

The Notion of Human Dignity in Jewish Tradition

By

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Since the General Assembly of the UN adopted “The Universal Declaration of Human Rights” in 1948, great attention has been paid to the place of human dignity in Jewish tradition. As Hershey H. Friedman points out in his article “Human Dignity and the Jewish Tradition”,¹ one of the main architects of the Universal Declaration, Rene Samuel Cassin, asserted that the idea of human dignity emerges from Scripture (Hershey refers to Cassin’s article “From the Ten Commandments to the Rights of Man”²). The notion of dignity (in Hebrew, *kavod*) is deeply embedded in the Jewish view of human and divine-human relationships.

Two Biblical references will show how significant *kavod* is in Scripture. In the Genesis story that opens the Bible, on the sixth day of creation the Torah tells us that all human beings are created “in the image of God” (*b’tzelem Elohim*). Rabbinic teaching interprets this expression to mean that all people are deserving of being treated with dignity. No-one is more worthy or deserving of respect than anyone else. We all share equally in our creative source. In the tractate of the Mishnah entitled *Avot*, 3:14, the 2nd century rabbi Akiba is quoted as saying, Beloved is man for he [and woman] was created in the image of God; he is even more beloved in that it was made known to him that he was created in the image of God, as it is written: “For in the image of God He made man” (Genesis 9:8). That is, *the awareness we have* that, according to God’s report in Torah, each of us is created in God’s image is the true act of grace on God’s part, because it enables us to recognise within each other the shared humanity that enables us to act towards each other with respect.

This passage from Torah has inspired a sense of human dignity among sages and scholars throughout Jewish history, since the emergence of Rabbinic Judaism 2000 years ago. Rabbi Louis Jacobs discusses the importance of human dignity in the life and teachings of Rabbi Nathan Tz’vi Finkel, head of the Yeshivah of Slobodka in the early 1900s. He claims that Finkel derived his great concern for human dignity from Rabbi Akiva’s teaching in *Avot*.³ At the opposite end of the Jewish religious spectrum, the 1999 Statement of Principles of the Union for Reform Judaism in the United States employs the same passage from Genesis to provide the rationale for its religiously motivated concern for human rights and social justice.

The second Biblical text comes from the prophetic section of the Hebrew Bible. In the famous account of Isaiah’s prophetic calling (Isaiah 6), the prophet has a vision of angelic beings (*seraphim*) declaring, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts, the whole earth is filled with His glory (*kavod*).” The Hebrew term translated here as “glory” is in fact the same word used elsewhere for “dignity.” According to a rabbinic tradition, the idea is that when human beings treat one another with respect or honour on earth, this replicates or substantiates God’s holiness in the heavenly realms. A midrash, or rabbinic legend, teaches us that if we seek holiness we shall find it in our imitation of God’s behaviour: just as God heals the sick, so we too must heal the sick; as God cares for the needy, so we should care for the needy; as God redeems those who are captive, so we must redeem those

¹ Hershey H. Friedman, “Human Dignity and the Jewish Tradition”, *Jewish Law*, 2008, accessed Sep 28, 2014, <http://www.jlaw.com/Articles/HumanDignity.pdf> .

² Rene Cassin, “From the Ten Commandments to the Rights of Man”, in *Of Law and Man – Essays in Honor of Haim H. Cohn*, ed. S. Shoham, (New York: Tel Aviv, 1971), accessed Sep 28, 2014, <http://reencassin.over-blog.com/article-from-the-ten-commandments-to-the-rights-of-man-72080499.html>

³ L. Jacobs, “Dignity”, in *What Does Judaism Say About...?*, (New York: Ktav, 1973), 110.

who are captive, and so on. For each of these expressions of human dignity the rabbis find texts in the Bible that illustrate God's role-modelling behaviour. For example, God visits Abraham when he is house-bound following his circumcision (Genesis 17:24, 18:1, reading these verses in juxtaposition). By imitating God's behaviour, we transform God's heavenly holiness into earthly *kavod*.

