



Rising with Gravitas

Kevod Habriyot, Human Dignity



THE JEWISH IDEA OF HUMAN DIGNITY

How do we wake up each morning knowing “I am enough” and “I am worthy of love, belonging, and joy?” How do we nurture such a mindset of inherent dignity in our children? The Torah teaches us that humans – no matter gender, race, color, or abilities – are created in the image of God. As such, we are inherently worthy. In Hebrew this value is called *kevod habriyot* – the honor and dignity of all people. How do we step more fully into our own worthiness, raise our children with these values, and create communities imbued with dignity and respect for all?

The Hebrew term *kevod habriyot* literally means “the honor of the created beings.” In Hebrew, the word for honor, *kavod*, is related to the word for weight, as in gravitas, or giving weight to the presence of another human being.

We often refer to important ideas as “heavy” and frivolous ideas as “lightweight.” In fact, our bodies can influence our thinking simply by holding a lighter or heavier object. In a study in *Psychological Science*, each participant was given either a heavy or a light clipboard. They were then asked to ponder a hypothetical problem of injustice. Those who held the heavy clipboards thought more deeply about

the issue, while those with light clipboards literally held the issue more lightly, giving it less consideration.

Are there important issues in your life that you want to hold less lightly? Are there other issues that you’d like to hold more lightly?

Judaism holds all matters of human dignity with great weightiness. It is a central tenet of our tradition that all humans – no matter color, creed, IQ, or salary – are quintessentially worthy of respect. In these pages, we will explore self-dignity, the dignity of others, and the dignity of those who are differently abled. Weighty topics indeed.

Some questions to ask yourself as you move through this unit:

- *Where in my family, workplace, or community do issues of dignity and honor surface?*
- *How do I honor my own dignity? What implications does it have?*
- *How can I teach my children to honor every person, and value each as created in the image of God – no matter their appearance or abilities?*

WHAT IS THE TORAH'S MOST IMPORTANT TEACHING?

An ancient Jewish story tells of two rabbis who argued about the Torah's most important teaching.

Midrash Sifra

“Love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18) – that is the most important teaching of the Torah, said Rabbi Akiva.

Ben Azzai [disagreed, and] said, “This is the record of Humankind’s initial generations: [On the day God created humans, He created them in the image of God; male and female He created them.”] (Gen. 5:1-2) – that is an even more important teaching.

מדרש ספרא, קדושים, ד: יב,

...ואהבת לרעך כמוך רבי עקיבא אומר זה כלל גדול בתורה;
 בן עזאי אומר זה ספר תולדות אדם [ביום ברא אלהים אדם
 בדמות אלהים עשה אתו, זכר ונקבה בראם...] זה כלל גדול
 מזה.

- Which value or principle do you see underlying each rabbi's opinion?
- What might a commandment to love mean? If love is a verb, what actions would it include? Who is included as “neighbor”?
- Where do you see God-like capacities in humans? What are some of the more amazing abilities that humans demonstrate?
- What makes it challenging to treat each person with dignity? How do tensions between risk and safety, or pride and humility, get in our way, and what can we do about it?
- What connection do you see between the ancient Jewish teaching that all people are created in God's image, and the work of Jews and others around the world to free humanity from oppression and bring about a better world for all people?

It may be difficult to love every human being at all times, but being created in God's image means that human life is sacred. Indeed, we are taught that “whoever saves one life, it is as if they saved the entire world!”¹

1 Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5.



A Story from the Lubavitcher Rebbe²

A person who studied with the Lubavitcher Rebbe once asked him: “Rebbe, what is our people’s task in this world?” The Rebbe replied: “A Jew is a lamplighter on the streets of the world. In the olden days, there was a person in every town who would light the gas streetlights with a flame he carried at the end of a long pole. A lamplighter knows that the fire is not his own, and he goes around lighting all the lamps on his route.”

Yoram Raanan made aliyah from the United States forty years ago. On November 25, 2016, his entire art studio, including 2,000 paintings, burned to the ground when a forest fire hit his village of Beit Meir near Jerusalem. To view Raanan’s other prints, visit: <http://www.yoramraanan.com>.

Yoram Raanan, Bereshit (In the Beginning). Used with permission of the artist.

The person asked: “How does one become a lamplighter?” The Rebbe replied: “One must begin with oneself, cleansing oneself, becoming more refined, and then one sees the other as a source of light, waiting to be ignited. When, Heaven forbid, one is crude, then one sees but crudeness; but when one is noble, one sees nobility.”

² Lightly adapted.

WHY WAS ADAM CREATED ALONE?



Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5

Humans were first created as one single person [Adam], to teach that whoever destroys a single life is considered to have destroyed the entire world; and whoever saves one life it is as if they saved the entire world. And also to promote peace among people, that one should not say to his or her fellow, “My parent is greater than yours.”

- *What might the mishnah mean by “the entire world”? What does it say about each person, if saving one person or destroying one person is considered like saving or destroying the entire world?*
- *Have you encountered a community in which every person is treated as innately worthy, equal, and unique? What would it look like if people treated each other this way, even when they don’t see eye to eye?*

The Mishnah is a collection of rabbinic teachings that were redacted by Rabbi Judah the Prince in the 3rd century C.E.

Writing Exercise

Take 5-10 minutes to write down your answers to these questions. Writing in silence allows your thoughts to flow freely, unedited. When you are finished writing, discuss with your sister some of the issues and ideas that came up for you.

- *What do these teachers tell me about my innate worthiness? What thought patterns could I wash away to more fully inhabit my destiny? What can I do to help myself internalize my worthiness and embody it more fully?*
- *What do I tell my children – verbally and in my modeling – about who they are and what they are capable of? How do these messages affect them?*
- *How could looking at each of my children as created in God’s image affect how I see and relate to them, and how they see and relate to themselves?*
- *What can I do during challenging parenting moments to keep these ideas in mind?*

HONORING THE DIGNITY OF SELF

By Dr. Ronit Ziv-Kreger

Jewish mystical teachings tell us that the world was created in several iterations. In an iteration before the one described in the Torah's Creation story, God beamed tremendous light into vessels that were meant to hold it. The vessels could not bear the light, and consequently shattered to pieces.

