

Or Hamidbar – A Jewish Approach to Human Rights

Rabbi David Lazar, June 11, 2020

1. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), p. 44

Culture is best seen not as complexes of concrete behavior patterns — customs, usages, traditions, habit clusters — as has, by and large, been the case up to now, but as a set of control mechanisms — plans, recipes, rules, instructions (what computer engineers call “programs”) — for the governing of behavior.

2. Genesis 1:26-27

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כְּדְמוּתֵנוּ וַיְרִדוּ בְדִגְתַּת הַיָּם וּבַעֲוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבַבְּהֵמָה וּבְכָל־הָאָרֶץ וּבְכָל־הַרֹמֵשׂ הָרֶמֶשׂ עַל־הָאָרֶץ: וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצַלְמֵ אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא אֹתָם:

And God said, “Let us make humanity/*adam* in our image, after our likeness. They shall rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth, and all the creeping things that creep on earth.”

And God created humanity in God’s image, in the image of God, God created **him**; male and female God created **them**.

3. Babylonian Talmud, *Eruvin* 18a

Rabbi Abbahu raised a contradiction between the verses: On the one hand it is written: “Male and female, God created them,” in the plural, and on the other hand it is written: “So God created man in God’s own image, for in the image of God, God created him” (Genesis 1:27), in the singular.

At first, the thought entered God’s mind to create two, and ultimately, only one was actually created.

4. Mishnah, *Sandhedrin* 4:5

How did they admonish witnesses in capital cases?

They brought them in and admonished them, [saying], “Perhaps you will say something that is only a supposition or hearsay or secondhand, or even from a trustworthy man. Or perhaps you do not know that we shall check you with examination and inquiry?”

Know, moreover, that capital cases are not like non-capital cases: in non-capital cases a man may pay money and so make atonement, but in capital cases the witness is answerable for the blood of him [that is wrongfully condemned] and the blood of his descendants [that should have been born to him] to the end of the world.”

For so have we found it with Cain that murdered his brother, for it says, “The bloods of your brother cry out” (Gen. 4:10). It doesn’t say, “The blood/*dam* of your brother”, but rather “The bloods/*damei* of your brother” meaning his blood and the blood of his descendants...

Therefore, humans were created singly, to teach you that whoever destroys a single soul [Printed editions add: of Israel], Scripture accounts it as if he had destroyed an entire world; and whoever saves one soul [Printed editions add: of Israel], Scripture accounts it as if she had saved an entire world.

And for the sake of peace among people, that one should not say to his or her fellow, "My parent 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 God, for [in our world] one stamps out many coins with one die, and they are all alike, but the King, the King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be God, stamped each person with the seal of Adam, and not one of them is like his or her fellow.

Therefore each and every one is obliged to say, "For my sake the world was created."

5. Babylonian Talmud, Taanit 20a-20b

Our Rabbis have taught: A person should always be soft like a reed and not hard like a cedar.

It happened that R. Eleazar the son of R. Simeon was coming from Migdal Gedor on his donkey, and he was feeling very happy because he had learned a lot of Torah. He passed by a very ugly man who said to him "Peace be upon you." R. Eleazar did not answer. He said: "Good for nothing! How ugly this man is!" Then he asked him, "Are all the people of your city as ugly as you are?" The man said: I do not know, but go and tell the artist who made me, how ugly is the vessel which you have made."

When R. Eleazar realized he had done something wrong, he got down from his donkey and bowed in front of the man and asked for forgiveness. [The man] said to him: "I will not forgive you until you go to the artist that created me and tell him: how ugly is the vessel that you created."

R. Eleazar walked behind [the other man] until he reached [the man's] city. When the people who lived in the city came out to meet him and said "Peace be upon you rabbi and teacher," the ugly man asked them "Who are you calling Rabbi?" They replied: 'The man who is walking behind you.' He said to them: 'If this man is a rabbi, may there not be any more like him in Israel!'

They asked him: Why? He replied: "He did such and such to me." They said to him: "Nevertheless, forgive him, for he is a man of great Torah learning." The man replied: 'For your sakes I will forgive him, but only if he does not make a habit of acting this way.'

Immediately, R. Eleazar son of R. Simeon went to the *beit midrash* (study house) and taught: "A man should always be soft like a reed and not hard like a cedar."

And for this reason the reed merited that of it should be made a quill for the writing of the Torah scroll, *tefillin* and *mezuzot*.

6. Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 133b

Abba Sha'ul says, " 'And I will glorify Him [i.e. God]" [Exodus 15:2]--This means "like God.' Just as God is gracious and merciful, so too should you should be gracious and merciful."

7. Rabbi Shmuel Yitzhaki – Rashi (1040-1105, France)

This means "like God" -- And the language of "And I will glorify Him" is like "I and Him" -- I will make myself like God by attaching myself to God's ways.

8. Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaCohen Kook (Latvia-Palestine, 1865-1935), For the Perplexed of the Generation 1:1

That man is created "in the image of God" is the basis of the Torah. The root-meaning of "the image" is that complete freedom we find in man, by virtue of which he possesses free will. If there were no free will, there would be no place for Torah, as Maimonides writes in The Laws of Repentance. In this sense, free will is the basis of the Torah from a practical perspective. Now the knowledge that man is made "in the image of God" comes to teach that complete, perfect freedom will must exist [as well] in the true, perfect Being, may His name be blessed. This is the intellectual basis of the entire Torah upon which rests all actions.