

PARSHAT BEHAR-BECHUKOTAI
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What is the value of human life? In an article in *Time Magazine* in 2008, Kathleen Kingsbury writes: “In theory, a year of human life is priceless. In reality, it’s worth \$50,000.” She continues, “That’s the international standard most private and government-run health insurance plans worldwide use to determine whether to cover a new medical procedure.” Even though those are 2008 dollars, and the value may be a little more today, she is not satisfied with the answer. According to her research, “Stanford economists have demonstrated that the average value of a year of quality human life is actually closer to about \$129,000.” Even that answer is not satisfactory. So how do we measure the value of a human life? In 2011, the Environmental Protection Agency set the value at \$9.1 million; the Food and Drug Administration - \$7.9 million; the Department of Transportation \$6 million. According to an online page of the Finance Degree Center, if all of our body parts on the open market could be put up for sale our bodies would be worth some \$45M on the black market, but that, it suggests, is only if you could harvest every usable chemical and part from it.

However we try to understand it, it is very difficult to give a monetary value to human life. The interesting part is that this is exactly what the Torah does. The last chapter of the Book of Leviticus, Chapter 27, was probably appended to the book. Most Biblical scholars believe that the book probably ended, at one time, at the end of Chapter 26 with the blessings and the curses, as this would have served as a suitable conclusion to the book and to its message of instructing the Israelite people to follow the covenant and the commandments. “In order to include in Leviticus a matter of central importance,” Baruch Levine in the *JPS Torah Commentary* writes, “funding of the Sanctuary, Chapter 27, was added. Maintaining the physical plan of the sanctuary was certainly costly, and it was necessary to provide the materials used in public sacrifice and to support the clergy.” I must confess that this continues to be a good rationale -to support the synagogue and the clergy as well.

Chapter 27 sets forth a number of sources of income, including pledges of fixed amounts of silver, animals, consecration of property, and tithes. Levine suggests that the actual goal of the system was to secure silver for the sanctuary and its related needs, not, for the most part, to secure that the actual commodities that were pledged or consecrated be donated. It was the redemption payment that the sanctuary really wanted, not the actual donation of animals or people.

In the first few verses of the chapter, the Torah tells us that when a person makes a vow to the Lord for the equivalent of the human being the following scale shall apply: “If it is a male from 6-20 years of age, the equivalent is 50 shekels of silver; if it is a female, the equivalent is 30 shekels. If the age is from 5-20 years, the equivalent is 20 shekels for a male and 10 shekels for a female. If the age is from 1 month to 5 years, the equivalent for a male is 5 shekels, and the equivalent for a female is 3 shekels. If the age is 60 years or over, the equivalent is 15 shekels in the case of a male and 10 shekels for a female.”

The practice for delegating people for lifelong service in the sanctuary existed in ancient times. The monetary value represents the amount of money that an avowed person's service in the sanctuary would be worth. Carol Meyers, a Biblical scholar, suggests that the valuation table relates mainly to labor potential rather than to intrinsic worth. The highest monetary values appear for persons of ages 20 to 60. Such people would be considered mature adults, and would have the highest labor potential. Perhaps, Meyers suggests, because of average differences in physical strength, women or girls were deemed to have a lower productive capacity than males of the same age, and the text assigns them a somewhat lower valuation in all categories.

Whatever the reason, the Torah actually gives a monetary value to a human being. Yet, we know that a human being is priceless in that human life cannot be evaluated solely on a financial scale. As created in the image of G-d, we have the opportunity and indeed the privilege to make of our lives something even beyond priceless.

In a commencement address at Stanford University on June 12, 2005, Steve Jobs, then CEO of Apple Computer and Pixar Animated Studios, spoke to the students in a most frank matter. He told the students: "When I was 17, I read a quote that went something like this: 'If you live each day as if it were your last, someday you'll most certainly be right.' That made an impression on me, and since then, for the past 33 years, I have looked in the mirror every morning and asked myself: 'If today were the last day of my life, would I want to do what I am about to do today?'"