- *It's not always easy to relate to someone else's brokenness – let alone our own. This teaching implies that both light and brokenness are spread throughout our world. What happens when you notice only brokenness or only light about a person?*
- *How might this mystical Creation story about brokenness relate to the teaching that “The entire world is filled with God's glory (kavod)”?*

In the wilderness, upon seeing that the freed Israelites lost hope and created the Golden Calf, Moses smashed the first set of tablets he received from God on Mount Sinai. After God forgave the people, Moses once again ascended Mount Sinai, receiving a second set of tablets of the Ten Commandments. The Midrash teaches that the Israelites carried the broken

tablets along with the whole tablets in the ark throughout their years of wandering in the wilderness. The broken and the whole were transported together.

- *Could a person be both broken and whole? How so? What could it mean to carry in holiness our brokenness and our wholeness together?*
- *How can a person carry their brokenness in a productive way without being dragged down by it?*

When we relate to another person's brokenness only as being strange, different, and perhaps irritating, we are less likely to treat them with dignity. We may pity the other rather than compassionately empathizing with them. Sadly, human behavior toward those who are seen as an “other” can be cruel. The distinguished Spanish biblical commentator, Abraham ibn Ezra, pointed out that the Hebrew word for cruel, *achzar*, אַחְזָר, can be read as a composite of the words for treating another “as a stranger” (רַז-זר), or “merely as a stranger” (רַז-אכזר).

- *Whom have we kept at a distance but can consider drawing closer?*

The Jewish teachings about dignity underscore that we are all rooted in one Source, and our light and beauty as well as our brokenness and flaws ultimately stem from this Source. Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe directs us to begin our *kavod* practice by focusing on this unifying energy, starting with enhancing our personal self-worth:

“Given that you have within you a holy, divine image, it requires you to treat yourself with the fitting level of spiritual refinement.”

The Torah teaches us the cost of failing to recognize our innate dignity. Moses sent twelve spies – a leader of each tribe – to tour the Promised Land, asking them for factual information about it. Upon their return, they included in their report how they saw themselves and their resulting projection: “We were in our own eyes as grasshoppers, and so we were in their eyes.” The people were not ready for the Promised Land.

Remind yourself: you are a special, precious being of infinite value. In all of eternity you are unique. **Keep looking for people and places where this truth is spoken and where you experience it.**

This is not simple! How can we better distinguish between our innate dignity and the poor choices we occasionally make, or behavior patterns that are flawed and could be improved? As we notice what needs fixing, how do we avoid all self-loathing? How do we acknowledge the feelings we experience when evaluating our flaws without shaming or isolating ourselves?

Address flaws that need to change from a place of worthiness and without boasting or seeking approval from others, as Rabbi Wolbe puts it, “All of this [spiritual work on our own *kavod*] is not to seek favor in the eyes of others, but to honor your own, inner divine image.”

The Spiritual Danger of Pursuing Honor

If realizing self-dignity is so important, how might we understand the rabbis’ warnings about the spiritual danger of pursuing honor? They warn that if you pursue honor it will flee from you, emphasizing that one who flees from honor is more likely to receive it.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, *Middot HaRayah, Kavod 4*

The more a person lacks an inner sense of wholeness, the more they will naturally seek to experience wholeness from external sources. It is only the lowliness of spirit that awakens the desire to glorify oneself before others, whether in virtues the person possesses or in ones they don’t. This is the reason a person needs to enhance the impression of their inner dignity and wholeness, so that when one speaks about oneself, the words will always be in proper measure.

כל מה שהשלמות הפנימית יותר חסרה כן הטבע מחפש להשתלם לצד חוץ. רק במעמד שפלות הנפש יתעורר חשק להתהדר לפני אחרים. בין במה שיש בו בין במה שאין בו. ועל כן חייב האדם להגדיל את רושם השלמות הפנימית, ודבריו בייחוסו להכרת עצמו לאחרים יהיו תמיד במשקל הראוי.

- *How is the inner wholeness that is rooted in our holiness different from the ego, which chases after external recognition?*
- *Kavod in Hebrew can imply inner dignity as well as ego. What can we learn from this?*
- *When have you felt rooted in your true, inner dignity?*
- *When have you felt less secure and searched for external recognition?*
- *We all feel nurtured by recognition. How do we grow our inner kavod? How do we diminish the ego-chasing-for-recognition kavod?*
- *How do we raise children who are rooted in their inner dignity?*

The more we foster our inner dignity, the more we are able to be compassionate and honor others.

Pirkei Avot 4:1

Ben Zoma says... Who is dignified? One who gives dignity to all people.

אִתּוֹהוּ מְכַבֵּד, הַמְכַבֵּד אֶת הַבְּרִיּוֹת

This excerpt is a commentary on the quote from Pirkei Avot by: Rabbi Sholom Noach Berezovsky, known as the Slonimer Rebbe³

When the Mishnah asks, “Who is dignified?” it does not mean, “Who is made dignified by other people,” as many may think it does. What is the value in being dependent on other people for dignity? Rather, “Who is dignified? One who gives dignity to all people” teaches that **the gaze of one person to another is like glancing in the mirror. If a person’s face is dirty, they will see a dirty face in the mirror. It is the same when a person looks at another person. One’s internal purity and refinement will determine how generously one looks at others and how easy it is to see another’s positive attributes.** On the other hand, if one is tainted with negative attributes and behaviors, they will see negative attributes in everyone else, too. Therefore, the truly dignified person is the one who treats all people with dignity and who appreciates all people. This behavior is the true sign that a person is truly dignified.⁴

- *Where have you experienced a connection between self-respect and treating others with respect?*

3 The previous Slonimer Rebbe, Rabbi Sholom Noach Berezovsky (1911-2000), is widely known for his Hasidic teachings, which are published as a series of books entitled *Netivot Shalom*.

4 Adapted from a translation by Rabbi David Jaffe, founder of The Kirva Institute and author of *Changing the World from the Inside Out*.

