

Encountering the Homeless

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As part of my work, I regularly introduce Jewish high school students to homeless people on the streets of Washington, DC. Bringing students to a downtown square where homeless tend to be, I challenge students to find a human connection and initiate conversation. I tell them: "Consider the concept that each person is created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God. For the next halfhour I want you to treat everyone you meet accordingly." It is a powerful experience that has affected thousands of young people and has profoundly affected the way I look at the world, not to mention other human beings.

And yet...When I am alone, in a rush or otherwise occupied, do I always act in the manner I am teaching? When approached on the street, I make it a rule that I must at least offer "words of kindness." In the words of Rabbi Yizchak, "He who gives a coin to a poor man is rewarded with six blessings, but he who encourages him with friendly words is rewarded with eleven." (*Baba Bathra* 9a) At the same time, I must admit to times when I simply pretend that I don't see. I fear the look in the eye, and what that might mean. How do I understand both my joy at the connections I have made, but also my occasional reluctance to make those connections?

The French Jewish Philosopher Emanuel Levinas offers a helpful way to understand what is happening in each of these encounters. Levinas teaches that the essence of an encounter with another person, especially a face-to-face encounter, is not simply about connection, but at its core is about responsibility, of being commanded.

When I look at a little baby, my response is not only one of affection or happiness; it also encompasses a profound sense of responsibility. Simply by connecting, I have incurred responsibilities. I become commanded. When I first became a parent and took my first gaze into the eyes of my little daughter, I felt a profound sense that I had no choice but to organize my whole life to meet her needs.

When I teach teens to treat all people as though they are made in the image of God, it implies that seeing the Divine image in others is what we most need to do in the world. Levinas takes that value one step further: We must not only seek to recognize the infinite dignity of others but also be prepared for our responsibilities to them — the ways in which they will command us.

We know this instinctually, and it's terrifying. We may try to ignore homeless people not because we fear for our safety or don't consider them made in the image of God. Rather, we fear encountering the homeless because we know they are a valuable and unique image of the Divine. We are afraid that if we look into their eyes in a face-to-face encounter, our sense of responsibility will be so profound that it will be overwhelming.

As Jews, our job is to seek out mitzvot, to feel that commands are not burdens, but privileges and opportunities to connect with God. We are at our best when we do not avoid, but actually seek those opportunities for connection, as well as the responsibilities that inevitably follow.

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