Jobs went on to tell the students that a year before the commencement address they found a tumor on his pancreas. He now had to face his own mortality. Though he was worth millions of dollars, he could not evade the inevitable. He told the students that no one wants to die, but no one has ever escaped it. Therefore, since their time was limited, they shouldn't waste it. Steve Jobs may have been worth millions of dollars, but in coming to face with mortality, he understood what his life was really worth, and he pledged to make the most of whatever days he was granted.

Rabbi Hayyim Angel writes: "The Book of Leviticus lies at the heart of the Torah. Its final two chapters present two models of a relationship with G-d. Chapter 26 presents the Torah as a mutual covenant... In contrast, the dedication of oneself in Chapter 27 stems from voluntary love." Angel suggests that we are not to sacrifice ourselves. Instead we are to dedicate ourselves completely to G-d. This is the basis of the last chapter in the Book of Leviticus.

He then continues to remind us that there are three commandments concerning love in the Torah. The first reminds us to love our neighbors as ourselves. The second, to love the resident alien. The third, to love G-d with all our heart, soul, and might. Taken chronologically our first responsibility is to love those closest to us. But we can only do so if we recognize that we, ourselves, are people of inestimable worth. We should appreciate the teaching in the Mishnah of Sanhedrin which states that in capital cases the witness was to be warned that the possibility of taking a life is of great consequence. The text tells us: "Therefore, every single person is obliged to say: 'The world is created for my sake.'" This is not meant to be an egotistical view of our own self-importance. Instead it is to recognize that we are of great value and we can make a difference in the world. We must have self-confidence in ourselves, in our possibility to add our

contributions to all humanity, and in our ability to carry through with that task. As Hillel reminded us: “If I am not for myself, who will be for me?” Once we understand that then we can learn to love another, our neighbor, those closest to us.

We clearly cannot stop there, we must reach out beyond ourselves and our neighbors to make a difference in the world at-large. Rabbi David Hartman writes: “When we love our neighbor, we extend the self and expand communal solidarity. In loving the stranger, however, we meet the ‘other’; the different one, the one who cannot be subsumed easily under our familiar categories.”

The Torah reminds us 36 times that we are to be kind to the stranger, to love the stranger, for we were strangers in the land of Egypt. We know how it is to be treated as an enslaved minority, as individuals who are seen as alien to society, as people who are not counted as worthy human beings. It is therefore our task to ensure that no one shall be treated that way. Whether they are part of our own family, community, society or country does not matter. It is our task to reach out to those in need and to make a difference in their lives. It is in that way that our lives become worthwhile. It is, then, being created in the image of G-d, that we live up to our potential. As Hillel reminded us once more: “If I am for myself alone, what am I?” And as Tuvia Tenenbom writes :” Love of the other is not an idea; it’s life itself.” If we can accomplish those two objectives, then we show our love for G-d, living up to our human and divine-like potential, in that way our lives become priceless.

How much is a human life worth? It cannot be measured, for as partners with G-d we can even improve upon creation. The Midrash tells us that Turnus Rufus, the wicked one, asked Rabbi Akiva: Whose works are superior, those of G-d or those of man? He answered him: Those of man are superior.

Answered Turnus Rufus: But look at heaven and earth, can man make their like? Rabbi Akiva replied: Do not draw on what is above human experience and control, but rather on that which is within our range. He said to him: Why do you circumcise? He answered: I knew you would ask this question, and so I anticipated you by declaring that human works are superior to those of G-d. Thereupon Rabbi Akiva brought him ears of corn and cakes. He said to him: The former are the works of G-d, the latter of man. Are not the latter superior to the ears of corn?

Turnus Rufus, however countered: If he requires circumcision, why does not the child leave the mother’s womb circumcised? Rabbi Akiva replied: Why indeed, does the umbilical cord come out with him and he is suspended by his navel and his mother cuts it? As for your query why he is not born circumcised, this is because the Holy one Blessed be He has given the commandments for the sole purpose of refining our character through them.

In other words, we are partners with G-d in the world and we are challenged to improve upon the world which G-d created for us. How much is a life worth? It is beyond priceless, for each person can make a difference in the well-being of the world and humanity. That is our challenge, our duty, our obligation, and our privilege.