HONORING PARENTS

By Ronit Ziv-Kreger

If all our relationships, including with ourselves, ought to reflect dignity and honor, then what do we learn from Jewish tradition's focus on honoring parents?

- *As a parent, what is the relationship between fostering a loving, close relationship with your children and establishing parental respect and honor?*

The fifth of the Ten Commandments is about *kavod* for parents.

Clinical psychologist Dr. Wendy Mogel, in her *New York Times* bestselling parenting book, *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee: Using Jewish Teachings to Raise Self-Reliant Children* (a great read!), brings many examples from her clients which demonstrate that establishing *kavod* toward parents may be easier said than done these days. She says that “the inclusion of the Fifth Commandment in the Big Ten [is] proof” that the challenge is not new.

Harvard Graduate School of Education's guidance to parents in their Making Caring Common project suggests, “Use authority wisely to set clear boundaries. Explain how your limits are based on a reasonable and loving concern for your child's welfare.”

- *What challenges have you experienced when trying to establish a family culture that promotes respect toward parents?*
- *How do we foster respect toward parents both as a specific category and as part of the respect due to all people, children included?*
- *What concrete actions have you found helpful to establish parental kavod in your family?*
- *What concrete actions do you do to demonstrate to your children your kavod for them?*
- *How might honoring parents and being honored by them at home help children make the leap from family to community? How might it help nurture good citizens in our society?*

A poignant line in the book of Psalms (71:9) says, “Do not cast me aside when I grow old; do not forsake me as my strength fails.” The sages of the Talmud ask, What behaviors reflect *kavod* for aging parents? The Talmud responds with the following instructive guidelines: “To feed them, give them drink, dress them, cover them, and accompany them.”⁵

5 Babylonian Talmud, Kiddushin 31b.



Photo by Yonit Schiller

- *When is it fitting for children to offer parents kavod through concrete physical assistance? In what other ways do you honor your parents?*
- *If you have had the experience of caring for aging relatives, what insight did it give you about dignity and honor?*
- *In what ways might our children benefit from us honoring our parents, or from having a direct, close relationship with grandparents, when possible?*
- *Given your family situation, how might you show your children positive examples of offering kavod to parents and elders?*

A Jewish folktale describes a man whose elderly parent kept spilling soup on the tablecloth. One evening, the elder dropped a porcelain bowl and it broke. His son said, “From now on, you will eat from a wooden bowl, which cannot break.” The next day, the son returned home and saw his own child sitting and carving out a wooden bowl.

The man asked the child, “What are you doing?” “It’s for you, Father,” the child explained, “so that you can use it when you are old, and your hands start to shake.”

The Jewish guidance about *kavod* for parents is not only an issue of good parenting and planning for our future, it’s also a spiritual practice.

The Ten Commandments were given to Moses at Mount Sinai on two tablets. The first tablet addressed the relationship between a human being and God, while the second was about interpersonal relations. Honoring parents is on the first tablet, teaching us the spiritual import of the parental role. When our relationship with our children is one that embraces love and closeness, along with appropriate, firm boundaries; when we *receive from* our children and not only give to them; and when our family culture is about honor and respect, we not only deepen the holiness of our home, we also foster our children’s spiritual development.

HONORING THE DIGNITY OF OTHERS

The Jewish concept of human dignity has become a cornerstone of human conscience the world over. Christian historian Paul Johnson wrote, “Much of the mental furniture of the modern world... is of Jewish fabrication.” Human dignity is certainly one central piece of the world’s mental furniture.

Unfortunately, this has not always been celebrated in the world. It is chilling to recall that Adolph Hitler wrote, “Conscience is a Jewish invention.” He went on to say, “The struggle for world domination is between me and the Jews. All else is meaningless. The Jews have inflicted two wounds on the world: Circumcision for the body and conscience for the soul. I come to free mankind from their shackles.”

Hitler indeed violently trampled on the idea of human dignity.

When one surveys the multitude of law systems across the world, it is evident that biblical truths about human rights form the core of the loftiest standards for humanity.

The General Assembly of the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on December 10, 1948. Article 1 of the Declaration states: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.”

René Samuel Cassin was a French Jewish legal scholar and judge, and one of the major architects of the Universal Declaration of

Human Rights. Cassin won the Nobel Peace Prize for his work in human rights in 1968. According to Cassin, human dignity and rights had their origin in the Ten Commandments, which he called “the first Code of the essential duties of man.” Cassin wrote and spoke prolifically on the connection between Judaism and human rights, helping to found the Consultative Council of Jewish Organizations, which focused on providing a Jewish perspective on human rights to the UN human rights system.⁶

Harvard University psychologist Dr. Donna Hicks⁷ has worked on facilitating dialogue in many world conflicts. During the course of her field work, she noticed a phenomenon that was hindering the parties from resolving their differences: A tacit conversation was going on “under the table.” It was as if people were saying, “How dare you treat me like this! We want to be treated like human beings!” This subtext was preventing the parties from moving forward. Hicks realized that there were important emotional reactions about dignity, and about how dignity is violated, which fueled the conflicts.

- *Where in your life might there be a “conversation under the table” about dignity or violations of dignity? What is one positive thing you can do about it?*
- *How does the issue of honoring one’s own dignity and the dignity of others come up in conversations with your children?*

⁶ René Cassin, “From the Ten Commandments to the Rights of Man.”

⁷ For more information about Dr. Hicks’ work on dignity, see her TedX talk on her website: <http://drdonnahicks.com>, or read her book, *Dignity: Its Essential Role in Resolving Conflict*.

A PARENTING INSIGHT FROM CREATION: TWO NOTIONS OF DIGNITY

Rabbi Joseph Ber Soloveitchik, in his famous book, *The Lonely Man of Faith*, suggests that the Torah's Creation story in Genesis chapters 1 and 2 offers two models of human dignity and worthiness.

In Genesis 1, Adam is created in the image of God and charged with a mission of ruling the environment, developing it, and transforming it. The Torah uses the name *Elokim*, a divine name used when referring to God as Creator. People, in God's image, experience honor and dignity when they create, develop mastery, contribute to their environment, and actualize their divine potential. This is human dignity that stems from creativity, accomplishment, and contribution.

