

Hired for the Day

Shalom Carmy

Don't say: I cannot hear all of the Torah and observe all of the commandments written in it, about which it is written, "Longer than earth is its measure" (Job 11:9). It is like a king who had an endlessly deep pit and told a member of his family to hire workers to fill the pit. He then hired workers. The foolish one went and gazed at the pit and said, "When will I fill it?" The shrewd one said, "What do I care, since I am hired for the day? I rejoice that I found work for myself." So God says: "What do you care? You are hired for the day; do your day's work."¹

There is nothing so physically and spiritually destructive as diverting one's attention from this world. And, by contrast, how courageous is halakhic man who does not flee from this world, who does not seek to escape to some pure, supernal realm.²

I

“Sanctification” and “sanctity” are Latin words; “holiness” is a Germanic word. Both translate the Hebrew word *k'dushah*. The editors of this volume, in their letter of invitation, used the two European words interchangeably. Almost all Jewish or non-Jewish discussions of *k'dushah* in English prefer the term “holiness” or “the holy.” What conscious or unconscious factors led the editors of this book to settle on “sanctification”?

One possibility is that “holiness” functions as a noun rather than as a verb; the transitive verb “hallow” is uncommon, *pace* the Gettysburg Address. “Sanctification” is a noun derived from the verb “to sanctify.” If this book is more about the dynamic of *making* things holy than about being holy, then “sanctification” seems to be a more suitable word. Yet, as Rabbi Soloveitchik often observed, holiness in Judaism is always a characteristic of human beings or a state brought about through human action. Holidays, for example, are holy because they fall out on dates specified by the Jewish calendar, and the calendar is determined by the Sanhedrin (or its successor entity, acting for the Jewish people). That is why the Kiddush that expresses the sanctification of the festivals ends with the words, “Blessed are You, Eternal One, who sanctifies Israel and the [solemn] times”; it is Israel who sanctifies the date. We recite a different formula for the Sabbath, “...who sanctifies the Sabbath,” because the Sabbath is determined by the weekly cycle and not through the calendar proclaimed by the rabbinic court. Nonetheless, Rabbi Soloveitchik noted, the Yerushalmi proposes a different text for this blessing: “who sanctifies *Israel and the Sabbath*”—so that even the Sabbath is, in some sense, dependent on human proclamation. Thus holiness and sanctification, even as technical halakhic institutions, are ultimately about what human beings make of themselves. Our reflection on the meaning of sanctification today must be rooted in the human condition.

Sanctification has a particular role in Christian theology. At the risk of oversimplification, the Christian believes himself or herself to be justified, accepted, and forgiven by God, through faith and not through works of righteousness—regardless of human initiative. Of course the Christian desires to live a worthwhile life, and that is manifested through good works. The process of becoming a righteous, saintly human being is called sanctification. In its liberal version, whose secularized form dominates contemporary therapeutic philosophies, this means that we are all okay regardless of our moral record (i.e., that we are justified by our faith); nevertheless, we still want to look upon our existence and pronounce it worthwhile. To talk about sanctification in this context is to pose the question about the meaning and significance of our lives.

“Sanctity,” in common parlance, has another connotation. When we speak of the “sanctity of life” we ordinarily refer to something about human existence that makes it inviolable. We speak of an attribute of humanity in which all participate—regardless of our achievements, whether moral, religious, or worldly. We like to think that we, and other human beings, are entitled to a certain respect and dignity by virtue of our humanity, that certain things ought to be done for us and ought not to be done to us. The ideal of the *sanctification* of human life and the conviction of the *sanctity* of human life are different, but the verbal link carries with it some natural association as well. We may feel anxious about the fate of the sanctity of life in our culture because we fear it is in danger of erosion. We may feel anxious, even desperate, about sanctification: not because we are worried about the respect of other human beings, but because we yearn for self-respect and, if we believe in God, because we care about how we appear before the Almighty.

