



Saving the World Entire

Judaism

Three rabbis debated the hidden teachings of the Torah, the written law, in the light of the oral teachings of Moses, handed down from generation to generation.

They debated about why God, HaShem, the Name, had created mankind through a single human being, Adam.

‘Why didn’t He just create hundreds or thousands of human beings in the first place?’ wondered one of them, a young rabbi. ‘Perhaps it would have been easier for Him. There must have been some reason for HaShem to create only one male-female human being in the beginning.’

‘Tradition explains that HaShem first created only Adam to show us the importance of a single human life,’ explained the second rabbi, an elder well versed in the learning of the Talmud. ‘Only one man, Adam, was first created to teach us that if someone destroys one single life of the Jewish people, it is as if he has destroyed all of humanity; and that whoever saves one single life of the Jewish people, it is as if he has saved all of humanity.’

The young man nodded his head, grasping the deep meaning of the Talmudic teaching. But then the third rabbi stepped in.

‘And couldn’t that apply not just to the life of a Jew, but to all human lives?’ he asked, trying to take the debate to another level.

The older rabbi furrowed his brow in thought, while the young man waited for his response, intrigued.

‘Well ... yes ...’ he replied hesitantly. ‘We could say that this statement should apply not only to the Jewish people, but to every human being, insofar as all human beings come from Adam.

‘But, looking deeper,’ the old man continued, ‘it is also true that, in Genesis, when Cain killed Abel, HaShem reproached him by saying “the bloods of your brother cry out.” He did not say “the blood”, but “the bloods”, referring to both Abel’s blood and the bloods of all his descendants. In this sense, we might say that if someone destroys one single human life, it is as if he destroys all mankind, and whoever saves one human life it is as if he saves all mankind.’

The third rabbi smiled with satisfaction, seeing that the old man was coming to confirm his intuitions, and asked again:

‘And couldn’t such a Talmudic teaching apply to all life, regardless of whether it is a human life or not?’

This new question plunged the elderly rabbi into even deeper reflection. For a little more than a minute he was silent, while the other two rabbis waited patiently for an answer from him.

‘I would say,’ the old rabbi finally broke off, ‘that indeed it could apply to all life, and not only to human life, for, in Genesis, it says that HaShem placed Adam in creation “to work it and take care of it.” But, if we look at the Hebrew verbs in Scripture, we see that the first of these is *le'ovdah*, which means, literally, “to serve it,” and the second is *leshomrah*, which means “to guard it.” And it must be acknowledged that this verb appears in our tradition to describe the responsibilities of the guardian of a property belonging to someone else. According to this tradition, the guardian has to watch over and protect, and can be held liable for negligence if there is loss or damage to what is guarded.

‘From the Torah,’ continued the elderly rabbi, ‘one could therefore conclude that, if Adam was charged with serving and guarding all creation, the death of a single man could also mean the death of all creatures created by HaShem.

‘So I humbly believe that we could indeed affirm that whoever destroys a life it is as if he has destroyed the world, and whoever saves a life it is as if he has saved the world.’

The third rabbi smiled satisfied, looked at his two companions and, with a mischievous smile, added:

‘And if we accept that saving a life means saving the world, can we not conclude that a single human being can save a whole world?’ □

Narrative construction from Talmudic texts and rabbinic commentaries by Grian A. Cutanda (2024).

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Comments

There is, to our knowledge, no such traditional story of these Talmudic teachings in the Jewish tradition as the one we have just given above, at least not in narrative form. But the reflections, elucidations and conclusions reflected here do exist in the traditions of the Talmud itself and in various rabbinic commentators. All we have done is to give it a narrative format.

Specifically, the core of this discussion – that whoever kills or saves a life is as if destroying or saving a world – can be found under the different aspects expressed here in the Talmud, specifically in the Mishnah, Sanhedrin 4:5.

Could anyone suppose that this idea is also found in the Quran, specifically in Quran 5:32?

That is why We ordained for the Children of Israel that whoever takes a life – unless as a punishment for murder or mischief in the land – it will be as if they killed all of humanity; and whoever saves a life, it will be as if they saved all of humanity.

It is paradoxical that the followers of two such opposing religions – three if we count Christianity, as the heir and to some extent the continuation of the Jewish tradition – have so disregarded this fundamental precept of their beliefs that they have all perpetrated genocide, some of them in the last hundred years.

Furthermore, this precept of the world's three major monotheistic religions underscores one of the key ideas underlying the Earth Charter,



which is that 'Every individual, family, organisation, and community has a vital role to play.' Indeed, as the third rabbi suggests here, perhaps a single human being could be the cause, consciously or unconsciously, of the salvation of the entire Community of Life on Earth.

Our sincere thanks to Juli Peradejordi, author, editor and expert on Judaism, who reviewed these pages for us.

Sources

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Associated text of the Earth Charter

The Way Forward: Every individual, family, organization, and community has a vital role to play.

Other passages that this story illustrates

Preamble: To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny.

Preamble – Universal Responsibility: We are at once citizens of different nations and of one world in which the local and global are linked.

Preamble – Universal Responsibility: Everyone shares responsibility for the present and future well-being of the human family and the larger living world.

Principle 1b: Affirm faith in the inherent dignity of all human beings and in the intellectual, artistic, ethical, and spiritual potential of humanity.

Principle 16: Promote a culture of tolerance, nonviolence, and peace.

