KAVOD: Find Out What It Means, To Us

Rosh Hashanah Day One, Adat Shalom, RFSD, 2018/5779

The late Queen of Soul, Aretha Franklin, spelled it out: “R-E-S-P-E-C-T.”

Today we’ll explore that essential attribute: respect – honor – *Kavod*. WE spell it “kaf, vet, vav, and dalet” (lacks the ring, but packs a punch!).

Let’s “find out what it means” – and can and should mean -- to us.

Kaf, vet, dalet is the root of *kavod* – and, of כָּבֵד *kaved*, liver: that under-appreciated heaviest internal organ (well over three pounds),[[1]](#footnote-1) that breaks down toxins.

*Kaved*, *kavod* – the liver breaks down bio-toxins within us; respect breaks down social toxins between us!

On this first morning of the New Year, may *kavod* be our purifier.

FIRST: KAVOD AS A CORE JEWISH VALUE

               Honoring everyone starts with Torah’s very first chapter: *Vayivra ha’adam b’Tzelem Elohim*, “God created the human in the Divine Image” (the source for a later Declaration, “all…created equal...endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights”). When an earthly ruler churns out multiple images (as on coins), they’re all the same – boring! But with the Ruler on high, each comes out different.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In this room alone are some [seven?] hundred varied representations of God! Working backward from who WE are, *God* must therefore be black and white and other-complected -- queer, and straight -- typically and differently abled -- She, as much as He -- cis-, fluid, and trans-. All, without fail, ALL of us: in God’s image.

Thus, we’d best appreciate and learn from all *others,* for they too – in their *differences* from us, and their similarities – are Divine. And, we must dig *ourselves*! – however clouded by doubt, depression or internalized oppression – for we each bear infinite worth, and potential.[[3]](#footnote-3) We should extend kavod always, to self *and* others.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Behind this rich word, *kavod*, is “heft, substance.” *Koved* is weight, in physics.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Heavy things are hard to move: that’s why tshuvah, our introspection and self-betterment, is hard. The Psalmist wails, “My sins weigh like a burden, too *kaved*/heavy for me.” But don’t give up, lest we be Pharaoh, hardening (literally HEAVYING – *vayich’bahd*, again from *kaved*) our hearts, with apathy-turned-evil.[[6]](#footnote-6)

You may think of Kavod as “glory”, like in the Kedusha, *m’lo khol Haaretz k’vodo*, the whole world is filled -- with God’s liver, or weight?! – no, God’s glory, right? Sort of. Kavod connotes interiority, plus substance. Here it’s not external glory, like fame or fortune, but inherent greatness.[[7]](#footnote-7) God, the *Melekh Hakavod*,[[8]](#footnote-8) is so substantial, She’s glorious! You’re glorious too, when you do something big -- for an aliyah to the Torah, a great mitzvah, a wicked good pun, we say כֹּל הַכָּבוֹד, “all the honor.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

*Kavod*’s best-known use -- as honor, or dignity – retains these other meanings: to give honor is to recognize the inherent “weight” and “glory” in others.

Acknowledging others’ substance – that in their own intellectual or emotional way, they’re ‘heavyweights’ – that’s giving them kavod. The opposite of *kaved*, heavy, is *kal*, light – treating another as ‘lightweight,’ of little consequence – which in turn is the root of *k’lalah*, or curse. Rabbi David Jaffe, a (great!) teacher of Mussar, expounds: “It *is* a curse to treat people as if they are not significant, by not giving them attention, or underpaying or mistreating them.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Indeed, the moral stakes are heavy – we MUST accord weight to, or honor, others.

Honor the living, and the dead: mourning customs balance *k’vod ha’met* with *k’vod hachayim*. Honor the Community, or God, by coming up *lichvod* haKahal, *lichvod* haMakom. Honor parents, *kibud av v’em*, by caring for them, according them dignity.[[11]](#footnote-11) To honor visitors, we don’t just say “welcome honored guests”, we set out *kibud*, snacks, literally ‘in their honor.’ We extend ourselves, raiding our own shelves, for the other.[[12]](#footnote-12) *That’s* honor.