In the next chapter of Genesis, a second important model of dignity arises. Here God breathes the breath of life into Adam's nostrils. Rabbi Soloveitchik describes this aspect of human experience as not about accomplishment or actualizing divine potential, but rather, "awareness of communing with the Great Self." Each breath we take can be a reminder of our inherent worthiness and potential closeness with the Divine.

Rabbi David Aaron, in his book, *The God-Powered Life: Awakening to Your Divine*

Purpose, puts it this way: "Our soul is part of God. Each and every one of us is a masterpiece – a piece of the Master – and surely deserves to be treated that way."

These two notions of dignity seem to be contradictory: one is based on outward creativity, effort, achievement, and mastery, and the other is based on inward intrinsic worthiness.

Rabbi Aaron suggests that balancing these two "can be a source of tremendous creativity, productively, stability, and fulfillment."

What might this kind of balancing look like? He continues: "Spiritually healthy people intuit their Godly greatness from within and are constantly driven to actualize their divine potential by doing great acts for their community, the world, and God."

As parents, many find this question of balancing effort and accomplishment with inherent worthiness as an ongoing challenge and opportunity.

- *How as parents might we appropriately balance these two seemingly contradictory notions of dignity in our own lives, and how might we model this for our children?*

SPOTLIGHT ON ISRAEL

Yehudit Karp



Photo credit: Flash 90,
<http://www.nrg.co.il/online/1/ART2/070/492.html>

Yehudit Karp (b. 1937) is widely acknowledged for her determined pursuit of truth and justice. Throughout her career as a lawyer, she has acted with grit in the Israeli and international

spheres to preserve moral standards and to ensure human rights in general, and women's rights, children's rights, and victims' rights in particular.

Karp was an active partner in the development and drafting of most of the Basic Laws that form Israel's constitution, and advocated as a representative of the Ministry of Justice during the Knesset debates on these laws. Basic Law: Human Dignity and Liberty, which is considered to be Israel's bill of rights, was essentially formed according to a draft personally initiated by Karp.⁸

- *Yehudit Karp used the justice system to make change in Israel. Where in your life can you effect change – in your family, your workplace, or your community?*
- *How can we support our sisters' work to create a world where all are respected and each person's dignity is recognized?*

⁸ Lightly adapted from Frances Raday and Mika Levy, "Yehudit Karp," *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*, Jewish Women's Archive, <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/karp-yehudit>.

BASIC LAW: HUMAN DIGNITY AND LIBERTY

(passed by the Knesset in 1992; amended in 1994)

Israel is governed by a set of Basic Laws that apply to citizens and residents of the State of Israel. In 1992, the Israeli Knesset passed Basic Law: Human Dignity and Liberty. Built on the core Jewish concepts that we are created in the image of God and that all people have inherent dignity, the law protects individual dignity and freedom.

Basic Principles

1. Fundamental Human Rights

In Israel, human rights are founded upon recognition of the value of the human being, the sanctity of human life, and the principle that all persons are free; these rights shall be upheld in the spirit of the principles set forth in the Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel.

2. Purpose

This Basic Law is designed to protect human dignity and freedom by anchoring in a Basic Law the values of the State of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state.

3. Protection of Life, Bodily Integrity, and Dignity

No one may infringe upon the inherent right of every human being to life, bodily integrity, and dignity.

To read about the remaining Basic Laws, visit <https://bit.ly/2qubYVV>.

Jewish Law

The Jewish concept of *kevod habriyot*, human dignity, is a crucial and decisive factor used in determining matters of Jewish law. Here's one small example. A question in Jewish law once arose: "Should guide and service dogs be permitted in a synagogue?"

The Lubavitcher Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, addressed this question in a letter written in 1959, over thirty years before the Americans with Disabilities Act was signed into law in 1990. He emphatically argued that the issue of human dignity justifies the presence of guidedogs. The Rebbe's thoughts on the matter are not only a precedent to the law, but highlight the role of accommodating a person with a disability in order that he or she may be included in Jewish life.

- *What strikes you as you read this? What seems especially important to you? Did anything surprise you?*
- *How do rights in this Basic Law compare to the rights given to citizens of your country?*
- *Look at the second principle, entitled "Purpose." Note especially that human dignity and freedom are anchored in the values of the State of the Israel as a "Jewish and democratic state." What about this makes sense to you? What do the words "Jewish" and "democratic" add to this clause?*
- *If you were to draft basic principles of dignity for your family or community, with whom would you consult? What process would you create? What impact could it have?*

HONORING THE DIGNITY OF THOSE WHO ARE DIFFERENTLY ABLED: THE VALUE OF HUMAN LIFE IN ANCIENT TIMES

By Ken Spiro⁹

It is human nature to be critical and discerning. While this nature serves us well at times, it comes with the liability of not treating others (and sometimes ourselves) with dignity. From ancient times, humanity has been amiss in treating people with dignity. God, the Torah, and our sages offer powerful tools and guidance to help us grow in treating all people with dignity.

The following excerpt from Ken Spiro's book, *WorldPerfect: The Jewish Impact on Civilization*, is about the disregard that ancient cultures had for human life. It is a shocking text, but it begs us to consider whether the modern world has moved completely beyond the ancient disregard for the value of human life, and to what extent today's world honors the dignity of each and every person.

Greeks and Romans – as well as virtually every ancient culture we know of – practiced infanticide.

By infanticide, I mean the killing of newborn children as a way of population control, sex selection (generally, boys were desirable and girls undesirable) and as a way of ridding society of potentially burdensome or deformed members.

A baby that appeared weak or sickly at birth, or had even a minor birth defect, such as a cleft palate, harelip or clubfoot, or was in some other way imperfect, was killed.... This was done by an immediate member of the family, usually the mother or father, and usually within three days after birth.

The method of “disposal” varied, but generally we know that, in antiquity, babies were taken out to the forest and left to die of exposure, dropped down wells to drown, or thrown into manure piles....

