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# The Triumph of Life

R. Yitz Greenberg





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**UNIT 1** The Image of God

**SESSION 1** Infinite Value

One of Judaism’s most radical teachings for the world is the idea that humans were created “in the image of God.” But what does this mean? Why is this idea so central to the Torah and Jewish living, and what are its broader implications? These are questions R. Greenberg has spent decades thinking through, and we will spend the next three sessions exploring them. To guide our exploration, we will use R. Greenberg’s words from a draft of his forthcoming book, *The Triumph of Life*.

R. Greenberg believes the Torah stresses that human beings are created in the “image of God” to teach us that all people share the following three dignities: (1) infinite value, (2) equality, and (3) uniqueness. We will devote one session to each, combining traditional sources with R. Greenberg’s comments.

First, discuss with your *havruta*:

- » What do you think it means to be created in the image of God? Have you learned about this idea in other contexts? What did it mean there, and what did you think about it?

## **WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE CREATED IN THE IMAGE OF GOD?**

The image of God is introduced in Genesis 1 [\[1\]](#), in the creation of the world. But some of its most important implications aren’t spelled out until eight chapters later, in the world after the Flood. God makes a covenant (*berit*) with all humans and animals, called the Noahide covenant in later Jewish literature. The image of God shows up here as the justification for treating murder as one of the most serious crimes of all.

### **SOURCE #1** [\[2\]](#)

בראשית ט:א, ה-ז

<sup>1</sup>וַיְבָרֶךְ אֱלֹהִים אֶת-נֹחַ וְאֶת-בָּנָיו וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמְלֵאוּ אֶת-הָאָרֶץ: ... <sup>5</sup>וְנֹאֵךְ אֶת-דַּמְכֶם לְנַפְשֹׁתֵיכֶם אֲדַרְשׁ מִיַּד כָּל-חַיָּה אֲדַרְשָׁנּוּ וּמִיַּד הָאָדָם מִיַּד אִישׁ אָחִיו אֲדַרְשׁ אֶת-נַפְשׁ הָאָדָם: <sup>6</sup>שֹׁפֵךְ דַּם הָאָדָם בְּאָדָם דָּמוֹ יִשְׁפָּךְ כִּי בְצַלְם אֱלֹהִים עָשָׂה אֶת-הָאָדָם: <sup>7</sup>וְנֹאֵתֶם פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ שְׂרָצוּ בָאָרֶץ וּרְבוּ-בָהּ:

Genesis 9:1, 5-7

<sup>1</sup>God blessed Noah and his children, and said to them, “Be fertile and increase, and fill the earth... <sup>5</sup>But for your own life-blood I will require a reckoning: I will require it of every beast; of humankind, too, will I require a reckoning for human life, of everyone for each other! <sup>6</sup>Whoever sheds blood of humans, by humans shall their blood be shed; for in the image of God did God make humankind. <sup>7</sup>As for you—be fertile and increase; abound on the earth and increase on it.”

◇ **Chiasm**

A chiasm is anything which can be summarized as ABA or ABBA or ABCBA etc. The purpose of the chiasm is to highlight whatever is in the middle.

Two strong themes emerge from these verses as core to the Noahide covenant:

1. Life—especially human life—should spread and increase (more on this theme in a future session);
2. Life, as symbolized by blood, is sacred and should not be destroyed. This is especially true for human life because—unlike animal or plant life—humans are created in the image of God.

Both of these themes are central to R. Greenberg’s thought. He argues that, if God has infinite value, then humans, as God’s images, must have at least a fraction of that value. But a fraction of infinity is still infinite! Therefore, this passage teaches us: humans have infinite value.

1. What does it mean to say that a human has infinite value? How might knowing this fact change the way you interact with fellow human beings?
2. What is the relationship between humans having infinite value and being tasked to spread and increase throughout the world?
3. The phrase at the core of this passage is structured as a chiasm, ◇ a common and important biblical literary device. In this case:

יִשְׁפַךְ	דָּמּוֹ	בְּאָדָם	הָאָדָם	דָּם	שֹׁפֵךְ
will be shed	their blood	by humans	of humans	blood	whoever sheds
A	B	C	C	B	A

4. Why do you think this passage is trying to emphasize the word “*adam* - humankind”? What is the key message we are supposed to take away?
5. The idea that murder requires a death penalty would have been unremarkable in the premodern period. It seems the idea here is to highlight the value of human life, such that only the worst imaginable punishment is fitting. On the other hand, there is a potential logical inconsistency between valuing human life and taking it away (by killing a murderer) in the name of that value. What do you think about this? Is the idea of capital punishment for murder successful in highlighting the value of human life?
6. What is the significance of this *berit* being given to all of humanity (in this case, Noah and his family, pre-Abraham), not just to Jews?

