

Two Core Principles of Jewish Ethics

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Abstract: "Imagine what it would be like if we really believed that the person sitting next to you right now, or the salesclerk in the supermarket, or the guy who mows your lawn, were all created "in the image of God." Would it make a difference? What difference would it make?"

The focus of my teaching tonight concerns two core principles of Jewish interpersonal ethics.

Now there are many contenders for such a distinction. They include "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," or "You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him," or "You shall revere your mother and father," "You shall not covet."

To be sure, all of these are very important Jewish ethical values. But I would propose that the first of the two core values of Jewish interpersonal ethics is: every human being is created in the image of God, *betzelem Elohim*.

This ethical principle is mentioned three times in Genesis, chapter one. What do we mean by God's "image"? How is God's "image" reflected within us? "Image" cannot refer to any physical resemblance between God and human beings. Why not? Because Judaism insists that God is real but without any form or shape. Therefore, it must refer to qualities, attributes that we share with God. What Godly capacities do we possess?

- 1) Conscience – the capacity to make moral judgments
- 2) Intellect – the capacity to think
- 3) The capacity to love
- 4) The capacity to dream new dreams
- 5) The capacity to invent
- 6) The capacity for free will

What are the ethical ramifications of being created in the image of God?

“To be created in God’s image” means we are God’s co-partners in the perfection of creation. God made a good world, but God did not make it perfect. It is our task to finish the job, to complete the task. “To be created in the image of God” also means that every human being is entitled to be treated with respect, dignity, kindness, justice, and compassion. And this is not at all easy to do.

Imagine what it would be like if we really believed that the person sitting next to you right now, or the salesclerk in the supermarket, or the guy who mows your lawn were all created “in the image of God”. What difference would it make? Would it make a difference? Indeed it would. It means we would treat people differently, very differently, than we do on a regular basis. As an experiment, try thinking of everyone you come in contact with for one day as created in God’s image and see what happens.

Now what is the second core principle? It is the pursuit of holiness (*kedushah*). In Leviticus, chapter 19, we are commanded to be holy as God is holy. Pursuing a life of holiness is one of the 613 commandments. It is the responsibility of every Jew.

What does “holiness” connote? What does it mean to be holy? Most people conjure up an image of asceticism, otherworldliness, piety, or meticulous ritual observance. But this is not the way the Torah understands the concept. What does “holiness” mean in Lev. 19? Holiness means to live on the highest ethical plane in the real world. Holiness has to do with taking care of the poor and making sure the poor have food to eat (v. 9). Holiness concerns the way you treat the employees in your company (v. 13). Holiness means not taking vengeance or bearing a grudge. It means loving your neighbor as yourself (v. 18). Holiness concerns taking care of the elderly (v. 32). Holiness has to do with how you treat the stranger – the illegal immigrant of today (vv.33-34). Holiness has to do with honesty in your business practices (vv. 35-36).

Now, in all these examples from the Torah, where must holiness be achieved. Not just in synagogue – which is easy – but in the real world, in every day life: in our relationships, at our work, at school, at home.

So what is holiness, Jewishly understood? Holiness is conducting oneself on the highest ethical plane. Holiness is about becoming the most morally concerned and the most sensitive human being you can possibly be.

Tonight we have discussed two of the core values of Jewish interpersonal ethics. And I am confident that we already practice them. But if we would fully incorporate them into our lives we would transform the world.