Gruesome evidence of this practice has been found in various archaeological excavations. Most notably, in the Athenian Agora, a well was uncovered containing the remains of 175 babies thrown there to drown.

Lest we assume that this was the practice of the poor and ignorant, one of the most influential thinkers in Western intellectual history – none other than Aristotle – argued in his *Politics* that killing children was essential to the functioning of society. He wrote:

There must be a law that no imperfect or maimed child shall be brought up. And to avoid an excess in population, some children must be exposed. For a limit must be fixed to the population of the state.

⁹ Ken Spiro, *WorldPerfect: The Jewish Impact on Civilization* (Deerfield Beach, FL: Simcha Press, 2002), 5–7.

Four hundred years after Aristotle, the practice of killing babies was firmly entrenched in the Roman Empire. The following is an excerpt from a famous and much-quoted letter from a Roman citizen named Hilarion to his pregnant wife, Alis, dated June 17, c. 1 c.e.:

Know that I am still in Alexandria. And do not worry if they all come back and I remain in Alexandria. I ask and beg of you to take good care of our baby son, and as soon as I receive payment I will send it up to you. If you deliver a child [before I get home], if it is a boy keep it, if a girl, discard it.

- *Do these extreme and terribly heinous acts have any relevance to our current culture and how the communities that we live in value human life? In what ways have we progressed from these ancient practices, and in what ways is human dignity still lacking in our world?*
- *Are there some people in your culture who are considered more or less valuable than others?*



There is a wonderful word in South Africa – Ubuntu – that expresses human dignity and unity. Originally a Nguni Bantu term meaning “humanity,” it is used to communicate that our humanity is interconnected with the humanity of other people.

- *Consider a person or a group that you normally distance yourself from. In what ways are you connected, even if in ways that are invisible to the eye?*

SPOTLIGHT ON ISRAEL: ISRAELI ARMY UNIT 9900

Ro'im Rachok is a special program in the Israeli Army for soldiers with autism

Deciphering Satellite Photos, Soldiers with Autism Take On Key Roles in IDF

Ben Sales, Jewish Telegraphic Agency, Dec. 8, 2015

Sitting in front of a computer at the center of Israel's largest army base, a soldier stares at the screen, moving pixel by pixel over a satellite photograph, picking out details and finding patterns.

A few years ago N.S., who has autism, thought the Israel Defense Forces wouldn't take him. N.S., who like other soldiers could not give his name due to IDF protocol, expected to miss out on being drafted – a mandatory rite of passage for most Israeli 18-year-olds.

Now, more than a year into his army service, N.S. is a corporal who spends eight hours a day doing what few other soldiers can: using his exceptional attention to detail and intense focus to analyze visual data ahead of missions. Soldiers with autism can excel at this work because they are often adept at detecting patterns and maintaining focus for long periods of time.

N.S. is among some 50 soldiers and trainees in *Ro'im Rachok*, Hebrew for “Seeing Far,” a program aimed at drafting autistic children. Based in the IDF's Intelligence Unit 9900, which maps and analyzes visual data, the soldiers of *Ro'im Rachok* decipher aerial reconnaissance photos to provide information to soldiers ahead of combat missions. Other tracks train recruits to be army electricians who deal with devices such as night vision goggles, or optics technicians, who work with binoculars.

“There's an agenda to show people on the spectrum have abilities and can do things,” said T.V., a former Defense Ministry official who cofounded *Ro'im Rachok* in 2012.

Participants in *Ro'im Rachok* attend a three-month training as part of their army service and an introduction to army life. Along with photo analysis or optics, trainees learn about following orders, staying on schedule and working with a team.

After three additional months of training on base, participants are drafted and placed within Unit 9900. Before they arrive, their fellow soldiers and commanders receive training on working with people with autism, and every team meets weekly with a counselor to discuss the group dynamics.

Want to learn more? Watch this video about Ro'im Rachok: <http://bit.ly/2g5UGY2>.

“The day I enlisted, I got very excited,” N.S. said. “I was really like, I’m an inseparable part of Israeli society.”

Ro'im Rachok integrates people with autism into the IDF and enables them to serve in key positions. (Photo courtesy of IDF)

- How does the *Ro'im Rachok* program help the State of Israel?
- What accounts for the difference between how the ancient world treated people with disabilities and this wonderful example of inclusion in the Israeli army?
- Do you know of any organizations in your community that work to bring dignity and opportunities to people with disabilities? How can you get involved?



< Roim Rachok >

Integrating
autistic youth
within
the IDF

LEARN WITH YOUR SISTER

Honoring Dignity For All, Even My 'Enemies'

By Chaya Lester



It was Rosh Hashanah of the year 2015. A dust storm had laid itself across the Land of Israel – and the entire Middle East. It came from Syria. Five days of hot “snow.” With vision-choking, car-coating, throat-fulls of sand.

Scientists say it was inexplicable and unprecedented. They had no natural explanation for it. All we knew is that it came from Syria and it demanded a full-bodied reckoning of all who waded within it.

Imagine the whole country *kvetching* its way through one vast communal *shvitz*. Like a semi-apocalyptic sweat, like a cleansing fever, like the clouds that gathered around Mount Sinai, like the pillar of cloud in the desert. It was a mythic and metaphoric agony and it escorted us straight into Rosh Hashanah.

All we could do was wipe our brow, raise our eyes, and wonder aloud, “What, dear Lord, are You trying to articulate with this dust plague?”

For me, the answer came one muggy Friday night at my Shabbat table. Most serendipitously, we had among our guests a woman who is part of the Syrian/Lebanese Christian community here in Jerusalem. As we commiserated over the dust storm and its accompanying discomforts, this woman, with hot tears on her cheeks, spoke up. She told us what she was witnessing in her community. She said that the Syriac Christians

saw the dust from Syria as a sort of divine message. For their families – the Christians of Syria – were being genocidally slaughtered by ISIS.

She told us how they are mourning, terrified, and undergoing a soul-searching return to their faith. She begged us to pray for them and the innocents being murdered brutally and senselessly across the border.

As I sat there listening, I heard the quiet whisper of response from God I was yearning to hear. For me, it was a message served straight onto my Shabbas plate. It was my call from God, clear as any shofar blast, asking me to pray for and then seek ways to help the innocents being slaughtered.

