The Ethic of Holiness

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There is a paradox at the heart of Judaism, which remains the defining tension in Jewish life today. On the one hand, the Torah gave the world the first universal vision of humanity. We are all children of the one God, Creator of heaven and earth. That was a radical idea then; it still is. In the ancient world, each nation had its own god or pantheon of gods. The Canaanites had Baal; the Moabites, Chemosh; the Egyptians, Ra, the god of the sun. That was polytheism. In the contemporary world, each culture—indeed, each individual—has his or her own version of the moral life: "whatever works for you." That is relativism: polytheism for a secular age.

There is one God, the God of all, who created every person in the divine image and through Noah made a covenant with all humanity. Not everyone recognizes this fact but, said the prophets, one day they will. We will recognize that we are all children of the one God, and therefore members of the same family. War will cease and the knowledge of God will cover the world, in Isaiah's lovely phrase, "as waters cover the sea" (Isaiah 11:9). Ancient though this idea is, it is the single most pertinent vision for the twenty-first century, the "global age" which sees a diversity of cultures, respecting one another under the overarching sovereignty of God.

That is the universalistic perspective of Judaism. On the other hand, however, the Torah challenges this entire constellation, as the coin of faith has another side as well. The Jewish concept of *k'dushah*, holiness, is not universal. Not all times and places are equally holy;

nor are all people. The word *kadosh*, holy, means "set apart, different, distinctive, dedicated." The Israelites are called in the Torah a *goy kadosh* (Exodus 19:6) or an am *kadosh* (Deuteronomy 7:6; 14:2, 21; 26:19; 28:9), a holy nation and a holy people. This means that they are not like others. Other nations may contain holy individuals, but none aspires to that condition for the nation as a whole. It is this that lies behind Balaam's description of Israel as "a nation dwelling alone, not counting itself among other nations" (Numbers 23:9). God is universal. Holiness is not.

In this context an observation of Rabbeinu Bahya[1] is particularly pertinent. Before performing a *mitzvah*, we recite a blessing: "…who has *made us holy* through the commandments and has commanded us to…" Yet there are many commandments over which we do not make this blessing: giving *tzedakah*, for example, or visiting the sick, or doing some other act of hesed. In general, commands between us and God require a blessing. Those between us and our fellow humans do not. Why so?

Rabbeinu Bahya's answer is that there are two kinds of commandment: rational (*muskalot*) and traditional (*m'kubbalot*). Only the latter bring holiness (*m'kubbalot hein hein ikkar ha-k'dushah*). The rational, interpersonal commands—not stealing, lying, or committing adultery; doing acts of kindness to others—are human universals. Even thieves, says Yehudah Halevi, have a code of honor among themselves.[2] It is the commands that exist only because they were commanded that bring holiness, for these alone are distinctive and non-universal.

Hence is the tension at the heart of Judaism: ethics are universal but holiness is not. What turns the tension into a paradox is that persistently throughout the Tanakh, we hear the idea that Jews and Judaism have significance not just for ourselves but for all humanity. Moses says, "This is your wisdom and understanding in the eyes of the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people'" (Deuteronomy 4:6).

Solomon at the dedication of the Temple envisages a time when "the foreigner who does not belong to Your people Israel but has come from a distant land because of Your name" will come to pray at the Temple (1 Kings 8:41). Zechariah says that a time will come when "Ten people from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of the robe and say, 'Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you'" (Zechariah 8:23).

How can this be? How can *k'dushah*, a way of life and mode of being specific to the Jewish people and not demanded by God of all humanity, become an inspiration to all humanity? How can a nation that dwells alone be a role model for nations that do not dwell alone? How can the particular be of relevance to the universal?

