Limmud North America
Limmud's mission is to animate and re-imagine Jewish community. We create experiences that connect Jews of all backgrounds with transformative learning and each other. We believe in empowering individuals to build a vibrant future for the Jewish People.

Unifying a grassroots network of hundreds of activists in cities across the United States and Canada through Jewish learning, we believe strongly in the power of curiosity to build bridges and span divides.

To learn more about our vision and programs, please visit our website limmudna.org.

Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz z”l
We were deeply saddened by the passing of Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz z”l earlier this year. A titan of Torah learning and hero of the Jewish People, Rabbi Steinsaltz was instrumental in founding the Global Day of Jewish Learning 11 years ago. May his memory be an enduring blessing, and continue to inspire our communities worldwide to come together in dedication to engagement with our sacred texts. We dedicate this year’s Global Day to his enduring impact on our People.
Preface

Welcome to the 11th annual Global Day of Jewish Learning!

This year, we join together across six continents for a Global Day unlike any other, at a time when we are physically separated because of a raging pandemic that has afflicted humanity. Our communities face unprecedented upheaval and fissures tearing at the fabric of what binds us. We have chosen as this year’s theme Human Dignity, because we know that this enduring Jewish value is more important now than ever.

Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz z”l left a challenge to Jews everywhere: “To take a step ahead in Jewish learning and commitment.” Thank you for joining us in this holy work!

The Global Day of Jewish Learning began in 2010 as a celebration of Steinsaltz’ monumental work of translating the Talmud. It is now an annual celebration bringing Jews across the spectrum of beliefs and backgrounds together through our shared love of learning. And this year, Limmud North America was honored to adopt the Global Day into our family of programs.

The Global Day is the work of many hands, internationally and in communities large and small. We appreciate the work being done on the ground to organize events in synagogues, JCCs, Hillels, Federations, community organizations, and homes all around the world. The success of the Global Day is due to all of your collective efforts. Thank you!

Limmud North America is dedicated to connecting people of all Jewish backgrounds to learn from and with each other, and we can think of no better way to celebrate our vision of a connected and empowered Jewish community than through unified learning that spans the Globe. Thank you to David Helfand and Robbie Medwed for contributing units to this curriculum; to David Helfand and Yoel Saidian for coordinating so many of the logistics that go in to making the Global Day possible; to the many teachers and rabbis who will teach via video livestream on the Global Day; to our partners Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies, Hadar, and Reconstructing Judaism.

We wish you a wonderful day of learning on Sunday, November 8, 2020 and hope that the study of Human Dignity will offer us all new blessings of mutual appreciation.

Rabbi David Singer
Limmud North America
Curriculum 2020 - Human Dignity

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Using These Curricula
Jewish texts are best-studied in community, either with one study partner (hevrutah) or a group. You can certainly study these texts on your own, but we recommend joining with a friend (or two!).

The units to follow are designed to facilitate group study. Each text or group of texts are followed by probing questions for consideration. We encourage you to join with a group of fellow learners (virtually, or in person, local conditions permitting) to engage with this sources from our tradition. Each unit represents roughly 40 minutes of guided learning.
What does it mean to be made in the image of God? What are our individual and our communal responsibilities toward one another? How do we ultimately understand what we as humans are supposed to be doing in this world? Human Dignity is a concept that is crucial to all mankind. In Judaism, the value of human dignity traces its origin to the story of Creation, when God creates humanity “in the image of God.”

Part I: Where it all Began - Creation of Human in God’s Image

This set of texts will guide you through classical Jewish texts exploring what it means to be created in the image of God and what our responsibilities are within that framework.

Let’s start at the beginning!

What does the Torah tell us about humanity being created in the image of God? How can we take the traditional verses that are associated with the Hebrew concept b’tzelem Elohim (“in God’s image”) and apply them to our modern lives and the equality that we hope for?

Text 1: Genesis 1:26-27

God said: ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’

God created human in God’s own image, in the image of God God created human; male and female created God them.

Text 2: Genesis 5:1-2

Now that we have seen where the idea of creation of humans comes from, take a look at this second version of being created in the image of God. The Torah has two creation stories, each slightly different. Which one has greater strength for you?
This is the record of the generations of humanity: On the day God created the human, God made the human in the likeness of God; male and female God created them and God blessed them and called them Human on the day of their creation.