These usages, I think, indicate what “sanctification” connotes for contemporary English speakers. Insofar as our subject is the meaning of sanctification in contemporary Western society, we will not here discuss the intricacies of *k'dushah* as a property of objects: we will not comment on how reciting *Kiddush*, for example, contributes to the sanctity of the Sabbath and festivals; or on the meaning of the word *kiddushin* in the marriage ceremony; or on the laws concerning the consecration of money or objects and the ensuing status of those objects. I will not discuss the details of the laws about the sanctity of the synagogue, even though they apply to our everyday conduct. I will use the Hebrew concept of *k'dushah* only to the extent that it helps clarify the discussion of its putative English equivalent.

Let us, then, examine briefly three projects that beckon to modern men and women in their quest for sanctification.

II

The Ascetic Impulse

K'dushab is related to separation. In Maimonides' great law code, the Mishneh Torah, the volume concerning *k'dushab* is devoted to laws concerning sexual and dietary prohibitions. Nahmanides' commentary to the verse "You shall be holy" (Leviticus 19:2) is a classic exposition of the idea of separation. The holy individual goes beyond the separation mandated by divine law: the Torah prohibits eating pig or shellfish, and it enjoins ritual purity in certain situations; holiness mandates abstemiousness even in partaking of permitted foods, and it also seeks to extend the standards of ritual purity to a broader range of situations. This ideal of *k'dushab*, it must be emphasized, is one ingredient in a life determined by thorough-going adherence to the *halakhab*, the law, and to the personal relationship with God that the law defines.

The thought that life attains heroic spiritual significance by voluntarily overcoming ordinary human restraints and limitations can be attractive to modern people who do not subscribe to these religious underpinnings. The noted scholar of modern German literature, J. P. Stern, wrote a long book, *The Dear Purchase*,³ on the theme that excellence, for many German intellectuals, became a function of such self-transcendence: think of Nietzsche, Mann, Kafka's "Hunger Artist." Stern maintained that this idea became prominent because the power of traditional religious life-plans had waned, leaving behind only the residue of asceticism, and he argued that this idea lies in the background of German political ideology of the interwar period.

Closer to home, the liberal American icon, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., articulated his creed while addressing fellow Civil War veterans:

I do not know what is true. I do not know the meaning of the universe. But in the midst of doubt, in the collapse of

creeds, there is one thing I do not doubt, that no man who lives in the same world with most of us can doubt, and that is that the faith is true and adorable which leads a soldier to throw away his life in obedience to a blindly accepted duty, in a cause which he little understands, in a plan of campaign of which he has no notion, under tactics of which he does not see the use.⁴

In this view, the individual, or the band of comrades, discerns no meaning to life and death beyond the recklessness and solidarity of self-sacrifice. The bluntness and brutality with which Holmes proclaimed his ideal is not unconnected to his having reached manhood with a purely secular outlook on the universe. For those who think like Holmes, this vision offers an alternative of sorts to religious sanctification. It is not, of course, a hospitable outlook for those who care about the sanctity of the human being. In Holmes's words one can hear a premonition of his later tolerance, from the Supreme Court bench, of forced sterilization in the name of eugenics: "three generations of imbeciles are enough."⁵

The Altruistic Impulse

It was precocious of Holmes to learn nihilism from the Civil War. President Lincoln at Gettysburg gestured to the more familiar notion of consecration through death on the battlefield: it is for a cause one understands and deems worthy of the ultimate price (in his case, sustaining the Union and the survival of the American experiment in republican government). I am not sure how many Americans today would be willing to give up 600,000 lives—their own and those of their children—for a political system, or even to emancipate the slaves. It seems safe to say that most people concerned about living a sanctified life today would associate this notion with living in a way that puts the welfare of others ahead of one's own personal benefit. Susan Wolf's influential essay "Moral Saints" defines saintliness entirely in terms of sacrificing one's interests for those of other

people; among most of her readers, ethics is synonymous with “what we owe each other,” so that the only way to raise ethics to the level of sanctification would be to dedicate oneself to others, beyond the customary reach of duty.⁶

