to be responsible for the blood of this one?" Surely it is said, "And when the wicked perish, there is joy" (Proverbs 11:10).

כיצד מאיימין את העדים על עדי נפשות היו מכניסין אותן ומאיימין עליהן שמא תאמרו מאומד ומשמועה עד מפי עד ומפי אדם נאמן שמענו או שמא אי אתם יודעין שסופינו לבדוק אתכם בדרישה ובחקירה הווי יודעין שלא כדיני ממונות דיני נפשות דיני ממונות אדם נותן ממון ומתכפר לו דיני נפשות דמו ודם זרעיותיו תלוין בו עד סוף העולם שכן מצינו בקין שהרג את אחיו שנאמר (בראשית ד) דמי אחיך צועקים אינו אומר דם אחיך אלא דמי אחיך דמו ודם זרעיותיו דבר אחר דמי אחיך שהיה דמו מושלך על העצים ועל האבנים לפיכך נברא אדם יחידי ללמדך שכל המאבד נפש אחד מישראל מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו איבד עולם מלא וכל המקיים נפש אחת מישראל 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 ושמא תאמרו מה לנו ולצרה הזאת והלא כבר נאמר (ויקרא ה) והוא עד או ראה או ידע אם לא יגיד וגומר ושמא תאמרו מה לנו לחוב בדמו של זה והלא כבר נאמר (משלי יא) באבוד רשעים רנה:

- What reasons are given for emphasizing truth? Which do you find most compelling?
- How does God fit into this picture? Is responsibility for saving lives primarily resting with God, or with people?
- Most of us are not in day-to-day situations where people's lives are literally in our hands. Are there ways to apply these principals to our lives?

The Importance of Human Dignity

First, look at the following Biblical texts. Consider how the ideas of divine humanity are in these texts, even if the word dignity isn't mentioned.

Leviticus 25:25

When your brother fails and his hand falls [when he is] with you, you should strengthen him, whether he is a stranger or a dweller, and he shall live with you.

וְכִי יִמוּךְ אַחִיךָ וּמָטָה יָדוֹ עִמָּךְ וְהִחַזַקְתָּ בּוֹ גֵר וְתוֹשֵׁב וְחִי עִמָּךְ

Deuteronomy 24:17-18

You shall not violate the rights of the stranger, the orphan; you should not take a widow's garment. Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and that Hashem your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to follow this thing.

לֹא תִטֶּה מִשְׁפַּט גֵר יְתוֹם וְלֹא תִחַבֵּל בְּגַד אִלְמָנָה: זָכַרְתָּ כִּי עֶבֶד הָיִיתָ בְּמִצְרַיִם וַיִּפְדֶּךָ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ: מִשֵּׁם עַל כֵּן אֲנֹכִי מְצַוְךָ לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת הַדְּבָר הַזֶּה:

Jeremiah 7:5-7

No, if you really mend your ways and your actions; if you execute justice between one man and another; if you do not oppress the stranger, the orphan, and the widow; if you do not shed the blood of the innocent in this place; if you do not follow other gods, to your own hurt – then only will I let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers for all time.

כִּי אִם הֵיטִיב תִּיטִיבוּ אֶת דְּרֹכֵיכֶם וְאֶת מַעַלְלֵיכֶם אִם עָשׂוּ תַעֲשׂוּ מִשְׁפָּט בֵּין אִישׁ וּבֵין רֵעֵהוּ: גֵר יְתוֹם וְאִלְמָנָה לֹא תַעֲשֻׁקוּ וְדָם נָקִי אַל תִּשְׁפְּכוּ בְּמִקוֹם הַזֶּה וְאַחֲרֵי אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים לֹא תִלְכוּ לָרַע לָכֵם: וְשָׁכַנְתִּי אִתְּכֶם בְּמִקוֹם הַזֶּה בְּאַרְצֵי אֲשֶׁר נָתַתִּי לְאַבוֹתֵיכֶם לְמִן עוֹלָם וְעַד עוֹלָם

- None of these texts actually mention the word dignity. However, it seems to be at the core of their statements. How does respect for other people's humanity fit in?
- Where are we told about explicit rewards and punishments? Where are we lacking reasons for action?
- Why emphasize the widow and the orphan? Are they representative of something else? Who would be the equivalent in our society?
- Do we have a special obligation to pick up or protect those who are more likely to fall down, or are they singled out because we are simply more likely to assume that they do not deserve the same respect?

Brachot 19b

Come and learn: The dignity of God's creations is so great that it can push away [ie override] a Biblical prohibition.

תא שמע: גדול כבוד הבריות שדוחה [את] לא תעשה שבתורה.

Pirke Avot 2:10

Rabbi Eliezer says: The dignity of others should be as dear to you as your own.

רבי אליעזר אומר יהי כבוד חברך חביב עליך כשליך.

Mishna Yoma 8:7

If debris falls on someone and there's doubt about whether he is there or not, or if there is a doubt about whether he is alive or dead, or if there is a doubt about whether he is a non-Jew or a Jew, one should remove [even on Shabbat] the heap of debris for his sake. If one finds him alive, one should remove the debris, and if he is dead, one should leave him there [until Shabbat is over].