ASK:

Both passages from Genesis describing the world's creation speak of humans being created in the image of God.

- How do you understand the idea that humans are created in God's image? How can your understanding be supported or challenged by the language of these verses?
- Is there any part of humanity that resembles God? If so, what?
- In Genesis 1:26 we see the text use words like “image” and “likeness.” What do each of those terms really mean? Are they the same thing? Why do you think these terms are used?
- How can you understand human dignity from these verses?
- What does it mean for you to be created in the image of God? What are your challenges, if any, with this notion?
- What is your definition of b’tzelem elohim?

Midrash Rabbah is a collection rabbinic interpretations of the Book of Genesis, compiled around 500 CE. Taking what you have learned already from the verses in Genesis, consider how this midrash influences your understanding of the nature of humanity having been created in the image of God.

**Text 3: Midrash Genesis Rabbah 24:7**

Ben Azzai said: “These are the generations of Adam:” This is a great principle in the Torah. Rabbi Akiva said: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself (Leviticus 19:18), this is a great principle in the Torah.” Thus, one should not say, “Since I am scorned, I should scorn my fellow as well; since I have been cursed, I will curse my fellow as well.” Rabbi Tanchumah said, if you act thus, realize whom it is that you are willing to have humiliated: “In the image of God God created human,” (Genesis 5:1).

ASK:

- What is the source of human dignity according to Ben Azai? For Rabbi Akiva?
- Does the proof verse make a difference in defining human dignity?
- What is the source of human dignity for Rabbi Tanhuma?
- Which statement makes the biggest impression on you?
Part II: A Reminder for Each of Us!

Pirkei Avot, Ethics of Our Fathers, composed somewhere between 190-230 CE, is a tractate of the Mishnah. Pirkei Avot presents laws and adages of how to live life in a meaningful and productive way. This first text will help us to further understand the concept of b’Tzelem Elohim.

Text 1: Mishnah Avot 3:14

והו יהוה אומר,تبיב אדומ שבברה בצלם. לשנה נודעת לו שבברה בצלם, שיאמר (בראשית)

Akiba would say: Beloved is humankind, since it is created in the image of God. This reveals a deeper love, for humankind is created in the image, as it says (Genesis 9:11) “for in God's image God made humankind.”

Sanhedrin is a tractate of the Mishnah that discusses the rules of court proceedings during the time of the Sanhedrin, the High Court. Similar to what we studied in Pirkei Avot, this text provides a mantra for living life and for understanding its importance.

Text 2: Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5


It was for this reason that human was first created as one person, to teach you that anyone who destroys a life is considered by Scripture to have destroyed an entire world; and anyone who saves a life is as if they have saved an entire world. And also, to promote peace among the creations, that no person would say, "My ancestors are greater than yours." And also, so that heretics will not say, "there are many rulers up in Heaven." And also, to express the grandeur of The Holy One: For a person strikes many coins from the same die, and all the coins are alike. But the King, the King of Kings, The Holy One strikes every person from the die of the First Person, and yet no person is quite like another. Therefore, every person must say, "For my sake the world was created.”

This text appears in the section of the Mishnah that informs us about the procedures for applying justice. Through its application of the law towards Cain and Abel, the text leads us to a conversation about the value of each individual human life.
DISCUSS:

- How does this text convey human dignity and how do you use your understanding of human dignity to influence this text?
- According to this Mishnah, how should we understand what human dignity is?
- The mishnah gives us a few understandings as to why Adam was created alone. How do you understand each of those answers?
- In what ways do these teachings about how we understand the importance of human life and perhaps human diversity help you understand your relationships that you have with others? What can we learn about interpersonal relationships from this text?

Part III: How Important is it Really?

In other places in the Torah and in Rabbinic Literature, we see statements that teach us about how we are supposed to live our life. Often, we ask questions to simply know what we are supposed to do or how we are supposed to act. This text from Berachot, the opening tractate of the Talmud, teaches an important principle based on the Torah.

**Text 1: Babylonian Talmud Berachot 19b**

The Gemara cites an additional proof: Come and hear - Great is human dignity, as it overrides a prohibition in the Torah.

**Text 2: Rabbi Menachem ben Solomon haMeiri on Berachot 19b**

The fundamental dignity of all creation is very precious to God. There is no value more precious than it.

