Sanctity as Defined by the Silent Prayer

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Sanctity isn't meant to be an esoteric subject reserved solely for rabbis, theologians, and scholars. It is a theme that has been accorded a blessing that is to be recited by every Jew three times a day as part of the Amidah, the Silent Prayer composed by the Men of the Great Assembly, in order to give voice to our collective desire to communicate with the Almighty.

The Amidah is the paradigm of prayer. It is what the Talmud and rabbinic commentators refer to as "[the] *t'fillah*." It is the one prayer at whose beginning and ending we take three steps backward followed by three steps forward, indicating our awareness of entering and then subsequently leaving the presence of the supreme Sovereign. The wording and structure of this prayer are profoundly significant. Its text carries the spiritual weight of authorship by saintly scholars imbued with prophetic inspiration.

All this is by way of introducing the reader to the importance (as well as the practical relevance) of the insights of the Amidah regarding the theme of holiness. It is within the context of the words chosen for our daily conversations with God that we will discover how the concept of sanctity helps us resolve two of the most pressing problems of life: How can we be certain that God exists? And if indeed there is a God, what does that mean for our mission here on earth?

Can We Ever Prove God's Existence?

Philosophers throughout the ages have debated this issue without coming to a universally agreed-upon resolution. Theists continue to believe and atheists to deny. Each side has its prominent spokespeople, yet in the final analysis neither can present irrefutable proof to declare its position victorious.

For atheists, this inability to fully prove God's existence with the exactitude of scientific methodology or the logic of human reason is sufficient to reject the possibility of a divine Being. What we cannot verify, they claim, must assuredly be discarded.

Yet, many of our most fundamental assumptions can never be verified or proven; they are simply grasped as truths beyond question. There is no proof, for example, of the existence of other human beings besides ourselves, yet we are convinced that they do exist. In the words of Alfred Tennyson:

> Thou canst not prove the Nameless, O my son,
> Nor canst thou prove the world thou movest in,
> Thou canst not prove that thou art body alone,
> Nor canst thou prove that thou art spirit alone,
> Nor canst thou prove that thou art both in one;
> Thou canst not prove that thou art immortal—nay, my son,
> Nor yet that thou art mortal—nay, my son,
> Thou canst not prove that I, who speak with thee,
> Am not thyself in converse with thyself,
> For nothing worthy proving can be proven,
> Nor yet disproven, wherefore thou be wise,
> Cleave ever to the sunnier side of doubt,
> And cling to Faith beyond the forms of Faith![1]

Theists are hardly surprised that the evidence of our senses cannot demonstrate the existence of that which is beyond our senses, nor that our reasoning cannot logically confirm that which transcends

the power of our intellect. Only the Almighty can truly grasp the Almighty. As Solomon ibn Gabirol put it, "If I could understand God, I would be God." It is precisely God's greatness that precludes our ability to fully describe God or prove the existence of the Divine.

Where decisive proof cannot play a role, both theists and atheists can share no more than a *belief* in the truth of their position. Both are guided by faith—faith in the truth of their conviction. And that is why both must be judged by the same standard: not which view can be proven, but rather which one is more convincing.

It is in this light that we need to understand the three opening blessings of the Amidah.

The Three-Part Section of Praise

The Amidah is divided into three sections. The first, consisting of three blessings, is called *shevaḥ*, praise. The second section, consisting of thirteen blessings (expanded from an original twelve), comprises *bakashah*, requests. The final section, consisting of three blessings, is known as *hoda·ah*, giving thanks. The Talmud tells us that the opening blessings of praise have a biblical origin:

> Our rabbis taught: From where in Scripture do we learn that we are to say [the blessing of] the ancestors? Because it says, "Ascribe to the Eternal, O sons of might [understood as referring to the patriarchs]" (Psalm 29:1). And from where do we learn that we say [the blessing of] strength? Because it says, "Ascribe to the Eternal glory and strength" (Psalm 29:1). And from where do we learn that we say [the blessing of] holiness? Because it says, "Ascribe to the Eternal the glory of God's name, worship the Eternal in the beauty of holiness" (Psalm 29:2).[2]

These three blessings are called, respectively, *Avot*, ancestors; *G'vurot*, strength; and *K'dushah*, holiness.

