

It Depends Upon Me

You are created.

Nothing special there. Humanity's origin is dust and dust is our end.¹

But there's more to the story.

You are created in the image of God.

Every one of us is. We may not know what exactly that means, but from the first chapter of the first book of the Torah, our tradition insists that it's true. "To see your face is to see the face of God" (cf. Gen. 33:10).

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This is a revolutionary idea. In the Ancient Near East, when the Torah's texts were written down, only kings and priests were thought to be created in God's image.² Theirs was a **special** kind of humanity, a **divine** humanity that gave them power and authority over more mortal mortals.

And then the Torah comes along and uproots the entire system.

In asserting that each one of us is created in the image of God, the Torah constructs what Rabbi Shai Held calls a "radical democratization;" we are, he teaches, "all kings and queens."³

And if that's not daring enough, our tradition takes things a step further. Not only is each of us royalty, but also each of us is the entire reason the world exists: **בְּשִׁבְלִי נִבְרָא הָעוֹלָם**, "For my sake was the world created" (Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5). Each of us has a distinct and critical purpose. As Martin Buber taught, "If there had ever been someone like me, there would be no need for me to exist."⁴

Every one of us is valuable and significant, and the choices we make matter not only to us but to the entire world.

¹ Unetaneh Tokef: אָדָם יְסוּדוֹ מֵעָפָר וְסוּפוֹ לְעָפָר.

² Cf. Shai Held's "Created in God's Image: Equality and Responsibility" (online [here](#)).

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *The Way of Man According to the Teaching of Hasidism* (Citadel Press: New York, 1964) p. 16, adapted slightly.

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This is the key message of one of Moses's speeches in this week's Torah portion, which we will read again on Yom Kippur. God says, "I have placed before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life that you and your descendants may live" (Deut. 30:19). These blessings and curses are assigned as a group – either all of us hang together, or together, we will all hang.

So suppose everything in society is going reasonably well. People are generally good to one another, there's no idolatry, and peace prevails. According to our *parashah*, this is a sign of blessing, a bounty for all.

Now in this scenario, suppose you, and only you, have got it in your mind to do something wicked. God's blessing has already been granted to the crops, the herds, and the towns; no curses anywhere in sight! You say to yourself, as one sage imagines: "Though I follow my own heart, I will be safe – I will be protected by the righteousness of the others. For there are many of them, and just me by myself sinning."⁵ It's safe for you to be bad because, on balance, everyone else is being good.

Wrong. Dead wrong. In fact, this is the only unforgiveable sin in the Torah.⁶ So we read, "The Eternal will **never forgive** such individuals; rather the Eternal's anger and passion will rage against them, till every sanction recorded in this book comes down upon them, and the Eternal blots out their name from under heaven" (Deut. 29:19). There is no more serious offense than shirking our own moral responsibility on the assumption that others will do what's right on our behalf. What we do matters, even if we do it in a large group. Even if I think I'm invisible, every action has at least two witnesses: myself and my Creator.

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It works in reverse, too.

Suppose society is a mess, with rampant immorality and a basic disregard for human dignity. We might well expect this society to bring about its own demise, to invoke – so to speak – God's curse. And in such an environment, what difference can a single one of us make? Could we really be held accountable for going along with the crowd and behaving like all of our neighbors?

⁵ Commentary of Ibn Ezra on Deut. 29:18.

⁶ Cf. Marc Saperstein's "Is There an Unpardonable Sin in the Torah?" (online [here](#)).

The answer is always yes; our deeds are recorded and what is written there proclaims itself, bearing our signature.⁷ What we do **matters**.

This lesson is illustrated once again by Moses.

As Moses prepares to descend Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments in hand, God informs him that the Children of Israel have built and have started to worship the Golden Calf. “Leave Me be,” God says to Moses, “so that My anger may blaze forth against them and that I may destroy them, and make of you a great nation” (Ex. 32:10). God plans to wipe out the Israelites and start a new Jewish people with Moses as the first ancestor.

And Moses is tempted to stand by. He had been fed up with the Hebrews himself, and who wouldn’t want to be the founder of a new nation, a second Abraham? But, the midrash tells us, Moses remembers his responsibility to do the right thing even when it would be so easy to go wrong. He says to himself *דָּבָר זֶה תְּלוּי בִּי*, “This matter depends upon me” (BT Berachot 32a). He intercedes in the people’s behalf, and God, pleased with Moses’ performance, spares them.

The Talmud compares this scene to a brutal drama:

This is like a king who became angry with his [adult] son and began to strike him. The king’s friend was sitting nearby and was too scared to speak. The king said to his son, “If it weren’t for this friend of mine sitting right here, I’d kill you!” [Upon hearing this, the friend] said [to himself], *דָּבָר זֶה תְּלוּי בִּי*, “This matter depends upon me.” Immediately, he stood up and rescued him (*ibid.*).

When a text repeats a phrase, you know it’s important. *דָּבָר זֶה תְּלוּי בִּי*, “This matter depends upon me.” If we can speak up, we must—even if we are afraid, even if the opposition seems too great, even if we think no one will notice. As we are taught:

Whoever can prevent their household from committing a sin but does not is responsible for the sins of their household; if [you can prevent] your fellow citizens, you are responsible for the sins of your fellow citizens; if [you can prevent] the whole world, you are responsible for the sins of the whole world (BT Shabbat 54b).

We cannot control the behavior of all who are around us, but sometimes we really can make a difference. More often than we care to admit, matters do depend upon us, and when they do, we are called upon to be dependable.

⁷ Unetaneh Tokef: וְתַפְתַּח אֶת סֵפֶר הַזְכוּרוֹת וּמְאֲלִיו יִקְרָא וְחֹתֵם יָד כָּל אָדָם בּוֹ.

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We pray never to be in the position of Moses or the fabled friend of the king, standing as witnesses to violence and challenged to stand up to the powerful. We hope it is more common to be in the situation of this week's *parashah*, surrounded by mostly good people doing mostly good things and wondering whether our own actions make a difference. But whether we are surrounded by people trying to do what's right or the powerful seeking to take advantage of their power – in either case, our tradition insists, what we do matters.

In the words of Rabbi Professor Marc Saperstein, "It is only if each one of us fulfills our own obligations, our own potential, that the congregation, the community, the Jewish people, and ultimately all beings living on this planet, may be able to flourish."⁸

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In this season of repentance, let us remember that each of us is unique and uniquely significant. Our words, our deeds, and even our thoughts matter. When we improve ourselves, we do so not only for our own sake but for the sake of those we love and the world we share. In returning to the source that makes us all holy, we play our part in the cosmic quest for wholeness.

Shanah tovah umetukah, may each of us find blessing and sweetness in the year ahead.

⁸ As above, "Is There an Unpardonable Sin in the Torah?" (online [here](#)).