

Biblical Perspectives on What Makes us Human

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Dr. Esther Shkop

We're going to examine the question of, "*Mah hu haadam* -What is the human being?" *Haadam* is the language of Chazal and it always refers to both men and women and non-Jews as well. Throughout the *Tanach* we find human beings musing on the meaning of what they are and the value that exists in a human life separate from what it can do. Does human life have essential value and if it does what is it?

We will look at two chapters of *Tehilim* and a short excerpt from the book of *Iyov* that asks the same question but in different circumstances. Chapter 8 of *Tehilim* has an intriguing pattern. The line that the chapter begins with is the way it actually ends. We have bookends so to speak at the top and bottom or the heavens and earth and a human being stuck in between. One can almost imagine David Hamelech lying on a knoll of grass, looking up at the expanse of the stars, and seeing infinity. Then he exclaims, "Hashem, how majestic, strong, and powerful is your name." For at best I know you by your name, but I cannot really know you. "You've placed your hod on the heavens..."

The Malbim explains the difference between *hadar* and *hod*. *Hadar* is external beauty. *Hod* is internal, eternal beauty. Maybe up in the heavens they know your *hod*, your essence. Down here we can see at best your reflection. We can try to understand the artist by what he made and the most distant I can see is the stars. "*Ki ereh shamecha maasei etzbosecha...*" - When I see your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon, the stars that you placed them..." There's a clause here left hanging. When I see that, I'm left breathless. "*Ma enosh ki tizkerenu...*" -What is mere mortal man that you would remember him and a human being that you should be mindful of him..."

"But that you appointed him. You gave him a role..." When Hashem created Adam He told him, "You shall have dominion over the fish and the birds over the earth and he placed him in *Gan Eden* to cultivate and develop it and to preserve it, not to keep it as it was, but to make it better. So when David Hamelech is looking at the grand expanse of all creation and looks at the planets and sees as it were

Hashem's finger, he feels tiny and he refers to himself as *enosh*.

The chapter continues, "You have made Him slightly less than *Elokim*." Some commentators say *Elokim* refers to the angels. Rav Hirsh says it refers to Hashem. Angels are compelled to do their mission. Man can choose between good and evil and in that sense he's deemed just a step below Hashem himself. "And you have crowned him with *kavod* (honor) and *hadar* (beauty)." *Kavod* is the essential self. As the British say, "I give you my word of honor." Without honor one is but a beast. *Kavod* is another word for the divine soul. It's not something given to you by other people. It's what makes you valuable, the divine part of you, something intangible, the crown given to us by Hashem. Rav Hirsh and the Malbim note that *hadar* refers to the beauty and sanctity of the human body formed by Hashem himself. There's no dualism here. One might think of the body as somewhat impure. But in fact, it is a holy instrument to be used in tandem with our souls to complete *maaseh bereishit* (creation).

Antisemitism in America

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Rebbetzin Tziporah (Heller) Gottlieb

This year has seen a rise in terrible anti-Semitic violence in the United States. Let's examine what this says about who we are as Jews in exile, the relationship between Jews and non Jews, and the bigger picture. Is this indicative of the end of our exile experience? Are we on the very heels of the Messianic era?

The Gemara tells us that when Yaakov fled his parental home on his way to Charan he stopped on the way and had a dream. There were angels ascending and descending a ladder. The word for angel is *malach* which literally means a messenger. Yaakov saw many things simultaneously, prayers ascending, salvation coming down. But he also saw that we would experience living in exile under various nations. He saw the saar, the angel, of each of these nations ascending and descending. He saw the rise and fall of Babylon, Persia, Greece. He saw Rome

ascending higher and higher, but he didn't see it fall. Hashem told him he had nothing to fear. His dream was predictive of the exile experience. The function of exile is to reveal to us who we are by defining who we are not. The Babylonians helped us to discover that our definition isn't might makes right. The Persians taught us that gentility and luxury aren't the basis of life. The Greeks made us realize that a humanistic world which denigrated morality was in fact warped.

Rome created a hedonistic society which lived for physical pleasure, an academic society where any achievement was viewed important. This mode of society, which is what we live in today, has one thing in common- aggression and ego. The voice of Rome is about the self against the world. And living in their society, we've adapted a lot of this.

The function of exile is to make us see this is not what we want. But in America, the voice

we've been using is yes. This is the land of opportunity and freedom, a very tolerant, kind, society. We are losing who we truly are. The assimilation rate is unspeakable. What's happening now is that the dark side of Roman civilization is beginning to show itself. Ideologically, this is good for us but physically it's a disaster. There's great hate being voiced in America and it's coming from two different sources, black racists and white supremacists. In truth, it's the voice of envy.