CONSIDER THIS:

- What does it mean to suggest that a principle “overrides” a prohibition from the Torah?
- Do you agree with the opinion of the Talmud?
- What are your thoughts on what the Meiri says?
- Do you feel that all creations are always so precious to God? Do you find comfort in that sense of preciousness?
Part IV: Applying the Ancient to the Modern

While we start by exploring our ancient texts, it is also important to understand how these concepts might have modern applications. Below are two contemporary approaches to the idea of Human Dignity.

When reading these two pieces, think about what you might have already learned from the ancient texts and how they might have applied them to their remarks.

Text 1: Rabbi Deborah Waxman Remarks at the 2016 LGBT Health Forum

The teaching that we are created in the image of God demands equal rights for all people. Even more, it invites a liberatory embrace that works toward the wholeness, health, and joy of each of God's creations. As an expressly religious teaching, this approach situates each and every individual within the community of other human beings. Jewishly, this approach values the individual, yet Judaism isn't a religion of individual confession or existence. One cannot be Jewish alone. To fulfill the most central acts of our religion and culture--to pray essential prayers, to marry, to mourn, we must come together in community. Collectivity is also a central way we understand ourselves. So the assertion of this text, that every individual is created in the image of God, is also a charge to the community to make space for all these distinctive individuals. In asserting the holiness of each life, there is an insistence that the community nourish each of these lives. If to be human is to know ourselves most deeply in relationship--with each other and with the Source of all Creation--then our communal organizations must accommodate this diversity and celebrate the image of the divine--not in our sameness but in our distinctiveness, including--even because of--our queerness. Being our full, whole, healthy selves--this is God's will and this is a blessing.

Text 2: Rabbi Lawrence Troster - “Created in the Image of God: Humanity and Divinity in the Age of Environmentalism”

The Hebrew term for "image" (tzelem) has a cognate word in Old Akkadian and Old Babylonian that throws significant light upon the original nuance of the term used in Genesis. The cognate word (tzalmu) can mean a statue, a bodily shape, a figurine, or a relief drawing. The term sometimes refers to a statue or an image of the king, which is placed in a captured city or elsewhere in the kingdom as an extension of the king's presence and the king's law. In other words, it as as if the king were present wherever the king's tzalmu is placed. The king rules wherever his tzalmu stands.

Seen in this light, humanity is the tzalmu of God. Wherever humans are, the presence of God is reflected. This cannot be said of any other creature. Indeed, the command to multiply and spread over the earth is none other than a desire to spread the presence of God and to actualize God's power throughout creation, rather than a desire for mere numerical increase. It is as if God could not function in the world without humanity...this is certainly in accord with the Rabbinic idea of human beings as “partners of God in the work of Creation..."
THOUGHTS AND QUESTIONS:

- What do you take away from both excerpts? What sits with you? Do you have any disagreements or issues with anything that was said?
- How do you understand the words of Rabbi Waxman that God demands equal rights for all people? How can you mend that fracture in the world?
- Rabbi Troster says that wherever humans are, God is reflected. Do you agree?
- Can God function in the world without humanity, as Rabbi Troster argues is not possible?

Closing Thoughts

This unit opened our conversation to understand the meaning of human dignity within a Jewish lens. Through these texts, we have a better idea as to what our individual responsibility as well as our communal responsibility for one another. How can you now take what it is that you have learned and apply it to your everyday life? How does the world that you live in reflect the world that God created for us?

The famous Hasidic master Rabbi Simcha Bunim teaches, “In every coat there should be two pockets. In one pocket should be a piece of paper that reads, ‘For my sake was the world created (Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5).’ In the other should be a piece of paper that reads, ‘I am only dust and ashes (Genesis 18:27).’” How do we perform this balancing act?

Let us end this unit with the words of Rabbi David Freidenreich’s prayer for Human Rights. Please take a moment to read this prayer together and reflect on its impact.