How, then, to honor a child crossing the border, desperate and fearful? Honor a transgender person, struggling to be seen for who they are? Honor one from a different religion, or politics, or class? How do we give *kavod*, today, to those who deserve it -- and who, created in God’s image, doesn’t deserve a *bissel* kavod?!

Enter, from the world of Musar, our ‘part two’:

KAVOD AS MIDDAH.

Honed in the 19th and 20th centuries and newly ascendant in the liberal Jewish world, Mussar is a practical system focused on ethical values or virtues, *middot*. Mussar bids us to consider one middah, virtue or character trait, at a time: Be deeply mindful of it in all interactions. Journal about it daily; hold a weekly *hevruta*, accountability conversation, plus a group, *va’ad*. Study it -- pray on it. Then, on to another middah, and another; eventually revisit the earlier ones, and chart your growth all the while.

Rabbi Sid taught mussar a few years back; some groups still run since then. I dove into it on my recent three-month sabbatical, at one point with Hazzan/Rav Rachel and others. From Rabbi Julie and Torah School, look for a ‘Middah of the Month’, which starts next week -- with Kavod (!)

Though Kavod is a key Jewish value, as leading Mussar teacher Alan Morinis notes, it’s hard “for us to take responsibility for honoring others. It [often feels] easier to be critical and harshly judgmental, seeing only others’ flaws and failings. When our eyes focus only on the soiled garment, ignoring the divinely inspired being within, there really isn’t anything much to honor.”[[13]](#footnote-13) [endquote].

How then to honor that spark of God in another? Develop an *Ayin Tovah*, a good eye. Make a moral and spiritual practice of cultivating favorable thoughts, and non-judgmental approaches.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Various middot do overlap: *anavah*, humility, was my big sermon topic, last year. (And wasn’t that humility sermon amazing, the best ever?!)[[15]](#footnote-15) Seriously: if we’re less full of ourselves, we’re more able to use that Ayin Tovah to see the good in others, which strengthens Kavod in turn.

We should be humble enough to not need to seek our own *kavod*, and thoughtful enough to routinely extend it to others. The Talmud Yerushalmi (Hagigah 2:1) has a warning for those who instead routinely ‘dis’ others: [quote] “Those who endeavor to build up [their own] kavod, at the price of another being degraded, have no portion in the world to come.”

And: last year, Anavah; this year, Kavod -- with a dozen more widely-accepted middot to focus on, and then some – one middah per year, at these Yamim Noraim, will take me and lots of us straight through retirement! Mussar is indeed a life-long process.

Nor is Mussar just *another* Jewish study topic. Done right, it hurts, all that critical self-examination – growing pains, as it were.

On this Rosh Hashana morning, let’s hurt and grow a little, together, with a *kavod* exercise. Sit comfortably; eyes open or closed, your preference. Now:

*Think* of a recent interaction where you didn’t treat another with quite the respect they deserve. One time: with a partner or spouse; a parent, child, sibling; a friend. Maybe a colleague, teacher, supervisee. Or a stranger. One interaction. [Pause 2 3 4 5 6 7 8].

You’ve got it? Uncomfortable as it may be, now replay the scene, in detail. How did it unfold? [Pause 2 3 4 5 6 7 8].

When and where, exactly, did you fail on Kavod? [Pause 2 3 4 5] – what shape did that take? [Pause 6 7 8 9].

How did you feel, in that moment? [Pause 2 3 4 5 6 7 8].

How might *they* have felt? [Pause 2 3 4 5 6 7 8].

And how do *you* feel about it, *now*? [Pause 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10].

That’s *cheshbon hanefesh*, soul-accounting, a traditional practice both of these Yamim Noraim, and of Mussar.[[16]](#footnote-16) Take it home, apply this model – not just to Kavod, but *Emet*/truthtelling; *Savlanut*/patience; and other middot. That’s how we think through the year that was, and contemplate the person we are, or ought to (and can yet) be. [Pause].