It is instructive to ask how precisely these three themes summarize praise of God, which is the ostensible purpose of the opening section of the Amidah. But perhaps a more pertinent question needs to be raised first: of what use is human praise to the Almighty? Why does an all-powerful God need the plaudits of God's creations?

It is abundantly clear that it is not God who requires our admiration; rather, it is we who desperately need to recognize God and to put into perspective the nature of our relationship. To praise God is to acknowledge that we have found the Almighty. We begin the Amidah by verbalizing the three ways that confirm our faith and make us certain we have someone to speak to who hears our prayers.

In short, the first three blessings are the closest we can come to resolving the universal quest for proofs of God's existence. They resonate with the reasons that bolster our conviction that there's someone above us with whom we can share our concerns and in whom we can place our trust.

Avot/Ancestors: Proof from the Patriarchs

This blessing draws on the powerful proof of history to articulate the first reason that convinces us we are right to praise God:

> Blessed are you, Eternal, our God and God of our ancestors, God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob; the great, mighty, and awesome God, God most high…..O Sovereign, Helper, Savior, and Shield. Blessed are You, Eternal One, Shield of Abraham.

In his classic work *The Kuzari*, the medieval philosopher Yehudah Halevi has the king of the Khazars ask the rabbi a profound question: Why is God described, in the first commandment of the Decalogue, as "the Eternal your God, who took you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage"? Would it not have been far more persuasive for the Almighty to declare, "I am the Eternal your God, who created the heavens and the earth"? Halevi uses this as a convenient introduction to explain how Judaism diverges from the methodology of Aristotelian philosophy. Very much aware of the profound abyss separating the personal God of the Bible from the God of the philosophers (the latter being self-contained, unmoved, and non-personal—in short, God the Creator), Yehudah Halevi posits that it is *history*, more than anything else, that is decisive for our relationship with the Divine. The God who is revealed in the record of Israel and in the miracles performed on their behalf could not have been reached by philosophical speculation, but only by revelation.

At the beginning of the story of our people's covenant with God, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob each sought the Divine in his own way—and God personally came in response to each one. The patriarchs knew God not as a concept but as a close friend; for them God was not a belief but a Being whose presence was constantly reaffirmed through direct contact and communication.

This reality of God's nearness is the theme of all of Jewish history. Collectively it was first made manifest by way of the miracles connected to God's deliverance of the Jews from the slavery of Egypt. That is the reason for the emphasis on the Exodus in the Decalogue commanding our commitment to God. And that is how we begin our praise of God: "Sovereign, Helper, Savior, and Shield. Blessed are You, Eternal, Shield of Abraham." There is no room to doubt God's existence when the Almighty has clearly played such a significant role in our story, beginning with our first patriarch and continuing through to our present day.

G'vurot/Strength: Proof from Nature

Maimonides, in his masterwork the Mishneh Torah, first posits the law that we are commanded to love and to fear God. He then proceeds to ask how one goes about fulfilling this requirement. His answer is the response of the philosophers who find confirmation of the Creator by concentrating on the beauty, profundity, and design of creation:

> When one contemplates God's wondrous and great deeds and creations, and appreciates the infinite wisdom that surpasses all comparison, one will immediately love, praise, and glorify [God], yearning with tremendous desire to know [God's] great name, as David stated: "My soul thirsts for the Eternal, for the living God" (Psalm 42:3).
> Upon [continuing] to reflect on these same matters, one will immediately recoil in awe and fear, appreciating how one is a tiny, lowly, and dark creature, standing with one's flimsy, limited wisdom before the One who is of perfect knowledge, as David stated: "When I see Your heavens, the work of Your fingers...[I wonder] what is humanity, that You should recall us" (Psalm 8:4–5).[3]

Maimonides aligns himself with the ancient proof of God from teleology. The complex design of the world clearly demonstrates the existence of a Designer. As Philo put it:

> Who can look upon statues or paintings without thinking at once of a sculptor or painter? Who can see clothes or ships or houses without getting the idea of a weaver and a shipwright and a house builder? And when one enters a well-ordered city in which the arrangements for civil life are very admirably managed, what else will you suppose but that this city is directed by good rulers? So then, one who comes to the truly great city, this world, and beholds hills and

> plains teeming with animals and plants, the rivers, spring fed or winter torrents, streaming along, the seas with their expanses, the air with its happily tempered phases, the yearly seasons passing into each other, and then the sun and moon ruling the day and night, and the other heavenly bodies fixed or planetary and the whole firmament revolving in rhythmic order, must one not naturally or rather necessarily gain the conception of the Maker and Father and Ruler also?[4]

For the midrash, this was in fact the very way Abraham first came to a belief in God: he saw a mansion all lit up and thought at first that the mansion had no owner or architect, for he did not see anyone. Upon further consideration, he realized that was impossible. The mansion, with its magnificent design, must have been built by someone. Extrapolating this to the world, Abraham concluded that there must obviously be a supreme Architect who created and owns it.[5]

The second blessing of praise in the Silent Prayer references God's might in ruling the world. Here we allude to God "making the wind blow and making the rain descend." God continues to play a direct role in seeing to it that nature functions in accord with highly complex laws that demonstrate a universal Lawgiver.

The most remarkable expression of the Almighty's power is God's ability to resuscitate the dead. We see evidence of this in nature when the trees seem to die as they shed their leaves in the fall, only to return to life again in the spring. We acknowledge it in our own lives when we go to sleep, a condition the Talmud refers to as one-sixtieth of death,[6] only to miraculously awaken once more in the morning. The blessing states: "You are eternally mighty, Adonai; the resuscitator of the dead are You, abundantly able to save...Blessed are You, Eternal One, who resuscitates the dead." This is the second reason why we believe in and praise God.

K'dushah/Holiness: Proof from Our Souls

It is the third blessing that has special meaning for us as we seek to understand the true significance of the concept of sanctity in Judaism: "You are holy and Your name is holy, and holy ones praise You every day forever. Blessed are You, Eternal One, the holy God." *Avot*, speaking of God's direct role in the history of our people, and *G'vurot*, addressing the way in which God speaks to us via the extraordinary complexity and design of nature, both convince us of the presence of the Divine. But what do we mean when we say "You are holy"? And what is it that lends credence to this assertion?

Paradoxically, this may seem to be the weakest and yet at the same time the most powerful proof of all—the strongest reason why we can feel confident of God's existence. It has its echoes in the mystical approach to religion popularized by the Baal Shem Tov, founder of the hasidic movement. One of his favorite quotes to his disciples was, "Taste and you will see that the Eternal is good" (Psalm 34:9). Religious experience is compared to tasting food: the taste cannot be described; it simply must be personally felt. The God within us is far more real than what we are capable of proving or of describing.

When a hasidic leader once asked his followers whether they believed in God, they were horrified by the question. "Of course we believe in God," they replied. "How could you possibly doubt our faith?" The rabbi, to their amazement, told them, "Well, I do not. I do not *believe* in God. Do you *believe* that we are sitting at a table? You *know* that we are sitting at a table. So too, to say merely that we *believe* in God is to acknowledge that we lack the certainty of our awareness. We *know* God. God is holy and that spirit of holiness resonates in our souls with the same certainty we have of our own being."

The existentialist movement has popularized the idea that the attempt to prove the existence of God is in and of itself impertinence. God must be encountered rather than discussed. If we are to

experience religious truth we must take what Kierkegaard calls "the leap of faith." This idea resonates in the works of Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, and their disciples. That leap of faith is a response to an inner call, a spiritual demand to be heard that can best be defined as the holy within us. It is "the still small voice" that spoke to Elijah with greater force than the strong wind, the earthquake, or the fire—the voice of God that announces its presence from the depths of our souls.