Three Moral Voices

To understand the answer we have to first grasp the complexity of Judaism. By and large, secular moral philosophers from Plato to John Stuart Mill failed because they thought that the moral life was simple. For Plato, knowledge led to goodness. The only cause of evil was ignorance. Plato failed to wrestle with the many destructive passions—hate, envy, fear, aggression, anger—that make people do evil even though, in their sober moments, they know that what they are doing is wrong. John Stuart Mill sought the "one very simple principle" that defined the limits of liberty. But liberty, as we know from the Bible, is not that simple. It is hard to balance individual freedom with collective order. As the Book of Judges says, "At that time there was no king in Israel; everybody did what was right in their own eyes" (Judges 17:6, 21:25). Is that liberty or chaos?

The Torah does not try to simplify the moral life. It recognizes its complexity. There is a prophetic voice that speaks of righteousness, justice, kindness, and compassion. There is a wisdom voice that speaks of prudence, self-control, honesty, and integrity. And there is a priestly voice that speaks of *k'dushah*, holiness. These are all part

of a moral vision that recognizes the different aspects of the human condition.

The prophets were interested in personal relationships (including a personal relationship with God). The wisdom books look at what we would now call "sustainability." They ask us to consider long-term outcomes. "Who is wise?" asked the sages, and they answered, "One who sees the consequences of one's actions" (Pirkei Avot 4:1). Hardest to understand is *torat kohanim*, "the law of the priests," which seems (and this is an ancient and quite mischievous claim) to be more interested in ritual than in ethics. It is not so. The priestly vision is moral through and through. But it is a special kind of morality, one that has fallen out of favor in the modern world and now needs to be reclaimed.

The Code of Holiness

The place to begin our inquiry is in the Holiness Code of Leviticus 19 (the *parashah* whose very name, *k'doshim*, embodies the idea of holiness). Here we find the great moral commands: Don't steal. Don't lie. Don't defraud your neighbor. Don't hate. Don't take revenge or bear a grudge. Respect your parents. Be honest in business. Love your neighbor as yourself. Love the stranger. Interwoven with these, however, are commands of a quite different kind: Don't crossbreed your livestock with other species. Don't plant your field with two kinds of seed. Don't wear clothing of mixed wool and linen. Don't lacerate yourselves. At first sight the chapter looks like a jumble of rules with no connecting thread, no overarching logic. That is a measure of how hard it has become to understand the idea of *k'dushah*.

What is unique about the priestly voice is set out in the very first chapter of the Torah. The creation narrative of Genesis 1 is not cosmological. It is not there to tell us what happened in the Big Bang some 13.7 billion years ago and the subsequent slow coalescence of energy into chemical elements, stars, planets, life, and humanity. It

is, instead, an ethical creation story. The key word, appearing seven times, is tov ("good"): "And God saw that it was good" (Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). *There is moral order, as well as scientific order, in the universe*. That is the central priestly principle.

The idea that there is order in the universe is not unique to Judaism. On the contrary, most ancient cultures believed this. But what they saw was not *moral*, but *political*, order. The monarch ruled the nation just as the sun rules the sky. Cosmology was used in the ancient world to justify class-bound hierarchical societies, with their divisions into rulers and ruled, free people and slaves. Judaism rejected this absolutely.

Often we fail to understand the significance of the statement that "God created humans in the divine image. In the divine image did God create the human; male and female God created them" (Genesis 1:27). What is radical in this verse is that it is not just that *some* people are created in God's image. (This is what other nations believed—about their rulers.) What is radical in the Torah's conception is that *everyone* is created in God's image—regardless of color, culture, class, or creed. Hence the profoundly egalitarian thrust of the Bible and of Judaism ever since.

The central problem to which Judaism is an answer is not political, the justification of the use of power. Judaism is skeptical about politics because it deeply distrusts the use and abuse of power. The central problem in Judaism is the perennial tension between two aspects of reality: God's creation and humanity's freedom. The greatest act of love and faith on the part of God was to endow each of us with freedom—but the freedom to do good comes indivisibly with the freedom to do bad. *God creates order. Humans create chaos*. The whole of Judaism is generated by that one tension, as the stories of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, and the generation of the flood make clear. God could solve the problem at a stroke by taking away our freedom. But that is something God will never do because God desires our freedom. God is a loving parent and we are God's wayward children.

