

## On the Human Created in God's Image

**Shalom Freedman (Q).** Rabbi, you are known for your gift for making friends and pupils. What is it in your conception of human relations that enables you to do this?

**Rabbi Irving Greenberg.** The central anchor of my thinking and of my life is the concept that the human being is created in the image of God. (In Ben Azzai's view, this is the great principle of the Torah.) Because humans are the image of God, they are endowed by their Creator with three intrinsic dignities: infinite value (the image created by God is priceless); equality (there can be no preferred image of God; that would constitute idolatry); and uniqueness (images created by humans from one mold resemble each other, but God creates God's images from one couple or mold, and each is distinct from every other) (cf. *Sanhedrin* 37A). All of society—economics, politics, culture—must be organized to respect and uphold these three fundamental dignities. Since the world is not yet structured to sustain these dignities, we must perfect the world. In the interim, we must act to respect these dignities to the fullest. We must also establish a process to move societal conditions and individual behavior toward ever-greater respect for these dignities. This is the guiding principle of the *halachah* and the ultimate goal behind all *mitzvot* and religious behaviors.

The principles of human infinite value, equality, and unique-

ness not only regulate the realm of society and collective behavior. They are equally the ethical principles that are meant to govern all human relationships. The religious goal and test of all relationships is that they reflect—and nurture—the image of God of the human beings involved. The key to friendship and love is to recognize uniqueness and value in each person; I must “hear,” “see,” and respond to the distinctiveness of this person before me at this moment. When people receive a distinctive hearing, they speak distinctively; then their uniqueness evokes unique response and love from the other, and the cycle of growing love is established. Furthermore, all communication takes place in the context of relationship. The more the other person treats you as an equal, the more equal you feel—and the more willing you are to say things you would not say if you felt unequal. This creates the basis of a fuller, more integrated, and more satisfying relationship. Again, the cycle of dignity and equality reinforces ever-growing friendship and feelings of worth.

In the covenant, God models such behavior. One can have all the power in the world, but the more power one possesses, the less one will receive love—because others are so intimidated by power that they won’t express what they really feel. So, in the covenant, God renounces power—takes on limits and equal standing with the human partner—so that humans can relate with integrity and love to God.

I have always set my goal to try to act covenantally with people, to listen to their own distinctive voice, to recognize their personal qualities, and to learn from their unique insights. People absorb and give back the response that they get. To the extent that people feel that you value and appreciate them, they reciprocate.

One reason I love my wife is that she actually practices such values. She will remember that eighteen years ago at this wedding you wore a black dress with a yellow scarf; I never recall such details. She gets to know all the shopkeepers and people we meet in a very distinctive way. She will remember that so-and-so’s grandchild is going to become bar mitzvah next week. People sense that kind of response, and respond to her. They feel treated like a *tzelem elokim* (image of God), and they respond by recognizing her as a *tzelem elokim*. In sum: The encounter with the

infinite value, equality, and uniqueness of the other evokes reverence and love for him or her.

**Q.** In reading your work, and in reviewing the other interviews, I did get the distinctive feeling that the dominant note of your thought is your desire to influence people for their own good. I have often sat in on the lectures of Rabbi Steinsaltz, and I have the sense that what he is really concerned with, returns to again and again, is the idea of how the human can best worship God. Now, I am not posing these as opposites; obviously they contain and complement each other; but it does seem to me that your desire to help humanity is central to your thought. And that even when you spoke about a crucial life plan for the years ahead, the key priority was the question of where you could do the most good. Would you say that this is a fair description of your basic attitude?

**Greenberg.** The principle is clear: If you “know” somebody, you want to help them. (In the biblical sense, to “know” means to encounter, experience, love. By extension, knowing is also used biblically, to mean intercourse.) When you feel the other and their needs, you want to help them in your bones. In turn, such attitudes nurture people and enable them to blossom even as the sun makes a growing flower bloom.

The two early major influences on my direction in life were important sources for the idea of the centrality of helping people. In my study years at Bais Yosef (a *musar* yeshiva that grew out of Rabbi Israel Salanter’s nineteenth-century renewal movement for Orthodoxy), the yeshiva stressed character-building and ethics. The students studied *musar* writings (both intellectually and existentially), including Salanter’s own writings. A powerful central theme in Rabbi Israel Salanter’s thinking was that you express your relationship to God in your obligations to your fellow human beings. As Salanter put it: The other’s physical [or material] well-being is my spiritual responsibility.

