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Rav Kook: In His Image and Human Dignity

(Midot HaRa'aya, Kavod, piska #1)

“When the obligation to honor God (*kevod Shamayim*) is grasped in an enlightened manner, it raises the worth of man and the worth of all creatures, filling them with largeness of spirit combined with genuine humility... It is for this reason that the sages declared that the dignity of every person (*kavod habriyot*) is so important that it supersedes a negative precept of the Torah (Berachot 19b). Thus, we learn that an enlightened conception of *kevod Shamayim* engenders as its beneficent by-product the principle of human dignity.” (Midot HaRa'aya, Kavod, piska #1)

In the above passage, Rav Kook addresses the concept of *kavod*—honor or dignity—and teaches that the honor and dignity we must ascribe to every human being has its source in the honor and dignity that stem from God Himself. It is noteworthy that the Torah begins not with mitzvot, but with the creation of humanity: “*Be’tzelem Elokim*”—man was created in the image of God (Bereshit 1:27). Everything else follows from this profound truth.

Every human face I encounter—including my own reflected in the mirror—bears divine fingerprints. The *kavod* intrinsic to God is, therefore, intrinsic to every human being.

THE LAW OF KAVOD HABRIYOT

The Talmud takes the spiritual concept of *kavod habriyot* and gives it practical expression

in halachic terms. A striking passage reveals Judaism’s radical commitment to human dignity: “Human dignity is so great that it overrides negative commandments in the Torah” (Berachot 19b). It is breathtaking to consider that within a legal system centered on divine law, human dignity can, at times, supersede explicit prohibitions.

KAVOD HABRIYOT AND THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

The notion of *kavod habriyot* is rooted in the belief that every Jew bears the imprint of



Rabbi Hershel Schachter

tzelem Elokim, the divine image. Rabbi Herschel Schachter, the eminent posek of Yeshiva University, cites the Meiri’s introduction to his commentary on the Talmud, where he quotes a Midrash describing the two tablets brought down by Moshe from Mount Sinai. Each tablet contained five commandments, arranged in parallel.

The first commandment, which establishes the existence of God, parallels the sixth, the prohibition against murder. The connection, Rav Schachter explains, lies in the fact that every human being is endowed

with a spark of Godliness. To take a human life is, in effect, to deny the reality of God. This idea forms the basis of *kavod habriyot*. (*YUTorah, Tircha D'Tzibbur, Kavod Habriyot and Kavod HaMeit*)

RAV CHAIM SHMULEVITZ'S SHMUESS

Rav Chaim Shmulevitz, famed for his powerful *shmuessen* (mussar talks) in the Mir Yeshiva of Jerusalem, addressed the subject of *kavod habriyot* with exquisite sensitivity. In one memorable address, delivered orally to his students, he began by citing the opening verses of Sefer Devarim. Moshe Rabbeinu, nearing the end of his life, prepares to rebuke the Jewish people. He alludes to the sin of the Golden Calf and the episode of the spies who delivered an evil report.

Strikingly, Moshe mentions neither sin explicitly. This seems puzzling. Would it not have been more effective to state the offenses clearly? Rashi provides a powerful answer: Moshe avoided naming the sins outright “*mipnei kevodan shel Yisrael*”—in order to preserve the dignity of the Jewish people (Rashi, Devarim 1:1).

In other words, even when delivering rebuke, Moshe carefully measured his words so as not to shame the people unnecessarily. The dignity of each individual—and of the community as a whole—is sacred. Embarrassment, even in the service of moral instruction, must be minimized whenever possible. (*Artscroll, Sichos Mussar, trans. Klugman and Scheinman, pp. 240–241*)

Rav Chaim then shared one of his most startling examples of *kavod habriyot*, drawn from the story of Bilaam. God Himself protected the dignity of even a person as wicked as Bilaam, described by the Sages as the patriarch of evil (see Avot 5:19 and Rabbeinu Yonah).