And I realized, shockingly, that I had not yet done that simple, obvious, human act.

And, believe me, I am a pray’er. I know that prayer transforms reality. I have seen it. I preach it. I believe it. So how could it be that I had not prayed a stitch over one of the most atrocious horrors on the planet?

And then I saw it, in stark fluorescence. My own smallness. My fear. My trauma. My wound-licking sense of self-preservation kept me from praying for Syria. And not without reason, after all. I’m a Jew in an embattled Jerusalem. “They” are my enemies, aren’t they?

But then I asked myself, is this the way I want to live? Is this the fate of my people – to be so traumatized that we fail to pray for, to care for, another’s glaring pain? This is not the kind of Jew I want to be.

This dust storm was my wake-up cloud; to be bigger than my own triggers.

Our tradition’s spiritual technology teaches that if you want something for yourself, pray for someone else who wants the same thing.

God knows I want peace. I want the monsters of the Middle East to retreat back into their dark caves. Enough of this violence.

I care something ferocious for the innocents, the forgotten, the children, a short border-cross away. I honor their humanity.

As such, I decided to be done feeling victimized. I had a world to care for. I had a region to pray for. And I had a heart big enough to break over my neighbors’ pains. Because they too are crafted in the image of God.

Here is my prayer made of dust.

I’m sorry, Syria
 For ignoring you and your endless
 reel of travesties.
 I have looked away
 I have hidden my face
 and hardened my heart
 lest it be singed by your sharp flames.
 But then the dust storm came
 and kicked you
 into my face
 and reminded me that I too am but small
 dust and ash and

I too sleep
 on a bed of swords
 with my neck against the world.

I too am but a breath
 away from devastation by desert wind.

Thankful for this pre-Rosh Hashanah
 chokehold of sand that did my blindness in.
 That roused me
 doused me with its astounding heat
 and reminded me
 that my neighbor’s misfortune
 is my own burden
 to shoulder – to shudder – to keep.

I will lift your children from the dust one by one
 and pray for their safekeeping
 as if they were my own.

I will turn my heart into a turnstile for all to
 pass
 who are innocent
 and caught in the crossfire of your monsters and
 militants.

Please God, put an end to all that is murderous,
 and heal the broken,
 the limbless – the hopeless – the friendless.
 And forgive us for our callousness
 in the face of human suffering so close and yet
 so far away.

Help Your children Israel
 be bigger than our own triggers
 that we may better serve You

Let us be a light unto darkened nations.
 To act like the children of royalty we were raised
 to be.

You have invested us with a mission
 to do a higher bidding
 than our fears would have us keep.
 Let us be humble as the dust
 and yet great enough
 to muster the world’s direst of prayers.



LEARN WITH YOUR SISTER

Overcoming Obstacles

When life doesn't go the way we expect, we often have the tendency to run away or hide ourselves from others. Contemporary researcher Brené Brown has found that embracing vulnerability and allowing ourselves to be seen as we truly are, are key to living a life of joy, worthiness, and love. In this article, Momentum Community Leader Susan Stillman courageously shares some of her experiences raising a child with a disability, telling about the good times as well as the challenging times. How can we emulate Susan's example in our own lives and let ourselves be seen as we truly are, embracing vulnerability and trusting that we are inherently worthy?

My Teen Son's Genetic Disease Turns Me into a Monster

By Susan Stillman, Momentum Community Leader for the JCC of Greater Washington¹⁰

My family looks like a regular family. Mom, Dad, four kids, a dog. We joke that even our 17-year-old child with special needs is pretty run-of-the-mill, even though he has a genetic disease called Familial Dysautonomia (FD). Sure, he has a feeding tube, but that has just become the norm for him and for us as well. He walks (although

he uses a wheelchair for long treks), talks, goes to school, had a bar mitzvah, plays piano, and is involved with theatre. He has a pleasant disposition with no behavior problems. Our life hums along like everyone else's.



Susan and her family

But periodically the awful disease that is usually manageable rears its ugly head and inhabits my son's body. When it does, it feels like there is a monster in the house. The poor child "feels awful" and has uncontrollable retching and oral secretions. When this happens, he sequesters himself in a small TV room in our house where we have a supply of towels just for this purpose.

¹⁰ Susan Stillman, "My Teen Son's Genetic Disease Turns Me into a Monster," *Kveller*, 2/23/16, <https://www.kveller.com/my-teen-sons-genetic-disease-turns-me-into-a-monster>. Used by permission of the author.

He lies on the ground and writhes around, retching and emitting secretions. Either my husband or myself (usually me, since I'm the stay-at-home mom) sits with him, wipes his mouth, changes the towels, and administers medicine repeatedly (through his g-tube and rectally) until it is finally absorbed by his wracked body and puts him into a deep sleep.

The retching noises are otherworldly, and not in a good way. At the suggestion of a therapist years ago, I don headphones and listen to music to help drown out the awful noise while doing my best to remain loving and focused on relieving his misery. This process can take two to three hours, which feels like an eternity.

When at last he falls asleep, I sit and wait for 10–15 minutes to make sure it is really over. Sometimes, the episode is like the burning embers of a fire and will reignite. It is a tenuous, stressful, awful time. I minimize all noise in the house to help him drop into a deep sleep. If it starts again, I am like a wild animal, feeling trapped and helpless.

And sometimes it brings out the monster in me. I pull out my hair and wail, begging for him to stop, even though I know it's not my son's fault; he does not have control over these episodes. It doesn't feel like one of my finer parenting moments, made worse by the fact that he always apologizes.

"I'm sorry, Mommy," he says.
 "It's not your fault. It's FD's fault," I reply, trying

to keep the desperation and agitation out of my voice. I am not always successful. We hate FD.

I am amused when people say what an amazing mother I am. I am not amazing. This is what people say when they are really thinking, "I could never deal with that. Thank God that's not me." I am an ordinary mother dealing with an extraordinary disease. I am not unique. Many people suffer in their houses too, with their own monsters – disabled children, mental illness, sickness, and so on.

