



JUDAISM FOR LIVING SERIES

THE ME IN THE MIRROR AN EXPLORATION OF SELF-WORTH IN THE TORAH

MODULE I
SOURCE AND DISCUSSION SHEET



Q: Where do we get our self-esteem from?

The Confusion:

Not such an easy issue to decipher:

Does our self-esteem come from our accomplishments, achievements or from others outside of us?

If it does come from the outside, it can be a moving target, hard to acquire and pretty frustrating; so much is really out of our control.

Or, does our self-esteem come from some internal, intrinsic capability, identity or natural talent? And if so, why are we **so compelled to look outside for external validation**, and are forever striving to change ourselves?

If we were really so great, wouldn't we all feel naturally good about ourselves?

An Important Clarification:

There is a difference between self-worth and self-respect.

One measure of worth is the intrinsic or inherent value of something. Another measure is based upon improvements that you make to it. Assets like gold, real estate, oil all have an inherent value; that's why they are called "real assets". Though their market prices fluctuate based upon current buyer preferences, they pivot around some real mark of their true value. On the other hand, something like clay is valuable only in so far as how you can improve it or what you can turn it into.

People, like assets also have an inherent value called self-worth and an improvement value called self-respect. The confluence of self-worth and self-respect creates our self-esteem.

This first module will discuss the fundamentals of self-worth.

THE TORAH VIEW OF SELF-WORTH

Believe it or not the value of the human body is worth roughly \$4.50, and a list of its constituent elements reminds one of a fertilizer mix.

You may never have looked at it quite this way.

Yet most of us intuitively appreciate a human being to be worth so much more than that. Why? The believer in us all would offer that the inherent value of a human being is based upon the possession of a priceless asset missing in that organic mix; the human soul. That ineffable yet powerful part of ourselves is our core, allowing us to think, to dream, to love to create and to transform. This is the part, according to Jewish tradition, that is pristine, pure and from which we draw into this world our enormous potential to become great.

True self-worth is based upon knowing that you are a soul, you are good and you are connected to G-d.

As we say in our morning prayers:

SOURCE 1: *Elokai Neshama Prayer*

G-d, the soul that You placed within me is pure. You created it, you formed it, you blew it into me and you guard it for me (morning prayer service)

The soul is holy and good and as Jews we believe that this is our essence and foundation without blemish from any type of "original sin" or irreparable deficiency.

In our Torah we learn that what makes us human is that G-d breathed into us the soul of life:

SOURCE 2: *Chumash Breishis (Genesis). Creation of Mankind.*

And G-d formed the man of the dust from the ground, and He blew into his nostrils the soul of life... (Bereishis 2:6)

Q: Why do you think the Torah uses breath as a metaphor for giving life?

Breath comes from the very depth of an individual, and has the ability to give life to that into which it is blown. And yet, that new life has a measure of independence from its source.

Symbolically, it was as if G-d took a very deep, essential and personal piece of Himself and gave it to us, making us like Him. As the Torah continues:

SOURCE 3: *Chumash Breishis (Genesis). Creation of Mankind Cont.*

So, G-d created man in His image...(Bereishes 1:27)

Q: What do you think "in His image" means, and what does it suggest about our self-worth?

If every human being realized that a piece of G-d was in him, there is literally nothing we would be incapable of doing. We would all walk around with an unshakeable recognition of our own self-worth!

JEWISH IDENTITY

Yet there is an added dimension to our self-worth which derives from our being Jewish, and that is our Jewish Pride.

Q Are you proud to be a Jew? Why?

The Jew has always stood for social justice, peace as an ideal, fairness and the protection of all those who were disadvantaged or unprotected. The dignity which we proffered to each individual expressed itself in a system of charity and social welfare unmatched to this day in its scope, sensitivity and compassion.

Unfortunately, many Jews today are not in touch with our brilliant legacy, and this is exacerbated by our lack of Jewish literacy regarding what our People has truly stood for over the years. This undercuts our Jewish pride and identity.

Consider these famous non-Jewish thinkers and what they had to say about the Jewish People:

SOURCE 4: “Concerning The Jews,” – Mark Twain. *Harper’s Magazine*, 1899

“If statistics are right, the Jews constitute but one percent of the human race. It suggests a nebulous dim puff of stardust lost in the blaze of the Milky Way. Properly, the Jew ought hardly to be heard of, but he is heard of, has always been heard of. He is as prominent on the planet as any other people, and his commercial importance is extravagantly out of proportion to the smallness of his bulk. His contributions to the world’s list of great names in literature, science, art, music, finance, medicine, and abstruse learning are also away out of proportion to the weakness of his numbers. He has made a marvelous fight in this world, in all the ages; and had done it with his hands tied behind him. He could be vain of himself, and be excused for it.”

The Egyptian, the Babylonian, and the Persian rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded to dream-stuff and passed away; the Greek and the Roman followed; and made a vast noise, and they are gone; other people have sprung up and held their torch high for a time, but it burned out, and they sit in twilight now, or have vanished. The Jew saw them all, beat them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities of age, no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, and no dulling of his alert and aggressive mind. All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?”

SOURCE 5: John Adams, Second President of the United States

“I will insist the Hebrews have [contributed] more to civilize men than any other nation. If I was an atheist and believed in blind eternal fate, I should still believe that fate had ordained the Jews to be the most essential instrument for civilizing the nations...”
They are the most glorious nation that ever inhabited this Earth. The Romans and their empire were but a bauble in comparison to the Jews. They have given religion to three-quarters of the globe and have influenced the affairs of mankind more and more happily than any other nation, ancient or modern.”

Sounds like Mark Twain and John Adams are both describing the Jews as the Chosen People; unique from all other Peoples in our accomplishments and in our treatment through history.

Q: Often, we get a bad rap for the claim of being chosen. What do you think being Chosen means?

The essence of being “Chosen” is taking responsibility for bringing goodness and peace into the world as expressed in the famous directive from the prophet Isaiah:

SOURCE 6: Prophet Isaiah Chapter 49: Verse 6

You shall be a light unto the nations (Isaiah 49:6)

And in numerous other places in the Torah, we are described with a mission of bringing holiness into the world:

SOURCE 7: *Chumash Shemos (Exodus) Chapter 19, Verse 5-6*

You shall be to Me the most beloved treasure of all the peoples....a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. (Shemos 19:5-6)

From our forefather Abraham, Jews have never shirked the responsibility of introducing the world to its Creator through our Torah. Nor have we ever denied a sincere gentile entrance into our brotherhood and kept this mission exclusively to ourselves.

We should never be ashamed of being chosen. We should be proud and humbled.

WALKING TALL

Walking around with this identity is like being part of an elite special forces unit of the Marines; no matter what difficult, challenging situation presents itself you walk with your head held high, knowing you're part of something special, meaningful and vitally important.

EXERCISE

Knowing that a piece of G-d is in you and that you are a part of a special people with the ability to transform the world, what can you undertake in your own life to step into this potential?

This composite identity of an exalted soul combined with a powerful national mission, is the basis for a healthy sense of self-worth and an energizing Jewish pride, independent of any accomplishments that we may achieve. When we get out of bed each morning, it's with an awareness that we're special and make a difference!

**Full Library of Discussion Sheets at inspiredjewishlearning.com
For Questions, Comments and more FREE Learning Modules
Contact Rabbi Simcha Barnett, Director Inspired Jewish Learning at simchabarnett@gmail.com**