◆ **Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5**

The Mishnah is the earliest Rabbinic legal work (from around 220 CE), separated topically into six orders (*sedarim*). This is from Seder Nezikin ("Damages"), generally covering criminal law.

◆ **Unique/alone**

Hebrew: *yehidi*, related to the word *ehad* = one.

◆ **Life**

This is the correct and original reading of this mishnah. Some modern editions read here "one who destroys one Jewish life." Not only does this make no sense in this context (because Adam pre-existed the Jewish people), all the ancient versions of the Mishnah skip this word. This problematic reading seems to have been influenced by Avot de-Rabbi Natan, a very popular commentary on Pirkei Avot. There, "Jewish life" makes some sense, but it was incorrectly imported here as well.

◆ **World**

We'll come back to the continuation of this text in future sessions.

**ONE LIFE IS A WHOLE WORLD**

Another key passage in Jewish tradition about the infinite value of human beings is from the Mishnah. A chapter about the interrogation of the witnesses to a capital crime takes a surprisingly homiletical turn:

SOURCE #2

משנה סנהדרין ד:ה

כיצד מאימין את העדים  
על עדי נפשות?..

הווי יודעין שלא כדיני  
ממונות דיני נפשות. דיני  
ממונות, אדם נותן ממון  
ומתכפר לו. דיני נפשות,  
דמו ודם זרעיותיו תלויין  
בו עד סוף העולם,

שכן מצינו בקין שהרג את  
אחיו, שנאמר (בראשית  
ד, י) "דמי אחיך צעקים",  
אינו אומר דם אחיך  
אלא דמי אחיך, דמו ודם  
זרעיותיו.

לפיכך נברא אדם יחיד,  
ללמדך, שכל המאבד נפש  
אחת, מעלה עליו הכתוב  
כאלו אבד עולם מלא. וכל  
המקים נפש אחת, מעלה  
עליו הכתוב כאלו קיים  
עולם מלא...

Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5

How do they intimidate the capital witnesses?...

They should know that monetary cases are not like capital cases. Monetary cases—a person can give money and be atoned; capital cases—[the defendant]’s blood and the blood of their descendents is dependent upon him until the end of the world.

For this is what we find with Cain, who killed his brother, as it is said, “the bloods of your brother are screaming” (Genesis 4:10). It doesn’t say “blood of your brother,” but “bloods of your brother”—i.e. his blood and the blood of his descendents.

Therefore, Adam was created unique/alone. To teach you that one who destroys one life is considered by Scripture as if they destroyed a whole world. And one who saves one life is considered by Scripture as if they saved a whole world...

Based on Genesis teaching that humans have infinite value, this mishnah is simple math. If you save one times infinite value, you have saved infinite value. If you save seven billion times infinite value, you have saved infinite value. Thus, saving a single individual is equivalent to saving a whole world’s worth of value.

1. The Hebrew word, *yehidi*, can be translated as either “unique” or “alone,” as above. What would you say is the different valence between them? Which one makes more sense to you? Why?
2. Why do you think this passage shows up in the context of witnesses to a capital crime? Put another way: in what way is this text a warning for the witnesses as much as for society at large?
3. Can you think of other reasons why humanity was created *yehidi*?

## **WHAT IS THE DE FACTO VALUE OF A HUMAN LIFE?**

We have explored two of the foundational texts about people being created in the image of God. As a central tenet of Judaism, there is obviously much more to say on this topic! R. Greenberg brings these issues to life in the modern world.