The essential insight of the priests is to recognize and create respect for the moral order of the universe. To do this involves making distinctions. The key verb of *torat kohanim*, priestly consciousness, is the same as it is in Genesis 1 (where it appears five times): *l'havdil*, "to recognize, make, and honor differences"—differences between heaven and earth, day and night, life and death, animal and plant, pure and impure, sacred and profane, permitted and forbidden, good and evil. The chief task of the priest is to maintain the boundaries between domains. Thus, no trace of contact with death is allowed in the sanctuary, which is dedicated to the God of life. Wool, an animal product, should not be mixed with linen, a plant one. Meat, which involves killing an animal, should not be mixed with milk, which involves keeping an animal alive.

An ordered universe is a moral universe in which everything has its integrity and its place in the scheme of things. Sin, for the priest, is disorder. So falsehood undermines human trust. Theft damages people's right to what they own. Bribery threatens the justice on which society depends. Hatred, violence, and revenge create chaos, the opposite of order. Order is best preserved through love. Just as God loves us, so too we should love others—both our neighbors and the strangers among us—for everything is God's creation and everyone is created in God's image. The priestly universe is not a cold, detached, scientific place but one driven and sustained by love. That love was expressed in one of Judaism's most ancient rituals and one still performed today: *birkat kohanim*, the priestly blessing. It is no accident that the *b'rakhah* recited by the priests before blessing the people is the only one that specifies that it must be performed with love (*l'vareikh et ammo yisrael b'ahavah*).

Sacred Ontology

The idea that the moral life is rooted in the order of the universe is one that was lost at some stage in the Enlightenment. That was when rationalist philosophers began to think of human beings as

radically distinct from the rest of nature. Immanuel Kant sought to locate morality in the human power of reason. Adam Smith and David Hume found it in human emotion. Jeremy Bentham sought to create a scientific morality by calculating the consequences of different courses of action, and so on. The problem was not that these views were false. It was the opposite: they all embodied some fragment of the truth. But because each claimed to be the whole and only truth, the result was confusion—the confusion that we call moral relativism. Alasdair MacIntyre's great work, *After Virtue*, is an account of the failure of the Enlightenment project.

The thinker who wrote most deeply about these matters—unfortunately, he also wrote obscurely, so he is little read and little known—was a sociologist called Philip Rieff (1922–2006). Rieff, who wrote about Freud and "the triumph of the therapeutic," believed that morality must be based on what he called a *sacred ontology*, by which he meant precisely what I have described as priestly consciousness. There is a moral order in the universe that must be respected, guarded, and sustained. It is this that is the basis of the moral imperative, the "Thou shalt" and the "Thou shalt not." What made the modern world unique and destined to eventual failure was its attempt to rid the world of commands and prohibitions, and the attendant feelings of guilt and responsibility. In the end, that leaves us as lonely, self-obsessed, narcissistic individuals without a shared world of meanings and social order.

Rieff was a pessimist. He thought that we had gone too far and there was no way back. In fact, however, there are serious grounds for hope, for we are beginning to realize again the extraordinary, yet vulnerable, order of life itself. Recent cosmology has shown how precisely tuned the universe was for the emergence of life. The decoding of the genome has revealed the astonishing complexity of "the book of life." We now know that the absence or misplacement of just a few of the 3.1 billion DNA letters that make up the human genome can result in devastating genetic disability. Ecological study tells us how delicately balanced biodiversity is and how easy it is to

unwittingly damage the earth's environment, threatening the future of life itself. Chaos theory has famously shown how the beating of a butterfly's wings in one part of the world can cause a tsunami in another. Small acts can have large repercussions, and local disorder can create global disequilibrium.

