

כבוד הבריאות - Human Dignity

ויברא אלהים את האדם בצלמו בצלם אלהים ברא אתו זכר ונקבה ברא אתם: בראשית א:כז

“And God created the human in God’s very image, in the image of God, God created the human, male and female God created them.” Genesis 1:27

What does the image of God mean?

What is added by the repetitiveness in the verse?

What does it tell us about the status of men and women?

What do you think the relationship of this verse is to the tradition of human rights?

To the declaration of independence’s ringing phrase: “We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal”?

It is interesting to examine Rashi’s ¹comment on the opening verse of Genesis. Rashi quotes a rabbinic midrash:

רש"י בראשית פרק א פסוק א

בראשית - אמר רבי יצחק לא היה צריך להתחיל [את] התורה אלא (שמות יב ב) מהחודש הזה לכם, שהיא מצוה ראשונה שנצטוו [בה] ישראל, ומה טעם פתח בבראשית, משום (תהלים קיא ו) כח מעשיו הגיד לעמו לתת להם נחלת גוים, שאם יאמרו אומות העולם לישראל לסטים אתם, שכבשתם ארצות שבעה גוים, הם אומרים להם כל הארץ של הקב"ה היא, הוא בראה ונתנה לאשר ישר בעיניו, ברצונו נתנה להם וברצונו נטלה מהם ונתנה לנו:

“R. Isaac commented: the Torah should have begun with the verse in Exodus, “This month shall be for you the first month,” (12:2) since that is the first commandment given to all of Israel. Why then did it begun with the genesis of the world? “The strength of Your deeds You declared to Your people, to give them the inheritance of nations.” (Psalms 111:6) So that if the nations of the world will say that the people Israel are robbers since they conquered the land of the seven nations, the people Israel would be able to respond, “All the earth is God’s. God created it, and God gave it to whomever God thought worthy. When God wished, God gave it to them; when God wished, God took it from them and gave it to us.”

What does this say about what is central to the Torah?

What does this say about national rights? about universal human rights?

The Torah itself at times differentiates between Jewish rights and the rights of others.

דברים כג:כא

(כ) לא תשיך לאחיך נשך כסף נשך אכל נשך כל דבר אשר נשך:

(כא) לנכרי תשיך ולאחיך לא תשיך למען יברכך ה' אלהיך בכל משלח ידך על הארץ

אשר אתה בא שמה לרשתה:

You shall not take interest on loans to your kinsman, whether money or food or anything else that may be considered interest. You may deduct interest from the foreigner, but do not take interest from your kinsman that Adonai thy God may

1. Rashi: Acronym of Rabbi Solomon the son of Isaac (Shlomo Yitzchaqi) , 1040-1105, France. The most frequently consulted Jewish medieval Bible and Talmud commentator.

bless thee in all your undertakings in that land that you are about to enter and possess.

(Deuteronomy 23:20-21)

What is the relation of the Jewish community and the universal here?

Are there special obligations that one owes to one's own community?

Are there rights which one sees as due one's compatriots but not others?

On the other hand, it is interesting to see how the rabbis of the mishnah use the biblical verse describing the human as created in God's image:

The United States Supreme Court is deciding a series of cases regarding the rights of detainees. The United States Congress and the President of the United States have argued that the rights guaranteed in the Constitution including the right of habeas corpus apply only to citizens of the United States not to enemy combatants. Similarly, the administration has argued that American rights do not extend to foreigners held by American forces outside the territory of the United States. Compare these positions to the variety of points of view offered in these texts.

משנה סנהדרין ד:ה

לפיכך נברא אדם יחידי ללמדך שכל המאבד נפש אחד מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו איבד עולם מלא וכל המקיים נפש אחת² מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו קיים עולם מלא ומפני שלום הבריות שלא יאמר אדם לחבירו אבא גדול מאביך ושלא יהו מינין אומרים הרבה רשויות בשמים ולהגייד 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.

The human being [Heb.: Adam] was created, at first, as a single person to teach us that destroying a single life is the destruction of a whole world and the saving of a single life is the saving of a whole world; also, so that no one should say to another: my ancestry is greater than yours; and to teach us that there are not numerous realms of divinity. It additionally teaches how great is the Holy One, for a human being creates a mold from which to fashion many coins with a single stamp and each one is exactly like the other, but the supreme sovereign, the Holy One, has stamped each human being with the stamp of the first human, still no one human being is like another. Therefore, every person can say: the world was created for me.

Why do the rabbis refer back to Genesis?

How has the teaching of Genesis been expanded here?

What does this mishna teach about human dignity?

2. Printed versions of the Talmud sometimes add the word "Israel", i.e. one who saves the life of a Jew saves the whole world. The manuscript readings simply say, "a person."