Sanctity is not something we believe in; it is something we *know*, something we taste and feel in a way that transcends the need for any kind of intellectual proof.

Immanuel Kant, in an oft-quoted passage from his *Critique of Pure Reason*, claimed that his certainty of God's existence came from the stirrings of his conscience: "Two things fill the mind with ever increasing wonder and awe, the more often and more intensely the mind of thought is drawn to them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me."[7] God is not something outside of us. God is as close as our conscience, as near as our soul. In the words of the Amidah blessing, "Holy ones praise You every day forever"—and we join them in our daily prayers. We dare to claim holiness for ourselves because we have been created in God's image and because part of us is divine.

This is at once both a very mystical as well as a very real awareness. This feeling of sanctity that infuses us with the certainty of God's presence is at the heart of our religious experience. Remarkably, Albert Einstein, despite his massive intellect, himself surrendered to this unfathomable and mystical dimension of God. He wrote the following in 1932:

> The most beautiful and deepest experience a man can have is the sense of the mysterious. It is the underlying principle of religion as well as of all serious endeavors in art and science. He who [has] never had this experience seems to me, if

> not dead, then at least blind. To sense that behind anything that can be experienced there is a something that our minds cannot grasp, whose beauty and sublimity reaches us only indirectly: this is religiousness. In this sense I am religious. To me it suffices to wonder at these secrets and to attempt humbly to grasp with my mind a mere image of the lofty structure of all there is.[8]

The third blessing of the Amidah moves us from proofs to perception. As we personally speak to God, it assures us that the stirrings of sanctity within us are far more meaningful than any philosophical speculation. Holiness is the language of the soul, begging us to hear the voice of our Creator.

The first two blessings of praise try to respond to the question of God's existence. The third blessing, alerting us to the concept of sanctity, *negates the need for an answer*. For those of us who do not simply believe—but who encounter—God in every moment of our lives, who grasp holiness as the defining principle that governs our being, inquiring about God's reality is as pointless as questioning our own existence.

Sir Arthur Eddington put it well:

> Theological or anti-theological argument to prove or disprove the existence of a deity seems to me to occupy itself largely with skating among the difficulties caused by our making a fetish of this word. It is also irrelevant to the assurance for which we hunger. In the case of our human friends we take their existence for granted, not caring whether it is proven or not. Our relationship is such that we could read philosophical arguments designed to prove the nonexistence of each other, and perhaps even to be convinced by them—and then laugh together over so odd a conclusion. I think that it is something of the same sort of security we should seek in our relationship with God. The most flawless proof

> for the existence of God is no substitute for it; and if we have that relationship, the most convincing disproof is turned harmlessly aside. If I may say it with reverence, the soul and God laugh together over so odd a conclusion.[9]

The Historic Basis of the First Three Blessings

The third blessing, stressing the concept of sanctity, affirms that our awareness of holiness confirms our belief in the existence of the Holy One. But on a more profound level, the historic basis of this blessing, as pointed out by the midrash, adds a far more powerful dimension. When we recognize who first uttered this blessing and in what context, we will discover what the striving for holiness demands of us.

The first three blessings of the Amidah, we are taught, have their sources in three significant moments in the lives of the patriarchs. The first blessing, praising God as the Shield of Abraham, was uttered by the angels in the aftermath of the story in Genesis about the five kings who rebelled against four kings but were defeated by them.[10] The four kings had kidnapped Lot, Abraham's nephew, in order to force Abraham to come to Lot's rescue, which would then allow them to slay Abraham and put an end to his monotheistic theology. God shielded Abraham from falling victim to their nefarious plan, so that he could survive to promulgate his newfound belief in the one God. When the angels saw how God miraculously intervened to save Abraham's life, they were moved to exclaim, "Blessed are You, Eternal One, Shield of Abraham."[11]