The other influence was my father’s burning commitment to help people, especially the oppressed and the underdog. He held this very passionate—almost angry—position that after the Shoah one has to particularly treasure Jews and defend them,

even against God. Jews deserved compassion and healing—and they needed such treatment. Once, as a teenager going through an intense religious phase, I was criticizing the nonobservance and assimilationist tendencies of Jews. As I rattled on, my father suddenly flared up. “You dare to attack Jews in the name of God?” (Angry pause.) “Tell me—of these two [God and Israel], who should be more ashamed of their behavior over the past decade?” Without ever saying a word about the Holocaust, my father communicated that that was what he meant. God had not saved the Jewish people from the Shoah, but the Jewish people had remained faithful. Jews had renewed and intensified their Jewish commitment. In stunned silence, I heard the message: *Don't you dare ever attack (or shame) Jews in the name of God. They deserve better from God and from you. Pick a bone with God, if you feel so fired up with piety and prophetic passion.* Of course, he said none of this in words then; he said it more explicitly at other times. The depth of anger and accusation and compassion that was revealed in that minute left an impression on me that has never disappeared.

The Gemara makes the same point. Religious service is not so much intended to satisfy God, who, in a way, doesn't need the gratification; the real obligation is to be kind or helpful to God's creatures—who need it. This defense of the people, Israel, was a very strong theme in my father's life, and appeared in all of his *psakim* (rulings). He viewed the responsibility of the *posek* to employ the *halachah* to help people, to relieve people's pain. Therefore, he was highly critical of *chumras* that inflicted avoidable burdens and of rulings that caused pain to people when there were alternative imaginative possibilities to mitigate suffering. He believed that *halachah*, as a system, has to be directed properly. *Psak* is never an objective exercise. This view was almost the opposite of Yeshayahu Leibovitz's idea that there is no human reward or humanitarian purpose to *halachah*; it is all selfless worship of God. My father's approach was that the last thing one should do is to glorify God at the expense of humans. Rather, one must help people, even “against” God. He did not really believe that such *psak* was against God; rather, this was what God wanted. He was dead-set against an halachic authority who comes in the name of the law and insists that people have to do such-and-such even if it is very destructive to them.

I remember one case of an Orthodox family in which the wife had come from a somewhat less Orthodox background. The husband was a forerunner of the *baal teshuvah* trend, i.e., he became more and more traditional and strict beyond the law in observance. There was no *eruv* in those days in New York, so taking a baby carriage out of the house was prohibited halachically. The wife was very upset. She felt that it was not good for the baby to be kept indoors all day, so she took the baby carriage out every *Shabbat*. Such action constituted *chillul Shabbat*, and the husband became very angry. The matter turned into a bitter fight, and it was harming the relationship; indeed, it was rocking the marriage. The couple came to my father. Well, the law is the law; he could not make believe that taking out the carriage was not against the law. But he stretched the *halachah* (though he had a halachic basis for this). He convinced the husband that there is no real *rishus harabim* (public space) today (a place that, by strict definition, 600,000 people have to pass through regularly each day). Thus, the wife's sin was *not* as grave as the husband felt it was. (The gravity of the act was disturbing the husband and driving him to more and more aggressive arguments with his wife.) My father was “countenancing” the woman's violation of *Shabbat*, *de facto*. Seeing that she was not going to stop, he made the *averah* (sin) less severe in her husband's eyes so that he would live with it—in order, so to speak, to save the marriage. That incident left a strong impression on me because he had gone beyond what was legally justified in order to help people.

As I look back now, almost fifty years later, I feel that this model gave me the psychological freedom to think in terms of pluralism. When I see Reform Jews doing their service on *Shabbat* (thereby also committing some Halachic *chillul Shabbat* such as lighting the candles or playing the organ on the day itself), my father's model enables me to not have the instinctive feeling—which most Orthodox Jews feel—of anger or rejection. I experience it not simply as a gross violation or some willful rejection of God's word; I also recognize that, in a certain way, it is an alternative model. One can disagree with someone else's religious behavior without rejecting the other—especially by not judging them and condemning them in the name of God. Furthermore, just as the *halachah* says that to save a life one can “override” the

prohibition against carrying or traveling, so out of respect for human dignity one can give the quality of life of the other person weight in arriving at the *psak*. This implies giving halachic weight to people's feelings and priorities.