A Prayer for Human Rights
Rabbi David Freidenreich

"Our God and God of our ancestors, do we not all share one parent? Did not one God create us all? And you have bestowed your dignity upon flesh and blood! It is well-known and obvious in Your sight that whoever can protest against wrongdoing in this world and does not protest is held accountable for what happens in the world. May it be Your will, therefore, that we act to protect human rights and human dignity. Help us to perceive the Divine Presence in every one of your creations, so that we may find favor and good will in the eyes of God and one another."
Barukh Atah Adonay, our God, ruler of time and space, who fashioned the first human being in the divine image and endowed every descendant with human rights—for one who disgraces another person brings disgrace to the likeness of God. Barukh Atah Adonay, creator of humanity and human rights.
Part I: The Value of Human Life

We begin this unit, on the Ethics of Human Dignity, with a video on the Value of Human Life by Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, of blessed memory. Rabbi Steinsaltz, the visionary who inspired the Global Day of Jewish Learning, speaks about the value of human life in Judaism and how it takes precedence over almost every other commandment.

Watch the Video

DISCUSS:

- What do you take away from Rabbi Steinsaltz' teaching?

The value of human life takes precedence over nearly everything else. Rabbi Steinsaltz reminds us that we have that ethical responsibility to take care of ourselves and those around us.

**Text 1: Rabbis Elliot N. Dorff and Daniel Nevins - Dignity: A Jewish Perspective**

“Dignity” in the Jewish tradition refers to the inherent worth that each person has as someone created in the image of God. People have this status regardless of gender, race, age, level of abilities or disabilities, or even the morality of their actions and their treatment of others because God has implanted this worth in them. The Jewish tradition certainly distinguishes among groups of people—Jews and non-Jews, men and women, children and adults, young and old—and it has many rules and models to distinguish good from bad behavior, ideal ways to interact with others from those that are less so or even wrong and prohibited; but in the end, even those who commit capital crimes must be punished for them in a way that preserves their inherent value as a creature and reflection of God.

**ASK:**

- What does it mean that we have to like everyone else and approve of their actions?
- What is our ethical obligation towards other people?
Text 2: Genesis 5:1-2 (A Refresher)

וַיְבָ֣רְא בּ֔וֹרָאָ֑ם וּנְקֵבָ֖ה זָכָ֥ר אֶתֽוֹ׃ עָשָׂ֥ה אֱלֹהִ֖ים בִּדְמ֥וּת אָדָ֔ם אֱלֹהִים֙ בְּרֹ֤א בְּי֗וֹם אָדָ֑ם תּוֹלְדֹ֖ת סֵ֔פֶר זה

This is the record of the generations of humanity: On the day God created the human, God made the human in the likeness of God; male and female God created them and God blessed them and called them Human on the day of their creation.

Midrash Sifra is a rabbinic exploration of the Book of Leviticus. This particular quote is commenting on the commandment to “love your neighbor as yourself.” Within this text, we will see two understandings and approaches to the biblical verse.

Text 3: Midrash Sifra Kedoshim 4:12

"וַיְבָ֣רְא בּ֔וֹרָאָ֑ם וּנְקֵבָ֖ה זָכָ֥ר אֶתֽוֹ׃ עָשָׂ֥ה אֱלֹהִ֖ים בִּדְמ֥וּת אָדָ֔ם אֱלֹהִים֙ בְּרֹ֤א בְּי֗וֹם אָדָ֑ם תּוֹלְדֹ֖ת סֵ֔פֶר זה אומר עזאי בן. בתורהגדולכללזהאמר עקיבא רבי " – כמוך לרעך ואהבת. מזהגדולכללזהאמר " – אדם.

"And you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18). Rabbi Akiva says: This is a great principle in the Torah. Ben Azzai says: "This is the record of the generations of humanity" (Genesis 5:1) — This is an even greater principle.

Both Rabbi Akiva and Ben Azzai offer important understandings of Jewish tradition. They both share what they believe to be great principles of Torah.

DISCUSS:

- How does loving one's neighbor as oneself fit in as a foundational idea for ethical behavior among God's creations?
- Who counts as a one's neighbor? What does that mean? Do you think Rabbi Akiva and Ben Azzai understand their neighbors differently?
- Why do you think Ben Azzai references Genesis 5:1-2 as his proof text as opposed to the source text for the concept of “b’tzelem Elohim” - Genesis 1:26-27? Is one text stronger than the other?

Part II: We Are Born with Dignity

Let's look at some texts that explore the nature of humanity's dignity. Is dignity intrinsic to the human experience, or is it something that we acquire or earn?
**Text 1: Deuteronomy 21:23**

You must not let his corpse remain on the stake overnight, but must bury him the same day. For an impaled body is an affront to God: you shall not defile the land that the LORD your God is giving you to possess.