The second blessing, praising God as the One who resuscitates the dead, is related to an event in the life of Isaac, the second patriarch. The seminal event in his life took place when God commanded his father, Abraham, to sacrifice his son. Abraham obeyed, bound Isaac on an altar, and was a moment away from slaughtering him when God sent an angel to stop the offering and explain that it was but a

test: God did not, in fact, desire human sacrifice.[12] According to the midrash, when Abraham lifted up the knife, Isaac's fear of being killed caused his soul to leave him. Isaac had, in fact, actually died before the angel could stop Abraham from carrying out God's command. Miraculously, God intervened and restored Isaac's soul to him. That made Isaac the first person who ever experienced coming back to life after dying. As witnesses to this miracle, the angels proclaimed, "Blessed are You, Eternal One, who resuscitates the dead."[13]

It is the historic source of the third blessing, rooted in an incident in the life of Jacob, which is most relevant to us as we seek greater understanding of the meaning of sanctification. The words "Blessed are You, Eternal, the holy God" also echo an exclamation of the angels. They were recited in the aftermath of Jacob's first prophetic vision. He had come to the place on which the Temple would later be built, Mount Moriah. On that very spot Jacob dreamed a dream. He saw "a ladder set upon the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven, and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it" (Genesis 28:12). This vision inspired Jacob to sanctify God's name: "And Jacob awoke out of his sleep, and he said, 'Surely the Eternal is in this place, and I knew it not'; and he was afraid, and said, 'How full of awe is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven'" (Genesis 28:16–17). And when the angels heard this, they responded by reciting the words that have become the conclusion of our final blessing of praise: "Blessed are You, Eternal One, the holy God."

Note carefully the order in which sanctification took place: first Jacob sanctified God, and only then did the angels declare their sanctification as well. Acknowledging God's holiness is the task of both Jews and angels. Both are required to fulfill this mandate. But remarkably enough, the midrash says that angels are not allowed to praise God until the Jewish people does so first![14] What is behind this strange sequence? It is nothing less than the recognition that angels can only justify their existence by way of their influence on humanity. Their reason for being is to serve as messengers of divine

communication, proclaiming the truth of God's holiness to the world. Their mantra is "Holy, holy, holy is the Eternal One of hosts—the whole world is filled with God's glory."[15] When human beings acknowledge God's presence in "the whole world," on earth as well as in heaven, angels are then permitted to sing because they have then fulfilled their purpose.

In Jacob's vision of the ladder, he saw angels ascending and descending. One would have expected the reverse: since the home of angels is in heaven, we would have assumed that the first part of their trip would have been to come *down* from above. Instead, Jacob saw them leaving the lower region of earth to *ascend* to heaven. It was only after they completed their task here that the angels were welcomed above. And it was only after they were able to make Jacob realize that God's holiness was as near as the spot on which he slept that the angels were permitted to join the celestial choir in singing paeans of praise to God.

The Jewish Meaning of Holiness

"The whole world is filled with God's glory." Those are the words of the angels after they offer their threefold exclamation of "holy, holy, holy." With this phrase the angels capture the uniquely Jewish explanation of holiness. It is an idea that for some biblical commentators is implied in the numerical value (*gematria*) of the Hebrew word *sullam*, "ladder," which serves as the focal point of Jacob's vision.[16] *Sullam* ("ladder"), *mamon* ("money"), and "Sinai" all share the same numerical value of their letters, 130. What a remarkable trilogy! What could these three words/ideas possibly have in common?

The answer holds the key to the symbolic content of Jacob's dream. On the very spot that would one day become the site of the holy Temple, Jacob was taught that the essence of Judaism is *the linking of earth and heaven*. Humanity's role is not, as in Christian thought, to

forsake this world; it is, rather, to sanctify it. "My kingdom is not of this world" is the teaching of Jesus. In contrast, the message of Moses is "to perfect the world through the Almighty's sovereignty."

Saint Simeon Stylites was the first and probably the most famous of a long succession of stylites, or "pillar-hermits," who, over the course of more than six centuries, acquired a great reputation for holiness throughout Christendom. In an attempt to get closer to heaven and nearer to God, Saint Simeon and his followers decided to remove themselves as far as possible from earth and live secluded with God on top of a self-constructed pillar. At first Saint Simeon's pillar was little more than nine feet high, but it was subsequently replaced by others, and the last in the series apparently towered more than fifty feet over the ground. For these "pillar-hermits," casting off all connection with humanity expressed the true meaning of holiness. In their eyes the top of Mount Sinai was a final destination, a place from which the pious ought to never descend.

