

**YOM KIPPUR MORNING 5780 - October 9, 2019**  
**Rabbi Jonathan Blake, Westchester Reform Temple**

**The Life-Changing Difference between Honor and Dignity**

Here's a question. What is the most important verse in the Torah?

One of the most famous Rabbis of his time—and of all time—Akiva, who lived in the first and second centuries of the Common Era, reduced the Torah to one essential principle that could guide a person throughout his or her life:

“Love your neighbor as yourself,”<sup>1</sup> Akiva taught, citing the central verse from Leviticus that we will read this afternoon.

“Love your neighbor as yourself” creates a kind of pragmatic social compact, an “I-scratch-your-back-and-you-scratch-mine” approach to life.

The verse assumes that most people operate out of self-interest and can therefore use self-interest to relate to others. If I know what I want for myself, I can apply the same to others and everyone wins.

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<sup>1</sup> Leviticus 19:18.

Akiva often sparred, academically, with a man named Ben Azzai who wasn't even a rabbi but whose opinions are nevertheless venerated. Ben Azzai had a different idea about the most important verse in the Torah. He looked to Genesis, where the Torah teaches that all human beings are made in the image of God and belong equally in the family of humankind.<sup>2</sup>

For Ben Azzai, that we are made in God's image is the key principle of our existence. We tend to the needs of others, not, as Akiva suggested, in the hope that others will reciprocate and tend to *our* needs, but because it is the Godly thing to do. Self-interest plays no role here. We treat each other in accordance with each person's inherent *Dignity*, that God-given spark that makes us human, and which, consequently, implies that no human has any more or less "worth" than any other.

While Akiva's point about loving one's neighbor as oneself is easily understood and applied, the Talmud ultimately favors Ben Azzai's view.

Recognizing the spark of divinity in every human being comprehensively changes our outlook on life. How we treat other people becomes an exercise not in assessing what we would want for *ourselves*, but in imagining the world through

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<sup>2</sup> Paraphrasing Genesis 5:1.

God's eyes, as it were, imagining ourselves as equally God's children. That act of inspired imagination fundamentally changes our relationship to every other person.

Akiva tells us *what* to do—love your neighbor as yourself—but doesn't explain *why*. Ben Azzai cannot tell us *how* to live our lives, but he does tell us that the essential feature of human existence is our inherent Divinity, a quality that we know as *Dignity*.

Most civilizations have not oriented themselves around this quality of Dignity. For most of human history, including the present day, we can observe societies attuned to a quality called *Honor* instead. Although we often use the words “Honor” and “Dignity” interchangeably, their innermost meanings could not be more different. Whereas *Honor* refers to an attribute that one attains, builds, polishes, *Dignity* is inherent, inviolable, God-given.

Now, here's another question. Have you ever wondered why Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr decided to duel in—of all places—Weehawken, New Jersey?

I have.

The answer goes like this. In 1804, dueling was in the process of being outlawed in the northern United States. Both New

York and New Jersey had prohibited the practice. Even Ben Franklin—who was twelve times challenged to a duel himself, and never accepted once—joined the chorus of prominent anti-dueling activists in Revolutionary America.

Hamilton and Burr, like Akiva and Ben Azzai, also often sparred with each other in writing. But Hamilton and Burr didn't keep their beefs academic. Refusing to be dissuaded, even by the law (or by Ben Franklin!), they took their duel to Weehawken because New Jersey was not as aggressive in prosecuting dueling participants. The same site, along the Hudson river, beneath the towering cliffs of the Palisades, hosted eighteen known duels between 1700 and 1845.

In other words, in New Jersey, it was well known, you could easily get away with murder.

In fact, Aaron Burr did. After surviving the duel, Burr was indicted for murder in both New York and New Jersey, but the charges were later dismissed or resulted in acquittal.

It took the better part of another hundred years to abolish the practice in America. It seems that the Civil War induced sufficient fatigue from bloodshed to bring about an end to dueling, once and for all.

But dueling is just one symptom of a larger phenomenon called “Honor Culture.” *Honor cultures* emerge when a centralized state authority is either absent, or deemed illegitimate, or weak, and when people feel materially vulnerable. Under these conditions, people take offense easily, feel threatened quickly, and engage in higher rates of pre-emptive aggression and vigilante justice to settle their disputes. They go to great lengths to demonstrate physical bravery and avoid appearing weak.<sup>3</sup>

In the worst-case scenarios, this pre-emptive aggression develops into bloody feuds enveloping whole families, gangs, or tribes.