The last phrase is a gross understatement. What Lincoln consecrated was not merely supererogatory behavior, but extreme, life-and-death action. To be sure, the commandment to love God “with all your heart and all your soul and all your possessions” (Deuteronomy 6:5) includes the possibility of dying to sanctify God’s name. Some Jews meditate daily on this possible eventuality. All religious individuals think about it regularly—in light of the political realities of our time, how could we not? But at the same time, most of us, barring combat soldiers, will not have the opportunity to engage in such extraordinary actions on behalf of others—and if we do, it is likely to happen not through our contrivance and not as we would have planned. Such sanctification thus cannot ordinarily be a life-project.

Whether Lincoln was ever a conventional Christian believer is doubtful. What is evident is that the kind of religious faith that he took seriously did not rejoice in the easy grace and taken-for-granted justification of liberal therapeutic theology. Quite to the contrary: when Lincoln spoke of God it was to consider the awesome responsibility we assume before the Divine, as when he reminded the nation, in his Second Inaugural Address:

Yet, if God wills that [the war] continue, until all the wealth piled up by the bondsman’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said that “the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether.”⁷

Most current idealization of sanctification through dedication to human welfare lacks the dramatic decisiveness of physical violence, martyrdom, and bloodshed. As a result we are also less likely to grasp the dangers in heroic self-sanctifying self-giving. Human beings are created in the image of God, but they are not God. To treat them as if they are divine is to distort that image. When we seek to make a human being or a group of human beings more than human, we are liable to end up making them less than human. This is the story of nationalism in the modern world. More insidiously, because the decisive dimension of physical compulsion is absent, such distortions readily infiltrate the projects of lovers who seek to assign ultimate value to their personal relationships, or of parents who become overly invested in their children, or of political activists all fired up with their passion for the ideal social order as they perceive it. Our desire to “empower” others often becomes the project of controlling them, enslaving both sides of the relationship in the process. Today we even see an attempt to sanctify existence by manufacturing a neo-pagan cult of nature in place of the personal, commanding God of Scripture.

Human beings deserve better than this. Investing absolute value in helping other people makes them, in effect, objects of our benevolence and pawns in our desire for sanctification. This is the social worker’s fallacy: “I am here to help others; what the others are here for, God only knows.” Likewise, reducing ethics to everyday altruism is unlikely to provide altruistic people with the sense that their lives are truly worthwhile. In the early nineteenth century, John Stuart Mill was brought up to believe that being ethical was identical with striving for the greatest happiness of the greatest number. He writes in his *Autobiography* that in early adulthood he came to ask himself:

Suppose that all your objects in life were realized; and that all the changes in institutions that you are looking forward to, could be completely affected at this very instant: would this be a great joy and happiness to you? And an irrepressible

self-consciousness distinctly answered, “No!” At this my heart sank within me: the whole foundation on which my life was constructed fell down.⁸

How Mill repaired the philosophy that his father had taught him, and how he was able to continue as a utilitarian (albeit one with a broader idea of what constitutes happiness), is not our concern here. One inference we can make from Mill’s crisis is that the do-gooder’s idea of happiness is impoverished. Another is that the entire idea of anchoring the meaning of life exclusively in benefit to others begs the question of what is truly valuable. If a grand life of difficulty and risk for its own sake—like that celebrated by Holmes and pondered by Stern’s German modernists—is too much at variance with normal human life to serve as a foundation for a sanctified existence, then Mill’s altruism (however effortful its pursuit in the short run) lacks the sense of majesty that we would want to attach to a sanctified human existence.