Christians built a monastery on top of what they believe to be the location of the original Mount Sinai. For them, that spot is holy. For Jews, holiness is incompatible with estrangement from earth and from humanity. "Do not separate yourself from the community" is the accepted ruling of Hillel,[17] embodying this perspective. Jews understand Sinai as a fulfillment of Jacob's vision of the ladder. Angels served as our models, by ascending and descending, because the journey to heaven requires a return trip back down to earth. Moses climbed to the top of Mount Sinai to get the Torah and then brought it back to the people Israel. His goal was not to bring Jews to heaven; he wanted to bring heaven down to the Jews.

Torah is compared by the sages to water. Just as water is a source of life for the world,[18] so too is the Torah a source of life for the world. Just as water flows down from the mountaintop to bless the land below with its life-giving power and make it fruitful, so too is the purpose of Torah to enhance and nourish everything here on earth.

Those who seek only the sacred are content to stand on pillars, far removed from the world and its challenges. Those who perceive their mission as perfecting the world and transforming the profane into the holy identify their spiritual mission with ladders, rising to the sky but rooted in the ground, linking heaven and earth.

Sinai and sullam—the mountain on which the Torah was given and the ladder of Jacob's dream—also share a message of meaning with the word *mamon*, money. At first glance, the connection seems highly problematic. Money and spirituality seem to be antithetical. The love of money, says the New Testament, is the root of all evil.[19] The Christian Bible declares: "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God."[20]

But Judaism disagrees. Humans do not become saints if we take a vow of poverty. Wealth is not a curse; it is merely a challenge. Holiness is defined by our ability to use wealth to enhance and sanctify the presence of God on earth.

Is money holy or profane? The midrash gives us the answer in the explication of the verse concerning God's commandment to Moses: "This they shall give, everyone that passes among them that are numbered: half a *shekel*, after the shekel of the sanctuary" (Exodus 30:13). God stressed that they shall give "this," illustrating with the actual coin.[21]

Why did God need to do this? Because the midrash tells us Moses was baffled by this command, not knowing what to do. Yet what was so difficult? It seems quite simple. God had specified "half a *shekel*." Why did God have to follow up the command with a visual demonstration? And moreover: why does the midrash add that the coin God showed him was "a coin of fire"?

Our sages explain that what Moses could not grasp was how God could command something as seemingly mundane as half a *shekel* for

the holy task of counting Jews. How could currency possibly be used as a way to identify holy people?

"God then showed him a *shekel*, a coin of fire." What does the midrash mean? How can a coin of fire resolve the problem? And did Moses have to be shown the image of a coin in order to know what God was talking about? The explanation is profound: If you, Moses, cannot believe in the relevance of the coin, then let Me illustrate by way of a coin of fire. Fire is the symbol of money because fire destroys, but it also creates. Fire may burn, but it can also cook, warm, and serve beneficial purposes. The same is true of wealth. Precisely because it has this quality, it becomes doubly holy. When we choose to use a potentially destructive object in a positive and productive manner, we have learned the secret of true holiness.

This is a concept we find similarly expressed by a symbol used on the High Holy Days: the *shofar*. Why is the *shofar* the vehicle for bringing us to repentance? What is there about the horn of an animal that may be linked to spiritual rebirth? The horn is one of the four major causes of damage produced by animals.[22] We, too, may at times allow ourselves to be possessed by our animalistic nature, but the *shofar* tells us to take the potentially destructive horn and transform it, thereby becoming holy.

Hasidim have suggested that the Hebrew word for coin, *matbeiʿa*, may also be read as *mi-teva*, which means "from nature," from the world around us. God told Moses to "take a coin of fire," and we are thus taught that we may find opportunities for great holiness in the world about us. Like fire, a coin may be either creative or destructive. The potential for both exists; the choice is in our hands.