Whereas in Europe, the privilege of fighting duels was restricted to aristocratic gentlemen, in America, it tended to be politicians, newspaper editors, attorneys—men whose professions required them to make public remarks or whose public reputations were deemed of the utmost importance—who most often received and accepted challenges to fight.

In those days, elected officials couldn’t settle their scores over social media, so guns would have to do. Andrew Jackson challenged his enemies, real and perceived, to duels, more

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<sup>3</sup> I commend to you McCaffree, Kevin. “Honor, Dignity, Victim: A Tale of Three Moral Cultures” (2018), published online at [https://www.skeptic.com/reading\\_room/honor-dignity-victim-cultures/](https://www.skeptic.com/reading_room/honor-dignity-victim-cultures/), as well as Pinker, Steven. 2011. *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*. New York: Viking; Black, Donald. 2011. *Moral Time*. New York: Oxford University Press.

than 100 of them. (One opponent, Charles Dickinson, whom Jackson challenged after Dickinson accused him of reneging on a \$2,000 horse bet, even died, a fact that did not prevent Jackson from winning the presidency several years later!)

Gradually, along with dueling, many other hallmarks of Honor Culture in America have waned. But they have not faded away entirely. Consider:

The prevalence of dueling in American history gives us some insight into this country's obsession with guns and the phenomenon of the now ubiquitous mass shooting, in which a grievance is "resolved," so to speak, in the most horrific way imaginable. In the South, where Honor Culture has its deepest roots in the US, high school students are more likely to bring a weapon to school, and there have been more than twice as many school shootings per capita.<sup>4</sup>

Or consider this: It used to be the case that a man who refused a challenge to duel was humiliated publicly with a uniquely Southern form of punishment called "posting." A man who refused to fight would find his name smeared as a coward on a written statement hung in public places and published in newspapers. Nowadays, character assassination

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<sup>4</sup> Osterman, L. L. & Brown, R. P., "Culture of Honor and Violence Against the Self," 37(12) *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 1611-1623 (2011), available online at [https://www.academia.edu/1069747/Culture\\_of\\_Honor\\_and\\_Violence\\_Against\\_the\\_Self](https://www.academia.edu/1069747/Culture_of_Honor_and_Violence_Against_the_Self)

has moved online where it can inflict exponentially more damage.

Honor Culture posits that a person's worth derives from his station in society, his family name, his public reputation, his wealth, his accomplishments. Such a culture begins with the presumption that "honor" is something one earns, builds, hones, and protects. Consequently, people who occupied lower rungs on the social ladder—people of color, women, the poor, ordinary laborers, the infirm or differently abled—never got caught up in having to defend their honor, because, according to the assumptions of Honor Culture, they didn't have any to begin with.

Have we really come that far? How much moral progress have we really made? How much effort, how much emotional and material investment, do we *continue* to place in achievement, clout, social stature?

The college bribery scandal that blew up this spring suggests that we have not come far from the idea that wealth and privilege, celebrity and influence, status and attainment, academic and athletic credentials, social rank and reputation, matter more to many than, say, equality, fairness, and human dignity.

In such a culture, should any of us be surprised at the shockingly high rates of students going off to college with anxiety disorders, and the similarly high rates of adults of all ages reporting feeling that their lives lack purpose, that their careers fall short of their hopes for personal and professional joy and contentment, that their minds feel overfull and their hearts feel empty? In such a culture, should any of us be surprised at how easily we substitute net worth for self-worth?

One of my favorite stories begins with a ship sailing through the Atlantic on a cold and foggy day. Suddenly a voice is heard from somewhere out on the water. It is a cry for help. The captain runs to the side of his ship, only to realize that the fog is so thick he is unable to see exactly where the cry is coming from. But he can hear a frightened voice yelling, “Save me; I am in a boat that has sprung a leak. Save me!”

The captain quickly grabs a bullhorn and shouts in the general direction of the boat. “We are trying to get to you. What is your position? What is your position?”

The voice answers back, “Senior Vice President of a bank! Senior Vice President of a bank!”

Our inherent, human dignity is the anchor that keeps us moored to our true self-worth, and connects us to our fellow



humanity, and, ultimately, as Ben Azzai taught, to God. Anything else will ultimately fail us.

The late author David Foster Wallace tapped into this truth when he said:

“If you worship money and things — if they are where you tap real meaning in life — then you will never have enough. Never feel you have enough. It’s the truth. Worship your own body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly, and when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally plant you.... Worship power — you will feel weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to keep the fear at bay. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart — you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out. And so on.”<sup>5</sup>

*Dignity* is *not* the same as “honor” or “respect.” We can command *respect* in accordance with our positions of authority in the workplace, or our role as parents, grandparents, elders, and so on.

