

## Reflections on What It Means To Be Holy

Reuven P. Bulka

### Defining Holiness

Shabbat is obviously the most holy day of the week, and arguably the most holy day in the calendar. At its end, in the Havdalah (“delineation”) service, we conclude with the words, “who delineates between the holy (*kodesh*) and the profane (*hol*).” That is the standard translation. But what type of praise is it, for delineating between the sacred and the profane? This should be obvious to anyone. Even the alternate translation of *hol* as meaning “secular” is somewhat lacking. A more accurate translation of *hol* would be “ordinary.” We bless God who distinguishes between the holy and the ordinary. The world is full of ordinariness. Average, ordinary, good enough, is better than nothing, but a far cry from holy. It is the difference between acceptable and excellent, between doing alright and doing our best.

Perhaps there is in this simple observation a clue as to the general sense of “holy.” Holy is beyond ordinary, and moving toward excellence in all of life’s affirmations. To be sanctified, as we express in all blessings prior to fulfilling a divine dictate (*mitzvah*), is to be endowed with the means to attain excellence, or at least to be oriented toward excellence. This works best when the *mitzvah* is fulfilled with full concentration and understanding.

In the Torah, we read: “Speak to the entire congregation of Israel and say to them, ‘You shall be holy, for I the Eternal your God, am holy’” (Leviticus 19:2). God is the ultimate model, the focal point in

aspiring for holiness. But God is a tough act to follow. Accentuating the difficulty is the midrash, cited by Rashi, in explaining the verse: “My holiness is higher than your holiness” (Vayikra Rabbah 24:9). The midrash in effect states the obvious: that God’s holiness is utterly transcendent, and by definition it will always be higher than human holiness. The midrash thereby makes an already difficult task an impossible one. Judaism is difficult enough without venturing into the realm of the impossible.

A better understanding of holiness might offer an insight into this complexity. When God says “My sanctity is higher than yours,” the message is clear. No human being will ever, can ever, bridge that gap between the human and the Divine. We are human, and God is God. We will never reach the peak.

But the peak will always be there to reach. This means that there will always be something for which to strive. However good we may be, we can always be better. Any achievement will give birth not to self-satisfaction, but to the desire for even greater achievement.

It is clear that if we define holiness as reaching up to God, we are setting ourselves up for a fall. It will never happen that we reach that height. *K’dushah*, holiness, is therefore not a defined, or definable, destination. Instead, it is a process of continual striving, absent any self-delusion that we are as good as we can be.

Returning to the problematic verse and its explanation, it now makes more sense. We define holiness as *the continual process of getting better*. To be holy requires that one never think of oneself as merely “good enough.” As if to guarantee that this process is never ending, God tells us to be holy because God is holy—God is so transcendently holy that we will never reach such holiness, and because we can never attain such holiness, the process of reaching, aspiring, can never cease.

One of the more immediate implications of this definition is that holiness is not only elusive and unreachable; it is simultaneously

beyond self-definition. The moment you think you have attained holiness, you cease to be holy. Holiness is a process, a continuous challenge. Holiness is also enmeshed with humility. Both these attributes are ultimately intangible, and severely compromised through the awareness of them. Those who say “I am holy” and those who say “I am humble” are both living in a false world. One cannot be humble and aware of it, or holy and aware of it.

### The Holiness Model

If that is so, how can we strive to be holy? The immediate obligation following the charge to be holy is to be in awe of one’s parents (Leviticus 19:3). The ladder to God starts with how we embrace our parents. In the interaction with our parents, we are on the way to apprehending the awe we are to have for God, who is the ultimate Parent.

There are defined parameters for what it means to hold our parents in awe. These include not sitting in their designated places, not contradicting them or condescendingly agreeing with them, and not calling them by their first names.<sup>1</sup> It is possible to adhere to all these regulations yet still not be in awe of one’s parents. The rules create the ambience of awe, but the *feeling* of awe comes from the child. The feeling is facilitated by, rather than established by, the rules.

Why are we asked to be in awe of our parents? More precisely, what is achieved by being in awe of our parents, more than by simply honoring our parents? And what justification is there for being in awe of our parents?