Rashi notes that the donkey who rebuked Bilaam died immediately afterward, so that



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people would not point and say, “This is the donkey that rebuked Bilaam and left him speechless.” Allowing the donkey to remain alive would have perpetuated Bilaam’s humiliation, which would have violated the principle of *kavod habriyot*. Therefore, it died. (*Ibid., p. 241*)

Finally, Rav Chaim emphasized a crucial point—perhaps the most important of all, particularly in our daily interactions. *Kavod habriyot* does not merely require refraining from insulting or degrading others. One is obligated



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to actively enhance and magnify the honor of one's fellow human being. We must recognize the immense potential inherent in every person. A human being, created in the image of God, can reach heights far beyond our imagination. It is this inherent loftiness that obligates us to the highest standard of *kavod habriyot*. (*Ibid*, pp. 242-243)

REB ARYEH BEAUTIFIES A MITZVAH

A beautiful story is told about the tzaddik of Jerusalem, Rav Aryeh Levin, which captures this lesson vividly. In the days following Yom Kippur, Rav Aryeh went to purchase an etrog for Sukkot. Like many Jerusalemites, he went to Meah Shearim to carefully select a prized fruit.

Rav Aryeh entered a shop, the shopkeeper showed him an etrog, and Rav Aryeh glanced at it briefly and asked to buy it. He paid and hurried out. A young man who witnessed the scene was surprised. Unlike others who examined numerous etrogim for the slightest

blemish, Rav Aryeh had purchased the first one he was shown.

The young man followed him and asked respectfully, "Why does everyone carefully inspect many etrogim, while you, Rav Aryeh, took only a quick look and rushed out?"

"You ask a good question, my precious boy," Rav Aryeh replied. "Everyone knows that there are two mitzvot the Torah commands us to beautify. One is the etrog, as it says, 'Take for yourselves a fruit of a beautiful tree.' The other is 'vehadarta pnei zaken'—to honor the elderly.

"I had to decide which mitzvah should take precedence. I am on my way to a dental office to retrieve dentures belonging to an elderly man in a nursing home. Without them, he cannot eat properly. If I lingered over the etrog, I might miss the bus and delay returning his teeth. God willing, he will be able to eat his meal tonight with dignity, like a proper human being."

With that, Rav Aryeh apologized and rushed off to catch the bus. (*Tablet*, *Reb Aryeh's Erog, Haim Be'er*)

Rav Aryeh teaches a profound lesson in sensitivity. When weighing competing mitzvot, he determined that preserving a person's dignity and self-worth takes precedence over ritual beautification. The inner beauty of the human soul, created in God's image, demands our utmost care.

CHAIM THE MISFIT

The following humorous story sheds light on the importance of valuing every individual.

In a small Eastern European shtetl, the community faced a dilemma. The Torah portion containing the *tochacha*—the rebukes and curses—was approaching, and no one wished to be called up for that aliyah. Even the rabbi and the *baal koreh*, who traditionally received it, declined. The congregation regarded it as a bad omen to recite blessings over such harsh

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verses.

After much deliberation, the leaders devised a plan. They would ask Chaim, the town misfit, who rarely attended synagogue, to take the aliyah. They even offered him a few rubles to ensure he would come and accept. Chaim readily agreed.

On Shabbat morning, prayers began, but Chaim was nowhere to be seen. Anxiety mounted as the service progressed. The Torah was taken out, and still he had not arrived. Suddenly, just as panic set in, the door burst open and Chaim ran inside.

"I'm here!" he announced. "Ready for my aliyah!"

The rabbi approached him and asked, "Why are you so late?"

Chaim replied, "Do you think you're the only synagogue reading the *tochacha* today? This is my third Torah reading this morning."

Perhaps this humorous vignette reminds us to ask ourselves whether we truly recognize the *tzelem Elokim* in every person—even those we are tempted to dismiss.

LIFE LESSONS

- When we disagree with others, we must never allow differences of opinion to become dislike of the person.
- Learn to perceive and be sensitive to the *tzelem Elokim* present in every human being.
- Change something in your home to make it kinder and more welcoming—a place where every guest feels valued and respected. ■



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