The Mystical Impulse

The two secular ideologies we have just tried on each contain one ingredient of a sanctified life. On the one hand, the ascetic irrationality of Holmes’s “dear purchase” captures the total commitment, the passionate love, required of human excellence. On the other hand, the liberal rationalism of the social worker rightly stresses that such a life must be centered on something other than oneself. A third approach may be found in a popular strand of mysticism, which understands religious practice as a set of actions and “intentions” aimed at affecting God. At first blush, this is nothing but a restatement of fundamental Jewish doctrine: Judaism assigns the human being, the image of God, enormous responsibility; human action is therefore significant and potentially world-altering. The power of religious action is not dependent solely on its visible, measurable worldly impact. If the question of sanctification is about how human beings can, by their own actions, make their lives profoundly worthwhile, this language

seems like the answer to a prayer. From this perspective, human beings are indeed agents of their own sanctification. Moreover, within a kabbalistic framework, human actions create external spiritual entities and are even said to affect God and to redeem the fallen world.

Upon reflection, however, it becomes evident that mystical formulations of Judaism go beyond Jewish fundamentals: adding may end up detracting. Judaism, as expressed in the *halakhab*, indeed glorifies the human being's capacity to participate in the creation of the world. This is understood in terms of various models of personal relationship to God: simply, one obeys God. Obedience leads to more intimate modes of relationship: one imitates God and even becomes a partner with the Divine in creation. Just as certain almost invisible or trivial gestures express immense, immeasurable love between friends and lovers, parents and children, so too the precise performance of divine commandments bears significance and spiritual power indiscernible to the indifferent eye.

Now retain the idea of spiritually effective human actions, *mitzvot*; focus more and more on the supposed effects that these spiritual forces exert on high, but take away or downplay the implicit or explicit personal connection to God effected through subordinating ourselves to the commandments and responding to God creatively. What is left is not the experience of God, but instead some occult celestial mechanics, conformity to the rituals of which casts enchantment via a mysterious metaphysical realm, bathing its votaries in warm feelings of spiritual elevation and conferring upon them, at least for a while, an aura of sanctity. No doubt this is not the way things are for serious kabbalists, whose lives emerge from a thorough grounding in *halakhab* and its culture—at least I hope it is not. What I have described here is closer to magic than to the service of God. As such, it has the frisson but not the strenuous adventure of profound nihilism; it generates the self-approval of the social activist without affecting the real world; it exploits the idea of God, and it even engages in *mitzvot* and rituals without the unrelenting

commitment to obey—or the fear and trembling that Lincoln, for example, felt in the face of human responsibility in earnest. Adding mystical trumpets and flourishes to traditional religion does not enhance religious reality; rather, such embellishments are liable to make it fanciful.

III

The limitations and pitfalls we have noted in these popular attempts at constructing a sanctified existence lead one to wonder whether the entire exercise is misguided. Perhaps sanctification, in the sense explored earlier, is not the watchword for those whose ladder is pitched in present-day Western culture and who aspire to something better. Judaism surely does not subscribe to the therapeutic doctrine of justification in which God forgives us unconditionally. Is it possible that the doctrine of sanctification, with which that doctrine is allied, is equally unhelpful within a Jewish framework?

Why should this be so? It is natural for people to want to know where they are going. It is inevitable that people will want to assess their progress in terms of some standard. Am I a better person today than I was a year ago, ten years ago, forty years ago? One may break down the analysis and consider particular virtues: relations to family, or to strangers; the development of one's talents; dedication to Torah study; and so forth. One might mark progress in sanctity in fairly circumscribed areas, like those listed by Nahmanides: greater discipline in indulging one's physical appetites; greater care not to engage in idle or malicious speech; greater aversion to wasting time; greater devotion to, and joy in, doing good to others. To take one seemingly minor issue: imagine what a revolution it would be if more people took seriously the sanctity of the synagogue, not by weaving metaphysical halos about it, but simply by behaving respectfully and refraining from idle chatter and casualness in the house of God! If people were to strive to act this way, one might discern overall a more whole-hearted dedication to goals worthy of all-consuming passion.