But what of our role in building – [our third & final exploration]:

THE KAVODIK *SOCIETY* THAT OUGHT TO BE [?!]

It’s hard to always extend kavod to folks we’re close with; it’s harder still, though needed yet more, to extend kavod to *all*.

Where kavod meets activism: Rabbi David Jaffe once helped organize domestic workers. He wrote: “It is ironic that the workers who care for the people we value most are among the most devalued in our society in terms of wages, protections, and status… the value society assigns to these workers is [tragically] closely aligned with how our society values women, people of color, and immigrants.” (p. 160)

Yes, *Kvod Hadadi*, generalized respect, is a social prescription. In fact *K’vod Ha’adam*, “Human Dignity,” is the name of Israel’s semi-constitutional Basic Law on civil rights[[17]](#footnote-17) -- a principle that many Israelis (and we) still uphold, against the many unequal structures enshrined in law and practice – there, and here.

Let’s make this plain: everyone deserves kavod. Those *with* resources usually enjoy it already! But too many -- the underprivileged, disempowered -- remain systematically disrespected. So it’s on *us* to work harder, to ensure that *they* are granted honor, dignity, weight[[18]](#footnote-18) -- in our work for change, and our personal dealings; from simply saying hello,[[19]](#footnote-19) to redistributive justice.

Immigrants get painfully little kavod, less and less, in today’s America. So we extend ourselves, for the Amiri family, and countless more.

People of color get painfully little kavod, in an era when the fact that “Black Lives Matter” still must be explicitly affirmed. So we treat racial justice as a high synagogue priority.

And glaringly, a full century after the right to vote – and two thousand years after our tradition (wisely)! gave many *women* leading roles on Rosh Hashanah (Sarah and Hagar in our Torah reading; Hannah’s prayer in today’s haftarah, and Rachel weeping in tomorrow’s; even *Hayom Harat Olam*, literally “Today, the world is pregnant!”) -- women hold up half the sky, but still with too little kavod.

So Adat Shalom is upping that kavod quotient, in the way we best know how: welcome to 5779’s year of feminist, womanist, and queer Torah interpretation.

(In some years past, a theme threaded through most services. We’ve done Hebrew poetry, American Jewish history, Yiddish women’s commentary, the Haftarot. Regulars build some real knowledge and vocabulary, and guests get a taste of something big).

This year, our dvar theme is **proactive *kavod***, centering exactly those interpretive voices shunned by a white-dominated straight cis-gender male “mainstream.” Each week will **not** stridently hit folks over the head with that message – but each week, rooted in Jewish values and text, will subtly signal how we seek to learn and be shaped by Great Torah from *all* corners.

For years, men have taught with straight blinders on; this year, our student rabbi Micah Weiss studied at Svara (the Queer Yeshiva), and our full-time shaliach Idan Sharon brings a lifetime of Israeli queer and progressive experience.

For eons, we’ve turned first to Rashi; this year, we turn first to Plaskow (Judith Plaskow, leading feminist theologian, with us on April 7th!).

Yes, this means embracing feminism, full-on, **as a kavod corollary**. Heck, in Kabbalah, “Kavod” itself is feminine! – each name of God aligns with one *s’firah*, mystical Divine aspect; Kavod goes with Shechinah, the grammatically and essentially female concept of God. Feminist and gender-neutral God-language, starting with *Shechinah*, is on the table, Hebrew and English.

50 years ago this week, “In September 1968, Jewish women joined in a protest at the Miss America pageant and tossed the symbols of their oppression into the ‘Freedom Trash Can.’ **What obstacles to freedom will *you* cast off ﻿this Rosh Hashanah**” (asks the JWA)?[[20]](#footnote-20) What blockages to kavod will we all cast off?