Society confers *honor* on us for having attended this or that university, or having won public recognition for our

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<sup>5</sup> *This Is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life.* New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2009.

accomplishments, or for our athletic prowess, or artistic talent, for our grades, or our income, or our philanthropy, or our social influence.

But, usually, when we say, “I want respect,” what we really mean is, “Treat me with dignity.” “Treat me as your equal in the eyes of God, because I am.”

It is concern for human dignity that motivates the Torah to build in societal protections for the vulnerable, the marginalized: the widow, the orphan, the stranger, the poor, the elderly, the infirm.<sup>6</sup>

It is concern for human dignity that moves the Torah to demand that the corners of the field are left unharvested and fallen sheaves of grain uncollected, so that the needy could come and take under the cover of nightfall, without having to demean themselves by asking for a handout.<sup>7</sup>

It is concern for human dignity that prompts the Torah to provide rules of ethical treatment of the other in warfare, even of women captured in battle.<sup>8</sup>

It is concern for human dignity that causes the Torah to prohibit insulting the deaf, or placing a stumbling block

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<sup>6</sup> Cf., among many other verses, Exodus 22:21-24, Lev. 19:34 & 25-35, Deut. 10:18, 14:28-29, 15:7-11, 24:17-18, 26:12, 27:19, and 31:12.

<sup>7</sup> Deut. 24:19.

<sup>8</sup> Deut. 21:10-14.

before the blind<sup>9</sup>... and remember, we're talking about more than physical disabilities here. *Everyone* has blind spots; everyone has tones to which we are deaf.

It is concern for human dignity that has the Torah insist that the young and able-bodied rise and show deference before the aged.<sup>10</sup>

It is concern for human dignity that informs the Torah's rule against accepting a laborer's clothing in pawn for services rendered, asking rhetorically, in the Torah's memorable phrasing: "What else is he supposed to sleep in?"<sup>11</sup>

It is concern for human dignity that led the Rabbis to teach that to embarrass another person in public is tantamount to having shed blood.<sup>12</sup>

My friend and teacher Rabbi Shai Held summarizes: "[T]he Bible cannot inform us precisely what legal protections are needed to prevent the exploitation of the vulnerable in our times, but it can tell us—if we listen to it, it *\*does\** tell us—that who we are as a society depends to a great extent on how we answer that question.... The Bible offers no more forceful message than this one:

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<sup>9</sup> Lev. 19:14.

<sup>10</sup> Lev. 19:32.

<sup>11</sup> Exodus 22:7; *cf.* also Deut. 24:17, which legislates against taking a widow's garment in pawn.

<sup>12</sup> Babylonian Talmud, *Bava Metzia* 58b-59a.

people on the margins matter, and their wellbeing is the responsibility of each of us, and of all of us.”<sup>13</sup>

The Bible envisions a *Dignity Culture*, a culture that puts the inherent, God-given dignity of the other as its foremost concern.

I believe that the safeguarding of human dignity is at the heart of America’s great promise, too. The Declaration of Independence, which declared “all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights,” hints at this, even if the transformation from Honor Culture to Dignity Culture in this country has come about slowly and painfully, and has a long way yet to go.

After all, our founding documents do *not* recognize the inherent dignity of enslaved Africans, or women, or, for that matter, non-landowners.

“The moral arc of the universe is long,” said Martin Luther King, “but it bends toward justice.” This is more than just wishful thinking; I believe that the centuries-old American story is, on the whole, a story of moral progress. And yet, now, again, Dignity is under siege, as our country swings perilously away from this

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<sup>13</sup> From Held’s forthcoming book, as yet untitled/unpublished. Posted by the author on Facebook, July 19, 2019.

guiding principle toward old ideas about Honor and meritocracy.

On this Day of Atonement, I implore us to make the restoration of human Dignity our foremost Jewish obligation in the coming year.

We must reassert the divinity that inheres within every human being, irrespective of gender, ethnicity, age, skin color, sexual orientation, religion, or country of origin.

Let this restoration of human dignity be our *Teshuvah*, our turning back to the essence of our humanity and the essential call of our faith.

Today, in this sanctuary, sit dozens of congregants who have quietly undertaken this effort with extraordinary diligence and joy.