Our family is bound together by many things, and this disease is part of the package. We all are happy and relieved when it goes away and our sunny, happy young man returns. When I pick up my other kids from school after a rough patch, they often say, "You are in a good mood. Our brother must have had a good day."

Like all families, we cherish the good days and muddle through the bad ones.

- *Where in your life might the fear of being seen as you truly are be holding you back? Who in your life has earned the right to be privy to the challenges that expose your vulnerability?*
- *What can you learn from Susan's account of how she has dealt with having a child with a disability? What struck you about her story?*
- *How can you and your family be good friends to people in your community who are differently abled (and to their families)?*

LEARN WITH YOUR SISTER

Some Thoughts on How to Make Change

From Mindy Scheier, Founder of Runway of Dreams



Mindy with her son Oliver

A fashion designer, Mindy Scheier has spent her career designing and styling for major fashion houses. In 2013, Mindy founded Runway of Dreams, an organization that works with top brands and retailers to adapt mainstream clothing lines for people with disabilities. Mindy's work with Runway of Dreams is inspired by her son Oliver, who has a rare form of muscular dystrophy. In February 2016,

Runway of Dreams announced its first major brand collaboration with Tommy Hilfiger, introducing an adaptive version of the spring children's line. The collaboration launched to major success – nearly selling out. It is Mindy and Runway of Dreams' goal to work with multiple brands and retailers to bring mainstream clothing options to people of all abilities – no matter their age or socioeconomic background – in order to to make fashion truly accessible for all.

Mindy was a participant in the Summer 2016 Momentum Fashion Industry Trip to Israel.



Mindy and her Momentum sisters in Israel

MINDY'S ADVICE FOR MAKING CHANGE

Look Up

A woman who has a daughter with cognitive delays once said to me: “There are many people out there who have children with disabilities. But you looked up and said: ‘How am I going to make a difference for other people?’ So many people don’t look up.”

Look beyond your situation. There are other people who can benefit from problems you are able to solve.

Let People Know There’s a Problem

So many people have said to me: “I never knew this was a problem. I never knew that people with disabilities could have difficulties dressing themselves.”

Speak loud and proud about your problem, and others will be interested in helping you. Put it out there. It will resonate. People will welcome the ability to problem-solve with you. Maybe you can’t solve the problem, but someone else can.

Use Your Strengths

In our culture, we are often measured by our weaknesses. Rarely do we focus on what we’re good at, and how to do better. But we should think about our strengths and how we can use them.

When the problem presented itself with Oliver, the natural way for me to respond was with what I’m good at – using fashion to solve the problem. Take a look at your strengths and see how you can apply them to make a difference.

Commit

You need to dedicate your time, energy, and resources to your issue; you need to be committed. That sounds overwhelming, but there are different levels of commitment. Find the level of commitment that you can sustain. Model your own commitment, and others will notice and be attracted to it. I have people emailing me every day to find out how they can help. It will happen.

Seek Collaboration

Yes, I was a woman who had a problem and a solution, but if I hadn’t surrounded myself with people who were smarter than I, and who had better connections than I had, I would still be just a woman with a great idea. Find the right people to help you, and together you can make a big difference.

- *What are some issues that you are confronting in your family and community?*
- *How can you use Mindy’s advice to address these issues?*

TRY IT OUT

PRACTICAL TIPS AND RESOURCES FOR FAMILIES

Ideas for bringing the value of Kevod Habriyot, Human Dignity, into your family life

For Yourself or with a Partner

- Check out the podcasts, videos, and articles on MomentumUnlimited.org.
- Select a phrase that inspires you, write it on a card, and place it where you'll see it. Repeat the phrase to yourself a few times each morning with enthusiasm. Phrases to consider:
 - I let my light shine
 - Who is dignified? One who gives dignity to all people (Pirkei Avot)
 - I honor the broken and the whole together
 - All people are made in God's image

For Families with Children of All Ages

- Tell your children that they are created in the image of God and that they, like all people, have God-like competencies with tremendous potential. The effort they make and even the mistakes they make can help them grow into their potential. Remind them to see others as created in the image of God, especially when conflicts come up.
- Discuss at the dinner table how to see the image of God in others even when they are difficult to like.

- Consider as a family whose dignity in your community might be compromised, and what you could do about it.
- One way to engage children of different ages with the concept of human dignity is to volunteer with them to help people whose dignity is sometimes compromised in our society. Model taking responsibility for others, not in ways that pity them but in ways that shine a light on their uniqueness. Depending on the age of your children, you could consider a homeless shelter, soup kitchen, nursing home, or local organization.
- Visit elderly or homebound people in your community. Talk to them about their lives and the adventures they have had.

For Families with Older Children

- Model *kevod habriyot*. Make sure your home, workplace, synagogue, and community center are accessible. Ask friends and acquaintances with disabilities what you can do to make venues and opportunities more accessible for them. They will probably tell you things that you would have never thought of on your own.

- Watch the short video, “Red-A Feeln Original Short Film” about bullying, with your older children (grade 4 and above). Have a discussion about what to do when you witness someone being bullied.
- Encourage your child to join a local Friendship Circle, a club that creates meaningful relationships and friendships between teen volunteers and children with special needs. Find one in your community (<https://bit.ly/2EI56te>) or create your own.
- Volunteer in a tutoring program for students who need extra help.
- Play a video of James Berry reading his poem, “What Do We Do with a Variation?” on Vimeo. Ask your children: “How would you respond to the question the poet raises?”
- **For families in the United States:** Participate in a social action project for Martin Luther King Day. Discuss the impact that Reverend King’s words had on the American public, partly because they were anchored in religion. Talk about how the Jewish ideas of *kevod habriyot* and being created in the image of God can have a deep impact on the world around us.



Momentum women visit *Nalaga'at* (literally, “please touch”), a platform for arts and culture that represents a meeting place between deaf, blind, and deaf-blind individuals together with the public.



JInspire Bergen County women visit Shalva on their Momentum trip. Shalva is an NGO that supports and empowers individuals with disabilities and their families.