Let us now go back to the list of commands in Leviticus 19, the Holiness Code. It no longer seems as strange as it did at first. Translated into contemporary terms, we would understand it to be saying something like this: Respect the integrity of the environment. Be cautious before engaging in genetic engineering. Be careful about how you treat animal and plant species. Don't place a stumbling-block before the blind (such as by tempting people into mortgages they can't repay, or by creating financial instruments so complex that no one understands them). Don't undermine the trust on which an economy depends. Don't use the media, either print or electronic, to spread hatred or you will create forms of terror and violence you can't control. And so on.

Each failure to respect boundaries and limits may seem small considered in itself, but the cumulative effect of this tendency will be to destroy the finely tuned balance on which both the natural and human orders depend. Marriages will break down. Children will suffer. Banks will no longer trust one another. The economy will stall. The media will sow cynicism and disrespect. Governments will lack authority. Inequities among people will grow. People will consume natural resources faster than they can be replenished. Resentments will fester. Violence will increase. And a great civilization—in this case, the West—will begin to decline, eventually taking its place with the great superpowers of the past, none of which today survives except as archaeological ruins and relics in museums.

That is what happens when morality loses its grounding in a sacred ontology—when, in Jewish terms, it loses its sense of *k'dushah*.

The Jewish people has never lost its sense of *k'dushah*. That is why, alone among the civilizations of the ancient world, it never died. It lost everything else: its land and its sovereignty, its Temple, its kings, priests, and prophets. But it never lost the disciplines and consciousness of *k'dushah*. It dedicated—and still dedicates—the first moments of the working week to a ceremony celebrating distinctions, order, and boundary-maintenance. The Havdalah ceremony uses the same verb as God did in creating the universe and as the kohanim did in their service in the sanctuary.

It was this survival, against all the laws of history, that earned the awe of those who studied Jewish history—among them Blaise Pascal, Leo Tolstoy, and Winston Churchill, who said, "Some people like the Jews, and some do not. But no thoughtful man can deny the fact that they are beyond question the most formidable and the most remarkable race which has ever appeared in the world." Moses' prophecy came true: "This is your wisdom and understanding in the eyes of the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people'" (Deuteronomy 4:6).

The Jewish Tasks

Just as there is not one moral voice in Judaism but three, so there is not one Jewish task in the world but three. There is the *wisdom* task, in this case specified by Jeremiah in his famous letter to the Jewish exiles in Babylon: "Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Eternal for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper" (Jeremiah 29:7). The sages called this attitude one of *darkhei shalom*, the ways of peace. It was the world's first-ever formula for becoming a creative minority, contributing to society without losing one's identity. It remains the best way of structuring the diverse, multicultural societies of the West today.

There is the *prophetic* task, beautifully expressed by Isaiah in the passage we read as the *haftarah* on Yom Kippur: "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?" (Isaiah 58:5–7). Jews continue to be inspired by the prophetic ethic, which is why they are to be found disproportionately as doctors fighting disease, economists fighting poverty, businesspeople fighting unemployment, lawyers fighting injustice, and teachers fighting ignorance. Wherever there is hopelessness, there you will find Jews giving people hope.

And there is the priestly task of *k'dushah*: sanctifying life by honoring the sacred ontology, the deep moral structure of the universe, through the life of the 613 commands—a life of discipline and self-restraint, honesty and integrity, respect and love. It is found in the code set out in the chapter of the Torah that opens with the momentous words, "Be holy for I, the Eternal your God, am holy" (Leviticus 19:2). Other cultures and faiths drew inspiration from its wisdom and prophetic traditions, but *k'dushah* remained a specific Jewish imperative that has made us different. Even so, it contains a message for the world, to which Jews bear witness whenever and wherever they remain faithful to it.

Our vocation remains: to be *mamlekhet kohanim v'goy kadosh*, "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6).

NOTES

[1] Commentary to Numbers 15:38.
[2] *Kuzari* II 48.