### **SOURCE #3**

#### **Yitz Greenberg, *Triumph of Life***

What does it mean to treat someone as being of infinite value? Simply put: a human life is priceless—worth beyond any measure of money... In 2001, I had a cardiac episode from which doctors concluded that I should undergo a heart bypass operation to remove clogged arteries. Because I was over 65, the operation was paid for by Medicare, that is, the United States government. I saw the bills afterward, and they came to more than \$250,000. At the time, my life expectancy was just about ten years. In effect, the United States government made a statement that the life of Yitz Greenberg was worth saving at a cost of \$25,000 a year. That is not quite an expression that my life was of infinite value. Still, it certainly showed that the culture and legal system of the American people valued my life and that of millions of others at a very expensive (i.e. highly valued) level. This points toward the future possibility of spending at the rate of infinite value. In fact, the adoption of Medicare was a statement of placing increased value on the lives of senior citizens in the United States. Had I personally not been covered, I probably could have scraped the money together for the operation. But for tens of thousands of others, I suspect that they could not raise the resources and so their lives might have been forfeit. This is a sobering and shocking reminder that providing medical coverage for millions of uninsured people is a hotly contested political issue in American politics, circa 2020.

The flip side of placing this value on life is expressed in two other statistics. In the 1990s, the World Health Organization (WHO) estimated that millions of children in the third world passed away every year from the tail end of various infectious diseases and their symptoms, especially: dysentery,

◇ **Dehydration**

Cesar G. Victora, Jennifer Bryce, Olivier Fontaine & Roeland Monasch, “Reducing Deaths from Diarrhoea Through Oral Rehydration Therapy,” in *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, vol. 78, no. 10 (2000), pp. 1246–1255.

◇ **A day**

“Oral Rehydration Salts,” *International Drug Price Indicator Guide*. Retrieved 30 December 2018, at <http://mshpriceguide.org/en/single-drug-information/?DMFId=572&searchYear=2000>. Reflects prices from 2000.

diarrhea, and dehydration. ◇ The WHO estimated that most of these children could have been kept alive by a daily dose of oral rehydration tablets (which supply the vital electrolytes lost in this final stage) together with clean water. Unfortunately, their society and the humanitarian resources of the world could not—or did not try to—put together the funds and resources to provide them with the tablets. What was the daily cost of the tablets? Twenty-five cents a day. ◇ Now you know what is the *de facto* value of a child’s life in those countries due to the state of the society... This is a gross violation of the dignity of infinite value of these children. This is a measure of the world repair that is needed. This also shows the gulf between humanity as it behaves and as it should be acting, if it were honoring the intrinsic God-given dignity of infinite value.

Here is another take on what it would mean to take life seriously: to act in accordance with the Divine economy, which bestows the dignity of infinite value on every human being created in the image of God. What is the value of an image of man—that is, a work of art created by a classic major artist?... In 1990, the world record for a painting at that time was set when an image of man—a painting by Van Gogh, itself literally an image of a man, *Portrait of Dr. Gachet*—was sold for \$82.5 million dollars to a Japanese insurance company. As a publicly held company, the Japanese firm had to report what it did with the painting. It chose to display the portrait for prestige and public relations purposes. But such a valuable painting could be damaged in public exhibitions. Therefore, the company built a special room to exhibit the painting. Aside from safety protections, the temperature and moisture had to be fine-tuned properly. In a room too hot, the paint could be damaged; if too cold, the frame could harden or crack. If the gallery was too moist, the painting and canvas could be rotted; if too dry, the paint could flake and fall off. Naturally the company built a setting to the exact specifications needed to protect such a precious artistic image.

Keep this picture in mind the next time you go downtown in the dead of winter, in some major city in a modern affluent economy. See a homeless man or woman, lying inadequately covered, chilled by freezing winds and then splashed with mud and slush by a passing car. This human is being

treated not as a person of infinite value but as a piece of garbage, ignored like flotsam and jetsam in the sea. This is not only a violation of his/her dignity as an image of God; it is a measure of the gap between the world as it is and the world as it should be. This is an important marker of why the Jewish tradition insists that this world, as it is, cannot stand. This world must be repaired until its standard operating procedures meet the test of treating human beings as being in the image of God, with all the dignities and care this entitles them to receive.

- » What would it look like in your life to take one step toward taking the doctrine of a person's infinite value more seriously? What's something you can do today to take the world one micron closer to its final redemption?