**Drasha/Sermon "Kavod Ha'Brios: Human Dignity"**

Tanner Brownlee had a plan: Raise some cash so he could buy his dad’s old patrol car at a charity auction in Greeley, Colo. last year.

The 19-year-old’s father, Sheriff’s Deputy Sam Brownlee, died in the line of duty in 2010. And that old Dodge Charger the deputy drove was more than just a car to Tanner and his brother, Chase, 16. Tanner had a few of his father’s mementos, including a motorcycle jacket, given to him the day his father died. “Just everything I can get means a lot to me,” Tanner said.

So the brothers launched a GoFundMe campaign, raising $3,340 so Tanner could try to buy the Charger. On the pledge page, Tanner wrote:

"I understand there will be a lot of high bidders, but I am willing to do what it takes to get this car. It meant a lot to my dad and he cared so much for it. I think if anyone should be able to gain such an incredible honor to own such a special vehicle, it would be me or my little brother. I personally, being his son, would want someone I trust to have this car and take care of it. My father’s police car is something he was very much attached to and to someone else it may just be some car. But to me, it was my dad’s."

But the bids went far beyond Tanner’s means. Local rancher Steve Wells made the winning bid of $60,000, much higher than the Kelly Blue Book value of $12,500. Upon confirming the bid, the auctioneer handed Wells the keys to the Dodge Charger.

Every person in the room where the auction was taking place knew that knew Tanner Brownlee wanted his late father's car more than any 19-year-old had ever wanted any other car. Why did anyone bid against him? Why did wealthy rancher Steve Wells bid $60,000 for an old Dodge Charger, and then take the keys? Where was his concern for an orphaned young man? Where was his respect for human dignity?

The concept of human dignity is crucial to all of mankind. The General Assembly of the United Nations adopted "The Universal Declaration of Human Rights" in 1948. Article 1 of the Declaration states: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood." Rene Cassin, one of the major architects of this declaration -- and not surprisingly, a Jew -- won the Nobel Peace Price in 1968. He didn't hide the fact that the idea of human dignity and rights came from -- again, not a surprise -- the Torah and the Ten Commandments. He wrote an essay, "From the Ten Commandments to the Rights of Man." Human dignity is inextricably linked with human rights and belief in the brotherhood of all humankind.

Human dignity -- known in Hebrew as kavod ha'brios -- is central to Judaism. From the Torah perspective, kavod ha'brios applies to non-Jews as well as to Jews. Brios means creations. It also applies to the deceased as well as to the living.

Let's look at several examples of how Jewish law emphasizes the importance of human dignity.

Almost all electrical devices and machines are muktzeh on Shabbos. Muktzeh -- literally meaning 'set aside' -- prohibits moving any item that has no use on the Sabbath. For example, a radio is muktzeh; since one can't play a radio on Shabbos, it becomes muktzeh and prohibited to move.

However, a deaf person may wear a hearing aid on Shabbos since the principle of human dignity overrides the problem of muktzeh. It's extremely embarrassing for a person to go to the synagogue and not be able to respond to people who talk to him. In addition, there is a great deal of mental anguish for a person to go to a synagogue and be unable to listen to the Torah reading, pray along with others, and perform other mitzvos.

Closely related to this issue is the problem of an electric wheelchair on Shabbos (or Yom Tov). An institute in Israel designed an electric wheelchair for Shabbos use that does not involve the violation of any Torah laws. The source of the electricity in such a wheelchair is a battery; a battery releases power stored before Shabbos and does not generate power. The development and use of such a wheelchair was encouraged by Torah authorities, who felt that being forced to stay home for several days results in a loss of human dignity and self-worth.

Other examples involving less-usual scenarios presenting dilemmas in Jewish law:

-- The Torah (Deut. 22:5) prohibits a man from wearing women's clothing (and vice versa). The Talmud includes under this prohibition men who groom themselves the way women do, e.g. dying his hair for grooming purposes. An interesting question arose when half the beard of a young person mysteriously turned white and he was embarrassed about it. He asked a rabbinic authority whether he would be permitted to dye his beard black. He was permitted to do so because of human dignity.

-- An individual was getting a haircut and in the middle was told his father died. As a mourner for a parent he would not be permitted to take a haircut until 30 days following the funeral. However, walking around with half a haircut would be embarrassing and undignified. Therefore, because of kavod ha'brios, he was permitted to have the job completed.

-- Human dignity is so important that the Talmud describes numerous enactments and laws that were passed in order to ensure poor people weren't embarrassed. In olden times the expense of the funeral was harder on a family than the death of a loved one. Consequently, the family would abandon the corpse, until Sanhedrin president Rabban Gamliel disregarded his own dignity and had his own body carried out in simple shrouds. Afterward, everyone followed his lead.

A final example of the significance of kavod ha'brios can be shown by how the Rambam (Maimonides) identifies the preferred manner of giving tzedaka (charity): A lofty manner of giving tzedaka is to do so anonymously, preserving the dignity of the recipient. But optimally, providing someone with a job and the means to independently support himself and his family is an even greater way of preserving human dignity.

So ....to return to the story we began with ...

Tanner Brownlee wanted his late father's car. Why did anyone bid against him? Why did wealthy rancher Steve Wells bid $60,000 for an old Dodge Charger, and then take the keys? Where was his concern for an orphaned young man? Where was his respect for human dignity?

What happened next at that charity auction in Colorado shocked everyone in the room. As soon as Steve Wells got the car keys he outbid everyone for, he took then and turned to Tanner: “Here’s your car.”

Wells explained why he wanted to buy the retired cruiser for Tanner Brownlee: “It never crossed my mind not to.”

Wells owns a 32,000 acre ranch in Northern Colorado and makes a living off his land. A few years ago a large portion of his property became a site for oil and gas drilling. “It’s no secret we’ve made a lot of money,” Wells said. “I have been able to donate to things in a way that financially I never dreamt I could have and that’s very important to me.” Wells says giving is important to him because of a special gift he was given when he was a child.

“I’m adopted,” Wells said. “And being adopted you have a different perspective on life. I look back and I could’ve been raised in foster care, my mother could’ve had an abortion, I mean, there were so many different things that could’ve happened during the course of my life. I was adopted by outstanding parents. I couldn’t ask for anything more and I’ve always felt that need to give back.”

When Wells learned of the special auction of the fallen deputy’s retired patrol car, he knew he found a perfect opportunity to give back in a big way.

Author Laura Hillenbrand wrote, "Dignity is as essential to human life as water, food, and oxygen."

The concept of human dignity -- known in Hebrew as kavod ha'brios -- is crucial to all of mankind and plays a significant role in Judaism. One who accepts the view that all of mankind was made in the likeness of G-d must respect all people, regardless of how one feels about himself. Human dignity and social justice are implicit in the Torah concept that man was created in G-d's image.

Every person matters. Treat others with dignity.