

## PURIM 2019

Purim is the religious holiday for the dialectical thinker and the contrarian. So it is tailor made for the Jewish mind. On Purim, we celebrate the wicked Haman and the wise Mordecai. At our rabbis' instruction, we get so drunk as to straddle the line between the two, tilting ever so slightly in Mordecai's direction. That's when our souls are best equipped to examine good and evil, the main courses on Purim's menu, and thereby honor the mitzvah in Deuteronomy (10:16) to circumcise the foreskin of our heart and not be stiff-necked – in other words, to open our hearts in the broadest possible sense of that word.

Our faith's holiest day, Yom Kippur, literally means “a day like Purim.” On both of these holidays, we mark our escape from the scourges of sin and death. And we do so by circumcising our hearts – in one case with fasting, in the other with boozing. We weaken our bodies so we can bare our souls.

On Purim, we read the Book of Esther, the one book in the Tanakh that never mentions God or any other name for the deity. Nor does it report miracles or direct supernatural intervention. Instead, we are left with a story about people that reveals us at our best and our worst. Haman may be the story's most notable character. He is from the tribe of Amalek, which was made famous in the Torah for preying upon the Hebrews soon after they fled from Egypt, when they were at their most hungry and exhausted. Jews are directed to remember that event, and especially how the Amalekites literally “cut down all the stragglers in your rear.”

On Purim, we remember Haman and all other agents of human destruction throughout our history. But we also remember Mordecai and what he stood for. Whether we're talking about Amalek cutting down the hungriest and slowest of the ancient Hebrews, or Hitler calling for the “elimination of the incurably ill,” what these monsters are targeting is clear: human dignity. By contrast, Mordecai comes to rescue such dignity. You can make a strong argument that the Torah can be reduced above all else to a plea for the importance of dignity. In fact, that is exactly what I will argue tonight. We will reflect not only on what it means to act like Haman, but more importantly, what it means to act like Mordecai and champion dignity.

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The first impetus for tonight's talk was a two-volume set of books written by a Conservadox rabbi named Shai Held.<sup>1</sup> What struck me most about his preaching was the extent to which his moralizing focused on human dignity. Truly, the Torah is filled with reminders about the centrality of that concept.

The Torah teaches us that all human beings are made in the divine image. Judaism offers no higher praise than that. God, we are told, is supremely compassionate to people, especially the oppressed. To the Jews, he says that “I am the Lord your God who brought you out from the

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<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Shai Held, *The Heart of Torah, Essays on the Weekly Torah Portion*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017).

Land of Egypt to be their slaves no more.” (Lev. 26:13) As for humankind generally, we are told early in Genesis that God makes us “masters” of this planet, directing us to “rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on the earth.” (Gen. 1:28)

God’s purported concern and respect for human beings form the backbone of many Biblical commandments. We are admonished never to insult the deaf, place a stumbling block before the blind, or mistreat widows or orphans. (Lev. 19:14, Ex. 22: 21-23) We are also directed to befriend the stranger and to love strangers as ourselves when they live in our midst. (Deut. 10:9, Lev. 19: 18, 34) In addition, we are given a set of laws to ease the burdens on the poor and share part of our wealth with the needy. These teachings all point in the same direction – to honor not merely exemplary human beings but humanity itself.

Just as Jesus taught that the poor will always be with us, the Torah stated that “there will never cease to be needy ones in your land.” (Deut. 15:11) But we are also told that if we obey God’s commandments and open our hand to the poor, “there shall not be needy among [us].” (Deut. 15: 11, 4) In short, we are taught a simple formula for the salvation of our species: honor human dignity, broadly and deeply.

On another occasion I might have tried to further illustrate this point by citing extensively to the progressive teachings of the Talmudic rabbis, or the freedom and justice activism of so many Jews in the modern world. But that’s not where I’m going tonight. You see, the second impetus for this talk was my trip to Charleston, SC this past Christmas. There, I developed a very different view about the role of dignity in Judaism and in Abrahamic religion generally.

Consider the definition of the term “dignity” in Miriam Webster’s on-line dictionary. It is defined alternatively as

1. “formal reserve or seriousness of manner, appearance, or language”
2. “the quality or state of being worthy, honored or esteemed”
3. a. “high rank, office or position”  
b. “a legal title of nobility or honor”
4. (archaic) dignitary.

Immediately, I was struck by the first and the third definitions. They seem accurately to convey how people generally use the term. We associate “dignity” with what it means to be “dignified,” which connotes a sophisticated bearing and high level of social status. From that standpoint, when Purim celebrants get drunk, wear costumes, and make silly noises with groggers, they’re the opposite of dignified. But from a Jewish perspective, a truly *religious* perspective, Purim celebrants do nothing to undermine anyone’s dignity, including our own.