However, it would be comic or presumptuous to ask whether one was becoming, or had become, a more holy or a more sanctified person over the past year. It would be even more comic, I think—almost like a Monty Python sketch—to assess one’s progress in sanctifying the universe as a whole, or in sanctifying a large number of things in the universe. The ideal of sanctification is simply too general and too fuzzy to serve as a practical guide.

If we are attracted to sanctification as a slogan, it is partly because we want more out of life than simply the accumulation of prescribed actions: we crave an ideal that elevates us and transforms us (preferably without extreme pain or the sacrifice of our worldly values) in a manner that neither everyday secular existence nor the life of routine religious observance can. Perhaps because the secularized doctrine of justification caters to our need to “accept ourselves” unconditionally, we also want a framework of moral striving that can underwrite the move from absolute self-acceptance to unconditional self-approval.

Perhaps we feel insignificant, or are tempted to think of ourselves as insignificant. We may be doing work that is not appreciated and is often of dubious value to ourselves or to others. We suspect, often rightly, that our fellowship is more anonymous and our closer relationships are more fragile and insecure than we can easily tolerate. We lack a vivid connection to God as intimate Commander, Guide, Judge, and Friend; our engagement in organized religion is shrouded in gray conformity. And so, in the absence of achievements in which we can honestly believe or of all-consuming passionate love, we yearn for a doctrine that affirms the cosmic import of our actions in spite of appearances.

During the period that I groped my way toward Orthodoxy, I often thought about the rabbinic statement: “One should always view oneself, and the world, as balanced between merit and guilt. If one performs a single commandment one is fortunate, for one has decided oneself and the whole world to merit...”⁹ The Talmud does not say that the individual and the world are really poised between

salvation and damnation: it is quite possible that the small action that I will perform in the next moment has no overwhelming cosmic significance. Rather, we are told to think of ourselves—and the world—as *if* our actions have that significance. In the over forty years that have passed since I reached my present theological position, my skepticism about general, vague ideals has increased, as has my faith in the eternal significance of each moment.

In the midrash cited as an epigraph for this essay, the shrewd worker says: “I am hired for the day; I rejoice that I found work for myself.” One aspect of the midrash has become clearer to me over time. The king did not hire the workers directly, but rather assigned the task to a member of his household. The foolish worker despairs at the cosmic insignificance of his labors, while the shrewd worker is satisfied to do his work with no illusions about its cosmic importance. Neither worker has encountered the king prior to being hired. The shrewd worker enters into the spirit of the work joyously but anonymously: he has no reason to assume that the king knows him or cares for him. It is only as the story unfolds that the king dispenses with the supervisor and addresses the shrewd worker directly, commending his judgment. The king does not assure the worker that the assignment has some obscure hitherto unsuspected world-changing impact. He doesn’t even tell him that the work is outstanding. All he does is remind the worker that he is fortunate to have a day’s work for himself, and that the day’s work awaits him.

I’m not sure I would have noticed this point forty years ago. Today it means a lot to me.

NOTES

¹ *Yalkut Shimoni* §863 (to Deuteronomy 11).

² Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1983), p. 41.

³ Cambridge University Press, 1995.

⁴ Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., “The Soldier’s Faith,” in Max Lerner, ed., *The Mind and Faith of Justice Holmes: His Speeches, Essays, Letters, and Judicial Opinions* (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1988), p. 20.

⁵ Cited by Lawrence Meir Friedman in *American Law in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 110.

⁶ Wolf’s essay was published in *The Journal of Philosophy* 79 (August 1982), pp. 419–439.

⁷ The biblical quotation is Psalm 19:10.

⁸ John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography* (Auckland, New Zealand: The Floating Press, 2009), p. 134.

⁹ *Midrash Tanhuma*, ed. Warsaw, *Va-yeileikh*, ch. 2.