Now to come full circle: Aretha Franklin’s strong voice (on Otis Redding’s words) helped a generation of people- especially women- of color to find *their* voice, and insist upon kavod (r-e-s-p-e-c-t) on *their* terms. The spiritual reflections and literary criticism of women of color, loosely black feminism, is ‘womanism.’ And one renown womanist theologian -- a Hebrew Bible PhD, proud philo-Judaic Christian participant in various Jewish communities, and dear friend -- has already expanded our consciousness from Adat Shalom’s bimah. Rev. Dr. Wil Gafney recently wrote “*Womanist Midrash*,”[[21]](#footnote-21) a careful reading of our holy text, informed by the vital experiences of women of color – her Torah too will be ours this year.

To quote another leading woman of color: “when they go low, we go high.”[[22]](#footnote-22) When *we* see kavod shortages in the world around us, we *privilege* the very voices which are wrongly marginalized. In shul; and, in life. Kavod, breaking down toxins.

So:

Let’s keep seeking out new ways to give honor (*ten kavod*). Let’s make the dignity of others our spiritual concern. Let’s dig deep into our own track records with kavod, as part of our *cheshbon hanefesh*, soul-reckoning -- and give extra, proactive kavod to those who, in this messed-up world, now receive it least.

As Pirkei Avot asks and answers: *Eizeh hu mechubad*, who is honored? – *ha’m’chabed et ha’briyot*, one who honors others, honors the Creations.[[23]](#footnote-23)

And as the Queen of Soul belted out, “R-E-S-P-E-C-T, find out what it means to *me*; to *you*, *us*; to *all*. Together, let’s bring a bit more kavod into this world of ours – just a little bit, “mm-mm, just a little bit.”

Shanah tovah.