The justification derives from the simple fact that our parents gave birth to us. Without that, we would not exist. The act of creation, of giving birth, involves all sorts of sacrifices. Carrying a child for nine months is no picnic. Giving birth is painful. The period after birth is likewise painful. The time, energy, and expense of raising a child

are intrusions on the sedentary, uncomplicated, and perhaps even relatively burden-free life. Yet the parents enter into this challenge cognizant of the challenges, but not fully aware of the extent of the complications. This should be elicited awe. Once we have embraced this sense of awe, honoring one's parents flows much more naturally. As beautifully developed by Rabbi Aaron Halevi of Barcelona, the fullness of appreciation of parents is the conduit toward full appreciation of God, and provides for all the needs anyone may have.<sup>2</sup>

### Holiness of a People

Until now, we have concentrated on individual holiness. There is, however, another sphere of holiness worthy of attention: the holiness of the group, of Israel as an entity. In this regard, there are two distinct references to the holiness of the group that link holiness with compliance, with fidelity to the Godly covenant. The first is found in the book of Exodus: "And you shall be for Me a kingdom of *kohanim* (priests) and a *holy* nation" (19:6). This is preceded by a condition: "If you will listen attentively to Me and observe My covenant" (19:5). This assurance is echoed later in the Torah: "God will establish you for God as a *holy* people, as God swore to you, if you observe the commandments of the Eternal your God, and walk in God's ways" (Deuteronomy 28:9).

Very clearly, the way to holiness is contingent on our fulfilling the commandments and walking in God's ways. Are these two contingencies? It certainly seems so. One might ask: how does "walking in God's ways" differ from fulfilling the *mitzvot*? It seems that there is indeed quite a distinction.

Rabbi Hama the son of Rabbi Hanina expounded: "What is the meaning of 'You shall follow after the Eternal your God...' (Deuteronomy 13:5)? Is it possible for any mortal to follow the divine presence? It has already been said that 'the Eternal your God is a consuming fire' (Deuteronomy 4:24).

Rather, it means to follow the attributes of the blessed Holy One. Just as God clothes the naked...you too should clothe the naked. The blessed Holy One visited the sick...you too should visit the sick. The blessed Holy One comforted mourners...you too should comfort mourners. The blessed Holy One buried the dead...you too should bury the dead.”<sup>3</sup>

Maimonides, in commenting on the words “and walk in God’s ways” (Deuteronomy 28:9), also invokes the rabbinic understanding of these words, underscoring the humanistic thrust of Rabbi Ḥama: “Just as God is called gracious, you too be gracious; just as God is called compassionate, you too be compassionate; just as God is called holy, you too be holy.”<sup>4</sup> Maimonides calls these the good and upright ways. These are the ways we follow in God’s path; literally, this is the path to holiness. Rabbi Aaron of Barcelona follows along these same lines in explaining that very precept to “walk in God’s ways”:

We are commanded to perform all our actions in an honest and good manner, with all our strength, and to channel all matters that are between us and others in a kind and compassionate manner, as we know from our Torah that this is the way of God, and this is what God desires from God’s creations....The sages of blessed memory said, in explanation of this precept: Just as the blessed Holy One is called compassionate, you too be compassionate; just as the blessed Holy One is called gracious, you too be gracious; just as the blessed Holy One is called righteous, you too be righteous; just as God is called holy, you too be holy.<sup>5</sup>

The language in Maimonides and *Sefer Ha-hinnukh* are almost identical, and very definitively link compassion, grace, and holiness.

It is instructive to note that following in God’s ways (Deuteronomy 13:5) and walking in God’s ways (Deuteronomy 28:9), essentially the path to holiness, are linked to acts of kindness—deeds that we would be inclined to endorse as virtuous, even absent an explicit mention

in the Torah. Why is following in God's ways not linked to the ritual obligations that are unique to Jews, such as Shabbat, *t'fillin*, *m'zuzah*, and *kashrut*? What are we missing here?

One possible explication links to the following insightful observation: "For Judaism sheer compliance with the Law as such was never regarded as the ultimate value, it rather represented a means to the fulfillment of the Divine Will."<sup>6</sup> Is it possible that unique *mitzvot* are the contours, the outer boundary within which we are urged to travel, and within which we walk in God's ways by acts of kindness and compassion?

