

# **B'RESHIT 5775**

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One of the most important things we learn in this week's *parasha*, *B'reishit*, is that every single human being is made in the image of God. In the very first chapter of the very first book of the Bible, we read in verse 27:

וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ, בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ: זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה, בָּרָא אֹתָם.

So God created humanity in God's own image, in the image of God they were created; male and female God created them

The implications of this reality are among the most important of all biblical truths. It means that when we encounter another human being, we are encountering our beloved Creator. Yeshua teaches this by his very being, as the flawless manifestation of God's reality (*b'tzelem atzmut*). He taught us this in his deeds, healing and teaching pious people, sinners, Jews, Gentiles, Women, men, anyone who would listen and come for healing. And he teaches us in his charge to us: whatever you do for the least of these, you do for me (Matthew 25:40). Yeshua makes it unambiguously clear that what we do or don't do for others reflects on our relationship with God (See Matthew 22:36-40). Our all being made in the image of God I believe is the foundation for his teaching to us that we should love our enemies, walk the extra mile, and give our shirt as well as our coat to one who asks (see Matthew 5:40-48 and Luke 6:27-36). Our Sages taught similarly radical statements concerning the importance of the dignity of people.

We learn the following in b.*B'rakhot* 19b-20a:

תא שמע גדול כבוד הבריות שדוחה את לא תעשה שבתורה

Come listen: So great is human dignity that it supersedes a negative commandment in the Torah.

This statement is one of the most beautiful teachings in the Talmud. The opening announcement (תא שמע) "listen up," is meant to signify that something important is about to be said. The phrase (כבוד הבריות) human dignity, literally "weight of creation-or having been created" is a touchstone for all subsequent ethical discourse in *halakhic* language. And one of the most important meanings of this statement is that regardless of what a person does or who they are, they have dignity owed to them by virtue of their being created by God. I would argue that this statement is the great indicator of ethics being at the heart of the *halakhic* process, and one of the reasons I find *halakhic* life in Yeshua to be the most joyful and holistic way of being a Messianic Jew in the world. With Yeshua's core values at the center of our way of being we can encounter each mitzvah application as an opportunity to honor God and one another more explicitly. Yeshua models and informs that process in a way that brings *halakha* to its fullest potential.

Another example of the importance of כבוד הבריות can be found in three places in Talmud Bavli, b.*Sotah* 10b, b.*B'rakhot* 43b, and b.*Bava Metzia* 59a. Here, we learn:

אמר רבי יוחנן משום ר' שמעון בן יוחי נוח לו לאדם שיפיל עצמו לתוך כבשן האש ואל ילבין פני חבירו ברבים

Rabbi Yochanan said in the name of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai: It is better for one [person] to cast oneself into a fiery furnace rather than to publicly shame/humiliate one's neighbor.

Now this is another fairly extreme statement that requires unpacking to fully appreciate all of the implications and nuances. I have learning prepared for the community on this text and how it relates to Yeshua's teachings that, God willing, I will have an opportunity to share with you all and we can learn them together at some point soon. In the meantime, here are a few important points to note. Many rabbis say many different things throughout the Talmud. Any time you see the same quote appear numerous times, you can rest assured that it is meant to carry some significant weight. Furthermore, while the language sounds hyperbolic, there are some fairly prominent figures who include this statement in their *halakhic* codes. This means that these early sages meant for us to avoid publicly humiliating people as much as, and even more than, eating forbidden foods or publicly violating Shabbat.

I am convinced that no such statements would have been made without the fundamental underpinnings of Genesis 1:27. The upshot is this, undermining the dignity of another human being is an affront to God regardless of their status, gender, race, or behavior. This is fundamental to Judaism even without recognition of Yeshua in the conscious mix. Once we add Yeshua into the conscious mix it is even more pronounced. God drove the point of human dignity home in coming among us as a human being; one who came into contact with those who were impure on every level and gave everyone an invitation to the kingdom. All they had to do was choose life. In Yeshua, God brings it down to a choice. God chose to create us and gives us the power to choose to live consciously aware that we are made in God's image...to choose to model our lives after Yeshua.

So...how do we model that choice?

