

Section Two



ON OUR HUMANITY

1. What does it mean to be created in the divine image?
2. What does the concept of gender contribute to our understanding of being human?
3. The terms “grace” (חַן, *chein*), “salvation” (יְשׁוּעָה, *y’shuah*), and “love” (אַהֲבָה, *ahavah*) have been important concepts in Jewish religious vocabulary but are frequently associated with Christianity. What can these terms mean in our contemporary Jewish lives?
4. What is your concept of soul and afterlife?

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1

Traveling through the sub-Saharan desert of Eastern Chad, I saw the boy dressed in rags, standing alone. His sad and hollowed eyes reflected the hopelessness of his situation: a Darfuri refugee living in the midst of dust, disease, and desperation. In my time with the men, women, and children of Darfur, I listened with a broken heart to countless stories of rape, violence, and murder of their loved ones. Yet I will never forget the boy standing there alone.

I returned home with many questions about this boy. *Was this boy created in the divine image?* If so, could I imagine a God overflowing with hurt and desperation clearly being reflected in the image of this sad little boy? I also wondered if the men, the *janjaweed*, who committed atrocities beyond belief against the Darfuri people were created in the divine image. Is there a God that tears people's lives apart, that kills and causes hurts that penetrate so deeply that they can never be healed?

Out in the desert, I considered these questions in a very different way than I ever had from the comfort of my life in the States. The boy (the victim) and the man (the perpetrator) are both created in the divine image. Yet it is nearly impossible to see the Divine in either of them. The divine image reflects goodness, fulfillment, and peace. Where was that to be found in a land of murderous *janjaweed* and innocent victims who now wandered the land in desperation?

Judaism maintains that the human being is created in the divine image. It is often difficult to make out that image amidst the clouds of darkness, death, and destruction that human beings have created. Ultimately, the divine image is in each of us, but it is waiting to be discovered. It is the goodness that resides in each of us. It is that “still small voice” of conscience that pleads with us to look for the sacred in other human beings and implores us to treat other people with dignity, which includes making sure that all human beings have food, water, and shelter as well as opportunities to live a sacred life. It is that innate instinct that drives us to create and not to destroy, to lift up and not to tear down. The divine image is peace incarnate, our instinct to pursue peace in each and every place that human beings interact with each other. The divine image is that uniquely human potentiality for affirming that which is good. It is our inner compulsion to choose life.

2

Sitting in tents of the Darfuri refugees and hearing their plight, I asked myself: What is it to be fully human? This, I believe, is the most challenging question that we face. We seem to spend a lot of time on theological questions: Is there a God? How can God allow human beings to suffer? Do I believe in God? Although worth examining, I believe that throughout the ages, we have devoted an excess of time to questions about God and far too little time to questions about the human condition. We are infants in our understanding of what it means to be human. I often wonder whether humanity has progressed much from the story of the first two brothers, Cain brutally killing Abel.

Gender is one important factor that enriches our understanding of what it is to be human. Men’s primitive forebears were hunters and predators; and from the beginning of time, men have been the perpetrators of most of the violence, destruction, and genocide that has been

done to other human beings. It is men who have shaped a construct of life that is violent and destructive.

Men living in the twenty-first century must begin to confront this history and reflect carefully on their own individual behavior. Although most men have not committed horrific acts against women, men should be asking if they have done enough to create a world wherein violence aimed at women is no longer tolerated. Today, men must strive to develop more compassion, kindness, and love toward women. They must also learn to resist the temptation to dominate others.

Historically, women have been the victims of war, rape, and abuse. It is women who have seen their worlds torn apart by the cruelty of men. It is women who have held home and community together. It is women who have found wellsprings of forgiveness and compassion in their hearts.

Women living in the twenty-first century must continue to explore their own history. It is critical that they remain resolutely committed to living lives that do not emulate the worst qualities of men but rather uplift the humane parts of women and men.

It was Abraham Joshua Heschel who challenged both men and women to ask themselves an entirely different question. Heschel wrote, “We ask: What is man? Yet the true question should be: Who is man?” (Heschel, *Who Is Man?*, 28; Heschel died in 1972, and it is clear in his work that “man” refers to both men and women).