There is nothing intrinsically kind about putting on *t'fillin*, or observing the Shabbat. However, the covenantal reinforcement offered by these precepts creates the ambience for kind expression. This is especially the case in the instance of Shabbat, as setting apart a day free from work creates the time and space for bringing other human beings into our orbit.

### **The Holiness Track**

The blessings we recite prior to the fulfillment of a precept include the words *asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav*, "who has sanctified us with [God's] commandments." This theme resonates in our prayers, where we often express our gratitude to God for, among other notable acts of grace to us, having sanctified us with the *mitzvot*. This is expressed as thanks for what is; it is not a request. On the other hand, we often do ask God to sanctify us with the commandments (*kad'sheinu b'mitzvotekha*). And sometimes we do both: for example, in the Musaf Amidah on festivals, we first thank for what is, and then ask for the very same thing for which we have just thanked God. What is the sense of this? The answer to this may seem obvious, but bears some elaboration. What do we mean when we thank God for sanctifying us with the divine commands? Are we thereby presuming that we are by definition holy? That would be, at the least, presumptuous, and at

worst bordering on arrogance. The fact that we ask God to sanctify us via the precepts suggests that we do not claim presumed holiness.

Another possibility follows in line with our suggestion that holiness is a process rather than a destination. The process begins with our being placed on the holiness track, so to say. That is achieved via being given the tools: namely, the *mitzvot*. How far along the track we go, on a track that is endless, but continually moving forward (should we so choose), depends on us.

We express gratitude to God for being put on the track, and then ask for God's help as we endeavor to continue the process.

### Exterior and Interior

The Talmud records a fascinating exchange of views on how to actualize the immortal words of Moshe Rabbeinu, "This is my God, whom I will adorn" (Exodus 15:2). One view is that this is achieved via adorning oneself in the fulfillment of the commandments: by making a beautiful *sukkah*, by acquiring a beautiful *lulav*, a beautiful *shofar*, beautiful *tzitzit* [fringes], etc.<sup>7</sup>

Another opinion about this verse, that of Abba Shaul, goes a bit further. Abba Shaul sees this as the charge to be like God, playing on the complicated word *v'anveihu* (literally, "I will adorn Him") and seeing it as a play on the words *ani va-hu* (literally, "I and He"—with the third-person pronoun referring to God). For Abba Shaul, the verse is an imperative that we should emulate God. Just as God is gracious and compassionate, so too should we be gracious and compassionate.

Abba Shaul seems more concerned about "interior decorating" as the proper way to partner with God. Adorning the precepts is fine, he says, but not enough. We need to also adorn ourselves, by adopting and embracing the ways of God as our own. All signs point to an

understanding of holiness as the divine way in which we interact with others. This might sound surprising, as one would presume that the way to holiness is via the ritual commandments that are between us and God, such as *lulav*, *shofar*, and keeping kosher.

Why is it that the conduit to holiness is through person-to-person interaction? Perhaps because there are no holier objects in our world than other human beings. Other objects (such as a *sefer torah*, *t'fillin*, or a *m'zuzah*) have a significant and defined sanctity. Yet nothing compares with God's own creations: other human beings.

In the way that we interact with others, in the Godly way we behave toward them, we affirm their holiness—and, by definition, the holiness of God. It is through this that we achieve the desired holiness that God asks of us. It is through this that we become holy like God—not as holy as God, but holy like God.

### Object Holiness

A word about object holiness. At first blush, object holiness does not seem to fit the dynamic “process” of holiness described above. After all, a Torah is a Torah, and its holiness is hardly compromised by anything external to it. On the other hand, we do have a grasp of what it means to not ascribe holiness to the Torah scroll. We are all too familiar with the desecrations of the Torah that have haunted our history.

The fact that a Torah is holy is, in actuality, related to a holiness process: namely, the process of continually ascribing holiness to the Torah, and behaving in a way that affirms this sanctity in increasing measure. The same applies to the sanctity of *t'fillin* or of a *m'zuzah*. Shabbat and the festivals are not exactly objects, but they are inanimate manifestations of holiness. As much as Shabbat and the festivals are holy, we nevertheless sanctify these days at their beginning (by reciting Kiddush) and at their end (by reciting Havdalah). And we



can actually add to this sanctity by bringing in Shabbat earlier and concluding it later.