**Text 2: Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 46b**

It is taught that Rabbi Meir says: The Sages told a parable: To what is this matter comparable? It is comparable to two brothers who were twins and lived in the same city. One was appointed king, while the other went out to engage in banditry. The king commanded that his brother be punished, and they hanged his twin brother for his crimes. Anyone who saw the bandit hanging would say: The king was hanged. The king, therefore, commanded that his brother be taken down, and they took the bandit down. Similarly, people are created in God’s image, and therefore God is disgraced when a corpse is hung for a transgression that the person has committed.

The biblical verse (Deuteronomy 21:23) and the talmudic passage (Sanhedrin 46B) establish for the Rabbis that human dignity is not necessarily something that is acquired. Accordingly, it is also important to note that one’s dignity cannot be removed by any negative thing that a person may do. Dignity is a special feature of human beings that is implanted by God at the time of creation and is integral to human nature.

**DISCUSS**

- Understanding that dignity is not something ‘acquired’ but, rather, something we are born with, how does that influence the way we should treat or relate to other human beings?
- How might your understanding of human dignity be different if it were something acquired, rather than a characteristic of humans from birth?

**Text 3: Genesis 9:5-6**

But for your own life-blood I will require a reckoning: I will require it of every beast; of man, too, will I require a reckoning for human life, of every man for that of his fellow
man! Whoever sheds the blood of man, By man shall his blood be shed; For in His image Did God make man.

DISCUSS:

- What do you understand to be your moral and ethical responsibility based on Genesis 9:5-6?
- What is the relationship of human dignity to God as a result of the above verses?

Part III: Practical Implications

Knowing all that we have discovered about the concept of human dignity, its source, and its nature within each and every person, what are the practical implications for how we live?

Text 1: Rabbi Chayim David HaLevy, Aseh Lecha Rav Section 3, Entry 87

It is our obligation to be concerned about just law; more than that, it is our obligation to be concerned about the criminal himself; more than that, it is our obligation to be concerned with the dignity of humanity.

ASK:

- Do you agree with the statement of Rabbi Chayim David HaLevy?
- Do you think there is a balance that can be struck about being concerned about both Jewish law, the criminal and dignity of humanity?
- What else should we be concerned about?

Text 2: For the Perplexed of the Generation by Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaCohen Kook

The foundation of the Torah is that human was created “in the image of God”. The essential meaning of “the image” is the complete freedom we find in man, [which means] that man must have free will. If there was no free will, there would be no
context for the Torah, as Maimonides writes in The Laws of Repentance. If that's so, free will is the basis of the Torah, practically speaking. The knowledge that man is made “in the image of God” comes to teach that the perfection of total free will must exist [as well] in the essence of true perfection, may His name be blessed. This is the intellectual foundation of the entire Torah that all deed relies upon.

**DISCUSS:**

- What is the connection between our ethical responsibility as human beings and free will?
- Do you agree that if there is no free will, there is no context for the Torah?

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**Closing Thoughts**

There is a story of a Hasidic Rebbe and a conversation he had with his student. Rabbi Israel of Rizhin once asked a student how many sections there were in the Shulchan Arukh, the Code of Jewish Law. The student replied, “Four.” “What,” asked the Rabbi, “do you know about the fifth section?” But there is no fifth section,” said the student. “There is,” said the Rizhiner. “It says: always treat a person like a Mensch.”

Our Jewish tradition puts an emphasis on acknowledging that human being's life are incredibly important regardless of rich or poor, race and gender. It is our goal and hope that we can live life fully while still remembering what is at our core: love of people, value of ourselves and being made in the image of God. Above all else, remembering the advice of the the Rizhiner Rebbe, always treat a person like a mensch!
Part I:
The Power of Words

Jewish tradition teaches that God spoke the world into being. God said, "let there be light," and there was light. "Let the earth sprout vegetation," and plants grew. Whatever God spoke about, God created. So too do we as mere humans have the power to create entire worlds with our words.

Text 1: Proverbs 18:21

-death and life are in the power of the tongue.

In the Book of Proverbs we learn that our words have the power to create life and the power to end it. But how? Are our words so powerful that we can end life? Are our words so magnificent that we can create life out of nothing?