FACILITATOR'S GUIDE

In this session, we explore the value of kevod habriyot, human dignity

The guiding questions in this unit are:

- *Where in my family, workplace, or community do issues of dignity and honor surface?*
- *How do I honor the dignity of self? What implications does it have?*
- *How can I teach my children to honor every person, and value each as created in the image of God – no matter their appearance or abilities?*

Meaningful Vocabulary

<i>kavod</i>	כבוד	dignity, honor, and respect
<i>kevod habriyot</i>	כבוד הברייות	human dignity
<i>tzelem Elohim</i>	צלם אלהים	the image of God

Facilitating the Session

1. Seek Participant Input

Well before the session invite a few sisters to take a small role in leading it. For example:

- Planning an activity to kick off the session or accompany it (see **Extra! Program Ideas**)
- Leading a conversation about what your group can do to bring the Jewish value of human dignity to your community
- Leading a conversation about a sister's own experience raising a child with a disability, and what others can do to help
- Putting together a document with information about local organizations that participants can get involved in

- Leading the conversation about Ro'im Rachok, using the video
- Inviting one or more of the women to share one way she brought home the learning from your last gathering

Involving participants helps them take ownership over their learning, and prepares them to take the lead in their family and community!

2. Choose Your Session Activities (in advance)

Remember: You know what will best engage your participants, and we encourage you to tailor the session to their interests and needs. **Soul Sparks** activities carry a particular power, and we encourage you to include them where possible!

3. Prep Your Space

Before the session begins, prepare the room, for example by arranging the space or seating to support connection. Think about what materials you will need, and make sure you have everything prepared.

4. Welcome and Warm-Up

Make a ritual of transitioning your sisters from their hectic, everyday lives to your safe space of learning and growth. Consider engaging your participants in a short guided meditation, or in a stretching exercise that will help them relax and settle in to be present.



Reminder! Sisterhood Safe Space

Remind everyone that they are in the Sisterhood Safe Space of confidentiality and compassionate listening, free of judgment and unsolicited advice.

5. Intro and Inspiration

One of the many revolutions that Judaism brought to the world was its understanding of the essential dignity of every human being. How do we wake up each morning knowing “I am worthy of love, belonging, and joy?” How do we nurture such a mindset of inherent dignity in our children? The Torah teaches us that all humans – no matter gender, race, color, or abilities – are created in the image of God. As such, we are inherently worthy, with God-like capabilities. In Hebrew this value is called *kevod habriyot*, the honor and dignity of all people.

As a group, create a Star of David appreciation for each woman. Give each participant a thick sheet with a large Star of David drawn on it, and have her write her name in the center of the star (see above). Then have each woman pass her sheet to the sister on her right. This sister writes an appreciation of the woman whose name is on the star in one of the small triangles. She could list a trait or action that points to the innate

dignity and power of that woman, something foundational that she would deeply appreciate. Continue passing the sheets, so that each woman writes for six others. Then have each woman receive her own sheet back. At the end of the session, or back home, invite each woman to write a self-appreciation note in the center hexagon.

6. Soul Sparks Activities

There are different activities you can try that will encourage learning and growth; we suggest choosing one or two for your session. Below are some of our favorites:

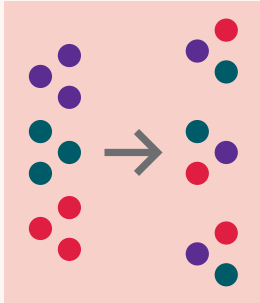
What Is the Torah’s Most Important Teaching? (p. 212)

As a group, explore the debate in the text and the questions that follow.

Honoring the Dignity of Self and Honoring Parents

Divide into three groups, and give participants fifteen minutes to read and reflect on the questions from one of the following sections: (1) the first half of *Honoring the Dignity of Self* (from p. 215 through the first column of p. 216); (2) the second half of *Honoring the Dignity of Self*, from *The Spiritual Danger of Pursuing*

Honor (pp. 216–217); (3) *Honoring Parents* (pp. 218–219). Advise the women that they will be redivided into other groups later, and will each be presenting to the new group the text and key ideas from the first group. New groups should comprise one woman from each of the first three groups, such that every group contains someone who has discussed each of the three



topics. See graphic for how to divide the groups.

Every woman in the new group now has eight minutes to present the topic she had dialogued about in her initial group.

After everyone has

spoken within her group, provide women time for individual journaling. Consider each woman writing an “I am” poem (see right column).

7. Reflection and Closing

Recall the main ideas explored in the session, and create an opportunity for reflection.

Reflection Suggestion: Ask participants to reflect on the following, possibly by writing or drawing before sharing: “One takeaway I’ll be going home with after our session is...” or “I would like to practice *kevod habriyot* at home by....”

Direct the women’s attention to the “**Try It Out: Practical Tips and Resources for Families**” section (pp. 234–235). These suggestions will help them bring home to their families the learning they have done today, in fun and interesting ways. Encourage them to choose at least one thing they will do with their families and to report on how it went at the next session. Give a brief overview of the rest of the unit.

Provide participants with the opportunity to schedule a time with their learning partner before they leave the session (see “**Learn with Your Sister**” activity, pp. 228–233.) Let all the women know when you’ll be meeting again and what theme will be explored.

Extra! Program Ideas

To enhance your session, you may want to consider the following:

- Visit a local organization that expresses the value of human dignity through its work, such as a vocational training facility for people with disabilities, a tutoring program for low-income students, or an elder home.
- Initiate a project to support an organization that fosters human dignity, perhaps in ways that will help the women to involve their children.
- As a reflection toward the end of the session, invite women to each write an “I am” poem by filling out the following prompts (or the like). Other examples are available online.

I am-----

I wonder-----

I hear (real or imaginary)-----

I am (the first line of the poem repeated)-----

I honor-----

I see-----

I hope-----

I am (the first line of the poem repeated)-----

I trust-----

I say-----

I dream-----

I am (the first line of the poem repeated)-----

Give women five minutes to write their poem. You can offer a template or just the structure.

Ask for quiet during the writing time. Then invite those who’d like to share to do so.



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