

JCI CURRICULUM: UNIT 1: CHAPTER 2 – B'TZELEM ELOHIM
LESSON 2: EXPLORING ALTERNATIVES TO TZELEM ELOHIM

LESSON 2 – Exploring Alternatives to *Tzelem Elohim* (45 mins – 1 hour)

Goals

For students to:

- Consider the practical implications of the concept of *tzelem elohim*
- Distinguish between a value system based on *tzelem elohim* and those based on other core values
- Analyze Peter Singer's value system and its practical implications
- Assess each system in light of their advantages and disadvantages

Materials:

- Poster board
- Markers
- Pens
- Paper / journals
- Text handouts
 - Text Handout #1 – Jerusalem Talmud, *Nedarim* 30b
 - Peter Singer interview
- Computer with internet access and projector (optional)

Procedure

1) Framing exercise #1 (5 mins)

- a) Write on the board the words "Infinite Value."
- b) Explain/remind students that Genesis describes human beings as being created *b'tzelem elohim* (in the image of God). Explain that the modern orthodox thinker Yitz Greenberg teaches that the concept of *tzelem elohim* implies that each human being has infinite value.
- b) Ask students to journal on some of the instances when it would be difficult to hold this belief. (For example: risking thousands of lives to save one person (if we really mean infinite $1 \times \text{infinity} = \text{infinity}$ and $5000 \times \text{infinity} = \text{infinity}$. Do we really believe this?)

2) text study (10 -15 mins)

- a) Divide students into *chevrotot* and have them study the Jerusalem Talmud *Nedarim* text and discuss the questions on the sheet.

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b) Tell each pair to take either Akiva or Ben Azzai's side of the debate and explain to the class why they chose that side.

c) In the wrap-up discussion, consider the following:

Akiva and Ben Azzai, two contemporaries who liked sparring with each other, were trying to reduce the Torah to one compact principle that could guide a person throughout their life. Akiva uses self, and therefore self-interest, as the measure of all: love your neighbor, is to mean that we behave toward our neighbor, as we would want them to behave to us. It is pragmatic, realistic, yielding laudable outcomes. But inspiring? It reduces to something like a social contract: An "I-scratch-your-back-and-you-scratch-mine" philosophy of life. It gets a good job done but keeps the human being planted firmly, and only, on the ground.

Ben Azzai, on the other hand, uses the image of God as the measure of human existence. We tend to the needs of others not so others will tend to our needs, but because it is the sacred thing to do. Self-interest plays no role here. We create and fashion and serve as stewards because that is what God does. We wonder and conceive and judge and protect because that is what God does. Remind students that this may not ever be attainable (refer back to the framing exercise).

3) Main Activity (15-20 mins)

Option 1: Distribute article on Peter Singer and have students read in groups of three.

Option 2: Screen the Bill Moyers interview with Peter Singer.

Discussion Questions:

- How would you answer Singer in light of the value of *b'tzelem elohim*?
- What are Singer's core values that leads him to controversial conclusions?

4) Conclusion (5 mins)

Journal Questions:

- Have students journal about the 3 most challenging aspects of today's discussion.
- Ask students to write 3 questions that they are leaving today's class with.

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TEXT #1: The Jerusalem Talmud relates that two sages from the second century CE each attempted to distill all of the teachings of the Jewish tradition into a single aphorism.

(ד הלכה ט פרק) ב,ל דף נדרים מסכת - ירושלמי תלמוד
תולדות ספר זה, "אומר עזאי בן בתורה גדול כלל זהו אומר עקיבה רבי (יט פרק ויקרא) "כמוך לרעך ואהבת".
מזה גדול כלל זה (ה בראשית) "אדם..."

Rabbi Akiva (second century CE) taught: "Love your neighbor as yourself." (Leviticus, 19)
This is the most important rule in the Torah."
Ben Azzai says: "This is the book of chronologies ...Man was created in the image of God.'
(Genesis, 5) That is an even greater principle so that one should not say "Because I have been
humiliated, let my friend be humiliated with me, because I have been cursed, let my friend be
cursed with me".
Jerusalem Talmud, *Nedarim* 30b

WHAT THE TEXT MEANS:

- Try to explain the logic behind the two positions. What do you think these two sages are arguing over?
- What principle do you think that are they interested in clarifying?
- How are these principles different? How are they similar?
- What are the ramifications of what these rabbis are saying? Which position is better for society?

WHAT THE TEXT MEANS TO ME:

- Explain which principle you prefer and why. If you were the "neighbor," would you hold the same position?

CONSIDER

The effort to reduce all spiritual teachings into one bite-sized saying has analogues in other religions as well. Janaim is a religion that originated in India in the 6th century. It is practiced by about 5 million people today and teaches that charity and good works help a believer accumulate merit.