**Q.** And this attitude, no doubt, has gotten you into trouble?

**Greenberg.** There is no question that such views upset some people. Let me return the favor: In my judgment, the upsurge of *frumkeit* of the past thirty years has led to a halachic brand of "legalism," too often the enemy of *mentschlichkeit*. The classic case is the toleration of widespread *igun* [women being anchored without a *get*] on grounds that, legally, nothing can be done.

You know that some people have charged that I am too sympathetic to Christianity. In Jewish-Christian dialogue circles, I go out of my way to show the religious value and love implicit in *halachah* because I believe that Jewish law is an expression of love and covenant. But I have come to see that the Christian criticism of legalism has a grain of truth in it. If you don't watch your step, the process of law turns into pure legalism, almost indifferent to the human cost. Of course, not all law is legalism. . . . Legalism is the breakdown, the corrupt form of a valid religion based on law.

There are precedents in the *halachah* for increasing the legal "weight" of human pain. One of the most dramatic examples is in this very area of avoiding a situation of *igun*—a state where the woman is trapped, unable to free herself for remarriage and for entering into a decently fulfilling human condition. To avoid *igun*, the rabbis rewrote the book on witnesses and evidence—validating a woman's testimony to the fact that the husband died even though women were not permitted to witness in all other areas of traditional law. They also accepted the testimony of one witness as proof—though normally two is the minimum. There is also a precedent that a *derabbanan* (a rabbinically enacted *halachah*) is overridden for the sake of *kavod habriyot* (human dignity). (Admittedly, there are cases of not overruling the *halachah* because of human dignity—such as the ruling that a person should strip himself in public if he discovers that he is

wearing *shatnetz* [clothing of wool and linen] rather than continue to violate God's laws.)

Then there is the principle of *hefsed merubeh*. In some cases, if the person can manage financially without a questionable chicken, we rule that it is *treyf*. But if it is a heavy financial loss for the person, the same chicken is ruled kosher. Now we should push these precedents further. After the Shoah, the value of *tzelem elokim*—of nurturing the infinite value, equality, and uniqueness of every person—is critical. Such confirmation is the only credible statement about God one can really make. This is the true glorification of God in an age when God is profoundly hidden, in a time when there has been a serious assault on the credibility of faith because of the great destruction of human life.

The way to restore credibility of belief in God—before one talks of worship—is to reduce evil and suffering by restoring the image of God. To restore the image of God means bringing out to the fullest the individuality, the equality, and the value of every human being. It follows that this consideration should be given a heavier weight in *halachah* or *psak* than in the past.

Historically, after destructive assaults on Jewry, great messianic outbursts have followed. It was as if the spiritual leadership understood that the balance between the power of redemption and the power of destruction had been shifted or destroyed; therefore, restoring the balance and credibility of faith demanded strong counter action. In the same way, the image of God has been so desecrated in our time that it is hard to talk about and affirm God. Yet, the most incredible and powerful way to uphold the Divine is to affirm and reestablish the value of the human being in God's image. Otherwise, the destruction of the image of God (six million dead, tortured, etc.) shouts down all talk about God. In this generation, the most important way of renewed talking about God is to help human beings rebuild the value of humans. That must be accomplished not only by using classic *psak* to advance this goal, but by engaging the *halachah* to the limit and beyond to confirm human dignity.

**Q.** Rabbi, I have difficulty with some of what you said. I keep thinking of the Kotzker Rebbe's "God is wherever you let Him in." And I know that many Jews live today with not only a sense of

hidden God, but also a sense of God nearby. Another point: The redemptive actions of history you also point to in your writing, such as the rebirth of Israel—don't they show God active in history? Personally, I see my own life as being guided and directed by God. Sometimes it is as if the whole world was created for my sake, though I know, too, that I am a handful of dust. I really do believe that God guides, that there is personal providence, *hashgachah pratit*. I think I sensed that you yourself had this kind of feeling, and that you did talk about getting what you felt, at a certain point, were signals from God. While I recognize why, at certain times, people would need to talk about the absence or hiddenness of God, my own experience is of the increasing presence of God in my life.

**Greenberg.** The foremost expression of *hashgachah*—Divine Providence—is God's action in history. The Exodus was and is the classic statement of God's presence and care. The Exodus—at least retrospectively—manifestly exhibits God's intervention. But later events, such as the Purim salvation, in which God's hand is present but far from hidden, also have become cornerstones of Jewish faith. The process of redemption will not cease until the whole world is redeemed.