What do you think would happen if, this week, you thanked everyone who does something for you, however big or small? If someone opens a door for you, offers to get you something, even if you turn it down...thank them. Even if it is a person who you normally find annoying or rude, thank them for the good they do. Do this even if the person won't hear you, like if someone allows you to make a left turn, say thank you. Do this even if it's the person's job to help you. There are a number of layers of כבוד הבריות in operation here. For starters, you may find yourself thanking conservatives, liberals, LGBTQ spectrum people, Christians, Muslims, Jews, family members who you can't stand, family members who can't stand you, people in the community you find annoying, people in the community who find you annoying, etc. In other words, we

may begin to contextualize our discomforts, prejudices, hurt, and judgment with the recognition that no one is a lesser or different species. Everyone is made in the image of God. I'm telling you no one comes closer to God or holiness by being made to feel like they are less than human. And no one can appropriately judge another anyway without being willing to lay aside prejudices long enough to encounter the unique humanity of the person in front of you. A simple way to start that process is just being indiscriminately thankful of those who do big and small things for you. Again, this is only a beginning, but it's a helpful one.

Here's a potentially more difficult one, but really important: Take our synagogue decorum policy seriously as a matter of *כבוד הבריות* - human dignity. Non-sequitur?! Not really. In all sincerity, there are also multiple layers of the issue of human dignity the factor in to taking this decorum guideline seriously. I will focus on the personal electronics portions of the guidelines for the sake of our discussion. The other things on the decorum policy are important, but it's the electronics issue that is the most pervasive. I know us to be a community who cares about one another, and that's why I feel safe bringing up something that may be a challenge for us, but that I know we can do.

There are copies on the literature table, and posted on a laminated stand as well. (See decorum policy). The use of screens are helpful tools for learning from others who are not in the room, interacting with others who are not in the room, sharing experiences of things that happened that aren't in the room, making plans for things that will happen when you're not in the room etc. All of that is super useful and helpful in general, but there's a common feature that makes their use antithetical to Shabbat and holidays, and our time together here on those days particularly: Personal electronic devices take our attention away from the people and places around us in the moment. For another thing, their un-checked use communicates dependency on technology for social interaction. It undermines our dignity as human beings with free will to behave as if we are incapable of putting our phones away for a few hours to interact with the world and people around us in the moment. There are people in this community who do not use electronic media on Shabbat. It is disrespectful to establish a communal culture that requires people to break their own Shabbat observance through being asked to engage with the technology they set aside on these holy days. It is posted when we walk through those doors, "give your phones a rest." The decorum guidelines are standing up on the literature table. There are copies on the literature table. Our community's rabbinical leaders and elected board of directors have made this a policy. To actively, consistently, disregard these guidelines does violation to *כבוד הבריות*.

There's a flip-side to this as well: It will be impossible to healthily and lovingly hold each other accountable to keeping these standards without the value of human dignity at the heart of it. This is true of all *halakhic* matters as I mentioned earlier. It will not work to be disrespectful to

each other either in asking people to follow these guidelines or by treating those who do the asking as if they are being holier-than-thou just by adhering to them. To take something that is normally good or benign and to forbid its use in a limited way on rare occasions gives us low-stake practice in honoring our differences while agreeing to share a limitation in respect for each other. Not everyone is here right now. That means that there are people who have been historically ignoring these guidelines who are going to pull out their phones/laptops etc. and we'll have to say, "I'm sorry, but how about we share that at another time." We can point them to the guidelines. It's a good way to practice not being judgmental while establishing shared norms, to put **כבוד הבריות** ahead of our inclinations to be judgmental on one side or defensive on the other.

If you're interested in knowing MJRC standards and/or how your rabbis view these things in a more global Shabbat practice, i.e. beyond just the limited guidelines of the few hours we have together here, please ask us. I'd encourage you to ask each of us as well in forming your practice. Each of us probably draw exceptions in different places from one another, that's the sometimes frustrating, but ultimately beauty of practical halakha. There are so many nuances, and each situation provides new ways to ask how we can best honor God and one another in the nitty-gritty details of life. Please feel free to ask us about this as well as any other aspect of the guidelines.

God created us in God's image. God rested on the seventh day and called us as Israel to do the same. Navigating the uniqueness/holiness of our identity with the universal dignity that is the birthright of every human being can be a difficult task, but it also brings joy. The joy of encountering God and Messiah in everyone you meet. In a sense, all our vocation as Jewish followers of Yeshua can be narrowed down to that task, and expanded out into all of the details of our lives. May we take **כבוד הבריות** seriously and joyfully as we become conformed more and more into the image of the Word made flesh, Messiah Yeshua, the Son of God, in whom we come into the fullness of our humanity.