In Charleston, I was given a master class in what dignity has come to mean as both a secular concept and a religious one. This lesson was as sobering as Purim is festive.

Charleston has been called the “City of Churches” due to the number and variety of places of worship that grace its cityscape. But to me, Charleston isn’t so much the City of Churches as the City of Museums, for every time my wife and I passed an antebellum mansion,

it felt like we had encountered a separate museum. Perhaps this is because on the first day of our trip, we visited the majestic Nathaniel Russell house, which was once a single family home but is now open to the touring public. There, we stood in awe of the ubiquitous artistry, the studied functionality of every room, and the avant-garde engineering achievements, such as the elliptical spiral stairwell that connected the entry hall to the rooms upstairs where the family entertained.

The people invited to attend those upstairs galas would have exemplified the kind of dignity Webster's had in mind. The women were schooled in music, art, and literature. The men were savvy as to business and politics, and may have held such titles as "Judge" or "Senator." Surely, most could also point to the ultimate achievement of the dignified person from time immemorial – they "provided well" for their families. In other words, they were rich.

So, too, were the Patriarchs of Judaism and many others who we celebrate in the Tanakh, including King Solomon, who eventually acquired 700 wives and 300 concubines. The Jewish people who helped to settle Charleston had neither Solomon's wealth nor his stamina, but they weren't all poor either. While touring the city, my wife and I visited the historical synagogue that calls itself the birthplace of Reform Judaism in America. There, we were informed that not only did Charleston's white slave owners include Jews, but on average these Jews treated their enslaved subjects every bit as inhumanely as did their gentile counterparts. We heard the same thing about the Unitarian slave owners when we visited the historic Unitarian Church later in the day. Here you have two "progressive" religious groups, and yet their legacy in the City of Churches includes greed and cruelty. How is this possible?

There are many reasons – not the least of which is that human societies continue to misconstrue the meaning of "dignity," which we will delve more into shortly. But another reason, one hardly unique to any particular faith, is the ability of so-called "Men of God" to compartmentalize the realm of religion. Consider these words from Rabbi Held: "Religion is a double-edged sword. At its best, it prods and inspires to bring God's will and God's presence into every corner of our lives; at its worst, it foments the illusion that there is a delimited sphere called 'the religious.' As long as we fulfill our obligations there, the rest of our lives can be comfortably labeled 'secular' and thus remain beyond the reach of God's summons to the good and the holy."<sup>2</sup> Making the same point, Held went on to quote Martin Buber for the proposition that "authentic Judaism 'has always *opposed* so-called 'religion,' because it has seen in it the attempt to buy off God, who demands all, with a limited segment of life."<sup>3</sup>

Anyone familiar with organized religion knows exactly what this limited segment of life, this delimited sphere of the "religious," refers to. It is the realm where we pray to God, kiss our holy books, celebrate religious holidays, and give generously to a place of worship. As long as we act that way, live within the mores of our society, and "provide well" for our families, we are viewed as having retained our dignity as members of an organized faith.

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<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Shai Held, *The Heart of Torah, Volume 2, Essays on the Weekly Torah Portion: Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy*, p. 24.

<sup>3</sup> *Id.* (emphasis added).

You see, owning and even whipping people back in antebellum Charleston did not undermine the accepted mores of society. Neither, apparently, did engaging in the often deadly and invariably savage trade that transported human beings from Africa to Charleston. The fact is that the “venerable” Nathaniel Russell wasn’t just a plantation owner. Like such proud institutions as Lloyds of London and New York Life, Russell profited *directly* from the business of shipping human cargo, a business worthy of Haman. Nevertheless, this Renaissance man retained his so-called dignity until the day he died, 41 years before the first shot was fired at Ft. Sumter. God, some would say, smiled on Mr. Russell; he lived at the right time given his interests.

While social mores change, they tend to make room for some amount of economic inequality, and for good reason. We need to incentivize hard work and risk taking. As for slavery, we no longer tolerate it today, but it was so well established in the ancient world that even the Torah permitted it, subject to rules designed to ensure that a person’s slave-status didn’t last forever and ended with a jolt of economic opportunity. (See Deut. 15:13-14)