I believe with complete faith that the rebirth of Israel in this century is another one of those decisive turning points in history. But I also believe that God now acts primarily, at least on the visible level, through human activity—as is appropriate in a partnership whose human participant is growing up. God's "direct action" is all but invisible in the modern Israeli Exodus event. The human activities—armies fighting, diplomats negotiating, media covering, the wounds, the deeds, the suffering, the lucky breaks—are what is visible. This does not mean that God may not pull strings and create environmental or probability factors that affect the outcome. But the primary thrust of God's action is now directed through human acts. This does not diminish the religious significance of the redemption—or our obligation to acknowledge this gift from God.

On the other hand, to say that Israel is God's act in history—in the way that Gush Emunim people do—is close to offensive. A lot of secular, as well as religious, people died in those

Israeli army battles. Therefore, to give all the credit to God is like cheating these people. In this age, the only credit God wants—and properly gets—is, so to speak, for being with and holding the hands, for creating the framework for the people who are doing these acts of historic significance.

A second point about *hashgachah*. *Hashgachah* means that God is with us; God is interested in and concerned about every detail of our lives. There is not a moment in life that is cut off from God. But *hashgachah* is not to be interpreted as meaning that God is doing the fighting and, therefore, is guaranteeing the outcome for us. We no longer have the covenantal right to draw the same conclusion as does the Book of Judges—that if there was a good outcome, God did it because we obeyed; and if there was a bad outcome, God inflicted the bad result on us because of our sins. The interpretive rules have changed as the covenantal roles have changed, and humans have taken on more responsibility. This is God's will; this is the intended outcome of the covenantal partnership. This religious understanding has profound implications for human behavior. The concept that "God will do it for me" is the least acceptable version of the meaning of *hashgachah*.

*Hashgachah* means that even if I am given a bad hand to play in life it is my mission to play it well—and I will not be alone. Suppose that one is given a terrible sickness, or is born in the generation of the 1940s in Nazi-occupied Europe, when the primary choice is how to die with dignity; God is with one even then. I say this with a full heart. I believe that God was in Auschwitz. I believe that God was in the gas chambers with the Jewish people. But I do not believe that God inflicted those gas chambers on the Jews because they were sinful; nor is it proper to believe that God blew up the gas chambers, so to speak, at the end of the war, or that God miraculously stopped the Arab tanks in Israel. The Divine asks humans to stop the evil ones. Full responsibility is given to the covenanted human partner to redeem history—under and with God's *hashgachah*.

*Hashgachah* taken on the surface level can lead to mistaken and sometimes even destructive conclusions. *Hashgachah* means that God is behind the Jews in reconquering Israel. But it does not mean that Jews cannot lose even if they take a reckless or

politically or militarily nondefensible position! It is true that God is with us; it is true that God wants us to reconquer Israel. But that Providence does not exempt us from making reasonable projections as to what we are militarily and diplomatically (humanly) capable of accomplishing. We cannot write a political or military check that is not backed by the bank balance—with the claim that God is going to cover for us.

This view walks a thin line. One cannot function by pure rationality. There is an appropriate role for faith and hope and courageous risk. And there is the intangible element of help conferred by Divine presence. But that extra margin must be treated as a very narrow one. To say that we are fully responsible means that we are fully responsible to deal with the situation with our best judgment—assuming no miracles and no *Deus ex machina*.

How can one think of giving back a sacred piece of land? The answer is: If in the best human political or military judgment that is necessary, for saving lives or making peace, then one must take full responsibility and do it. Even if that decision is the wrong one, God approves of it because it reflects the exercise of mature judgment in a spirit of full responsibility for the covenant.

This position contradicts the argument: "God will come to our rescue, if we show steadfast faith." Others argue that all of Zionism's accomplishments defy probability and rationality, but God accomplishes it all miraculously—so we must continue on this path. May I offer something I learned from my CCNY experience? I was certain that God was with me; I thought that the inheritance left to City College was a Divine signal to start CLAL and take on the task of equipping Jews to deal with modernity. It turned out that the signal was not that clear-cut—nor did it guarantee success. *Hashgachah* is subtler and more hidden, and therefore should not be invoked simplistically. But with this understanding, there is *hashgachah* in daily life and every step of our way. *Hashgachah* means the blessing of a universal and continuous presence of God's love, God's judgment, God's calling.