On Yom Kippur, three years ago, we publicly affirmed that WRT had approached the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society—HIAS—with the intention to help settle a family of refugees. Ten days later, during Sukkot, 125 WRT volunteers showed up for our first organizing meeting. By Chanukah, the State Department approved Westchester County for up to fifty refugees, or about eight families, and by the first week of January 2017,

WRT had secured HIAS's blessing as a host congregation.

It took another two and a half years for WRT to be matched with a refugee family. At first we thought that we might receive a family fleeing the humanitarian catastrophe in Syria. As the number of Syrian refugees admitted to the US dropped precipitously, Iraq and Afghanistan seemed likely candidates. But, in the end, it was the little-known Central African Republic that would send us our first two family members, adult sisters named Achta and Mariam.

The Central African Republic, or CAR, is one of the world's most atrocious conflict zones. Mariam and Achta, who arrived this spring, have seen their lives ripped apart by war and genocide, and sought shelter in a refugee camp in neighboring Chad for five years before their approval came through. They left behind an aging mother, three other sisters, three brothers, and a four-year-old nephew. The other men—their father, husbands, brothers—have presumably either been killed or “disappeared” in war. Our brave sisters squeezed through an ever more restrictive vetting process that begins with the UN and entails authorization by no fewer than five executive-branch agencies, from Homeland Security to the State Department. They came here as two

of only about 22,500 refugees admitted in the last year<sup>14</sup>—less than ten percent of the number admitted in the early 80’s under Reagan, at a time when the humanitarian crisis of refugees now exceeds, in number and severity, any previous era since World War II.

They came here with, quite literally, the clothes on their backs and an overstuffed suitcase. And a sewing machine. Achta, the elder, also schlepped a giant satchel of textbooks: her most precious possession, as a teacher of Arabic language and literature. (I know: I hauled her fraying bag up to their apartment in White Plains on moving day in June).

Since then, every moment of their lives has been compassionately attended by our tireless volunteers. Your fellow congregants have restored and protected the basic human dignity that war, and torture, and racial and religious discrimination, and an unfairly restrictive vetting process, would have deprived them.

Your fellow congregants have brought them to daily English Language classes, fitted them with donated clothes, furnished an apartment rented to them below cost, helped navigate appointments with any number of

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<sup>14</sup> According to Pew Research Center, approximately 22,500 refugees were admitted in Fiscal Year 2018, when the cap was set at 30,000. The current administration intends to cap refugee admissions for FY 2020 at 18,000. Historical averages have been about 95,000 refugees admitted to the US each year.

governmental agencies, translated countless documents from their native French to English, provided much-needed medical care, and have even explained to them how a Con-Ed bill works.

They have elucidated innumerable cultural differences between Africa and America. On her first week here, Achta asked Kelly where she could buy a massive stone pylon for grinding seeds and grains into flour. Let's just say the education has gone both ways, as is often the case when one does a *mitzvah*: the giver finds herself enriched in the giving.

A few weeks ago, Mariam and Achta, who spoke virtually no English when they arrived just five months ago, secured their first jobs and are now working at Target in White Plains. One aspires to teach again; the other, to advance in the field of Human Resources. They are highly motivated to succeed, to contribute to the country that welcomed them, to make a better life in America, not only for themselves and their family, but for their community and country.

You have helped them reclaim their stolen dignity. Can there be any work more Jewish, more holy, than this?



At this time, I'd like for us to acknowledge all of our volunteers who have donated time and resources toward this effort. (*Volunteers Rise*)

Our Resettlement effort still needs your help. We ask for your assistance in whatever form you can offer it, as we have taken on the obligation to help our sisters achieve financial independence within a year. A card has been provided outside the sanctuary for all who want to learn more and support this effort.

Let me leave you with an image of what restoring human dignity feels like. Two weeks after arriving in the US, our volunteers brought Mariam and Achta to an Iftar—a sundown break-the-fast meal held each night during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. To their delight, the sisters met there a couple who spoke Fulbe, their African mother tongue. Later that night, Mariam sent a text message to our volunteers, on her donated iPhone, enthusing about making new friends here in America. She wrote (in French, her adopted language; we've translated):

“We love you so much, because, thanks to you, we have once again found God's smile.”

Your dignity, your inherent self-worth, is a precious gift from God. You did nothing to earn it. But it is yours, to love forever.

On Yom Kippur, remember this: No matter how far we may stray, our dignity is waiting for us to reclaim it.

Let us cherish it. Nurture it. Acknowledge it in our fellow human travelers. Do our part to help those whose dignity has been neglected to reclaim theirs.

To do all this is to see God's smile.

*G'mar Chatimah Tovah*

*May you be sealed for life and blessing*