Janaim has a saying: "One should treat all beings as he himself would want to be treated."
Agamas Suttrakritanga

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COVER STORY:

Peter Singer

September 10, 1999 Episode no. 302

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week302/cover.html>

BOB ABERNETHY: Now the controversial, for some shocking and threatening, ideas of Peter Singer. Singer is a world-renowned Australian philosopher who specializes in the ethics of life and death. Next week, he begins work as a professor at Princeton University, and his appointment there has provoked strong reactions.



On the eve of the new academic year, the serenity of the Princeton campus is misleading. Photographers, reporters, and demonstrators have been drawn here because of this man, Peter Singer, appointed this year to a prestigious chair at Princeton's University Center for Human Values. Singer has triggered controversy and protests because he denies that human life is sacred and argues that under certain circumstances, it would be moral to kill a newborn child.

Professor PETER SINGER (Princeton University): There are some disabled infants born with conditions so severe that doctors don't really try to keep them alive. They allow them to die essentially through benign neglect. But that can be a very slow process. In my view, if that decision is justified -- and I think it can be -- then with the consent and support of the parents, and only then, I think it would be justifiable to help that infant to die; in other words, to take active steps to end that infant's life more swiftly and more humanely.

ABERNETHY: Professor Singer believes that what defines and gives value to a person is not his or her intrinsic nature or having been made in the image of God, but the possession of certain specific qualities. Singer says newborns are not yet rational or self-conscious enough to qualify as persons; therefore, if the parents agree, in cases of severe disability, they can be killed.



Prof. SINGER: A human being doesn't have value simply in virtue of being a human; that is, just belonging to the species "Homo sapiens" isn't enough.

ABERNETHY: Singer also thinks whether an act is moral depends on its consequences, whether it best advances the interests of everyone involved. So to reduce the suffering of both children and parents, again only if the parents concur, Singer would permit infanticide in cases of spina bifida, Down's syndrome, and hemophilia. One reason Singer has reached these conclusions is that he does not accept the sanctity of human life.

Prof. SINGER: I don't believe in the existence of God, so it makes no sense to me to say that a human being is a creature of God. It's as simple as that.

ABERNETHY: One of Singer's strongest critics is another Princeton faculty member, Robert George, a professor of jurisprudence, who insists all human beings have a fundamental right to life, regardless of their age or qualities.



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Professor ROBERT GEORGE (Princeton University): When we have agreed that it's all right to kill certain human beings because we think they're not fully rational, they're not fully developed, or they have some defect or retardation, once we've decided that, we've lost the only logical principle we have, the only warrant we have for believing that human beings have fundamental rights that deserve protection and respect, that they must always be treated as ends in themselves and not as a means to other people's ends.



ABERNETHY: The handicapped have been quick to protest other events they see as threatening, and they plan a demonstration against Singer. In fact, Singer strongly advocates more help for the disabled. Nevertheless, many of them fear if Singer's ethics had been applied when they were babies, they might have been killed. Mary Jane Owen is blind, partially deaf, and unable to walk. She heads the national Catholic Office for Persons with Disabilities.



Ms. **MARY JANE OWEN** (Catholic Office for Persons with Disabilities): At core, we're all at risk. When we start making those kind of judgments -- I don't care if they're babies, I don't care if they're young children, I don't care if they're old people -- when we make those kind of judgments, then I think that we, as a civilized society, have faced the end.



ABERNETHY: In Western Europe, especially in Germany, Singer's ideas about taking life have recalled the Holocaust and Hitler's practice of eugenics. Singer's European critics have prevented him from speaking. That his views should be compared to those of the Nazis seems to Singer a grotesque irony.

Prof. SINGER: I mean, I find the charge of some link with Nazi policies particularly offensive because my family suffered so much at the hands of the Nazis. I mean, three of my four grandparents died in Nazi camps, and my parents had to flee for their lives to Australia.

ABERNETHY: In his many books and articles, along with ideas that offend religious believers, Singer also preaches the golden rule, and especially the goal of reducing suffering.

Prof. SINGER: Some of these issues that I've talked about that have been controversial really all stem from this idea that we should reduce the amount of suffering in the world if we can do so.

ABERNETHY: So Singer advocates, among other causes, animal liberation. He says animals can feel pain just as humans do, and for humans to cause them to suffer in medical research and food production is a form of cruelty he calls speciesism and judges as bad as racism.

Prof. SINGER: Animals can feel. They have interests. There's no reason why we should give less consideration to their interests than we give to similar interests of our own.

ABERNETHY: Practicing what he teaches, Singer himself is a vegetarian, arguing that a diet of greens, tofu, and other nonanimal food is not only healthy and economical but moral. For the same reason, to reduce suffering, Singer thinks the poor of the world deserve much more generous help from the rich, and he gives a fifth of his income to international relief. As Singer begins his work at Princeton, he knows that whatever else he supports,

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his views on infanticide have made him a lightning rod, for he asks this question: "If bombing civilians in war is all right, if abortion and assisted suicide are permitted, why is killing a severely disabled infant fundamentally different?"

This term, Singer will teach a graduate course at Princeton called "Issues of Life and Death." A demonstration against his appointment is planned for Tuesday, September 21.