**Q.** I believe that people of political views very different from yours (I am thinking of Rabbi Rabinovitch of Maale Adumim)

also expressed the idea that there are no guarantees, that God did not guarantee that we are necessarily going to be victorious in our present political struggle. But I believe that many of us feel that there are situations even in ordinary life when there comes what might be called "special" or miraculous manifestations of God. There are times when God seems to give us some special power or help.

**Greenberg.** There are times when you are carried through life beyond your normal capacity. This is part of *hashgachah*. There are times when your situation shifts—beyond your capability to affect it—in your favor. At such moments one has a right to affirm, trustingly or hopefully, that *hashgachah* is operating. But God helps those who help themselves. If you make realistic projections, then *hashgachah* pulls you through. But you are not exempt from making responsible projections. The more reasonable people's interpretation of God's acts in history, the more acceptable I find their views. I affirm that God is operating and transforming events in Jewish history miraculously now. But that fact cannot be allowed to hide or distract from the tremendous shift of responsibility for *tikkun olam* toward the human side. There is a greater role for the human agent of the covenant in the present historical situation.

**Q.** But how do we precisely understand this in various historical situations? Take, for instance, the Six-Day War, which many Jews saw at the time as an act of miraculous Divine redemption. Where is God's part in this, and where is man's?

**Greenberg.** It is very hard to draw precise delineations. That is another reason that we should welcome multiple views. I believe that the Six-Day War was a redemptive victory, accomplished by God and humans in covenantal partnership, comparable to the great biblical events of Redemption. (1967 is part of the larger process of the rebirth of Israel, which is comparable to the biblical Exodus itself.) However no one can give a definitive answer because there is no clear revelation anymore; the age of prophets who are unequivocal Divine spokesmen is over. (Even then, usually, there were counterprophets with countermessages. Learn-

ing what God was doing was not so simple then, either). Since God no longer sends prophets with definitive messages, there are pluralistic possibilities of understanding—and the number is expanding. You have to make your best assessment and act. You live by that best judgment, but you allow for the others to correct or to supplement your own interpretations.

Not only is pluralism valid and necessary, God affirms it. If I exercise my best judgment and make an error, then I am not condemned by God. An analogy: If a subordinate or colleague makes an error in judgment in carrying out a good responsible and responsive policy, then any good executive knows not to come down on the person in that context. You ask the person to review and learn from the error. But if you give people responsibility and then condemn them every time they make an error, then you are not giving them responsibility; you are merely covering your own back. God should be credited with being a decent executive. God has given humankind a genuine delegation of authority. This includes the right to make misjudgments. Those who make misjudgments do not delegitimize themselves. They should be tactfully and supportively criticized. And we should work to ensure that errors are corrected. But that is quite different from saying that the other (erring) people are delegitimized.

So there is no clear answer to your question—how to tell exactly God's role and how humans should act in history now. Here are some guidelines: Use your best judgment. Use the past models. There are no self-articulating guidelines and parameters from the past revelations, only models that you apply now as best you can. Isaiah saw the restoration of Israel as God's work and proclaimed Cyrus, the Persian emperor who made it happen, to be God's Messiah. Others—and, later, Jewish history—disagreed. Today, we have no prophets to give us an interpretation. All the more so today, we must allow for various judgments as to correct policy or what God—or humans—hath wrought. Every religious person who wants to serve God's purpose should welcome pluralism as likely to prevent or minimize errors and provide the widest range of insight into what God wants right now.

**Q.** So you mean it's for the individual to judge and decide in most life situations-what God wants of him?

**Greenberg.** No individual is an island unto himself or herself. The individual should not live in a solipsistic, atomized world. Most of us live in communities; therefore, you want to decide in the context of communities, if at all possible. There are also inherited parameters, law and practice in accordance with Jewish custom. These are fundamental models that are not to be dismissed. But no one can give a computer-programmed, "objective" answer. It is possible that the community errs, or that the official authorities err. The individual has to make a judgment, and cannot hide behind the community standard, either. The individual should defer, give weight, give respect to community values if for no other reason than all of us live in community. But when the individual genuinely believes that the community is in error, it is part of personal moral responsibility to stand up and say so, or to actively disagree, or to create alternative models.