CONSIDER:

- What are some of the ways you use your words each day?
- Do you choose your words as if you have the power to begin or end life? How do you think your daily experience might change if you did?
- What about the daily experiences of those around you?

The Talmud teaches its lessons through transcripts of conversations between teachers and students. In this section, we read of a scholar who was teaching a class in the presence of Rav Nachman, who agreed with what he had to say.

Text 2: Babylonian Talmud Bava Metzia 58b

The Gemara tells a story about a scholar who recited teachings in the study hall, who taught before Rav Naḥman bar Yitzḥak: "Anyone who humiliates another in public, it is as though they were spilling blood." Rav Naḥman bar Yitzḥak said to him: You have spoken well, as we see that after the humiliated person blushed, the blood leaves their face and pallor comes in its place, which is tantamount to spilling their blood.
This text declares that humiliating a person is akin to killing them, and Rav Nachman agrees, because when a person is humiliated the color leaves their face much like the color leaves the face of someone who has died. A change in the pallor of one's face isn't the only ramification of being humiliated in public, though.

Think of a time you endured humiliation. What was it like? Do you remember the feelings you felt back then? Are they still hurtful today?

For many people, the moment of humiliation is secondary to what comes after. Those who have been humiliated often carry the shame of that moment with them for days, weeks, or even years. Their lives have been permanently impacted and altered because they were humiliated.

DISCUSS:

• What are some of the ways you might try and fix the damage done by a humiliating incident?
• Do you think it would be easy or hard?

Part II: Welcome Spaces

In places and times when synagogues were located outside of the main city centers, the Rabbis instituted a series of laws designed to keep people from leaving the synagogue before everyone else finished praying. They instituted new prayers during Shabbat evening services that would prevent anyone from finishing on their own and leaving others behind. In addition to adding new liturgy, they also were more explicit in their expectations of their communities.

Text 1: Babylonian Talmud Berachot 5b

Abba Binyamin says: If two people entered a synagogue outside of the city in order to pray, and one began praying before the other and did not wait for the other person to complete his prayer, and left the other alone in the synagogue, their prayer is thrown back in their face.

ASK:

• Why do you think not leaving the synagogue early was so important?
• The rabbis had no problem nullifying the prayers of those who ignored others in need. What example does that set for the rest of us in how we look out for and care for others?
As you read the narrative below, keep in mind the rabbinic insistence that no one should walk home from synagogue alone. How does it apply to the narrative below?

Text 2: “Let’s Make Jewish Spaces More Welcoming for Black Kids Like Mine” - Nina Essel, Kveller

Our son is 5. He attended Jewish preschool at our synagogue and just finished kindergarten. Our daughter is 2. Neither knows the world outside the bubble we have carefully crafted. Our children live every day in Black skin and it’s an identity they cannot shed. We don’t want our children to have to choose but will others choose for them? Will our son find a Jewish community that is welcoming or one that inspects his Jewish credentials? Will our daughter find a synagogue that supports anti-racism work or one that prefers color blindness?

We know we have to hold up our end of the bargain: educate them about the religion and their heritage, keep a home that proudly conveys Jewish values, and the richness of our culture. My husband has learned to say hamotzi and kiddush. We light candles for Shabbat and build a sukkah for Sukkot.

But we are left wondering: Even if we do all that, will Jewish institutions, organizations, and other Jews welcome them into the fold? Not in the “oh, hey, we are so glad you are here” tokenism way, but in a deep and meaningful way? We hope our son and daughter will find a synagogue where they can be their authentic Black and Jewish selves, one that embraces all of them, where they feel safe emotionally, mentally, physically, and spiritually. But I worry that they will need to downplay their Blackness in order to afford white Jews their comfort or be forced to shed their Jewish identity because Jewish communities question their right to belong.

What do you think the author might say if people in her community took the rabbis’ decree very seriously? What do you think her family's life in a community might look like? What are the ways people can ensure others aren't “walking home alone” in today's times?

Part III: Barriers to Entry

Let's take some time to consider the barriers of entry into the Jewish community. There are many reasons why a person might feel marginalized from their fellow Jews.