Now, we all take pride in the fact that the United States eventually outlawed slavery. But on the history tours of Charleston, we hear that many a master-servant relationship continued long after the Civil War. Slavery was quickly replaced by Jim Crow, which continued in some respects until the time I was five. That’s when the government, under the name of the Great Society Program, provided the descendants of the enslaved with a jolt of economic opportunity, but only a jolt. For the last four decades, we have watched economic inequalities rise once again. Many of us would join Michelle Alexander in arguing that a New Jim Crow exists in the way that society discriminates against people of color in our justice system, by incarcerating, for example, three out of four African-American males in our Capital City. As for the exquisitely crafted antebellum mansions of yesteryear, they are largely becoming the second homes of zillionaires who otherwise live in gated communities where they can safely pursue whatever hobbies and enjoy whatever possessions dignify the affluent lifestyle. Our standards of dignity may evolve, but they are invariably associated with victory in a competition for money and leisure. And just as inevitably, this victory entails being able to take the labor power of the working class, buy it at a cheap price, and enjoy the fruits of that labor without exhausting one’s own supply of capital. You hardly need slavery to pull this off. You just need a society that fails to appreciate the meaning of “dignity” in an *authentically* religious sense of that word.

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So that’s how “dignity” is understood in a manner worthy of Haman. Let’s now speak about dignity in a manner worthy of Mordecai. How should we characterize dignity as an authentic religious concept? And why is it centrally important to Judaism in particular? These are the questions on which I’d like to focus.

Before we attempt to define “dignity” as a religious concept, let’s try to illustrate it by example. Consider a buck sprinting across an open field. Or a Golden Retriever approaching a stranger and licking his hand. Or a stately live oak whose branches extend dozens of yards in

each direction. Surely, *they* have dignity. But what about a baby deer that causes you to slam on your brakes to avoid a collision? Or a Rottweiler who growls at a little dog? Or a spindly, poorly placed cherry tree that serves as the culprit for a neighborhood power outage? Do they have materially *less* dignity? We may feel that way, but from a religious standpoint, I think the answer is no.

In each case, we're talking about creatures of God. And we're talking about members of a species, not simply individuals. When we behold one of these organisms do we not also, at least subconsciously, consider its species at both its most actualized and its least? The buck in the field forms a compelling image because of its speed, power and grace. But are not we not also compelled by the image of the baby deer, whose vulnerability summons our concern, our sympathy, and our hopes? Indeed, as thrilling as it is to watch an Olympic athlete epitomize human vitality, are we not at least as compelled by the image of that old married couple in the movie *Titanic* who were holding hands, knowing that they were about to drown but that they also have been infinitely blessed?

In each of these cases, authentic religion beckons us to *honor* these organisms. Whether because of their impressive qualities, their vulnerabilities or simply their potential, they call out to us, and we're commanded, we're summoned, to answer. To me, *dignity is the property of summoning honor*. What it is *not* about is acquiring honors -- or anything else that creates a false sense of inequality among members of the same species.

What gives that buck dignity has nothing to do with whether it falls in the top five percent of deer or mammals according to some measure of excellence. That buck is honorable simply by virtue of being a creature of God that shares the same planet we do. To be sure, it manifests more of those qualities we value than, say, a single celled organism, so it would be difficult to argue that it possesses no more dignity than the bacteria between our toes. But in terms of honor, why would we differentiate among deer, dogs or trees simply because some are enjoying the pinnacle of health, or fortune, and others aren't?

What about the dignity of people? Don't some of us legitimately summon more honor than others? To answer that question, let me cite my single favorite quotation from the Christian Bible, which comes from the Book of Luke (22:27): "For who is great," Jesus says, "the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves." To me, this says that when it comes to being *perceived* as dignified, it is far better to be at the table -- to be served, for example, in the gorgeous dining room at the Nathaniel Russell House. But when it comes to *actually* being dignified -- to summon honor in the truly religious sense of the word -- look to the servants, the custodians, the unglorified laborers, the so-called "working stiffs." And consider that their dignity is magnified still further the more seriously they take their service -- in other words, the more they engage in it with a giving heart and with pride in their work.

Dignity as a concept is broader than the notion of respect. Respect is earned based on what someone does and has done, whereas dignity is earned also by what someone may do in the future, or simply by what someone represents as a member of a species. We bestow dignity

more generously than we do respect. Yet ironically, dignity is more meaningful when it is bestowed because it is associated with an even higher plane. It is associated with honor and with God. You see, respect is something we bestow on individuals *as* individuals. Whereas dignity is something we bestow on individuals as representatives of something bigger – their species, for example, or their belonging to God.

In the spiritual sense of the term, to earn dignity as a human being is not a matter of taking but a matter of giving. It is not a matter of greatness but of goodness. It is not a matter of making your presence felt in this world but a matter of nurturing and caring for this world. You'll find these principles implicit in the highest teachings of prophets, no matter what faith they represent.