We can listen to what they say to see what they are thinking. The white supremacists say the Jews have all the power and money. They've taken our jobs. The blacks claim the Jews are selfish. They've taken over our neighborhoods, they charge us a lot of money in their stores... I would say to these blacks- "Substitute hatred for ambition and you'll do a lot better. You can do what we did and succeed." But they won't hear it. We're in a

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position once faced by Yaakov and Esav. Their fight began in the womb when they fought for the inheritance of two worlds. Esav is the voice of the white supremacists, the voice of the Nazi. "I not only want to prevail, I not only want to be number one, but I don't want competition. I don't want a close number two." They want to capture the ideology of Judaism without the mitzvot in order to claim their superiority. Christianity with its center

literally in Rome claims that the Jews betrayed their savior. Therefore, they deserve to die whether passively by conversion or actively by murder because we can't be number one if they deny our savior. The white supremacists feel threatened by our success. They see the Jews as selfish and themselves as victims. They see us on their turf and in fact we are on their turf. We've lost track of who we are. With the blacks our very existence is a reproach

because we've made it and they didn't.

This is all part of the plan of returning to who we truly are. We have an identity and a conscious. We're not just supreme court judges, high profile lawyers, or wealthy bankers. We're members of a holy nation, a nation of priests. We have to regain our heritage.

Shir Shel Yom: Yom Shishi Part I

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Rebbetzin Leah Kohn

Chapter 93 in *Tehilim* begins with the words, "Hashem has reigned; He has attired Himself with majesty... He has girded Himself with strength. Your throne is established of old; You are from everlasting." The chapter tells us that Hashem so to speak enclothed himself with strength and pride while creating the world. But why the repetition? The Malbim explains that there are two ways in which Hashem conducts the world. There is *derech hateva*, following the laws of nature, and there are miracles. We see that Hashem is king via these two ways that He leads the world. *Oz* (strength) refers to the natural way, *geyut* (majesty) refers to the supernatural way. The Malbim points out that in fact *derech hateva* is the greater way. He gives an example of a person who needs to lift something heavy for a moment. It's not easy, but it doesn't compare to carrying something heavy for a long time. It's a very heavy load to create a world and run it on an ongoing basis. Compared to that, performing a one-time miracle is easy. The greatness of Hashem is expressed more via running the world on an ongoing basis rather than witnessing a miracle. Even when He does do something supernatural, at the same time he still continues to run the world by nature. It's not a

contradiction. The combination of both ways is the greatest of miracles.

The Malbim gives an analogy. If you look inside a watch, you'll see many gears interconnected. If you stop one, all of them will stop. Yet although all of creation is interconnected, if Hashem stops one aspect of creation from doing its job, it doesn't affect the rest. This shows that Hashem malach- He is king.

"The rivers have raised their voice; the rivers have raised their depths... More than the voices of great waters and the mightiest breakers of the sea, is the Hashem mighty on high." The Malbim says that the rivers are an example of what we previously explained. The nature of water is to flow. Rivers flow, but only within the boundaries that Hashem set. We see the laws of nature in effect, but also being stopped by the word of Hashem. Before creation, the whole world was covered with water. Now it is contained in defined spaces. The amount of water is the same, but it does not overflow. We can see the waves of the ocean moving and then stopping at a certain point. This is an example of a combination of *derech hateva* and miracles in the same place. There's no difference between nature and miracles as nature is also a miracle. Both

happen by the word of Hashem. We can attempt to explain aspects of nature scientifically, but we are forced to stop at a certain point and say this is beyond our grasp, it's from Hashem. We can go from an effect to a cause and then to another cause and then we must return to the beginning point where we are compelled to say we don't know. This shows us the greatness of Hashem.

"Your testimonies are very faithful to Your house, the dwelling of holiness... to the length of days." The Malbim says that although Hashem's glory fills the whole world, we have the ability to see Him most in his dwelling place, the *Beit Hamikdash*. Hashem controls everything, nature and miracles, but His way of dealing with the world in a supernatural way sources itself from His stronger presence in this world in the *Beit Hamikdash*. Other commentators say that this chapter talks about the times of *Mashiach* when everyone, even other nations, will see Hashem as the king. When the *Beit Hamikdash* will be built the whole world will be filled with clarity and there will be that ultimate acknowledgement that *Hashem malach*.