

Shabbat Lech Lecha 5782 - What is a person worth?

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Shabbat Shalom!

“How much are you worth?” somebody once asked Sir Moses Montefiore, the supremely generous 19th century Jewish philanthropist. The rich man paused and gave a number.

The other person replied, “No, you are definitely worth much more!”

Montefiore responded: “You didn’t ask me how much I *own*. You asked how much I’m *worth*. I calculated the amount I have given to charity and named that number. For we are worth what we are willing to share with others.”

That’s one Jewish answer. Today I want to share two more Jewish answers to the same question about worth, one with a number and one without.

Do you remember the MasterCard commercials from years ago? In this series, each had different beginnings, but they all had the same closing tagline. For example, one I remember from 1997 featured a parent taking their child to a pro baseball game. We saw them enter the game with tickets, take their seats, and watch the game with unbridled joy. The accompanying captions read: “Tickets: \$28. Hot dogs, popcorn, and sodas: \$18. Autographed baseball: \$45. Real conversation: priceless. There are some things money can’t buy; for everything else there’s MasterCard.”

That’s the perfect word for the Jewish valuation of human life: priceless.

Two weeks ago we read, Breishit, which famously describes the creation of humankind with Adam and then Eve. The Talmud wonders why G-d created Adam all alone. After all, G-d could have created an entire family, city, or nation all at once, all at the beginning. Why wait? If the Torah says, “It’s not good to be alone” (Gn. 2:18) why create Adam by himself to be alone?

The Talmud answers its own question: “This is why Adam was created individually: to teach you that anyone who destroys one life, it’s as if they destroyed the entire world. Conversely, anyone who saves a single life, it’s as if they saved the entire world” (BT Sanhedrin 4:5). How so? If someone had somehow killed Adam, they would have

destroyed everybody on earth, the whole world. But if someone had somehow saved Adam's life, they would have saved all human life on Earth in that moment and in the future.

This line from the Talmud is quoted in the famous Holocaust movie *Schindler's List*. It's an extraordinary movie for many reasons. At the end, Isaac Stern - who is Oskar Schindler's right hand - gives him a ring and says that it has been engraved with Hebrew from the Talmud - the lines I just quoted you in paraphrase: "Whoever saves one life saves the world in kind." If you've seen the film, you recall that the movie closes with the faces of the actors, the survivors themselves, and their real-life children. The 1,200 Jews who Oskar Schindler saved decades ago grew into 8,500 Jews ten years ago; the number is surely higher today. Schindler saved not just 1,200 Jews but their future families for all time. In this real way, each person is a world - an Adam or Eve at the top of a limitless family tree.

And not just every Jew, but every human being. The proof is that Abraham is not the example given in this text. We read this morning that Abraham was the first Jew. He is called "Halvri - the Hebrew" (Gn. 14:13). The Midrash understands this to mean that he was on *Eiver* - one side, while the whole world was on the other. That is, he was a proud nonconformist. Let's go back to the Talmud teaching that each person is a world. *Adam* is the Talmud's example. And Adam was not Jewish but simply a human being. We know this because Abraham was the first Jew, and Adam preceded him.

So *every single person* is a reflection of G-d's image, says the Torah, and is therefore priceless in value. *Equally* priceless. The equality piece goes back to the Talmud too. It continues, "Adam was created alone in order to maintain peace among people, so that one person will not say to another: 'My father is greater than your father.'" In other words, since we all share the same single ancestor, none of us can claim to be worth more than another person.

That's the Jewish answer through the *religious* lens. But in a few limited cases, Judaism also approaches this question of worth through an *economic* lens.