God's holiness is the model for all human expressions of dignity. The word *kavod* is used in a number of compounds found throughout Jewish literature, each of them imitating the dignity that is due to the divine. These include "dignity due to [all] creatures" (*k'vod habri'ot*), "dignity due to the community" (*k'vod hatzibbur*), "dignity due to one's parents" (*k'vod av va'eim*, found in the Ten Commandments), "dignity due to the majority" (*k'vod harabbim*, respecting the majority ruling), even "dignity due to the Rabbi" (*k'vod harav*). The dead also have dignity, and the rules governing treatment of corpses are often geared to protecting the dignity of the person who was once alive, for example, attending to burial for someone who has no relations to handle the arrangements. The rulings in this area have been so concerned to maintain human dignity – not allowing a corpse to remain unburied – that they allow someone intent on carrying out some other ritual obligation to push aside that obligation in order to see to the burial.⁴

In traditional Jewish law *k'vod Hashem*, the dignity due to God, overrides all other expressions of dignity, including human dignity. That is, the will of God captured in the commandments (*mitzvot*) of Torah cannot be abrogated out of respect for human feelings. However, prescriptions in Jewish law (*halakhah*) which can be shown to rely on expansive rabbinic rulings rather than Torah commandments can more readily be pushed aside for the sake of human dignity. This is especially the case when refraining from a prescribed action will avoid putting others in an embarrassing situation. For example, it is not appropriate to display excessive piety in public since this may embarrass others who are not so pious in their behaviour.

Similarly those who are reliant on charitable donations should not have their dignity threatened. The medieval philosopher and jurist Maimonides (12th century) famously created an eight-staged ladder of charitable giving (*tzedakah*). The seventh stage is when both the giver and the recipient are unknown to one another; the eighth and highest stage is to provide a means of livelihood to those in need so they no longer rely on gifts. This scheme is driven by a sense of human dignity.

It is in general not acceptable to put those of limited financial means in an awkward position. Again with regard to funeral customs, the Talmud (Tractate Moed Katan 27a-b, around the year 500CE) teaches,

"Formerly they would bring food to the house of mourners in the following manner: to the rich in baskets of gold and silver, and to the poor in wicker baskets made of peeled willows. The poor were ashamed. The sages [rabbis] therefore determined that all should be provided with food in wicker baskets, out of deference to the poor.... Formerly they would carry out the rich in a cortege and the poor on a common bier. The poor were ashamed. The sages determined therefore that all should be carried out on a bier, in deference to the poor."

The passage goes on to describe how the patrician Rabban Gamliel disregarded his own dignity and willed that his corpse would be dressed in simple shroud. This allowed all the people to follow his lead, thus enabling the dignity of the poor to be protected.

⁴ For this and other examples of the practical application of "human dignity" as a principle in Jewish law, see Friedman, 2008, previously cited.

These examples from the Mishnah, the Talmud and later Jewish writing show that legal practicalities and theological principles are intertwined in a complex manner in Judaism. There is a notion that each human being has an intrinsic dignity that has been implanted within him/her by the Creator at the very origins of humanity. A sense of dignity is bound up with our self-awareness as human beings.

This notion is reiterated by the prophets in the spirit of what Rabbi Dr Leo Baeck (early 20th century) called “ethical monotheism”: “Have we not all one father? Has not one God created us? Why do we deal treacherously every man against his brother...?” (Malachi 2:10). It is developed over the centuries in the Jewish legal and philosophical traditions and given a powerful contemporary expression in the Jewish pursuit of human rights, for example, the significant involvement of Australian Jews in promoting Aboriginal Reconciliation. The Biblical and Rabbinic notions of human dignity have had a profound influence on the writings of the influential social-ethical philosophers Martin Buber and Emanuel Levinas. Thanks to the historical spread of Christianity and Islam across much of the globe, these notions are deeply embedded within human culture. That is true even today, despite the rise of secular materialism on the one hand and militant religious fundamentalism on the other, neither of which value the dignity of the individual.

Human dignity is a fragile notion, as Biblical history and indeed the universal story of humanity show. Jewish tradition has always been aware of this fact. That is one reason why Judaism has felt it so important to tie the theoretical notion of human dignity to practical rulings that confront life in the world with the ethical demands of real human beings, under the aegis of what it identifies as God’s pronounced word.