When we ask “Who is man?” instead of “What is man?” we commit ourselves to exploring all of our qualities as human beings, including gender. How do I kindle the humanness inside of me and others? What is it to be human and humane? Can we change the human condition?

3

As I sat with a teenage Darfuri girl who told me her story of being raped, I wondered where were grace, salvation, and love in her life;

where are those ideals in the lives of victims throughout the world? These concepts, which are taken seriously by Christians, are often neglected by Jews. As a result of my travels in the world of the dispossessed in Darfur, I have come to better understand the Jewish notions of grace, salvation, and love. For the contemporary Jew, these concepts need to be reclaimed.

Salvation is about doing what we can to help or save others from harm. For Jews, divine salvation comes through our efforts to advance the salvation of our fellow human beings. The measure of our lives is found in what we do to help people who are hurting. We find salvation in creating ways for the powerless and the victims of the storms of life “to be helped” by changes in society that allow them to be active participants in redeeming their dignity and their lives.

Similarly, grace in Judaism comes through the way we live our lives. Those who live in a humble manner and show loving-kindness toward others may be said to have grace. It often appears that we human beings have lost a sense of graciousness that also includes gratitude. Love is a core human need. Who does not wish to be loved or to find a way to love? Love is an art that needs to be nurtured. It requires both a striving to avoid harsh judgments of others and finding ways to support and love the vulnerable and the dispossessed, those who are in such desperate need of love and support.

In *Pirkei Avot* we are taught, “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? If not now, when?” (*Pirkei Avot* 1:14). From this insightful teaching we learn that all life is a daily search for the equilibrium that keeps love of self and love of others in proper balance. So it is with the ideals of grace, love, and salvation. If I am not kind to myself, if I do not love myself, and if I do not protect myself, who will do these things for me? Yet if I am not kind to others, if I do not love my brothers and sisters, and if I do not protect them, what am I? If I do not start to live a life filled with the qualities of grace, love, and salvation now, when will I ever start? Jewish teachings

prompt us to search for the delicate balance that falls between the antipodes of selfishness and selflessness. This search is a lifelong journey.

4

For the ancient Greeks, the human soul distinguished us from animals and reflected our ability to reason. In Judaism, the soul has been perceived as the quality that enables us to see the sacred in others and in ourselves. The soul is not a material object, and it cannot be dissected and studied; yet it is as real any as any physical part of our selves. One cannot experience the soul through the five physical senses, yet the soul can indeed be apprehended through our spiritual senses.

It is in the soul that one has a profound emotional appreciation of the natural world—the spectacular beauty of a sunset or a sunrise. It is in the soul that one can appreciate inner beauty in other human beings. One who has a mature soul has a deep appreciation of the plight of all human beings and their yearnings and hopes.

Our concern should be the nurturing and enhancing of the soul. This can be achieved when we look for the transcendent experiences in life—through the beauty that we find in nature, in the arts, in music, in prayer, and in any other activity that moves us emotionally. In this way, we develop a heightened sense of our own humanity as well as the humanity of others.

The afterlife is unknown and often is the source of great anxiety and fear. This is understandable, as this is how we face life—spending so much of life resisting change and afraid of what we do not know. The unknown in life has become a source of terror rather than a source of prospect and hope. We often shelter ourselves from facing that which pushes us out of our comfort zone and into an area of discomfort. The Jewish journey through life is one that embraces change and growth and provides us with a road map for exploring the unknown as we go through the various stages of life.

I believe there is an afterlife. Yet I am also convinced that this afterlife is unimaginable and unknowable. I prefer to think about this unknown stage that awaits all human beings as a time of prospect and hope. We best prepare for the afterlife by learning how to embrace the unknown in life and believing that no matter how dark the night, light will come in the morning. In other words, we learn how to understand the afterlife through our present life. We do this when we see that hopeless boy in the desert of Darfur and, despite all odds, we choose to act on our belief that one distant day this same boy will yet live with dignity, purpose, and hope.