In what way do we sanctify days that are already holy, independent of us? By accepting the holiness of these days as obligations for us, and sanctifying them through the appropriate behaviors that accrue to these days. This too is a process, rather than working on a same old, same old pattern. Ideally, the way we sanctify this week's Shabbat should be an improvement over how we sanctified last week's Shabbat.

Finally, I wish to include a reflection on the sanctity of marriage. It is not for naught that we call the first part of the marriage ceremony *kiddushin* (literally, "sanctification"). It is actually an obligation to betrothe one's bride: "Whoever marries a woman without first betrothing her has failed to fulfill this obligation."<sup>8</sup> What is the meaning of this? In *kiddushin*, the groom sanctifies and hallows his wife-to-be. It is a process wherein the groom is made aware that this is a sacred relationship, not a narcissistic exercise. Were one to rush straight into marriage without clearly sanctifying one's spouse, effectively sanctifying the union itself before entering into it, one would miss a crucial step in assuring the meaningfulness of the union.<sup>9</sup> Knowing that the union is sacred means that the dynamic process associated with holiness applies to marriage: every day, the sanctity needs to be an improvement over that of the day before.

### **The Holiness of Israel**

We come now to the culminating holiness, the holiness of Israel—which brings together the notions of holiness as a dynamic process, and the holiness of the land and its people. The land of Israel is often referred to as holy. We affectionately refer to it as *artzeinu ha-k'doshah*, "our holy land." The land itself is holy, Jerusalem has an elevated level of holiness, and within Jerusalem, the Temple, the *beit ha-mikdash* (literally, "the holy house"), is the ultimate holy place. These are all

places that are holy by designation; but, like other holy objects, they call upon us to revere these places, to ascribe holiness to them, and to further sanctify them through our behavior within them.

Israel provides us, in our time, with a unique opportunity to live out the idea of the holy as a constant commitment to doing better today than yesterday. It is evident in the passionate search for cures of ravaging illnesses. It is evident in the high-tech breakthroughs that Israel has generated, improving so many aspects of life.

Israel is a place where the Torah—its history, its glory, and its agony—comes alive. The glory is in the learning; the agony is in the stark and searing reminders of the times when the Torah was desecrated, and when those who embraced the Torah were brutally murdered. And, in a most inspiring expression of holiness as the kind, gracious, compassionate manner in which we venerate human life, Israel as a country has become the first responder to emergencies all around the world: to earthquakes, tsunamis, and more. The holiness of life is the underlying value that fuels this passion to save. This is actualized not merely by going to these places, but by expending the energy and resources dedicated to building and perfecting the equipment and expertise, which can then be employed in the service of intervening and saving effectively.

Surrounded as it is by enemies bent on its destruction, Israel has repeatedly shown that for those who will allow them in, nothing—not distance, not degree of difficulty, not expense—will deter them.

This, to me—and this observation is certainly consistent with our discussion—seems to be a state-sponsored holiness, a fusion of all the components that comprise holiness. In an age when the entire world can literally explode into nothingness, the most effective antidote and preventive is to affirm the holiness of life and of every human being, and to implement policies and behaviors that reinforce this affirmation.

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Mamrim 6:3.

<sup>2</sup> See his *Sefer Ha-hinnukh*, §33.

<sup>3</sup> B. Sotah 14a.

<sup>4</sup> Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Dei'ot 1:6.

<sup>5</sup> *Sefer Ha-hinnukh*, §611.

<sup>6</sup> Walter S. Wurzburger, "Covenantal Imperatives," in Gershon Appel, ed., *Samuel K. Mirsky Memorial Volume: Studies in Jewish Law, Philosophy, and Literature* (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1970), p. 8.

<sup>7</sup> B. Shabbat 133b.

<sup>8</sup> *Sefer Hareidim*, p. 98, no. 6 (commenting on Deuteronomy 24:5).

<sup>9</sup> See my *Best-Kept Secrets of Judaism* (Southfield, MI: Targum/Feldheim, 2002), pp. 90–98, for a more complete study of this topic.