What are the penalties for one person injuring another? Though the Torah describes the reciprocal punishment of an eye for an eye, the Talmud completely rejects this and instead presents a formula for assessing monetary fines. Jewish Law follows accordingly. The Talmud says, "One who injures another is liable to pay five types of compensation: damage, pain, medical costs, loss of livelihood, and humiliation" (BT Bava Kamma 83b). The brilliance of this formula is that it accommodates variables. It

recognizes that not everyone's index finger, for example, is worth the same amount of money. Nobody should lose a finger, of course. But if a surgeon loses their dominant index finger, they will lose out on significantly more career earnings than if, say, a singer does. Nothing against singers, but you get my point. Different people earn different amounts of money, and different people have different numbers of dependents at home. Life is complex, and a formula must be nuanced enough to make things more fair. Completely fair is impossible, but more fair is achievable and desirable. As Erica Brown writes, "While money cannot relieve great physical and emotional losses, it signifies accountability and responsibility as part of a just society." Of course money cannot fully compensate for a significant injury or God forbid a life, but it does make things much easier for the people who were counting on that person.

For what it's worth - pun intended - this question was on my mind recently when I saw a new movie on Netflix called "Worth." It stars Michael Keaton as Kenneth Feinberg, who after the September 11th attacks occurred, was appointed to be Special Master of the September 11th Victim Compensation Fund. He had some experience with creating formulas in cases involving damages. But this 9/11 case involved doling out billions of dollars to thousands of victim families in the horrific terrorist attacks on our country 20 years ago. Brilliant and too self-confident, Feinberg developed a rigid formula for compensation based on the victim's income. At an opening meeting with victims' families, he tried to explain the rules and his formula in an academic tone, like they were students and he the professor. The guests - who were all families of victims - understandably turned hostile and accused him of being insensitive to their losses. In attendance was Charles Wolf, the husband of a woman who was killed in the attacks. Deeply offended by Feinberg's callousness, Wolf started a protest group. The two men had a particularly insightful conversation in the middle of the movie, which I quote at length because it touches on many key points in relatively few words.

Feinberg began by asking Wolf, "Tell me what you want. Because we can make some adjustments. We could raise the baselines."

Wolf: "So you think this is about the money."

"Of course, yeah."

"That it's greed?"

“No, no, no, no, not greed. Money yes, greed no. Money puts food on people's tables. It puts roofs over people's heads. There's nothing dirty or demeaning about it. But let's not pretend it doesn't matter. It does. It helps people move on.”

“Who?”

“What do you mean ‘who?’”

“Do you know any of our names? Have you met any of us yourself?”

“As a matter of fact I have.”

“And what were they worth?”

“Well now you're talking about numbers...”

“Throw out your formula.”

“I can't. I can't. We need to have something rational.”

“I got it. I understand. I got it. But my wife is not a statistic.”

“No, certainly not, but we do have to go by a set of rules. I can't bend the rules for every case that doesn't fit the mold.”

“Why not? Congress did...in a day. But when 7000 citizens come to you and they ask for respect and ask not to be treated like some numbers on a spreadsheet, you act like that law came down from Sinai.”

Wolf was smart enough to understand that different people would receive different amounts of money. But he wanted *respect*. He demanded that Feinberg see him and others as people, not numbers. To his credit, Feinberg matures and does this admirably, ultimately winning the support of Wolf, who convinces all his followers to trust Feinberg and sign on to the fund.

In my words, Feinberg originally approached this assignment seeing people through an *economic* lens, but he comes around to see them through a *religious* lens. As priceless individuals. Compensation can never be completely fair, but perhaps it can be less unfair.

Fortunately, most of us never have to take on the thankless role of compensation fund special master. Nor are most of us a court judge. But we all judge other people. And we frequently judge people by numbers and material possessions: how big is their house? What type of cars do they drive? What brand of clothing do they wear? We often judge people by how much money they have - a set of numbers. Though it is human nature to do so, we should not. We must not. We must put aside the economic lens and hold up the religious lens to see all people as priceless: for they are all equally children of G-d; for they all possess unique gifts and talents; for they all have potential to do great things in the future. We must not judge others by numbers, for each of us is far more than a number.

To borrow from that MasterCard commercial: There are some times when a *court* must look at people through an economic lens. For everything else, we should look at people through the religious lens: priceless.

Shabbat Shalom!