Symbolically, Jacob's dream of the ladder was also about the purpose of Torah at Sinai and the proper use of material blessings. Immediately after Jacob awoke we are told, "And Jacob vowed a vow saying, 'If God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go and will give me bread to eat and clothing to put on, so that I come

back to my father's house in peace, then shall the Eternal be my God; and the stone that I have set up for a pillar shall be God's house, and of all that You will give me I will surely give one-tenth to You'" (Genesis 28:20–22).

The concept of tithing comes from Jacob and this passage. It appears right after he had the vision of the ladder. Why would he speak of something as materialistic as money, immediately after experiencing the most sacred vision of his life? Because that very vision enabled him to comprehend that one *can*—and *must*—serve God even with that which is seemingly secular and profane. Money should not be renounced; it should be used correctly. Wealth is not to be rejected, but rather utilized for its capacity to enhance and expand God's blessings on earth.

And so, too, the potential for holiness exists within everything that God has created. Indeed, that is why God pronounced all that was made, every day of creation, as tov, "good"; and, upon final completion, "God saw everything that had been made and behold it was *tov me'od*, very good" (Genesis 1:31). Not "good" because the world is perfect, but because the world is perfectible—with the help of humans, to whom God entrusted this task. Not "good" because the world is already holy, but because the world has the potential for holiness—if human beings fulfill their mission to become "partners with God in the act of creation."[23] Not "good" because the world is sanctified by God, but because the people with whom God entered into a covenantal relationship have the power to sanctify it.

Perhaps the best summary of this concept is to be found in God's command to "Make Me a sanctuary (*mikdash*), that I may dwell among them" (Exodus 25:8). The Israelites were told to erect a house for the Almighty. And yet we know that God is everywhere and neither needs nor can be contained in a single edifice, no matter how magnificent. The difficulty is resolved by the second half of the verse itself. It does not say, "that I may dwell in *it* [i.e., the sanctuary]." Rather, it says, "that I may dwell among *them*"—that is, among the

people. Since "the whole world is filled with God's glory," the purpose of the sanctuary (and this applies to all aids to holiness) is to awaken holy feelings, which then cause God to "dwell among them"—that is, in their hearts.

God is the source of holiness. Humans must discover it and proclaim it. That is our partnership. That is our mission, ever since we entered the covenant at Sinai. God has sanctified us with the commandments and it is we who must sanctify the world and make it worthy of the Almighty's presence.

NOTES

[1] In *Tiresius and Other Poems: The Ancient Sage*, by Alfred Lord Tennyson (1885).
[2] B. Rosh Hashanah 32a.
[3] Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Yesodei Hatorah 2:1–2.
[4] *De Specialibus Legibus* I:6 (Loeb Classical Library; London and Cambridge, MA: William Heinemann Ltd. and Harvard University Press, 1950), vol. 7, p. 119.
[5] Bereishit Rabbah 39:1.
[6] B. Berakhot 57b.
[7] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (1788).
[8] The quotation is taken from a speech by Albert Einstein to the German League of Human Rights in Berlin, in the autumn of 1932. It can be found in the appendix of Michael White and John Gribbin, *Einstein: A Life in Science* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994).
[9] *Science And The Unseen World* (1929; rpt. Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publications, 2007), pp. 49ff.
[10] Genesis 14:8–10.
[11] *Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer*, ch. 27.
[12] Genesis 22:13.
[13] *Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer*, ch. 31.
[14] *Tanna D'vei Eliyahu Zuta* 25.
[15] Isaiah 6:3.
[16] See, for example, *Ba·al Ha-turim* to Genesis 28:12.
[17] Pirkei Avot 2:5.
[18] Cf. Song of Songs 4:15, "A fountain of gardens, a well of living waters."
[19] First Epistle of Timothy 6:10.
[20] Matthew 19:24.
[21] *Tanhuma*, *Ki Tissa*, §7; see also Rashi to Exodus 30:13.
[22] M. Bava Kamma 1:1.
[23] B. Shabbat 10a.