1. The liver is neck and neck with the brain, but on average apparently beats it by a nose – 1560 grams, to 1500, per the BBC’s <https://www.sciencefocus.com/the-human-body/top-10-what-are-the-heaviest-organs-in-the-human-body/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5 – in Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 37a [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “According to Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, being made in the divine image endows all humans with three essential dignities: all humans are infinitely valuable, equal, and unique. Infinitely valuable means that people’s value is essential and not instrumental in any way. This is a good thing to remember in capitalist societies that only value people for what they can produce… As far away as we are from actually treating all people with the dignity they deserve, Genesis sets a goal to which we can aspire.” (David Jaffe, *Changing the World from the Inside Out*. Boston/London: Shambhala Press, 2016; p. 161) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Extending kavod to oneself does come first, and does affect how we extend it to others. As Rav Kook (Chief Ashkenazic Rabbi of pre-state Israel, 1919-1935) wrote (cited in David Jaffe, *Changing the World from the Inside Out,* p. 168): “The more one lacks a sense of inner-wholeness or completion, the more nature will seek to gain such wholeness and completion on an outer level. It is only in a state of low-level spirituality that there will be aroused in a person a desire to glorify himself before others… It is thus important for a person to enhance his sense of inner wholeness and completion, [so that] his self-assessment in relation to others shall always be in the proper measure.” And UK Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis ([9/5/18](https://chiefrabbi.org/all-media/parashat-nitzavim/)) cites the Alshikh on parashat Nitzavim (Deut. 29:9, our Yom Kippur Torah reading) to the same effect: why after saying kulchem / all of you, does it go on to name people by rank and profession? First is how God sees us, inclusively; then comes how we see ourselves and each other, in limited stratified hierarchies. We should learn to see ourselves, and others, as God does… [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. “Weightiness” or ‘heaviness’ is the starting point for many other uses of the word: like how the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah (which midrash suggests was not hedonism or libido gone wild, but weaponized nativism and insularity) was *kaved m’od*, very heavy. It’s also part of kavod in modern Hebrew, where k’vidah (**כְּבִידָה**) is one of the words for gravity, i.e. the pull between two objects with mass. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Though Philologos (MosaicMagazine.com, 11 April 2018), following Dara Horn’s suggestion, notes that the verb might mean weakened or addled, following other uses of the verb which imply “weak” eyes (Gen. 48), “stuttering” tongue (Ex. 3), and other examples of body parts not functioning as they ideally might. Sodom & Gomarrah, Genesis 18; Psalm 38:4; Ex. 4 through 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Real kavod most certainly isn’t manifest in wealth; as Psalm 49:17 clarifies, the rich at death can’t take their kavod with them! On glory, see Exodus 16:10, “the Glory of God was in the cloud” (and later references to the *annanei hakavod*, Clouds of Glory); see also Second Isaiah, in Lecha Dodi on Friday night, *k’vod Adonai alayich niglah,* ”the glory of Adonai will shine upon you.” Note too that the Aramaic cognate for Kavod, used in the Targumim, is *Y.K.R*., as in dear, or valuable – suggesting a positive evolution of the concept in late biblical times. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. “Melekh haKavod”, the Glorious Ruler or King of Glory, is from Psalm 24, sung during today’s Torah recessional. It is perhaps better translated as “God of substance, God of presence, God of all that is.” And, for a change in my sermons, ecology shows up only in a footnote – but Psalm 24 begins with the all-important message of both liberation theology and eco-theology, “The Earth is God’s, and the fulness thereof” – we are but tenants, while God is owner (see also Lev. 25:23, shmita, etc). This sense of God as creator/owner of a gloriously substantive world is captured, in secular fashion, in Phil Ochs’ “Power and Glory.” [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. If we preface a comment by saying “with all due respect,” what comes next is usually the opposite. Per our shaliach Idan Sharon, to offer the same ‘dis’ in Hebrew, you adapt our well-known phrase, and say dismissively, *Im Kol Hakavod*, “with all the honor [that I believe you’re due]” Fake kavod: *Not* very *kavodik*, respectful, is it?! [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. David Jaffe, *Changing the World from the Inside Out*. Boston/London: Shambhala Press, 2016; p. 160. After all, people’s significance lies in their Divine essence – and ‘essence’ is another meaning of Kavod, as in Ex. 33, where Moses asks to see God’s *kavod*. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Honoring one’s parents is straight from the Ten Utterances (Commandments), Ex. 20 and Deut. 5. We are not commanded to love them, interestingly, just to honor them -- which the Talmud (Kidushin 31b) defines as feeding, clothing, covering, and helping them in and out – i.e., ensuring their basic dignity, even in their elder years. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Another significant use is *k’vod hatzibur*, the honor of the community, a powerful concept which is sadly sometimes employed to enforce old norms (e.g., in the debates over women’s ordination, or women’s right to be lay-leaders in synagogues – old-school approaches to k’vod hatzibur precluded those enfranchisements, while evolving notions of communal honor required them). See too *k’vod harav*, the honor to be accorded to the rabbi, which used to be automatic, and these days is only granted when s/he deserves it. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Alan Morinis, *Everyday Holiness: The Jewish Spiritual Path of Mussar*; Boston/London: Trumpeter Books / Shambhala Press, 2007; p. 109. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Approaching others with that Ayin Tovah / Good eye also increases the odds of favorable results: “As parents and teachers recognize, when we strive to see the goodness in [another] – even if we have to strain our eyes a little bit – the perception becomes the reality and that goodness becomes manifest and actualized. Conversely, when the message we communicate by word, gesture, or just neglect is ‘you don’t count,’ ‘you don’t matter,’ [then] the recipient responds in kind.” (Rabbi Yitzchok Breitowitz, from a Drusha on Kavod given at Silver Spring’s Woodside Synagogue Ahavas Torah, quoted in the very helpful <https://jcrc.org/uploads/Jewish_Dialogue_Project_Guidebook.pdf> [and also in the intriguing but thoroughly messianic [Romance of the Hebrew Calendar](https://books.google.com/books?id=gTQIkH6iolQC&pg=PA172&lpg=PA172&dq=kavod+etymology&source=bl&ots=Lqv4IaLwMG&sig=_F0-V98innDaNMLFugVYBtlIIA4&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwi3kof-wo3dAhVGnOAKHe4PBJ8Q6AEwDHoECCgQAQ#v=onepage&q=kavod%20etymology&f=false) by Raphael Ben Levi, 2013, p.172]).