מי שנפלה עליו מפולת ספק הוא שם ספק אינו שם ספק חי ספק מת ספק עובד כוכבים ספק ישראל מפקחין עליו את הגל מצאוהו חי מפקחין עליו ואם מת יניחוהו:

Ibn Ezra on Exodus 22:23

After it says, "Do not oppress" in the plural the language changes to the singular... for anyone who sees a person oppressing an orphan or a widow and does not come to their aid, they will also be considered oppressors.

ואחר שאמר לא תענון לשון רבים אמר אם... תענה, כי כל רואה אדם שהוא מענה יתום ואלמנה ולא יעזרם, גם הוא יחשב מענה:

- The rabbis speak about dignity in a much clearer and more straightforward way. How do their explanations add to, or differ from, the texts from the Bible?
- Why do you think human dignity can override even Biblical prohibitions? Can you think of an example?
- How does this idea of dignity translate into action? Is this an abstract concept, or something we can actually apply to our lives?
- How does this idea extend in practical ways in the third and fourth texts? In what way does this give us a framework for action and responsibility?
- Does the importance of allowing a person to maintain their dignity extend to non-Jews as well?

Jews and Non-Jews

First, look at some Torah sources on Jewish relationships with non-Jews:

Deuteronomy 23:8

You shall not hate the Edomite, for he is your brother. Do not hate the Egyptian, for you were a stranger in his land.

לא תתעב אדמי כי אחיך הוא, לא תתעב מצרי כי גר היית בארצו:

Exodus 12:49

There should be one law for you, and for the stranger who lives with you.

תורה אחת יהיה לאזרח ולגר ולגר בתוכם:

Exodus 22:20-23

Do not wrong or oppress the stranger, because you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You should not mistreat every widow and orphan. If you mistreat them, they will cry out to Me and I will hear their cry. And My anger will blaze against you, and I will kill you, and your wives will be widows, and your children orphans.

וגר לא תונה ולא תלחצנו כי גרים הייתם בארץ מצרים: כל אלמנה ויתום לא תענון: אם ענה תענה אתו כי אם צעק יצעק אלי שמע אשמע צעקתו: וחרה אפי והרגתי אתכם בחרב והיו נשיכם אלמנות ובניכם יתמים:

Leviticus 19:33-34

When the stranger lives among you in your land, do not wrong him. He should be like a citizen for you, the stranger who lives among you, and you should love him like yourself, because you were strangers in the land of Egypt—I am Hashem your God.

וכי יגור אתך גר בארצכם לא תונו אתו: כאזרח מכם יהיה לכם הגר הגר אתכם ואהבת לו כמוך: כי גרים הייתם בארץ מצרים אני ה' אלהיכם:

- What are differences between the texts?
- Why do you think the injunction to treat “the other” with kindness and fairness is repeated so many times?
- The Jews were not treated well in Egypt; however, we have to treat the Egyptian kindly because we were strangers in their land. How would you explain this contradiction?

Next, look at how the rabbis explain relationships with non-Jews:

BT Gittin 61a

Our rabbis taught: We support the poor non-Jews with the poor Jews, and we visit the sick non-Jews with the sick Jews, and we bury the dead of the non-Jews with the Jewish dead, because of the paths of peace.

ת"ר: מפרנסים עניי נכרים עם עניי ישראל, ומבקרים חולי נכרים עם חולי ישראל, וקוברין מתי נכרים עם מתי ישראל, מפני דרכי שלום.

Jerusalem Talmud, Demai 4:1

It was taught: In a city where non-Jews and Jews live, tzedakah collectors collect from Jews and non-Jews and distribute to the Jewish poor and the non-Jewish poor. They visit the sick Jews and the sick non-Jews, and they bury Jewish dead with non-Jewish dead, and the comfort Jewish mourners and non-Jewish mourners, and they return lost objects

תני עיר שיש בה גוים וישראל הגביים גובין משל ישראל ומשל גוים ומפרנסין עניי ישראל ועניי גוים ומבקרים חולי ישראל וחולי גוים וקוברין מתי ישראל ומתי גוים ומנחמין אבילי ישראל ואבילי גוים ומכניסין כלי גוים וכלי ישראל מפני דרכי שלום.

of non-Jews and Jews, because of the paths of peace.

Rambam, Laws of Kings 10:12

The sages even commanded us to visit the non-Jewish sick, and bury their dead with the Jewish dead, and to support their poor with all of the Jewish poor, because of the ways of peaces. As it says, "God is good to all, and shows mercy to all of His creations," and it says, "Her ways are the ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace."

אפילו העכו"ם צוו חכמים לבקר חוליהם, ולקבור מתיהם עם מתי ישראל, ולפרנס ענייהם בכלל עניי ישראל, מפני דרכי שלום. הרי נאמר טוב ה' לכל ורחמיו על כל מעשיו, ונאמר דרכיה דרכי נועם וכל נתיבותיה שלום.

- These three texts are very similar. What do each of them add to the conversation? Which one do you like best?
- If we are supposed to treat Jews and non-Jews in the same way, why do these texts draw the distinction at all? Why not just speak of human obligations?
- Do you think non-Jews are, or should be, obligated to show Jews the same type of equal treatment?
- Do these distinctions apply anymore, in America today?