The text below comes from Pirkei Avot, a section of the Mishnah that focuses on wisdom passed down from our ancestors through the ages.
Text 1: Mishnah Avot 4:3

אָלָֽה וּבֶּלִּכְלָֽהּ וּא֑וֹל תַּחַֽי מַפְלִֽיָּֽהּ לְכָלָֽהּ רֵאוּי לְכָֽלָֽהּ אַלָֽהּ לְכָֽלָֽהּ שֶׁאֵֽין דָּבָֽר לְוָֽוהֵֽו אַלָֽהּ לְכָֽלָֽהּ שֶׁאֵֽין שָׁעָֽה לוֹ שֶׁאֵֽין אָדָֽם לְלַעַל אָדָֽם שֶׁאֵֽין דָּבָֽר לְכָֽל מַפְלִֽיָּֽהּ תְּהִֽי וְאַל אָדָֽם לְכָֽל בָּז תְּהִֽי אַל מָקֶֽם

Do not despise any person, and do not discriminate against any thing, for there is no person that does not have their hour, and there is no thing that does not have its place.

CONSIDER:

- What do you think our world would be like if we approached ability and knowledge as a puzzle, rather than a piggy bank?
- What if we found ways to value and emphasize the places we thrive, instead of judging others on their ability to match skills with someone else? are some of the ways you might try and fix the damage done by a humiliating incident?

One common barrier to entry into the Jewish community is the lack of spaces physically and emotionally designed to welcome the full diversity of humanity. For Jews who are non-binary (neither male nor female but some combination, mix, or rejection thereof), Jewish spaces can feel wholly unwelcoming.

For example, A synagogue with a mehitza (gender barrier) can leave non-binary Jews without any place to go at all. Even in non-segregated communities, so many moments of Jewish life are gendered in a very binary (male/female) way.

In the narrative below, Quinn, a non-binary Jew who chose Judaism, shares some of the very hard questions running through their mind when they are in Jewish spaces.


It was impossible not to notice every gendered space and role and heterosexual ideal. I realized that meaningfully engaging in Jewish practices and spaces would involve a great deal more thought and effort than they would for a heterosexual cisgender version of myself. Like so many other trans folk, I sat in those gendered spaces, focused more on my transness than the prayer happening around me. Would I be allowed into this space if those around me know I was trans? Was I somehow attacking the sanctity of their space by not disclosing that? Jewish spaces, whether in their initial conception or their modern interpretation, were constructed for male- and female-identifying people, and not for me.
Have you ever been in a situation where you were afraid to tell those around you about yourself? What made it a daunting task for you?

In their narrative, Quinn asks, "Was I somehow attacking the sanctity of their space?" Why do you think Quinn might have believed it could be possible that their mere presence in the space could be perceived as an attack on its sanctity?

**DISCUSS:**

- What physical, non-private spaces in your community are gendered?
- How do you feel about those spaces?
- How might you react if those spaces were no longer gender-specific, but open to all? What would feel good? What might be scary?
- What do you think you might gain from such an openness?
- Why do you think so many of our spaces and our rituals are gendered and binary?

There are other barriers that prevent access to participation in the full gamut of things Jewish. For example, there are so many ways in which we can take for granted a person being able-bodied. But what if one is not? How might that impact a person's inclusion? How can we ensure the elevation of their dignity?

The text below, from tractate Megillah of the Babylonian Talmud, explores these questions by probing what need a blind person has for light:

**Text 3: Babylonian Talmud Megillah 24b**

Rabbi Yossi said: All of my life I was troubled by this verse, which I did not understand: "And you shall grope at noon as the blind person gropes in the darkness" (Deuteronomy 28:29).

I was perplexed: What does it matter to a blind person whether it is dark or light? They cannot see in any event, so why does the verse speak about a blind person in the darkness?

I continued to ponder the matter until the following incident occurred to me: I was once walking in the absolute darkness of the night, and I saw a blind man who was walking on his way with a torch in his hands. I said to him: My son, why do you need this torch if you are blind? He said to me: As long as I have a torch in my hand, people see me and save me from the pits and the thorns and the thistles.
This text points to an enduring question of how we relate to those in our communities who have been marginalized. Is it fair to expect those disadvantaged to take the extra step of fighting for themselves and educating others? Are there times when they should be tasked with that responsibility? Are there times where it is inappropriate?

Try and put yourself in the shoes of someone from one of these stories. How do you think you might speak up, and what would you want from other people?