And yet, I would argue, there is something about Judaism in particular that makes the concept of dignity so central. Our people are called, alternatively, "Jews" or the "people of Israel." The former comes from Judah, who got his name from his mother's desire to praise the Lord. (Gen. 29:35) So the people of Judah are those who express praise or gratitude to God. In contrast, Judah's father Jacob received the name "Israel" as a result of his efforts in wrestling an angel of God. (Gen. 32:29) So there you have the two poles of Jewish spirituality – one involves gratitude, the other involves struggling. In both cases, God is the focal point. And when it comes to representing the highest object of honor, the religious Jew begins and ends with God.

Our inquisitiveness honors God, the source of truth. Our love for one another honors God, the source of life. Our gratitude honors God, the source of existence. Our relationship with God as the "Eternal Thou" beckons us to serve the world God has given us, not merely to utilize it for selfish purposes. In all these ways, God's dignity overwhelms that of anything finite. We also recognize that we cannot honor God without being honest with ourselves about who it is we're honoring. That's why Jews don't merely praise God. We feel compelled to struggle, intellectually and spiritually, with the meaning of divinity. That's why, for the majority of Jews, the word "heretic" is not an insult.

To the Jewish mind, God may be the most dignified, but God is not the sole object of dignity. This planet taken as a whole is itself a source of tremendous dignity. Whether we call it Mother Nature or Mother Earth, we think of it as a parent and see ourselves as its spoiled children. Clearly, we have been given the power not only to nurture the advanced life forms on this planet but also to destroy them. Authentically religious Jews assume the vocation of custodians of the earth and all its creatures because the planet's immense dignity demands nothing less.

As for the dignity of human beings, we've spoken about this concept's importance in Judaism. But if we look at our texts and our history, the commitment to human dignity is hardly unlimited. Ignore for a moment that some Jews in the Old South owned slaves. The Torah itself never banned slavery. And it countenances capital punishment far more than our rabbis would approve. Nor do we get a clear signal about how to conduct ourselves in the economic realm. We're told to love our neighbors as ourselves and yet, even though some of our neighbors have

virtually no possessions at all, we're required merely to tithe. Truly, it is difficult to know precisely how much concern and generosity is expected of us in our dealings with other people.

But this much we can say -- at a minimum, each of us must strive to be a mensch. Not a person who carries himself with an aura of sophistication, but one who reliably treats others respectfully and with some amount of concern. And an even higher Jewish ideal is to bestow dignity on *all* human beings and encounter them in terms of their potential, not merely their demonstrated skills or behaviors. Some people kill, steal, or humiliate others -- they take their divine gifts and use them to foment suffering. It is difficult to find dignity in such people. But remember Judaism's teaching that God has patience for human beings despite our limitations, so we're urged to celebrate each other for our humanity, even in situations where we fall short. For one thing, most of us have reached out to care for and help others. So we've exhibited the potential to be dignified in the highest human sense possible.

I am not here to over-inflate the importance of dignity as a concept. I am reluctant, for example, to compare it favorably to love. After all, isn't dignity best defined based on honor, and honor properly understood based on love? But because it's Purim, and I feel a little devilish, let's make the attempt to tout dignity as the *summum bonum*.

As Spinoza taught us, love often turns to hatred when bestowed on those who do not return it, or on pastimes that are dangerous and destructive. What's more, some of the greatest acts of selfishness begin with love; love for ourselves, families or tribes can blind us to the greater good. Indeed, we see in human history all sorts of damage that have been caused by lusts grounded in one form or another of love.

By contrast, when we bestow dignity, the effects don't seem so ephemeral. When we honor one another based on our shared humanity, not based on fortune or accomplishments, the effects don't seem so dangerous. When we honor one another based on our dispositions to give, not to take, we find that people invest their rewards into helping one another, and not lording it over one another, as the planters liked to do in Charleston. When we bestow dignity to Mother Earth by sacrificing some of the things we love most, we identify the only potential long-term path to earthly success. In short, when we bestow dignity on all who deserve it, rather than simply taking care of the ones dearest to us, then we will have honored the Torah's teaching that while the needy have always been with us, things don't have to be that way.

In conclusion, the Jewish concept of dignity begins with God's dignity and works its way down. It begins with honoring the infinite and eternal, then the planet that nurtures us, then the species of which we are part, then the communities in which we live, and only then do we as individuals merit center stage. Whereas Heschel taught that the Tanakh is God's book about man, I say that it is man's book about God. It proclaims Moses our greatest prophet precisely because he was the most humble, and it elevates the status of humility precisely so that we can honor God, whose dignity is infinite. As to *how* we honor God, the Tanakh directs us to apply our hearts and our hands to affirming the dignity of the finite objects and subjects that belong to God, especially one another. As to how we should affirm each other's dignity, I will leave you with two words: *help out*.