    Our shaliach **Idan Sharon** (with us all year via JAFI, with decisive help from the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington) – in reading Rav Breitowitz and other sources on kavod as another’s weightiness – had the insight to link it to the famous call to choose life, Deut. 30:19, from our Yom Kippur morning Torah reading. As a bonus for those who actually read footnotes, here’s how he outlines the connection:

    “I don’t know about you, this screams ‘*Vekharta BaHayim*’ for me. Looking at Kavod as the Adoration of Live, as the Sanctifying of humanity, as an Ideal as of itself.

    “Kavod means you see the other as a beloved child of God as indeed he or she is” [R. Yitzchak Breitowitz, elsewhere in the same shiur] – What is common to all People that we are asked to give such a significance to, what is precious in every person? Life! Life is to be cherished! Preserved and nourished!

    You could say that the text speaks not of life, but of freedom of choice. But if man and women are the children of God, what would you say God was, life, or free choice?

    If God is everything, are nature and all wildlife not a part of God?... Do you see? What makes man and women unique, if not life? Why are they assigned meaning, no matter their actions and beliefs, as the text says, if not for that exact spark of the divine?!” [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. These sermons are indeed a matched set, and in all modesty, the *anavah*/humility one does still feel worth re-reading, a year later: <https://www.adatshalom.net/images/flyers/DaysofAwe5778/2017YKAMFSD_Humble_Yourself.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. One challenge of cheshbon hanefesh is how our sense of self, our identity, is wrapped up in our choices, making these habits extra-hard to break. But even if tshuvah suggests a fundamental reorientation of who you are and how you show up in the world, the teaching about kavod being rooted in Tzelem Elohim offers support. As Alan Morinis (*Everyday Holiness*, p. 110) simply notes: “Your greatness is not attached to your identity but rather to the fact that you are human and your essence is a gift of incomparable beauty and majesty.” [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. <https://www.knesset.gov.il/laws/special/eng/basic3_eng.htm>. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Indeed, the mussar notion of *hitlamdut* (from L.M.D, learning, meaning ‘take everything as a learning opportunity’) applies here, fueling us as we push ourselves in the extension of kavod. Comedian and social critic Kamau Bell gives this example of the power of friendship and community to aid us in maintaining a stance of learning toward kavod: “There’s a tendency in many of us, when somebody says there’s a new thing called *cisgender*, we’re like ‘What? Another new thing? I can’t learn another new thing!’” Bell says. “But if you’re friends with somebody who knows about that thing, they’ll explain it.  (<https://www.fastcompany.com/40416723/w-kamau-bell-on-why-awkward-conversations-will-change-your-life>). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Alan Morinis would have us start here, with a simple hello. As he compellingly writes *(Everyday Holiness* p. 113): “One form of honoring about which the tradition has a lot to say is the act of greeting people. Pirkei Avot urges us to ‘take the initiative in greeting any person you meet’… This is a practice any of us can do. All it takes is an encounter with another person and a willingness to say, ‘Hello, nice to see you.’ Imagine, *this* we call spiritual practice? How sensible. I urge you to try it.” [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Jewish Women’s Archive (jwa.org), in a ‘shanah tovah’ email sent just hours before the holiday, 9/9/18. A fitting final entry! [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Wilda C. Gafney, *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne*; Westminster, 2017. Rev. Dr. Gafney was with us for our daughter’s bat mitzvah last parashat Vayechi, at which time she provided powerful insight into how slavery oppresses the oppressors as well as the enslaved: for just in the American chattel version, Osnat (Joseph’s wife)’s own descendants, despite being in many ways Egyptian, became slaves themselves. I hope and believe that we can learn again from her directly, for longer, soon…. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Michelle Obama, at the Democratic National Convention, summer 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Ben Zoma, Mishnah Avot (Pirkei Avot) 4:1 -- אֵיזֶהוּ מְכֻבָּד, הַמְכַבֵּד אֶת הַבְּרִיּוֹת That classic statement on kavod also informs mussar Rabbi David Jaffe’s eloquent summary: “Giving kavod is essential to human life; seeking kavod is destructive to the individual and the community; while developing [our own] inner kavod is the foundation of sustainable social change.” (*Changing the World from Within, p. 177*). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)